



# The need for professional training programs to improve faculty members teaching skills

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## Abstract

There is no doubt that the large majority of faculty members are expert and knowledgeable in their specializations. Yet, we still find that university graduates are not as qualified as they are supposed to be. The poorer university students are, the more likely they are taught by unskilled teachers. Ironically, many studies have concluded that faculty members tend to believe that students lack the basic skills for college-level work (UCLA Survey, 2005), ignoring that they themselves lack the effective teaching skills. The Saudi government as such has realized that 21st century requires generic skills to be integrated in the curriculum which in turn obligates faculty members to improve their teaching skills accordingly. Saudi universities expect the Deanships for Academic Development across all universities to provide trainings on different teaching and learning skills to improve the quality of their faculty members. The purpose of this study was to investigate the need and the competencies that are required by faculty members to acquire in Saudi universities to enable them achieve the standards stated by the NCAAA. A questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were utilized to get the data. The sample consisted of 882 participants (students, faculty members, chairmen and colleges boards, colleges' deans, and deanships' deans) from some universities in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The results showed the great need and importance of providing training programs to enhance and elevate faculty members' professional abilities in teaching. Many participants emphasized that in-service trainings should be mandated to ensure quality teaching.

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*Keywords:* University graduates, generic skills, teaching skills, academic training programs

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## 1. Introduction

Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping the social and economic development for countries in a globally interconnected and competitive world. In his book *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Paul Ramsden (2003) argued that "in knowledge-based economies, governments see universities as engines for social change and expansion of prosperity" p. (3). Hence, the need for highly trained and skillful graduates makes countries develop and execute thoughtful plans to improve the quality of teaching in higher education. Teachers in higher education come to the field of teaching with little, if any, formal professional trainings in teaching other than the content of their discipline. Little, Locke, Parker and Richardson (2007) said "in pursuit of national strategy of excellence, we are convinced that the enhancement and promotion of learning and teaching must be a priority for all of higher education" p. (11).

James (1990) and Winston (1999) argued that higher education is going through serious transformation in international competition, increase in social and demographical diversity among students, knowledge based economy, introduction of new educational and information technology, etc. Many researches have asserted that traditional teaching practices cannot produce high level thinkers/workers required for the labor market. These

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changes led universities all over the globe to develop programs aimed at providing resources and training to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes.

While many universities are seeking prestige through research, they don't neglect their role in providing quality teaching. To enhance the education system, in the last ten years, the Saudi Government has invested heavily and made serious efforts to boost the country's higher education system. The National Report by the Office of the Deputy Minister for Educational Affairs in 2009 pointed out that "the Ministry of Higher Education endeavours to raise the level of excellence and fulfil its requirements in the various higher education institutions. It also works to strengthen and invigorate the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). The Ministry has taken up a number of serious initiatives designed to elevate the level of excellence in institutions of higher education..." p. (18)

The importance and effectiveness of faculty training programs to enhance and elevate faculty members' professional abilities in teaching are well documented in the literature. Some institutions mandate in-service training for all faculty members; others require certificates in teaching. Furthermore, faculty professional development should be looked at as a lifelong learning process. Based on a number of in-depth interviews, Gibbs and Coffey (2000) developed a framework that lays out the rationale for conducting a faculty training program. Their rationale is based on the improvement of teachers' skills, the development of teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning, and the consequent changes in students' learning.

### *1.1. Teaching Professional Competencies and Standards*

Faculty members' competency encompasses knowledge of subject matter, teaching skills and professional attitudes. Obviously, knowledge based on a subject matter is not enough to claim competency in teaching. Besides subject matter, teaching professional competency requires additional "nonacademic" knowledge (i.e. social, administrative and technical). This analogy for faculty competency was supported in a report developed by Hendriks et. al (2010) for the Office for Official Publications of the European Union on faculty professional development. The report indicated that "learning strategies, learning to learn and reflecting on these learning strategies (metacognition) are as important as mastering content." Furthermore, the report referenced the work of Darling-Hammond who listed a number of studies "indicating that pedagogical training generally has a stronger effect than subject matter mastery".

While the Saudi National Qualifications Framework for higher education provided strong measures to assure programs' quality, it stopped short of specifying competency standards for faculty members. The lack of faculty competency standards in Saudi higher education is pointed out by Al-Ghamdi, Al-Gaied and Abu-Rasain (2012) in a study titled *Faculty Evaluation in Saudi Universities: A Suggested Model*. The authors argued that "faculty evaluation is still not satisfactory, as there are no standards or performance indicators against which to evaluate." (85)

According to Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) ratings for 2009, Singapore listed 5th showing high performance in learning outcomes. The educational decision makers in Singapore accept that teacher preparation is a determinant factor to education quality. To emphasize the importance of teacher quality, the National Institute of Education in Singapore (NIE) (2009) stated that "students need to acquire new knowledge, skills and dispositions to ensure their survival and success as individuals, as members of the community, and as citizens of our nation. To achieve this, we must develop teachers who are able to undertake greater responsibilities as they are at the forefront of educating our youth. It is now universally accepted that the quality of the teaching force determines the quality of education". Hence, the NIE developed a Teacher Education Model for the 21st century with the aim of uplifting teachers' competencies and consequently enhancing the teaching and learning processes. In order to bring about the desired learning outcomes and to graduate students who can compete in today's global economy, the universities should necessitate that teachers must acquire subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills and core values.

### *1.2. The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA)*

The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has set high expectations from its universities. In its Ninth Development Plan of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the government indicated that the education system remained insufficient to meet the requirements of the labor market. It thus recommended that new mechanisms that would respond to the demands of the economy and the labor market and, particularly, increase the employability of young people in different majors, medical, science, engineering, administration, computer science, and information technology are crucially needed. Acting on that, the Ministry of Higher Education has taken up a number of significant initiatives designed to stimulate and improve the quality and performance of higher education institutions. One of the most important initiatives designed to pursue drastic reforms in the sector of higher education is the NCAAA, which came into being in 2003 with the aim of improving the quality of higher education provision through determining standards and criteria for academic performance and accreditation of academic programs. The NCAAA has set eleven key quality standards for higher education institutions the most relevant of which to the professional training program is Standard 4. Standard 4, which deals with aspects of teaching and learning, focuses on five broad areas known as learning outcomes domains. These are

**Knowledge:** the ability to recall, understand, and present information, including: knowledge of specific facts, knowledge of concepts, principles and theories, and knowledge of procedure.

**Cognitive skills:** the ability to apply conceptual understanding of concepts, principles, and theories and apply procedures involved in critical thinking and creative problem solving, both when asked to do so, and when faced with unanticipated new situations.

**Interpersonal skills and responsibility:** including the ability to take responsibility for their own learning and continuing personal and professional development, work effectively in groups and exercise leadership when appropriate, act responsibly in personal and professional relationships, act ethically and consistently with high moral standards in personal and public forums.

**Communication, information technology and numerical skills:** including the ability to communicate effectively in oral and written form, use information and communications technology, and use basic mathematical and statistical techniques.

**Psychomotor skills:** which are required in some fields of study such as medicine, music and fine art.

### *1.3. An External Reviewers' Report to NCAAA*

In 2008, some external reviewers reported to NCAAA on the educational practices of one university in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia and highlighted the weaknesses in the institutional academic performance and identified the areas which require urgent improvement. They reported that traditional examinations are still widely used and that the assessment of student learning is not aligned with educational outcomes. Therefore more emphasis should be placed on writing clear learning outcomes and connecting them with teaching strategies and assessment should be well-established. The reviewers also reported that there is absence of a uniform system for on-going program evaluation. Lastly, a heavy emphasis on theory over application was observed in the institution teaching and learning practices.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the needs and the competencies that are required by faculty members to acquire in Saudi universities to enable them achieve the standards stated by the NCAAA. While faculty members are the direct target group in this study, the training program is meant indirectly to improve students learning outcomes. The obvious link between faculty training and students' achievement have been pointed out by Supovitz and Turner (2000) when they wrote "The implicit logic of focusing on professional development as a means of improving student achievement is that high quality professional development will produce superior teaching in classrooms which will, in turn, translate into higher levels of student achievement". This study will try to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a need to provide professional training programs for faculty members at Saudi universities?

2. What specific professional competencies do faculty members require to implement in their teaching and learning processes?

## 2. Methods

In investigating the needs and importance of having professional training programs to enrich faculty members' teaching competencies, the authors of this study tried to use a 360-degree approach that involves all key stakeholders—*students, faculty members, chairmen and colleges' boards, and deans of colleges and supporting deanships* at some universities in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. In addition to that, the researchers carefully reviewed the literature, the standard 4 of the National Commission of Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA), and the external reviewers' reports on the performance of one of the universities in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The results from a 360-degree approach are often used to plan specific paths in the development of professional training programs.

Data for this qualitative study were collected using different kinds of tools; semi-structured interviews, paper and electronic surveys. The combined use of different data gathering methods is one form of triangulation, which strengthening the credibility of the data and provides the researchers with a holistic view of the phenomenon under study. The sample consisted of 882 participants from some universities in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia (523 students, 306 faculty members, 18 chairmen and colleges boards, 12 colleges' deans, and 4 deanships' deans).

## 3. Results

This paper could serve as a needs assessment for the activities and initiatives any professional training program at the different universities is expected to offer. The authors reviewed the **NCAAA learning domains and the external reviewers' reports** to find out the expected standards faculty members should achieve in their students. Then, they interviewed the **deans of colleges and supporting deanships** to find out the challenges that hinder improving higher education and their view points to resolve them. The **students' evaluation of their teachers** was obtained from the Deanship of Quality Assurance to find out how students evaluate their learning experience in the academic programs. The authors also surveyed the **faculty members** to find out what specific areas they need training on to improve their teaching skills. All the participants in this study have unanimously declared the importance to have professional training programs to enhance faculty members' teaching skills. The specific analyses of the data collected from each group have been presented below.

### 3.1. Deans of Colleges and Supporting Deanships

The authors performed frequent meetings with many deans of colleges and supporting deanships. The reason of such meeting was to identify the challenges that encumber the improvement of higher education practices and how they could help in this regard. The main services and training packages that should be provided to faculty members were discussed too. Most of the challenges that the deans laid revolve around the fact that many faculty members lack the sense and the fundamental skills they requisite to make conspicuous progress in education in the 21st century. Furthermore, they pointed out to the main services and training packages that they recommend to be offered to faculty members. They asserted that faculty members need professional training on curriculum design, teaching and learning strategies, testing and measurement, utilizing technology in teaching, and communication skills.

### 3.2. Departments Chairmen and Some Colleges Boards

Meetings with the deans were followed by meetings with departments' chairmen and some colleges' boards. Eighteen departments' chairmen and board members were met and their concerns and needs for training were observed. They suggested some areas that they believe may help faculty members elevate their teaching competencies. Many topics were suggested covering five key categories. These categories are exactly the same as

those were suggested in the meetings with the deans of colleges and supporting deanships. The five main areas are course development and design, teaching strategies, assessment, using technology in education, and communication skills.

### *3.3. Students' Evaluation of their Teachers*

The evaluation of the teaching process as seen by the students is obtained by the Deanship of Quality Assurance (DQA) every year. The results of last year's evaluation were taken from the DQA record files. Students reported that they experience too much teaching that is marked by lectures, very little interaction with students, the use of dated materials, and a heavy emphasis on theory over application. Students believe that assessing students learning using the traditional approach will not progress their education. In light of this, professional training programs should help teachers to develop a better understanding of the power of student-centered approaches to learning, particularly those that involve active student engagement in the learning process.

### *3.4. Faculty Members*

An online survey was sent to faculty members to elicit the main areas they need training on to help them improve their teaching skills. The survey included some of the topics that were suggested in literature and by the deans of colleges and supporting deanships and the departments' chairmen and colleges' boards. They were also given the option to add some more topics. Three hundred and six responses were received. The main areas they noted are *Curriculum Design* (intended learning outcomes, course and syllabus design, program design based on NCAAA requirements), *Teaching Strategies* (interactive teaching and students' engagement, questioning strategies and learning discussion in the classroom, problem based learning), *Assessment and Evaluation* (effective students' evaluation strategies-performance assessment, portfolio, projects, etc., using multiple choice items to test higher order thinking skills, test items analysis and providing constructive feedback), *Using Technology in Teaching* (enhancing learning through the use of technology, using social media channels for learning, design effective PowerPoint presentation), *Communication Skills* (motivating students in the classroom, ethics of teaching, communication skills in the curriculum based on NCAAA, classroom management), *Thinking Skills* (scientific research skills, teaching creativity and innovation, teaching critical thinking skills).

Although each college has a strong cadre of qualified faculty, intended learning outcomes do not cover the five domains specified in the National Qualification Framework stated by the NCAAA as well as the other important skills that are considered crucial for students to cope with the 21st changes. This might due to the fact that faculty members lack the necessary educational competencies and skills mentioned above. Current university teaching is problematic because faculty members tend to teach the way they were taught with the inherent dangers of proliferating uninformed, out-dated, and/or inappropriate teaching and assessment practices. University teaching is still characterized by unclear expectations and poor alignment between course outcomes, learning activities, and assessment. Additionally, many of the assessment practices do not assess students' deeper understandings, fails to encourage active, deeper, independent learning and reflection. As such, there is an urgent need to establish centralized professional development departments in all universities designed to provide support and instruction about teaching, learning, and assessment. The professional training programs will shoulder this responsibility and will endeavour to support faculty members to improve their skills to enhance learning among student populations. Accomplishing this mission requires that faculty members must be proficient in content knowledge, pedagogy, current practices in teaching and learning and assessment.

## **4. Conclusion**

The outcome of this paper showed that high quality professional training programs for faculty members is important and will become essential to institutions' capacity to compete in this changing world. Professional training

programs can produce promising learning and teaching practices. The authors in this study believe that educational practitioners should play important roles in helping new teachers advance into the profession.

A good professional training program needs to combine both theoretical and classroom practices to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Teachers should routinely attend training workshops related to teaching strategies and students assessment to understand the students' learning processes and thus to improve learning. To conduct an appropriate and successful faculty training programs following the suggestions proposed by this study and the 9th Development Plan of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the training programs should focus more on formulating clear learning outcomes that cover the five learning domains stated by NCAAA, use a variety of teaching strategies, teach generic skills such as interpersonal and responsibility, communication, information technology, problem solving, critical thinking, team work, etc. and align assessment with learning outcomes and the teaching methods.

It is extremely important, however, to ensure that teaching staff in the professional training programs are highly qualified and experienced in the topics they are presenting. In addition, the quality and effectiveness of the training program are evaluated consistently and that feedback should be provided so that the program's goals are achieved.

## 5. Recommendation

Providing some workshops and lectures is not expected to change faculty members' way of teaching overnight. It is a continuous commitment that they have to undertake. They are required to be exposed to a numerous essential teaching and learning skills accompanied by reflection-on-action and valuable discussions. If they work hard for it and take it seriously, their way of teaching will definitely lead to an overall educational success. A coherent training program should be conducted throughout the year where faculty members are obligated to attend. The program should be designed by a group of educationists rather than a single teacher. Recommendations for educational areas that need improvement in Saudi Arabia's universities are

- The intended learning outcomes should cover the five domains required by the NCAAA.
- Programs should be evaluated to meet the NCAAA standards.
- Soft skills such as communication should be integrated into instructions to students.
- Greater efforts need to be taken to adopt a student-centered learning approach.
- Planned teaching strategies should be implemented to include procedure to develop cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and accountability as well as numerical and communication skills.
- Innovation and creativity in teaching should be encouraged and formal recognition to outstanding teaching should be given.

To sum up, a professional training program should focus its practices on all pedagogical aspects of teaching and learning that faculty members must acquire to fulfil and meet the standards of the NCAAA as well as the 9th Development Plan of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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