Competency Building of College Graduates: Challenges and Possibilities

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College graduates of Arab Universities enjoy tremendous talents for learning and development. As any student community there have strengths and weaknesses which some relate to the individual while other factors belong to the educational system and the environment whereby the learning and socialization take place.

Personal genuine talents are always conditioned by the social environment and the institutional capacity to provide an opportunity for growth and development.

The Arabic Education System is in need for reform to be able to compete with the contemporary challenges and expectations which will be demonstrated by its outcomes; the graduates.

Its un-dismissible fact that college graduates in the Arab world lack certain competencies the market demands or the newly reformed institutions expect. Regardless of the major of the field of specialty, there are common global competencies college student needs and is expected to have to be able to compete and excel in today's real world as she/he graduates.

At An-Najah National University has realized its successes and achievements throughout the years as well as the challenges stem from its commitment for Quality Education. This comes from its vision as a leadership in higher education and its contribution into the sustainable development in Palestine.

Thus, NNU does not save any opportunity for development to improve its deliverables. One of the latest projects NNU has adopted is specifically designed to enhance graduates readiness for the market and improve their ability to contribute to the sustainable development of their community.

The Competency Development Project which was launched in Oct. 2010 targeting the entire student community as part of institutional development strategy. However, due to limitations

in finance and human resources, the project focuses in the time being on the newly admitted students and on the senior graduates who are about ready to finish their study.

Approximately five hundred (500) students benefitted from the project between Oct-Dec, 2010 and over thousand (1000) students are expected to benefit from it during the period from Feb-May, 2011. The project plan anticipates approximately two thousand (2000) students to enroll in the workshops offered by this project every year.

The Nature of the Project:

The project integrates number of personal competencies in a practice-oriented workshops defined as university required courses. The elements of the project range from simple appearance skills up to leadership. The project is implemented through five modules as described below:

- Module one =basic behavioral competencies such as appearance, voice, etc, Community service, English language proficiency, Information Technology proficiency.
- Module two= Intelligent communication skills
- Module three= Self Management skills
- Module four= Relationship management skills
- Module five= Leadership and decision-making skills

Challenges in Employability of Graduates:

The local market in Palestine under the occupation suffers from severe difficulties most of which are result of the Israeli occupation which had been for decades. The ability for this market to absorb college graduates is limited, thus creates an additional challenge before the university management as well as before the graduates and their families. The financial burden students suffer makes it an obligation for the university to limit the education costs to minimum affordable level which puts a pressure on the university to manage other needs and obligations. It's an additional challenge the NNU takes along with the expansion in its scientific research centers and programs since financial difficulties remain the theme.

However, the university has established an Alumni career service unit in Dec, 2005 to provide the gradates with job opportunity in addition to professional development training workshops. Additionally, the Alumni unit regularly, holds job fares inviting institutions and organizations to meet and interview graduates on campus. Job offers gained could be at the local as well as regional level in number of neighboring Arab countries.

The university has established a Competency Development Review Board in Oct, 2010 made of deans of colleges and some administrators and student representative along with

representatives from the community ranging from private, government and NGO sectors. This board emphasizes mutual collaboration between NNU and the market community in addition to stressing upon the role of the organizations to provide internships for senior students on regular basis.
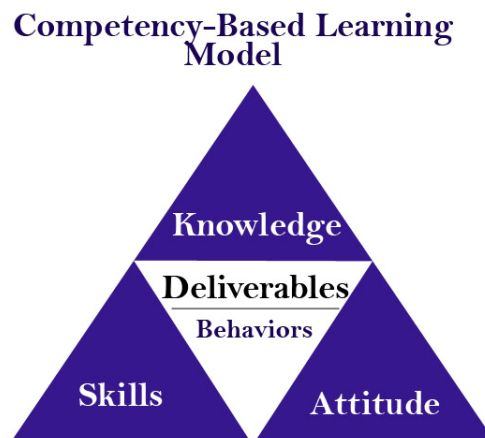
On the other hand the university provides the community with numerous professional consultations and services, given through faculty members from different fields.

The university considers the competency development project as a strategic initiative which will support the quality performance of its students as they graduate and to enhance their role as active citizens in the community.

The Competency-Based Learning/Teaching and the efforts to sharpen or fine-tune the personality of the student through competency training are just among the latest challenges NNU takes.

Despite all odds, NNU has ranked the first education institution in Palestine, the 5th in the Arab world by the webometrics, 1011th Worldwide in Feb.2011 and lately the membership to the UN Academic Influence Program in March 2011.

The followings are the summary of the competency project:

This project predicates upon a single philosophy: science and work are two sides of the same coin.

Learn- Understand- Do, with focus on Learning how to Learn.

This competency development project draws upon different sources some of which are associated with international/ national frameworks of qualifications including:

1. The Holy Quran and the Teachings of the Prophet(PBUH) concerning Science and Work (Global).

2. Competency- Based Education (USA) .

3. National Sustainable Development Strategies (UN).

4. European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EU).

5. Over 20 years of experience in Clinical Sociology and Professional Development Training in USA and the Arab World.

The Vision of the Project:

When the quality of their university graduates is assessed, some universities value education and research, others believe in the value of 'on-the-job' training and others counts on personal talents as qualities necessary to make an outstanding professional and active citizen. At An-Najah National University (NNU) we aim to equip our students with all these components together in what we refer to as COMPETENCIES.

It is the vision of this office is to prepare students not only qualified in their field, but to graduate them with the competencies that will make them a more capable, more competent, and more employable graduate. As the leading institution of higher education in Palestine, and one that takes as its ultimate mission the amelioration of the Palestinian community, NNU realizes its responsibility to contribute to the process of building a modern, independent state in Palestine. This is achieved by instilling excellence and quality in its graduates and by providing the market with competent graduates who are able to demonstrate distinguished capabilities at the professional and personal level.

NNU believes that the Competency Based Education can contribute into the National Development Process as it prepares students to meet the 21st Century Global Challenges. The unemployment rate and the marginal contribution of young generation of college graduates in the Arab World and the surrounding neighborhood demonstrate a desperate need for a Paradigm Shift in the entire Education systems in the region. An-Najah National University has drawn the road map for such change. Practice oriented graduate is capable to take an active role at the local as well as at the global stage.

The Mission:

The office of president Asst. for Graduate Affairs seeks to prepare students to meet the community and the global challenges through the implementation and evaluation of competence students acquire during their university learning. Provide the market with well-

educated, competent graduates who are able to play active role in the community through the following objectives:

The Objectives:

1 . Enhance students communications skills and self-confidence

2. Enhance self-management skills ,goal achievement ,success and other Emotional Intelligence skills.

3. Enhance relationship management skills, team work and other Social Intelligence skills.

4. Enhance leadership and decision making skills and impact on others.

5. Fine tune and sharpen students personality through providing opportunity to develop above skills.

6. Enhance students quality to perform with the competitive edge which will secure employment and independence.

7. Enhance students ability to contribute effectively into the national sustainable development process.

Deliverables:

After successful participation in the five phases of the competency building process, students are expected to acquire and demonstrate the following competencies:

1. Intelligent communications skills and manifested self confidence.

2. Self-management ,goal-achievement and other Emotional Intelligent skills.

3. Relationship management, team work and other Social Intelligent skills.

4. Leadership, decision-making and impact on others skills.

5. Character with distinguished and competitive competencies.

6. Increased the probability to secure and maintain career path .

7. Increase the probability of effective contribution into the National Sustainable Development Process.

Possibilities:

Through the implementation of the competency development project and the ongoing efforts to provide senior graduates with the basic training on number of personal competencies, NNU graduates successful possibilities after graduating is expected.

Personal Competency training complements scientific readiness, thus increase not only employability of the student but students' active participation in making better future for themselves and their families.

Competency assessment tools will be administered to measure the success rate and the status of the acquired skills. Competent entrepreneur is the ultimate deliverable.