

A Proposed Strategy to Achieve the Competitive Advantage in the Palestinian Universities

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Abstract: *The study aimed at presenting a proposed strategy to achieve a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities. The researchers used a focus group as a study tool which included some faculty members from three Palestinian universities (The Islamic University, Al-Azhar University, Al-Aqsa University). The researchers used the structural approach to formulate the proposed strategy in order to achieve a competitive advantage at universities. The strategy was based on five fields (goals) which are (intellectual capital, scientific research, job satisfaction, organizational structures and the local and international relationships), and a vision that based on appropriate objectives and activities to achieve these goals.*

Keywords: *proposed strategy, competitive advantage, Palestinian universities*

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I. Introduction

Universities are considered the most important educational and social institutions associated with the existence of (thought, science and civilization). These concepts are interrelated and complementary. The university also has a functional mission (teaching, scientific research and community service). Thus, universities are social, cultural and educational institutions that are founded by the society to serve people. Moreover, the universities cannot be isolated from society or human civilization (Al-Zubaidi, 2008, p.2).

In light of the recent developments, the competitiveness among universities has become severe more than before. So, the competition has increased among the local public universities, private universities and the international universities that have come to invest their money, establish buildings and provide services locally or universities that have established joint programs with local private universities. Furthermore, the universities that have attracted students from the other countries to join them or study electronically through education distance system. Hence, universities seek to invest their material and intellectual potential (Al-Qarni and Al-Atiqi, 2012, p. 225).

Some international universities have achieved scientific and distinguished reputation and become centers for attracting distinguished people not only from their countries but also all over the world. Besides, these universities have continuous and positive relationships with the beneficiaries of their research and advisory services and have the ability to organize their structures according to global changes. As a result, these universities have a leading position because of their competitive advantages level (Daniel, 2006, p. 94).

The importance of competitive advantage lies in providing services to beneficiaries in order to meet their needs, ensure their loyalty, improve the reputation of the organization in their minds and achieve the strategic excellence in the services. Moreover, getting into new and competitive field and forming a new vision for the future goals and opportunities that the organization wants to achieve. Also, the competitive advantage makes the internal processes of the institution more dynamic and follow the long-term development and progress because it is characterized by continuity and renewal (Al-Ghalbi & Idris, 2007, p. 309). Therefore, achieving a competitive advantage depends on the availability of many elements and the nature of interaction and integration among these elements which are: natural resources, capital, technology and human resources (Al-Rababaa, 2006, p. 8).

Getting a competitive advantage depends on the ability of the institution to adapt to the rapid changes that occur in its external environment and utilize the internal sources effectively. Moreover, the institution should implement the strategy of business management in the institution effectively and properly (Abu Ghuban, 2012, p. 32).

The external requirements of the competitive advantage success consist of society, government, and the institutions that care about the assurance of quality, accreditation and competitiveness (Al-Dakheel, 2011, p. 19), while the internal requirements consist of the organizational culture, university's leadership, infrastructure, resources and competent cadres (Al-Saleh, 2012, p.300).

The indicators of competitive advantage in the Higher Education

Many international and local attempts have focused on improving the Total Quality in the educational institutions through conducting conferences and forums and forming high committees to formulate specific indicators and standards for measuring quality in these institutions because there is no one indicator that can describe completely the complex educational system with its components, dimensions, inputs and processes. Thus, there are many quantitative and qualitative indicators whose success requires attention to many important criteria which are the organizational structure, school structure, curriculum, methods and means (Alimat, 2004, p. 15). As well as, measuring the performance of Higher Education institutions includes three fields: the first field (research and inventions which include indicators related to faculty members, the diversity of faculties and programs, and the awards received by the college), the second field (teaching and learning which include the indicators of student quality and diversity, while the third field includes the public service related to the satisfaction of society and participating in public activities (Al-Maqadma, 2013, p. 36).

Therefore, the competitive context urges the Higher Education institutions to do the best on showing their activities and services to all beneficiaries, as well as distributing those beneficiaries to categories and targeted groups in order to meet their needs, desires, goals and future aspirations (Qashqash, 2014, p. 53)

Some researchers dealt with the same subject of this study, such as Abu Daiya's study (2011) that aimed at identifying the reality of human capital and the competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities, while Assaf's study (2015) and Najim & Sayma study (2015) focused on the competitiveness among the Palestinian universities. Moreover, the Islamic university conducted a study day on the Academic Excellence which emphasized the need to build continuous competitive capacities for faculty members to develop their performance in the field of teaching, scientific research and community service in accordance with the standards of excellence through organizational learning.

1.1. Previous studies:

The researchers conducted a survey of the available studies according to the subject matter, and these studies were classified from the newest to the oldest, as follows: **Al-Sousi's study (2015)** aimed at identifying the degree of technical colleges' practice in Gaza governorates on excellence management and the competitive advantage strategies. As well as, determining the differences among the averages of the sample ratings on the degree of technical colleges' practice in Gaza governorates on excellence management due to the variables of (college, the work field, academic qualification, gender). **Abdul-Ghafoor's study (2015)** aimed at identifying the role of knowledge management requirements on providing a competitive advantage and the correlation relationship between the availability of knowledge management requirements and the competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities in Gaza Governorates. The results showed that universities provide knowledge management requirements in various dimensions, such as human resources, organizational culture, information technology, and organizational leadership. **Al-Fouqaha'a's study (2012)** aimed at identifying the role of adopting the strategies of excellence in learning and teaching to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the Higher Education institutions. The study considered that the competitive advantage of educational institutions stems from the achieved impact on the level of the student, employee and institution. The researcher used the analytical descriptive method and a questionnaire as a study's tool. The study showed that there is a strong correlation between the adoption of excellence strategies in learning and teaching and the achievement of competitive advantage in the Higher education institutions through providing a distinctive educational experience to students and supporting the academic staff to work due to the desired quality standards. **Al-Saleh's study (2012)** aimed at identifying the concepts, fields and strategies of building a competitive advantage in the Saudi governmental universities. As well as the most important requirements of the fields and strategies. The study showed that the awareness of the faculties members in the Saudi governmental universities on the concept of competitive advantage had a very high degree. Furthermore, the fields of scientific research, education, technology and knowledge production are the most important fields to build a competitive advantage in the Saudi governmental universities. **Bisaria's study (2013)** aimed at finding out the reasons of using competitive advantages in the education sector and identifying the types, importance and effectiveness of the competitive advantages in the private universities which will benefit students, parents and society. The study results showed that (50%) of the sample believe that the quality of the students achieves a competitive advantage, (33%) believe that the conditions of students achieve the competitive advantage, (17%) believe that forming an image for the management of colleges or universities achieves the competitive advantage, (66%) believe that developing the knowledge management achieves the competitive advantage in the colleges and universities, and (34%) believe that giving opportunities to teachers in order to develop themselves will contribute in developing the knowledge management that will achieve the competitive advantage. **Lindong's study (2007)** aimed at studying the competitive advantage of the private Higher Education institutions in Kuching City, Sarawak Province in Malaysia. The main focus of the study was on how these institutions analyze, manage and invest their external and internal environment and resources to achieve a competitive advantage. Moreover, identifying some main factors that have enabled these

institutions to develop and achieve a high competitive advantage in education. The researcher used a Case Study for four educational institutions and semi-structured interviews and observations as study tools. **Bradmore's study (2007)** aimed at measuring the current concern of universities about the rapid changes in competition in the global higher education sector, evaluating the strategies developed by universities because of the increased competition and developing a conceptual framework to guide the competitive behavior in universities. The main results of the study showed that the universities' concern with competition was high although the strategic planning was not developed and mentioning the sensitive strategic resources in the media of universities was neglected. Furthermore, universities implement many strategies in response to increased competition. These strategies include improving the university reputation, developing strong partnerships in the field of global research, developing the training courses to enhance the importance of the Labor Market and the beneficiary and strengthening the infrastructure and facilities to attract the best staff and students.

1.2. Statement of the problem:

Although the difficult conditions and harassment that face the Palestinian universities by the Israeli occupation, they seek for excellence and competition. So, the universities try to develop their strategies, programs and systems to increase the competitive position and quality. The researchers diagnosed the recent status of the universities and formulated a strategy to develop the institutions of Higher Education to get competitive advantages. Hence the problem of the study involved the main question as follows:

- What is the proposed strategy to achieve a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities?

1.3. The purpose of the study:

- Formulating a strategy to achieve a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities.

1.4. The limitations of the study

1- The subject limit: formulating a strategy to achieve a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities.

2- The humane limit: a focus group of faculty members of three universities.

3- The institutional limit: the Islamic University, Al-Azhar University and Al-Aqsa University.

4- The spatial limit: the governorates of Gaza Strip - Palestine.

5- The temporal limit: The study was applied in the first semester of 2015/2016.

1.5. The significance of the study:

1. The important contribution of competitive advantage in raising the output level of the Higher Education institutions.

2. This study may benefit:

- The faculty members and administrators at the universities of Gaza in achieving the competitive advantage of their universities.

- Researchers in the fields of competitive advantage.

- The bodies that are responsible for the Higher Education in planning programs.

II. Formulating the strategy

The definition of strategy:

Strategy: is a set of ideas and principles that deal with the field of humane activity comprehensively and integrally, and it includes the means of work, requirements and directions that make changes to achieve the specific objectives. It is also an act or a set of actions aimed at achieving the desired goals. Moreover, the strategy is concerned with the future and takes into account multiple possibilities that can be modified according to the continuous developments (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 4).

The answer to the study question, which is: What is the proposed strategy to achieve a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities?

In order to formulate a proposed strategy for achieving a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities, the researchers used the focus group tool, which concentrated on a group of experts who discussed a new subject and gave their opinions that are mutually agreed.

Thus, the researchers followed the next steps:

1. Formulated an initial framework for the strategy and send it to the group of experts, then invited them to the meeting for discussion.

2. Met the group to discuss the strategy and the procedures of implementation.

3. Divided the group into small groups, (3) individuals per group.

4. Distributed the goals of the strategy to the small groups for discussion and comments.

5. Asked the groups to modify the items of the strategy (delete - merge - add - redraft).

6. Each group presented the final findings and modification in front of the other groups.

7. Allowed all participants in the other groups to comment on the presented results.
8. Modified and documented the results of the proposed strategy in accordance with the recommendations of the experts.

The main items of the proposed strategy:

1-Ensuring the excellence of the intellectual capital: It focuses on the importance of building a clear educational philosophy for developing the intellectual capital represented in the creative and distinguished individuals because they are the main factor for raising the efficiency of the university and achieving a competitive advantage. Moreover, saving creative people from joining to competitive institutions.

2- Supporting the scientific research which is an input to a competitive advantage: it deals with developing the skills of human cadres on the scientific research and directing them to serve the community and solve its problems and issues.

3-Achieving the job satisfaction of employees: It is represented in providing services that meet their needs and tendencies, urging on cooperation and partnership among them, supporting them financially and morally and applying the principles of democracy among them.

4-Adopting distinct patterns for building the organizational structures: it means that developing the organizational and administrative dimensions that affect on the intellectual capital to monitor performance and work development. As well as, providing all possibilities of electronics and sources of funding to exchange and develop the knowledge and ideas.

5- Enhancing the relationships with local, regional and international universities: it means that building relationships with the other universities to keep up with the developments in the educational institutions, participating in research projects with the others, enhancing the academic cooperation and strengthening the academic position of the university locally and internationally.

The positive and negative effects on universities:

The most important positive effects on university:

- 1- Attracting the teachers who have high academic degrees.
- 2- The universities consider humans as the basis of raising their efficiency.
- 3- There is a fair and clear system for promotion at the university that encourages the faculty members to participate in scientific research.
- 4- Data and information are periodically updated.
- 5- Letting everyone know the services and educational potential of the universities.
- 6- The electronic services are used to facilitate the access to knowledge by beneficiaries.
- 7- The universities conduct international and local partnerships to improve scientific research.
- 8- Providing electronic databases.
- 9- Encouraging the employees to participate in the vocational development programs inside and outside the university.

The most important negative effects on universities:

- 1- The lack of financial incentives that are provided to the distinguished researchers.
- 2 - The lack of moral incentives that are provided to the distinguished researchers.
- 3- The weakness of the marketing process for the scientific production of the employees.
- 4- The universities lack incubators that are profitable financially.
- 5- There is no adequate budget to finance and support research and productive projects.
- 6- The universities do not employ their clients' opinions in developing intellectual capital.
- 7- The universities do not invest their relationships in supporting the intellectual capital well.
- 8- There is a weakness in employing the media on publishing the scientific research of the staff.
- 9- There is a weakness in providing advanced management systems to monitor and develop work.
- 10- The universities do not update their organizational structures in accordance with the competitiveness with the local and international universities.
- 11- The universities do not have a good plan to benefit from the generated knowledge in the minds of distinguished employees.
- 12- A weakness in using electronic programs to develop the intellectual capital requirements.

Table(1):SWOT Analysis of the Palestinian universities

The strengths	The weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing highly qualified human resources. -The distinguished demographic location of the university. -The diversity of the scientific and theoretical majors. - Availability of the quality support systems at the university. - Computerizing many systems at university (registration, libraries, databases, financial affairs). - There is communication with the community institutions. - A supportive, administrative and academic system. - There are distinguished relationships with the beneficiaries of the university. - There are good human relationships among the university employees. - Providing a system of accountability and monitoring in the university. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The lack of financial and moral incentives in the university. - The weakness of the infrastructure of the university (buildings, equipment, laboratories and computers). - The weakness of the relationship with research centers and the international academic institutions. - The lack of research directed towards developing intellectual capital. - The lack of providing incubators at the university. - The weakness of the ability of the university to attract self-support through private investments. - The weakness of the internal administrative communication at the university. - The weakness of rehabilitation programs for faculty members. - The weakness of transparency and participation in decision making. - The low level of the university according to the international classifications. - The weakness of marketing the scientific research outputs. - The individuality in doing research.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investing the reputation of the Palestinian universities in cooperation and organizing with the international universities. - The positive transformation of the university towards the knowledge economy. - The good reputation of the university. - The international agreements and partnership projects among universities. - The expansion of the university's area and providing opportunities to establish productive projects. - Some universities have special majors. - The positive image for the role of the university in serving the community. - The high demand on the post-graduate programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The siege and difficulty in travelling researchers and students. - The financial crisis of the university. - The continued competition with the other universities. - The weak contribution of the community in financing universities. - Reducing the budget allocated to the university. - The weakness of the connection between the system of scientific research and the needs of society. - The weakness of university independence and the interference of some parties in its affairs. - Leaving the talented people at the university. - The military instability and recurrent wars. - The rapid progress of the systems and programs of information. - The lack of awareness of the community institutions on the importance of partnership with the university and its role in sustainable development.

The proposed strategy to achieve a competitive advantage in the Palestinian universities

The researchers formulated the initial form of the strategy and held a focus group that included many faculty members of the universities to modify the strategy in order to formulate the final form, as follows:

First: the vision

An academic environment that is distinguished locally and internationally, supports values and creativity and contributes to building a knowledge society.

Second: the mission

The Palestinian universities seek to create an environment that supports creativity, innovation and excellence, adopt advanced patterns of building organizational structures according to the international standards, provide academic research environment with distinct human resources, build an effective community partnership and form a supportive administrative system.

Third: the values

Sincerity, respect, institutional loyalty and commitment, excellence, empowerment, initiative, accountability and transparency, partnership and cooperation, ambition and creativity.

Fourth: the goals of the strategy

Goal (1): Ensure the excellence of intellectual capital.

Objective (1-1): Build a clear educational philosophy for developing the intellectual capital.

The procedures of achieving the objective (1-1):

- Determining the constants of ideology and value of the intellectual capital.
- Employing the research and studies to serve the purpose of philosophy.
- Formulating an accurate mechanism for estimating the value of intellectual capital at universities.
- Holding workshops and training courses for employees on the value of intellectual capital.

Objective (2-1): Reduce the leaving of intellectual capital to the competitive institutions.

The procedures for achieving the objective (2-1):

- Formulating policies to attract highly qualified individuals to work at the university.
- Providing financial and moral incentives for distinguished researchers and academics.
- Providing opportunities for employees to benefit from the international experiences.

Objective (3-1): Depend on producing and applying the ideas.

The procedures for achieving the objective (3-1):

- Formulating mechanisms to ensure copyright and intellectual property rights.
- Supporting patents.
- Providing opportunities for distinguished and creative workers and investing their intellectual and creative energies.
- Setting guarantees to transform ideas into projects.

Goal (2): Support a scientific research as an input to a competitive advantage

Objective (1-2): Support the scientific research, innovation and creativity among the employees of the university.

The procedures for achieving the objective (1-2):

- Allocating an adequate budget for the scientific research.
- Marketing the scientific research of the employees in the media.
- Formulating a declared and supportive strategy for the scientific research.
- Developing the scientific research infrastructure like libraries, laboratories and research centers.
- Developing the scientific research skills of the cadres.

Objective (2-2): Prepare an appropriate environment to create a knowledge society at the university.

The procedures for achieving the objective (2-2):

- Formulating mechanisms to exchange ideas, information and experiences among individuals.
- Supporting and developing the management of creative works.

Objective (3-2): Connect the scientific research with the university's goals and the plans of sustainable development in society.

The procedures for achieving the objective (3-2):

- Emphasizing the social responsibility of the university towards society.
- The university attracts businessmen and economists to contribute to the development of society.
- Developing mechanisms to poll graduates' opinions and the labor market on university education.
- Preparing studies on the problems and needs of society.

Goal (3): Achieve the job satisfaction of employees.

Objective (1-3): Urge on cooperation, learning and team-working permanently.

The procedures for achieving the objective (1-3):

- Enhancing the social and personal relationships among employees.
- Reducing the workload of academics.
- Providing organizational climate for the employees to work together.

Objective (2-3): Provide a democratic atmosphere and academic freedom for workers.

The procedures for achieving the objective (2-3):

- Providing effective accountability and monitoring systems of employee performance.
- Providing independence and flexibility for the deans to use their innovative knowledge in problem-solving.
- Adopting the principle of participation in decision-making.
- Providing an environment of direct interaction between management and employees.
- Providing independence for universities from political parties.
- Providing guarantees for producing and distributing the knowledge of researchers.

Objective (3-3): Enhance a university's capacity to address problems, challenges and competitions.

The procedures for achieving the objective (3-3):

- Providing good coordination and cooperation among the units and branches of the university.
- Developing the means of communication to document the rapid changes on university education.
- Employing specialized advisory teams at the university.
- Developing quality assurance systems continually.

Goal (4): Adopt distinct patterns to build organizational structures.

Objective (1-4): Benefit from modern Information Technology and Communication.

The procedures for achieving the objective (1-4):

- Providing technical and human support for workers to develop their technical skills.
- Employing technology in the educational process.
- Providing advanced databases for workers and scientific research.

Objective (2-4): Strengthen the cooperation between the financial provisions and the requirements of intellectual capital development.

The procedures for achieving the objective (2-4):

- Finding internal and external funding sources to support innovation.

- Providing business incubators as a helping source of funding the university.
- Objective (3-4): Develop an administrative system to achieve a competitive advantage.
The procedures for achieving the objective (3-4):
- Facilitating the communication procedures with the distinguished universities.
 - Selecting professional administrative cadres at the universities.
 - Providing flexible organizational structures that support innovation and development.
 - Reviewing and updating the administrative structures periodically to achieve a competitive advantage locally and internationally.
 - Developing university regulations, laws and policies according to local and international systems.

Goal (5): Enhance the relationships with local, regional and international universities.

Objective (1-5): Enhance the joint academic cooperation with local and international universities.

The procedures for achieving the objective (1-5):

- Increasing the external scholarships of certain majors.
- Supporting the local scientific conferences and encouraging participation in external conferences.
- Implementing and developing joint training programs with local and international universities.
- Formulating a program for exchanging professors with the distinguished universities.

Objective (2-5): Increase the sources of supporting the joint research projects.

The procedures for achieving the objective (2-5):

- Participating in the local and international research competitions.
- Formulating databases on the donor institutions of joint research projects.

Objective (3-5): Enhance the university's academic position locally and internationally.

The procedures for achieving the objective (3-5):

- Coordinating with international universities to conduct research that serve society.
- Following up the international evaluation of universities to achieve advanced positions.
- Universities seek to get membership in the local and international unions.

III. Recommendations

1. Universities should achieve the efficiency of the internal processes (simplifying procedures, reducing costs, developing resources and improving outputs).
2. Developing the teaching methods and providing a modern virtual environment of learning to communicate with students and teachers.
3. Formulating a plan to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the strategic plan and correct any errors that may occur during implementation, as well as setting a final evaluation for the implementation rate of the strategic plan.
4. Universities should use the available material, financial and technical resources properly, as well as the effective management of human resources to show all creative potential and efforts to achieve a high performance level.
5. Preparing a comprehensive strategic plan that consists of all sub-strategies of the university, and should be a competitive strategic plan.
6. Using the general philosophies of competitive advantage with a strategic content that reflects the mission and objectives of the university and depends on making improvements and excellence in processes which ensure the safety of outputs.

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