The Challenges of Achieving Competitive Advantage at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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The study aims to identify the extent to which competitive advantage can be achieved across several areas (education, scientific research, community service, human resources, technology, and innovation) at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (IAU) in Saudi Arabia. The study also aims to identify the most important challenges that prevent the achievement of competitive advantage across these areas. The descriptive approach was employed using a questionnaire as a tool of collecting data from a sample of (199) faculty members at the University. The results of the study showed a high degree of competitive advantage across the six areas. The results also indicated that many challenges prevent the achievement of competitive advantage. The most important of these challenges was the fierce local and international competition between universities.

Key words: *competitive advantage; challenges to achieving competitive advantage.*

Introduction

Higher education is considered a fundamental pillar and an effective cornerstone for simulating and meeting the ambitions of societies and fulfilling the requirements of sustainable development for them considering the rapid changes in knowledge and economics. This will thus create a generation to lead societies towards excellence at all levels; economically, cognitively, and politically, which created a fierce global competition between countries to raise their higher education ranking and quality.

Therefore, universities in developed countries moved towards building competitive advantage to outperform other academic institutions by looking into best practices to live up to the criteria set by organizations for university rankings (ratings), activating the role of strategies, as well as optimizing investment in IT equipment and developing administrative operations (Al-Saleh, 2012, p299).

This was the core of the Saudi Vision 2030, which concentrated on the optimal use of and investment in human resources, where government institutions - especially the Ministry of Education – prepare and enable individuals to access and gain knowledge and skills. However, building highly educated and skillful individuals requires efficient and high-quality institutions, a necessary pre-requisite for achieving the Saudi Vision 2030 of "hav[ing] at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 universities in international rankings" (Saudi Vision 2030, p40)

Studies on competitiveness, such as those by Goodman (2011), Al-Saleh (2012), Al-Hout, Tawfiq, and Abed (2016), Ghanayim (2015), and Al-Shathari (2016) agree that competitiveness is the cornerstone of developing higher education systems. In addition, it is considered the key to moving into the age of knowledge and communications. Similar studies also reaffirmed that elements of competitive advantage require the implementation of appropriate and distinguished strategies across all relevant areas, including scientific research, technology, human resources management, education, community service and many other different areas, all of which support the procurement of competitive advantage.

The definition of competitive advantage

Porter (1995) defined competitiveness as "the ability [of a firm or institution] gained through attributes and resources to perform at a higher level than others in the same industry or market" (p. 48). In addition, Al-Sukkar (2013) stated that competitive advantage points to a feature or a group of features or elements that make the institution successful, which also, in turn, enable it to maintain a competitive advantage for a long time. This period guarantees the benefit for the institution and enables it to outperform its competitors in the products it offers (p. 81). Moreover, Bundakji (2006) showed that competitive advantage falls within the broad concept of competitiveness, which refers to all efforts, procedures, innovations, pressures, and all administrative, productive and developing activities practiced by organizations in order to obtain a larger segment and bigger spot in the markets they are interested in (p. 22). Therefore, competitive advantage in universities means that the university has the advantage that distinguishes it from other universities regarding its possession of strategies, roles, or tools that bring it to the forefront of universities in terms of ranking.

The importance of competitive advantage

Competitiveness has become an effective tool to face the challenges of the market, a criterion for determining the success of organizations and their distinction, a basic goal pursued by institutions that want to survive, and a standard that determines success and its basic elements compared to competitors (Al- Barazat, 2018, p. 21).

Among the features highlighting the importance of competitiveness, according to Al-Baghdadi (2018), are the following:

- The emergence of the concept of the 'economy of knowledge', which focuses resource of knowledge rather than on material resources.
- The increase in competitiveness and its pressures and the intensity of the struggle between the various organizations to attract beneficiaries, and the investment of modern communication and information technology techniques to attract a larger proportion of the market.
- The emergence of the concept of overall quality. Organizations are no longer able to rely on a single competitive advantage, such as low cost for example; rather, they compete for the best quality of all the benefits and services they provide.

Areas of competitive advantage:

Sirmon (2010) believes that the competitive advantage of institutions has five dimensions, namely: cost/price, type/quality, flexibility, time/speed, and finally creativity and innovation (p. 1390). Whereas, Al-Wadi and Al-Zaabi (2011, p 72) believe that competitiveness is based on four dimensions for any organization: excellence, cost, growth and alliances, and innovation. In addition, Assaf, (2015, p. 31), Al-Bakry and Bani Hamdan (2013, p. 100), and Johnson & Scholes (2002, p. 44) mentioned that the competitive advantage of institutions in general have six dimensions: (cost, quality, flexibility, creativity and innovation, survival, distinction). Melham(2014) also showed that the dimensions of competitive advantage of universities constitute of academic, educational and research services, and target the labor market and society in general. Consequently, it is based on five basic dimensions and indicators: education quality, faculty quality, scientific research, academic achievement, and community development (p. 48).

Considering the variation in literature in the number and type of dimensions of the competitive advantage of universities, and to determine what dimensions this study addresses, it is worth referring to the standards of the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA, 2018) in the KSA as a criterion for choosing the dimensions that the universities work with. Consequently, universities can compete each other according to these standards to create the feature that distinguishes it from its counterparts and makes it dominant over all

opponents and last longer. The National Center for Academic Accreditation and Assessment, NCAAA is a leading special regional center and one of the internationally recognized centers for accreditation and assessment of institutions above secondary education and their programs. Moreover, this center is the first station of local competition between universities of Saudi Arabia, and it is consisted of eight criteria: (Mission, goals, strategic planning, governance, leadership and management, learning and education, students, faculty, institutional resources, scientific research and innovation, and community partnership). Based on that, according to the standards of NCAAA, and by reference to the dimensions of competitive advantage in general, and in universities especially in the previous presentation of literature, it is clear that it is centered and intersected in six main dimensions of the competitive advantage of universities covered in this current study by analysis and study: "education, scientific research, community service, human resources, technology, innovation".

Al-Khunaizan and Al-Khudairi, (2019) showed that one of the most important requirements for global leadership in Saudi universities to achieve competitive advantage is shifting the university's role from focusing on employment to focusing on the principle of creating job opportunities, and real partnership with stakeholders from the public and private sectors and graduates. Badawi and Mustafa, (2018) showed the weak capabilities and capacities of Egyptian Higher education to meet global competitiveness standards with a set of opportunities and factors. These factors can be promoted as a framework for competitiveness in the field of Egyptian Higher education, including: Improving Egypt's rank in the World Bank report index, by building branches of international universities in Egypt, and improving business conditions, which creates job opportunities for graduates. Moreover, Khawaldeh (2018) found that there are five basic indicators of competitive advantage in Higher education institutions: (financial resources - human resources - size and position of the institution - scientific research - infrastructure). Furthermore, Shalabi, (2018) revealed that university teaching, scientific research and community service are among the most important inputs to achieving competitive advantage in universities. He added that the indicators of achieving competitive advantage varies between many factors. For instance, the university's position in global rankings, the extent of the partnership between the university and society, and the extent of its contribution to building the society of knowledge. In addition, the achievement of the university of entrepreneurship, the excellence of the academic reputation of the university, and the university's achievement of academic excellence awards are also indicators that reflect the extent to which the university achieved a competitive position compared to other universities.

On the other hand, Abdelsalam, (2018) indicated that one of the obstacles to achieving competitiveness in the higher education in Saudi Arabia is the weakness of specialized academic programs. In addition, the lack of demand on technical majors by for male and female students in Saudi Arabia, and the weak scientific production of Saudi universities also contributes to the challenges that we are yet to face. In Indonesia (Indiyati, 2016) showed that among the dimensions of the competitive advantages of the three strategies of universities,

service quality is the most distinctive dimension, which is followed by cost, and followed by innovation in Indonesian universities. Also, Kufaine (2014) indicated that most programs and strategies of the Higher education sector are imitated and repeated in all universities under study. This hinders excellence, and the impact of competitive and sustainable strategies in the education sector in Malawi needs to develop its programs and strategies through the continuity of pursuing competitiveness in the education of business market. Meanwhile, Bisaria (2013) recommends that bringing quality, focusing on the number of students in universities, and on university management to conduct self-analysis of the negatives and positives in their work is essential to achieve the competitive advantage of private universities and colleges in India. In addition, the university administration should also link the industrial sector with finance, link learning outcomes with the needs of the labor market and should focus on knowledge management and research production to increase competitiveness among universities. Finally, Hana (2013) showed that knowledge is the basis of innovation in the universities of the Czech Republic, and that for organizations to achieve competitive advantage, they must adopt continuous innovation.

The problem of the study:

Universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - as well as educational institutions at the local and global level - seek continuity and future growth in light of many of the strategic challenges that they face, which Al-Shathry (2016) asserts that they have contributed to reducing their competitive advantage, which was evident when the global university rankings emerged (p. 228).

That challenge to competition appears in Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University despite its relentless efforts and strategic initiatives, which can be extrapolated by its quest to reach advanced ranks among the competing international universities. The university was recently ranked 530 in the world's university rankings, and fifth at the level of the Kingdom's universities for the year 2021 AD (QS Top Universes, 2020), which clearly indicates the intensity and difficulty of this competition. Despite the progress achieved by Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University in ranking among universities in the international rankings, competition and the preservation of advanced positions necessitate making more efforts and standing on the elements that can give the university a competitive advantage, and overcoming the obstacles that hinder its achievement to reach global advanced ranks. Thus, the current study sought to identify the degree of obtaining the dimensions of the competitive advantage at the University of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal from the viewpoint of the faculty members, and to identify the most important obstacles that prevent this.

Study questions:

1. What degree of the dimensions of the competitive advantage did the University of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal obtain from the viewpoint of the faculty members?
2. What are the most important challenges that stand against obtaining the dimensions of the competitive advantage at the University of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal from the viewpoint of the faculty members?

Methodology

Method: The study adopted the descriptive method for being relevant to its nature.

Study population and study sample

The study population consisted of the faculty members at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to all the faculty members; following the examination of the responses, it was found that the eligible responses for statistical analysis were (199).

Instrument

To answer the questions of the study, a related data collection tool was prepared, which is a questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part consists of the primary data represented by the demographic characteristics of the sample members which included the academic rank, academic specialization, and years of experience. The second part consists of two sections. The first section includes the measure of the degree of obtaining the dimensions of the competitive advantage. The second section includes a measure of the degree to which the challenges that prevent the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage exist.

Validity and reliability of the Instrument

The validity of the questionnaire was tested in two different ways. First, external validity was verified by distributing the questionnaire to a number of referees in the field of educational administration, and leadership and other related disciplines. Second, the Internal consistency. was confirmed by applying the questionnaire to a pilot sample of 30 faculty members to verify the validity of internal consistency. The internal consistency measures the extent to which the phrases of the questionnaire are related to the total degree of the dimension to which the phrase belongs as well as the extent of the correlation of each phrase to the dimension to which the phrase belongs (See Table 1 and 2).

Table 1. Dimensional correlation coefficients with a total degree

Dimension	Correlation coefficient
Education	**0.8653
Scientific research	**0.9333
Community service	**0.9598
Human resources	**0.9501
Technology	**0.7936
Innovation	**0.8642

** Significant at level 0.01

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between the degree of each item and dimension

P	correlation coefficient	P	correlation coefficient
1	**0.8521	6	**0.8056
2	**0.8758	7	**0.8146
3	**0.8871	8	**0.7604
4	**0.7433	9	**0.9670
5	**0.8987	10	**0.7705

** Significant at level 0.01

Table 1 and 2 confirm the existence of a positive correlation between each dimension and a total score of the field at level 0.01 which gives high credibility to the instrument of the study.

Reliability of the study Instrument:

To verify the reliability of the study tool, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated, and the result showed high reliability, as shown in Table (3):

Table 3. Reliability coefficients of Cronbach alpha for the study dimensions and sections (Exploratory sample n=30)

Dimension/section	Item numbers	Reliability coefficients of Cronbach alpha
First section: the degree of obtaining the dimensions of the competitive advantage at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University.	46	0.98
Second section: the most important challenges that prevent the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage exist.	10	0.95

Study results

The first research question: What degree of the dimensions of the competitive advantage did the University of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal obtain from the viewpoint of the faculty members?

To answer this research question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations of the responses of the study participants were calculated. The results are displayed in Table 4:

Table 4. Arithmetic means and their descending order for the degree of obtaining the competitive advantage

Areas	Arithmetic * mean	Standard deviation	Order
Education	3.80	0.68	2
Scientific research	3.39	0.74	3
Community service	3.36	0.82	5
Human resources	3.37	0.76	4
Technology	4.08	0.65	1
Innovation	3.08	0.94	6
The total degree of obtaining the dimensions of competitive advantage	3.56	0.65	

* The mean from 5

Table (4) shows that the arithmetic means of the responses of the study sample about the degree of obtaining of the six dimensions of the competitive advantage at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University ranged between (3.08-4.08), which is a mean falling in the fourth (large)

category of the five-points scale categories. Meanwhile, the general average was (3.56) and the standard deviation (0.57). It is also evident that the "technology" dimension had the highest (M=4.08, SD=0.65), followed by the "education" dimension (M=3.80, SD=0.68), and the "scientific research" dimension (M=3.39, SD=0.74), then the "human resources" dimension with an arithmetic mean (3.37) and a standard deviation (0.76), and "community service" dimension with an arithmetic mean (3.36) and a standard deviation (0.82). Finally, "innovation" dimension comes in the last order with an arithmetic mean (3.08) and a standard deviation (0.94). This result is attributed to the reality of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University and the degree to which the dimensions of the competitive advantage have been achieved. Therefore, in a short period, the university achieved advanced ranks among the Saudi universities' classification in the QS world universities classification, so the university moved from the 13th rank according to the 2015 classification to the fifth in 2021, and at the global level it moved from group (581-590) in 2019 to group (521- 530) in 2021AD (QS, 2020).

The second research question: **What are the most important challenges that hinder the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage in Imam Abdul Rahman bin Faisal University from the viewpoint of the faculty members?**

To answer this research question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations of responses of the study participants were calculated. The results are displayed in table 5:

Table 5. Frequencies, percentages, and arithmetic means about the challenges that hinder the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage

P	Sentence		The importance degree of the challenge					Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Order
			Very high	High	Moderate	Low	Very low			
1	The absence of clear strategies to move towards achieving the university's competitive advantage.	R	24	76	66	24	9	3.41	1.00	9
		%	12.1	38.2	33.2	12.1	4.5			
2	The lack of budgets allocated to support achieving the university's competitive advantage.	R	30	88	51	23	7	3.56	1.00	4
		%	15.1	44.2	25.6	11.6	3.5			
3	Lack of senior management awareness of the importance of the university having	R	22	72	46	46	13	3.22	1.12	10
		%	11.1	36.2	23.1	23.1	6.5			

P	Sentence	The importance degree of the challenge					Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Order
		Very high	High	Modera te	Low	Very low			
	competitive advantages.								
4	The weakness of the community partnership in support of achieving competitive advantage	R 24	88	55	22	10	3.47	1.01	8
		% 12.1	44.2	27.6	11.1	5.0			
5	Weakness in attracting distinguished human resources.	R 33	93	40	21	12	3.57	1.07	3
		% 16.6	46.7	20.1	10.6	6.0			
6	Weak academic independence for faculty members.	R 38	102	34	14	11	3.71	1.03	2
		% 19.1	51.3	17.1	7.0	5.5			
7	Intense local and global competition between universities.	R 44	102	38	9	6	3.85	0.92	1
		% 22.1	51.3	19.1	4.5	3.0			
8	The weakness of university's ability to support research and scientific publishing.	R 29	88	46	25	11	3.50	1.06	6
		% 14.6	44.2	23.1	12.6	5.5			
9	The university's lack of educational programs that are distinct from other universities.	R 28	91	44	23	13	3.49	1.08	7
		% 14.1	45.7	22.1	11.6	6.5			
10	Poor alignment between university outcomes and labor market needs.	R 30	93	45	20	11	3.56	1.04	5
		% 15.1	46.7	22.6	10.1	5.5			
The general mean*							3.53	0.84	

* Arithmetic mean of 5 degrees

Table (5) shows that the participants believe that, "the challenges that hinder the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage in Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University from the viewpoint of the faculty members" came largely with general arithmetic mean of challenges (3.53) and a standard deviation (0.84). The expressions "challenges" came in the following order of importance. Phrase 7 "Intense local and global competition between universities" had an average of (3.85), and (SD=0.92) in the first place. This result indicates

that the sample members largely agree that the intensity of local and international competition is one of the most important challenges that hinder the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage in the University. This is also evidenced by the universities' keenness to achieve the highest standards to raise their levels through global rankings such as QS, the Shanghai Institute in China and the Times Magazine classification, which indicates the strength of the impact of local and global competition between universities on their achievement of competitive advantages. Phrase 6 "Weak academic independence for faculty members" had an arithmetic mean of (3.71), and (SD= 1.03) in second place. This result indicates that the lack of empowerment of employees and the weak academic independence of faculty members is the second challenge hindering the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage in the university significantly.

Phrase 5 "weakness in attracting distinguished human resources" had an average of (M= 3.57), and (SD=1.07) in the third order. This result shows that the poor recruitment of the distinguished human resource at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University is ranked third in terms of its importance in hindering the achievement of competitive advantage. This result is consistent with international classifications standards such as the QS classification criteria for universities, where one of its criteria is the proportion of international faculty members at 5%, as well as the Shanghai Institute classification criteria, one of which is the quality of faculty members and takes 20% in the classification. Phrase 2 "the lack of budgets allocated to support achieving the university's competitive advantage" had an average of (3.56) and (SD=1.00) came in the fourth place. This result shows that by monitoring appropriate budgets to support achieving competitive advantage through financial allocations for its six dimensions: (education, scientific research, human resource, community service, technology, and innovation) will increase from the university's ability to achieve a competitive advantage. Phrase 10 " poor alignment between university outcomes and labor market needs" had an average of (3.56) and deviation of (1.04). this result indicates that the faculty largely agree that the challenge of poor alignment between the university's outcomes and the needs of the labor market also comes in the fifth order of importance. This result is consistent with Khawaldeh (2018) who maintained that the absence of windows between the plans and programs followed and the outcomes and between the needs of the labor market hinder the achievement of the competitive advantage.

Phrase 8 " the weakness of university's ability to support research and scientific publishing" had an average of (3.5) and a deviation (1.06), in sixth place. This result indicates that the university's support for research and scientific publishing is important for raising the standards of competitiveness among its peers, through achieving advanced ranks in the international rankings. Phrase 9 "the university's lack of educational programs that are distinct from other universities, with arithmetic mean: (3.49), and deviation (1.08) came in seventh order. This result is consistent with results reported in previous studies such as Al-Zuhairi (2012) and Khater (2015) that one of the sources of competitive advantage is educational programs.

Therefore, the lack of excellence in educational programs is a challenge to the university's achievement of competitive advantage.

When comparing the programs of Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University with the programs of King Abdulaziz University, which achieved first place at the level of Saudi universities in the QS World University Rankings and (186) place at the level of international universities (QS Top Universes, 2020), in terms of academic programs, it becomes clear that King Abdulaziz University has (31) colleges, while Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University has (21) colleges. The percentage of programs that obtained academic and program accreditation (28%) with (81) undergraduate and postgraduate programs out of a total of 294 programs offered by the university (Department of Academic Accreditation at King Abdulaziz University, 2016). Whereas the Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University programs that obtained accreditation has (4) programs only, out of a total of 151 programs (Programs at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, 2020), this indicates the intensity of competition between universities in their distinguished programs on the one hand, and the weakness of the university in this aspect on the other hand, as well as considering this aspect an important challenge in achieving the dimensions of competitiveness in the university.

Phrase 4 "The weakness of the community partnership in support of achieving competitive advantage, with arithmetic mean: (3.47) and a deviation (1.01) came in the eighth order. This phrase came as a reflection of the opinion of the sample members regarding the importance of this challenge in impeding it to achieve the dimensions of the university's competitive advantage. It is more likely consistent with what was proposed in the theoretical framework in terms of a community partnership that investing all the university's resources and infrastructure can achieve competitive advantages for the university (Chechenism, 2018, p. 310).

Phrase 1 "The absence of clear strategies to move towards achieving the university's competitive advantage" had with an arithmetic mean of (3.41), and a deviation (1.00). This result reflects the existence of announced strategies for the university to move towards achieving competitive advantage, and this is evident in the university's vision on the university's official website, which states: "A pioneering university that achieves excellence locally, regionally and internationally (IAU, 2020). This result is consistent with Bashioh (2014) who emphasized that there is a strong correlation between the university's adoption of quality management strategies and excellence in university management and the achievement of higher education institutions competitive advantage. Finally, Phrase 3 "The lack of awareness of senior management of the importance of the university having competitive advantages" had an average of (3.22), and a deviation (1.12). This result shows a moderate measure regarding the importance of this challenge in hindering the achievement of the dimensions of the competitive advantage. This result can be attributed to the awareness of the senior management at the University about the importance of the university having competitive advantages.

Study recommendations:

Based on the results of the study, the authors proposed a set of recommendation. First, the university should establish a clear strategy for human resources management that guarantees the transparency of the promotions process and the reward system for its employees which might enhance loyalty to the university and motivates affiliates to productivity and academic excellence. Second, the university could establish a specialized innovation center that incubates inventors and innovators, and supports them through the university's resources, investing them to incubate innovators, and investing these innovations to raise the university's competitive capabilities. Finally, reconsidering human resources systems and the policy and procedures of the recruitment process, as well as ensuring selection criteria during the recruitment process, And the keenness to contract with distinguished faculty members, whether locally or internationally, in a way that guarantees equal opportunities for everyone and guarantees raising the level of university education at the university.

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