

The Status of Governance at the University College of Applied Sciences, Gaza

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed at verifying the use of university governance at the University College of Applied Sciences in Gaza (UCAS), which had (8000) students and (28) employees during the academic year 2015/2016. This investigation helps UCAS reach a high level of progress, when setting up governance as a top priority and as part of its Quality. To collect the required data, a (30) item questionnaire was distributed and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The results showed that the decision makers at UCAS rely on values and attitudes more than requirements and standards of governance. They also revealed that despite the existence of a bylaw to control the rules at UCAS, individual management character dominates more than the use of governance, at the student and staff levels. The results also revealed that most of the staff members at UCAS do not refer to the bylaw or are not aware of what it includes due to some of its unclear items. The researchers concluded that the poorness of financial resources has a significant impact on the inability to enforce rules and regulations. Finally, governance at UCAS is not at the required level, according to the international standards of governance. The study recommended the need to apply the standards and requirements of governance at all levels.

KEYWORDS: University Governance, University College of Applied Sciences, decision makers, UCAS.

INTRODUCTION

Governance occupies an essential importance in the world due to its role in improving the economic and financial performance of institutions. There is no specified definition of governance, however, it has been accepted to describe it as structures, legal relationships, authority patterns, rights and responsibilities, and decision-making patterns. Abu Daqah (2013) explained that governance is a case, a process of direction, and a trend. Therefore, governance is a healthy mix that enhances the efficiency and effectiveness of institutions. It also increases the integrity of institutions' actions and behavior, as it provides safety against any failures or bankruptcy. In this regard, university governance is a key element when focusing on the trends of the university education improvement. The World Bank (2012) stated that university governance guides universities to achieve their goals besides managing and monitoring their achievements. Upon that, universities should be the first institutions to apply the requirements of governance, where the mission of universities is to develop and graduate students and bring up good generations. Halawa & Taha (2012) reported that since the appearance of universities in Palestine in the seventies of the last century, some features of vitality in the Palestinian economy began to show. Therefore, they concluded that universities have a mutual relationship with the community. Al Haj (2012) mentioned that applying universities' governance transfers the universities from being centers of conducting exams and paying salaries into institutions of development that work within a strategic vision that does not see education as only a process of issuing certificates but a national industry for the future. In the same manner, Sarhan & Taha (2004) reported that the various stakeholders of a university set the higher goals of the university; however, they more or less believe that an university's higher goals include two main objectives. The first is a good education that results in qualified graduates who occupy the vacancies of various institutions in proportion to their needs. In other words, it means harmony between society requirements and the quality of the graduates. The second objective includes community service service through interaction between the university and the community and the contribution of the university in solving different problems through research and industrial, educational, social, and agricultural workshops.

Since universities are the backbone of building any society and raising present and future generations, this study aims at identifying one of the most important elements that support in building a developed educational system. UCAS is a leading Palestinian academic institution that is characterized by creativity and innovation compared to its counterparts. UCAS provides educational and community services for the most important section of society: youth. The Ministry of Higher Education Report (2015) reported that UCAS is the top educational institution in terms of the number of students, compared to its counter parts. On the other hand, The Academic Affairs Department at UCAS (2015) stated that UCAS seeks to achieve its goals with a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness, through its human resources and its qualified staff. The Academic Affairs Department at UCAS added that physical resources have a vital role in the progress and prosperity of the institution.

STUDY PROBLEM

This study aimed at exploring the status of governance at UCAS and the extent of its application including all of its requirements and standards. It also aimed at deciding which of the various factors (i.e. economic situation, the environment, customs and traditions, trends and outcomes of education, behavior of staff and students, and politics) are affected by the non-application of governance.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Precisely, the study was carried out in the aim of answering the following questions:

1. Is the weakness of UCAS regulations and their vagueness the reason behind the weakness of the application of governance at UCAS?
2. Is the lack of transparency and fairness a reason for not applying governance at UCAS?
3. Is the lack of accountability and social responsibility and indifference a reason for not applying governance at UCAS?
4. Is weak participation a reason for not applying governance at UCAS?
5. Is the weakness of the strategic vision of UCAS management a reason for the weakness of the application of governance at UCAS?
6. Is the weakness of the relationship between the administration and stake holders a reason for the weakness of the application of governance?
7. Is the lack of experience, when compared to other local and international universities in terms of the number of years since establishment, a reason for the weakness of the application of governance at UCAS?
8. Are officials the reason behind the deficiency in the application of governance or is the Palestinian society's culture the reason?
9. Is the problem of the lack of financial resources the reason for the weakness of the application of governance at UCAS?

STUDY IMPORTANCE

Among the most difficult challenges is the development of governance in higher education institutions, especially universities, because of their important role in leading change and development. At UCAS, there is a discontent among the staff and between the management and the staff. In the same manner, there is a sort of uncertainty towards some of the senior management decisions. Since educational institutions are the platform of communities and a source of science, they should have regulations that should be applied clearly and transparently. This means justice and accountability, integrity, clarity, staff and student satisfaction, and community participation. The researchers believe that the importance of this study stems from the significance of recognizing the extent of the application of the standards of governance at UCAS, especially since it is a prestigious academic institution with a good reputation among its counter parts. This is besides the use of various data collection tools in the study.

DEFINITION OF TECHNICAL TERMS IN THE STUDY

The two researchers defined the following terms procedurally:

- University Governance

It includes the structure and processes, both formal and informal, of decision-makers and the relationships between and among those decision-makers and the stakeholders.

- Decision Makers at UCAS

The College Council that regularly and officially meets on the first Sunday of each month. The number of members of the College Council is 28 staff members including heads of the academic departments at UCAS, the deputy director of academic affairs and the deputy director of administrative affairs.

- UCAS

It is a university college that grants both bachelor and diploma degrees and focuses on both theoretical and applied aspects. It was opened in 1998 and was granted the Distinction and Creativity Award in 2008 and the ISO 9001 Certification in 2011. It aspires to reach global standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies aimed at measuring the relationship between governance and several other aspects. Al Farra (2013) studied the challenges of governance in higher education institutions in Palestine, where he concluded that there was a poor balance in the responsibilities among the various administrative bodies of the Board of Trustees and the Council of the University and the interests of the stakeholders as well. He also found out the weakness of active participation in the decision-making process, whether among the management, staff or students. This affects responsibility sharing. Halawa & Taha(2012) investigated the status of governance at the University of Jerusalem, where the study aimed at verifying the use of governance to enable the university to reach high levels. They found that the Palestinian society is a tribal society and that governance at the University of Jerusalem existed, but was not at the required level. Gharaba (2010) studied the extent of the application of the principle of disclosure and transparency of governance in Beer Almdawar Company Ltd, as his descriptive qualitative study reported non-application of disclosure and transparency in the accounting performance, and the weakness in the application of disclosure and transparency in the financial performance requirements. Al Khawaja (2004) aimed to analyze the concept of governance and the principles of governance. To support the principles of governance, he stressed the importance of increasing awareness of the growing importance of governance for the board of directors for both managers and members. Robies and Salameh (2006) tackled the relationship between governance and financial performance in the construction sector. This study aimed at measuring the effect of applying governance on the financial performance of construction projects in Lebanon for a sample of (100) construction companies of various sizes, to test whether the involvement in the practice of governance among all the parties within the company leads to better financial performance of construction projects. They concluded that the lack of over lapping of the roles of the executives and the board council leads to a better financial performance of the company. This study was one of the few empirical studies in the Arab World, which dealt with the impact of the practice of governance on the financial performance of companies, stressing the importance of noninterference in the roles of executives and board members. Institutional Shareholder Services (2005) tested (77) of the governance factors and (16) of the financial performance measures, within the four groups (risk, profitability, market value, and evaluation). The institution team analyzed the relationship between each of the governance factors for every measure of the financial performance, using data for fiscal years (2004-2007). The study concluded that companies of the best governance are with less risk, because of the low share price variation and lower likelihood of bankruptcy. In addition, companies with better governance are of more profit and return of investment.

STUDY METHODOLOGY & PROCEDURES

The two researchers dealt in this part of the study with the study approach, population and sample, as well as, the study instruments, preparation steps and statistical methods used. Below is a description of these elements:

STUDY APPROACH

The study was conducted according to the descriptive analytical method. This method is described as: "A method that studies a phenomenon, event or issue present at the current time and where information can be obtained from them to answer the study questions with no intervention to it by the researchers" (Al Agha & Al Ustaz, 2000: 83).

STUDY POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The current study tackled the decision makers at UCAS to identify the extent to which UCAS applies university governance. The following tables show the sample distribution according to: their gender in table (1), their academic

qualifications in table (2), the number of years of work at UCAS in table (3), , and the positions they occupy at UCAS in table (4).The characteristics of the study sample are explained as follows:

Table (1): The Genders of the Sample

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	24	85.7
Female	4	14.3
Total	28	100

Table (1) shows that the study sample consists of 24 males that represent 85.7% of the total size of the study sample, while the other 14.3% of the sample were females.

Table (2): Academic Qualifications of the Sample

Qualification	Number	Percentage
BA	4	14.3
MA	16	57.1
PhD	8	28.6
Total	28	100

Table (2) shows that 28.6% of the study sample are PhD holders and 57.1% are MA holders. The same table shows that out of the 28 participants, the number of BA holders was only (4), representing 14.3%.

Table (3): Years of Experience at UCAS

Number of Years	Number of staff	Percentage
3 – 6	4	14.3
≤ 6	24	85.7
Total	28	100

Table (3) shows the number of years that the study sample have been working at UCAS, as 14.3% of the study sample have been working at UCAS for more than three years and less than six years, while 85.7% of the total sample have been working at UCAS for six years or more.

Table (4): Nature of Work

Nature of Work	Number of staff	Percentage
Administrative Staff	5	17.9
Academic Staff	3	10.7
Academic & Administrative	20	71.4
Total	28	100

Table (4) displays the nature of work at UCAS for the study sample, as 17.9% of them were occupying academic positions, while 71.4% of them were academic staff with administrative positions.

STUDY TOOLS

The researchers used the descriptive approach, thus a (30) item questionnaire was designed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted as well. The study instruments aimed at identifying the status of governance at the University College of Applied Sciences, Gaza. Therefore, the items of the questionnaires and the questions of the interviews were validated by experts in the field of governance and research methodology. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire items were distributed over six domains as follows:

- The domain of "laws and regulations
- The domain of "transparency and justice."

- The domain of "accountability and responsibility."
- The domain of "participation in decision-making."
- The domain of "leadership issues, senior management, and strategic vision."
- The domain of "taking into account the stakeholders and social responsibility."

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The researchers used the descriptive approach to explore the status of governance at the University College of Applied Sciences, Gaza. Thus (28) questionnaires were distributed among the decision makers at UCAS. Then, personal interviews were conducted with the members of the college council. The quantitative data was analyzed by using the statistical packages (SPSS) and the results of the interviews were analyzed thematically according to the six domains to be added to the findings and recommendations.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY'S QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table (5) shows the results of the data analysis, based on the quantitative data of the questionnaire.

Table (5): Averages and Standard Deviations of the Questionnaire

No.	Item	Average	Standard Deviation
1	The regulations applied at UCAS are clear.	2.9	3.0
2	UCAS regulations are applied to all the employees without discrimination.	3.26	3.0
3	UCAS regulations are applied to all the students without discrimination.	3.24	3.0
4	Problems are solved transparently at UCAS.	3.34	3.0
5	The weakness of the regulations used at UCAS is the cause of non-application of governance.	2.7	3.0
6	The lack of transparency of the information provided is one of the most important reasons for not applying governance properly at UCAS.	2.4	2.0
7	Discrimination is the most important reason of not applying governance properly at UCAS.	2.1	2.0
8	Patronage is the most important reason of not applying governance properly at UCAS.	2.04	2.0
9	Lack of experience is one of the reasons for the weakness of governance at UCAS.	2.78	3.0
10	The Israeli occupation is a barrier to the use of governance at UCAS.	3.8	4.0
11	The decision makers at UCAS affect using the governance at UCAS.	2.64	3.0
12	The weak financial resources have a negative effect on the application of regulations at UCAS.	3.22	3.0
13	Application of regulations is affected by the existence of pushy people at UCAS.	3.34	2.0
14	There is a kind of indifference in the application of regulations at UCAS.	2.14	2.0
15	The application of regulations preserves the rights of everyone at UCAS.	2.46	2.0
16	The application of regulations reduces the crisis at UCAS.	2.36	2.0
17	The application of governance leads to elevating UCAS's name.	2.24	2.0
18	The application of governance motivates all people at UCAS.	2.22	2.0
19	The application of governance is a key basis for the development of UCAS.	2.26	2.0
20	The application of governance attracts distinguished staff to work at UCAS.	2.02	2.0
21	The application of governance attracts distinguished students to study at UCAS.	2.06	2.0
22	The dominant people at UCAS play a negative role in the application of governance at UCAS.	2.36	2.0
23	Improvisation in solving problems is dominant at UCAS.	3.08	3.0
24	Customs and traditions hinder the application of governance at UCAS.	2.64	2.5
25	UCAS uses the saying "All is under the law".	3.36	3.0
26	The regulations used at UCAS are perfect.	3.32	3.0
27	UCAS continually strives to improve its regulations according to requirements of new changes and developments.	3.14	3.0
28	There is no arbitrary firing at UCAS because the regulations are applied fairly.	3.18	3.0
29	The employee can claim his rights at any time at UCAS because s\he is supported by the fair regulations at UCAS.	3.08	3.0
30	There is a freedom of expression on any subject at UCAS because of the transparency of UCAS.	3.08	3.0
Total score		2.75	2.56

Table (5) shows that the highest rate of response was to the item: "The Israeli occupation is a barrier to the use of governance at UCAS "with a mean of (3.8), and a standard deviation of (4). This was followed by the item" UCAS uses the saying "All is under the law" with a mean of (3.36) and a standard deviation of (3). The items "The problems are solved transparently at UCAS " and " The application of the regulations is affected by the existence of pushy people at UCAS" got the same mean of (3.34). On the other hand, the lowest response was to the item: "The application of governance attracts distinguished staff to work at UCAS." with a mean of (2.02), followed by the item "Patronage is the most important reason for not applying governance properly at UCAS" with a mean of (2.04), followed by the item "The application of governance attracts distinguished students to study at UCAS" with a mean of (2.06). The item "The dominant people at UCAS play a negative role in the application of governance at UCAS" got an average of (2.36) and a standard deviation of (2), while "Customs and traditions hinder the application of governance at UCAS" reached an average of (2.64) and a standard deviation of (2.5).

RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE DATA OF THE STUDY

It is worth mentioning that the information obtained from the personal interviews confirmed that a high proportion of the respondents stated that the laws and regulations applied at UCAS conform to the UCAS bylaw. In the same manner, the same respondents stressed that customs, traditions and tribal favoritism still control many UCAS policies. One of the respondents' answers was "We live in a small Palestinian society, and every citizen has his family or his tribe ... that is the son of so and works in that ministry or military force..." Accordingly, implementation of decision-making through the legal process is hindered in a way or another. Another respondent mentioned that "Many of the offenses such as murders and disputes need protection from the government". He added that these issues cannot be resolved by the UCAS administration drastically without providing protection from the authorities. Other opinions suggested the development of specialized committees and control devices, so that UCAS can be the same as other local Palestinian universities, at least. For example, she demonstrated that the expulsion of students who do not pay tuition fees is one of the most complex problems UCAS faces, as the poverty rate increases in our country, day after day, due to the Israeli occupation and siege. Another interviewee wondered "Does any official dare to raise his voice and prevent students from studying?" bearing in mind that the law is clear, but our circumstances as an occupied people are known to all. He added that the solution lies in searching for financial support. Others acknowledged that some of the UCAS regulations cannot be applied in light of the political conditions that we live in. Regarding the application of laws and regulations on the staff in terms of promotions, the respondents stated that the UCAS bylaw is fair, well-known to all and has clear standards. Moreover, the interviewees revealed that concerning the salaries, they apply to the staff of the Ministry of Higher Education, but they still mentioned that favoritism cannot be denied as well. Other interviewees assured that job security is available with no doubt.

DISCUSSION

If we compare the previous studies to the current study, it is noticed that there many common points between them. All of which calls for the need to focus on the application of university governance requirements and to apply transparency, accountability and integrity to all, without any discrimination. In addition, some special applications of laws and regulations of each institution are to be used according to its laws standards, with some ironic that this study and the one carried out at the University of Jerusalem are characterized in that the universities do not live under the protection of the Palestinian National Authority Law conclusively when compared to local Palestinian universities and international universities, as the researchers know the circumstances that may allow them to coexist as much as possible in the application of laws and regulations, and with respect to tribal favoritism and others.

STUDY RESULTS

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data analyses, the researchers concluded the following:

1. The Israeli occupation has an obvious impact on the non-application of governance as required, through the coordination processes that occur when trying to call the men in power to enforce the law or to protect the property of the university and its students and staff.
2. The university administration is trying to work on the application of the system among students without discrimination, with transparently and without resorting to secrets.
3. There is noticeable favoritism at UCAS resulting from tribalism, which is one of the characteristics of the Palestinian society.
4. Tribalism does not affect the application of governance at UCAS, which indicates that there is a contradiction in the answers of respondents.

5. The application of laws and regulations is clear and transparent and without discrimination in some situations where tribalism does not interfere.
6. Patronage and duplication in the decision making at UCAS is noticed, whether on the staff level, or at the level of students.
7. The negative values such as the worn customs and traditions that the Palestinian society has got used to are the roots of the problems facing the application of university governance, and cause difficulties to making decisions.
8. Poverty and vulnerable financial resources visibly impact the application of laws and regulations, in addition to the unstable political situation of the Palestinian society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the study findings, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Providing legal protection on an ongoing basis without obstacles to coordination and work.
2. Issuing clear strict and viable regulations, particularly concerning the rules of transparency, accountability, and integrity.
3. Reviewing the concepts of governance and the extent of their application at UCAS, and studying the governance results annually to adjust its outdated items in line with the students' and the staff's needs.
4. Assigning specialized committees for continuous monitoring and testing to determine the extent of the application of laws and regulations at UCAS.
5. Forming rapid protection intervention groups, unknown to the internal and external community, for the good of the university and not to spy on the targeted community.
6. Putting control systems such as hidden cameras.
7. Adopting and adapting the successful experiences and regulations of other universities that are similar to the environment at UCAS.
8. Expanding the financial support of the university to internal and external levels, in coordination with the Palestinian National Authority, and the relationships of the university staff, if possible.
9. Conducting awareness raising programs for the surrounding community and among the students through lectures to clarify the harmful worn customs and traditions that damage the university.
10. Verifying more than one party, and in many ways, on any complaint before applying the requirements of governance, especially when applying the sanctions system.
11. Getting rid of the pushy people and preference, through adopting "All is under the Law".

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