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**QUALITY AND EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION**

**THE CASE OF SAUDI ARABIA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY IN  
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**TO MY FATHER**

**SHEIKH  
MANSOUR BIN JOUMAH**

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## ABSTRACT

Modern higher education is a cooperation of stakeholders. Its development should be viewed only in terms of curricula quality and graduates employability. Because the Saudi system is relatively new and grows rapidly, while confronted with traditions and difficulties, neither of the above objectives is distinctly accomplished to fully fulfil the ambition of national growth.

This thesis critically investigated the approach of Saudi Universities. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed for this purpose. Subjects were from King Saud University, including students, graduates, teaching staff, and academic managers.

Shortage in pertinent information made the research heavily dependent on fieldwork data. The main focus was on factors responsible for defects in quality and employability. The correlation between these two issues provided a better understanding of undergraduate education, including assessment of student's learning, especially when the latter is taken as an indicator of the former.

The findings suggest a need for change in the Saudi higher education system to bring about substantive incorporation of packages of general skills, including employability skills, and modularisation in its programmes. However, this approach must not be adopted at the expense of either subject matter or Saudi culture. Integration of the above three elements into study courses is an ideal preference from the participant's standpoints.

Recommendations were forwarded to aid and improve the introduction of these new thoughts. But their prompt qualification is likely to be a matter of a more definitive decision. In Saudi Arabia, there is a demand for an extra academic provision to accommodate the change besides expected increase in student numbers, institutions' expansion and disciplinary diversification. Finally, elimination of gender distinction is a real challenge. This obstacle does not seem to be reconcilable with Islamic principles as well as with the pervading and rapidly changing higher education demands.



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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

## **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis is the result of a particular interest in the importance of the character of undergraduate curricula and the development of graduates' employability as the criterion for assessing the quality of the Saudi higher education system. In many parts of the world undergraduate curricula are no longer regarded as purely academic programmes, devised by specialists and structured through traditional taught courses. Instead, in recent years, there has been growing agreement (Prosser and Trigwell, 1998; Biggs, 1999; Morey, 2000; Barnett, 2003) that undergraduate curricula should focus on helping students to broaden their knowledge, and to develop their attributes and practical skills. It should be noted here that the undergraduate curricula taught at several colleges of the Saudi universities were originally Western in style, similar to those of America and Europe (Saleh, 1986; Shabrami, 1986; Bayuk, 1987; Mohammed, 1990), but they have been progressively subjected to change, and a more formal system has been adopted. The changes made have conformed to the aspirations and values set out in successive Saudi Development Plans (Mohamed, 1987; Addawood, 1996; Al-Hageel, 1998; Al-Khedair, 1999) and have thus largely been the outcome of the interplay between the requirements of governmental departments and funding agencies, on the one hand, and the academic, professional and religious sectors on the other.

While these groups have been the chief agents of change, it should not be assumed that all other stakeholder groups associated with the Saudi higher education system are uninterested in the process of curriculum development. Indeed, some of these groups, such as employers, managers and students, have attempted to influence both the general and specific issues relevant to the process of quality assessment in higher education. For example, it has been revealed by several Saudi researchers (Al-

Harthi, 1987; Al-Dosary, 1991; Al-Jalal, 1996; Murtada, 1996; Husseiny, 1997; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999), that Saudi employers expect their national system of higher education to provide graduates (their future employees) with the relevant knowledge and skills required to carry out their work to the highest possible standard. A detailed analysis of the views of these groups is therefore also necessary to assess the quality of the Saudi higher education system.

However, it appears that governmental and academic groups have so far exerted the most influence, and their views often tend to override those of other stakeholders (KSA, 1980-2001; KSU, 1999a and b, 2000; ABEGS, 1998). Nonetheless, it is hard to believe that the current dramatic reforms taking place in the field of higher education in many parts of the world – especially those resulting from the new democratic approach which promises equal opportunities for citizens of all countries (Tovey, 1994; Currie and Newson, 1998; Barnett, 2000), those arising from the growing association between education, globalisation and economic development (Albrow, 1996; Brown and Lauder, 1996; Scott, 1998), and the introduction of more advanced ideas about education quality (Green, 1994a; Brennan *et al*, 1997; Newby, 1999; Morley, 2001) – will not eventually have an impact on the surviving conventional elements of the Saudi system and, in doing so, also draw all relevant groups of stakeholders into a more active role.

## **1.2 The Saudi Context**

The growth of student numbers in many universities and colleges throughout the world, which has become more evident during the last two decades, is not unrelated to the quality of education and employability of graduates. While this can be viewed in terms of the relationship between the quality of input and output, it should also be seen as part

of a much broader tendency towards the increased participation of several groups of stakeholders. Such an expansion points to the dynamic and changing labour market for graduates (Barnett, 1997a; Ahier and Esland, 1999; OECD, 2000). Increased levels of unemployment in many developed and developing countries have already stimulated the reform of curricula as well as job-training schemes. In several Western countries - particularly the rich European ones, and the United States and Canada (Robertson, 1994; Coffield and Williamson, 1997; ILO, 1998/99) – vocational and skills acquisition subjects have been added to universities curricula. In addition, the initial education period has been extended and some more useful and sophisticated training and guidance programmes have been introduced.

### **1.2.1 Curricula and Employability**

Higher education curricula are increasingly becoming joint enterprises, developed through the activities of several groups of stakeholders. As a consequence of such dramatic change, the employability of graduates is emerging as a very important and powerful factor in the shaping of higher education. This undoubtedly reinforces the idea that the modern university is a collaborative industry, specialising in the production of a workforce. Some researchers, such as Hillman (1996), Barnett (1997b, 2000, 2003), Blake *et al* (1998), Rust (2001) and Harvey *et al* (2002) argue that such collaboration is positive because it will significantly improve the quality of the teaching and learning process and may even help in the development of the economy. Indeed, these researchers are of the opinion that collaboration of this sort may eventually result in a more unified and possibly more distinctively featured general university curriculum. All this suggests that if higher education intends to take on the challenge of change and face its critics, then the strategy for the assessment of quality has to be



based on a more practical outlook. The development of a viable tool for the assessment of stakeholders' quality - the meticulous evaluation and reformation of undergraduate curricula, which will sooner or later lead to the development of practical job-related skills and, hence, a higher rate of graduate employment - would appear to fulfil this demand.

It is also possible to envisage that in the process of graduate employability evolving as an index of quality in higher education, the notorious gulf between the academic and vocational sectors on the one hand, and traditional and modern attitudes and values on the other, will be significantly narrowed. This confirms the fact that employability is a truly modern concept and is, therefore, worthy of appropriate consideration. All this is likely to contribute to the development of modern undergraduate curricula which will not only promise greater opportunities for more students, in terms of education and employment, but, being based on collaboration and partnerships, as well as having more uniform educational attitudes and values, will also serve the needs and aspirations of several other participating groups.

### **1.2.2 Development of Saudi Higher Education**

There is no doubt that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is currently considered to be one of the fastest growing economies among all the developing countries (Al-Farsy, 1991; Khalil, 1994; Al-Jalal, 1996; Niblock and Wilson, 1999). In parallel, its higher education system is also expanding very rapidly, in terms of both quantity and diversity (Al-Karni, 1995, 1999; KSA, 2000, 2001; Al-Naeem, 2002). This system, which began in 1957 with a teachers' college comprised of 21 students, 5 teaching staff and 4 administrative officers, has grown, in the space of less than five decades, to 8

universities with 219 colleges. The projected rate of growth for student, academic and administrative sectors up to the year 2010 is of the order of 3% (KSA, 1998b; Al-Khedair, 1999). The extent of the Saudi higher education system's diversity is evidenced by the specialisation of its universities, as well as its colleges and departments (Al-Salloom, 1995, 1996; KSA, 1995-2001). For example, five of the Saudi Universities are comprehensive in their programmes (King Saud, King Abdulaziz, King Faisal, Um Al-Qura, and King Khaled), two of them are of Islamic orientation (Islamic and Imam Mohammed Bin Saud), and one of them specialises in petroleum and minerals (King Fahd). Al-Rashid (1998) estimates the percentages of the major disciplines offered to Saudi undergraduates are as follows: Education 34.8%, Humanities 21.7%, Islamic Studies 15.0%, Administration and Economics 7.4%, Natural Sciences 7.4%, Engineering 5.7%, Medicine and Associated Sciences 4.4%, Agriculture 1.2%, Social Sciences 1.2%, and other 0.9%.

The expansion of the Saudi higher education system is mainly the outcome of the improving national economy, which is also closely associated with social demand and demographic change. Therefore, the official policies and objectives of the Saudi state have been a significant force in shaping this system. The centralised administrative structure of the state has made the task of Saudi universities and colleges less difficult not only through funding but also by directing them to achieve specific goals. In other words, many of these centralised policies are widely claimed to have been initiated for the well-being of Saudi citizens, directed towards the enhancement of their religious, moral, intellectual, social and economic development (Al-Karni, 1990, 1994; Khateeb, 1994; Sultan, 1994; Al-Abdulla, 2002). The expected role of the Saudi higher education system in national development is very clear. The Saudi State

proposition, as expressed in Basic Strategic Principle No.6 of the 6<sup>th</sup> development plan (1995-2000), is as follows:

“To continue the development of manpower, through the meticulous evaluation of educational curricula and training programmes and implementing the development or modifications suggested by this education in conformity with Islamic Shari’a, the changing needs of society and the requirements of the development process” (KSA, 1995b, p.21).

### **1.2.3 Obstacles and Possible Solution**

The Saudi higher education system is currently faced with a gigantic challenge. Not only does it have to respond to the strong pressure created by national, social and economic development, but it also needs to take on board the worldwide development in science and technology and the internationalisation of higher education policy. However, in the opinion of many Saudi researchers, such as Al-Karni (1999), Khateeb (1999), Saegh (1999), Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999; and Al-Aali and Ahmed (1999), the performance of Saudi universities and colleges has so far been unsatisfactory. It appears that there are serious weaknesses on the practical side of many Saudi higher education programmes’ curricula. Abu-Baker (1992), Saegh *et al* (1995), Al-Kahtani (1998a and b), Al-Turkestani (1998) and Al-Baker (2002) argue that the deficiencies in students’ training and their inadequate job-related skills reflect the moderate standard of Saudi higher education in comparison to Western systems.

The critical situation facing the Saudi higher education system is also outlined by Alghafis (1992):

“There appeared to be a lack of specific information on the part of university staff concerning Saudi national development goals. This was symptomatic of the absence of coordination and cohesion between planners and teachers-researchers in the fields of science and technology. In fact, there was a somewhat negative response from interviewees to the question: Do you feel that university teaching-research reflects Saudi national development goals at present?” (p. 49).

Alghafis (1992), like several of the aforementioned Saudi researchers, suggests that a comprehensive restructuring of undergraduate curricula, teaching methods and administration may provide a solution to the Saudi higher education problem. This clearly indicates that there is an urgent need to investigate the issues directly related to the quality of curricula and their assessment, with the particular aim of achieving an effective balance between input and output, thereby enhancing the development of the Saudi national economy.

It is imperative that the Saudi higher education system embarks on the development of an effective balance between subject-specific knowledge and attributes on the one hand, and job-related skills and employability insight, together with appropriate guidance for undergraduates, on the other. Elsewhere, it has been fully explained that the purpose of this shift is to increase the chances of graduate employment (Scott, 1995; Hustler *et al*, 1998; UNESCO, 1998; Biggs, 1999; Raven and Stephenson, 2002). The entire debate on reforming the process and quality of student learning substantiates an important suggestion made by Betts and Smith (1998):

“There is a symbiotic relationship between learning and work. Work of any kind requires learning to be acquired and/or applied in order for it to be carried out successfully” (p. 79).

Many Saudi academics, such as Addawood (1996), Al-Zahrani (1998) and Al-Badr (1999) believe that the Saudi higher education system should benefit from the experience of others. This increases the possibility of reforms in the Saudi higher education system paralleling those widely proposed as a solution in Western countries (Bocock and Watson, 1994; Burgen, 1996; Whitston, 1998; ILO, 1998/99; Gill *et al*, 2000). For example, in Britain, the Dearing (Dearing, 1997) and Harris (Harris, 2001)

reports emphasise that higher education should fully realise its aspiration to be world class in both teaching and research, through a collaboration between staff, students, government, employers and society at large. The Dearing report, for example, states:

“The evidence we have had from employers shows that, while the intellectual development that comes from the single honours degree is valued, they see advantage in graduates being able to study their specialisation within a broad context. We favour students being able to choose between different types of higher education programme, including more offering a broader knowledge of a range of subjects” (p. 15).

It is interesting to note that in Japan, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and several Western European countries, where universities have already begun reforming their undergraduate programmes in this modern manner, recent figures show low rates of graduate unemployment for both men and women. Indeed, in some cases, this happened even during the first year following graduation, as the rates are within the range of 3.5-10.5% (ILO, 1996/1997, 1998/99; OECD, 1998, 2000). In contrast, graduate employment rates are falling in Saudi Arabia. Hafez (1998) points out that the number of Saudi graduates in certain fields (teaching, Islamic studies and social sciences) is already in excess of what is required by the national development plan. This situation is expected to extend to other fields, and perhaps worsen, unless a solution is found in the near future, particularly in view of the fact that the percentage of Saudi undergraduates (aged 19 - 24 years) in relation to the total Saudi population is presently only 14%. The implications of this figure have been debated by Kamel (1998), since it is significantly lower than the figures for both developed (for example, the United States 75% and Canada 70%) and developing (for example, Argentina 40%, Korea 38% and Peru 33%) countries.

A team of Saudi researchers (Abu-Baker, 1992; Al-Jabr, 1994; Ajaji, 1995; Al-Kahtani, 1998a and b; Al-Turkestani, 1998; Al-Aali and Ahmed, 1999) noted that in Saudi Arabia, as in other Arab countries (ALESCO, 1998; Nofal, 1998; Qasem, 1998) an additional problem facing graduates is the tendency of both government and private employers to employ more specialised and well-trained graduates. That is to say, those who possess the right mixture of skills, knowledge and attitudes to raise the quality of their performance at work, and not those whose qualifications are more general and theoretical.

Consequently, it is reasonable to say that the Saudi higher education system, with its traditionally-orientated curricula, is not producing graduates with the skills and qualities urgently required by the national economy. This suggests that a focus on employability might provide a radical solution to the problem, especially in view of the findings of recent research concerning some of the most developed countries in the world, where enormous shifts in the character of curricula have taken place. Thus, the solution to the Saudi problem may also lie in appropriate curriculum reform and the extension of the undergraduate training period, so that the necessary job-related skills and employability insights might be acquired. Furthermore, programmes need to be examined with the intention of defining some employability criteria, which can, in turn, be used to assess the quality of what students are learning. Indeed, it was exactly this perception – the importance of which I became progressively aware of while studying in the United States and the United Kingdom – as well as the shortage of systematic research specifically pertinent to the quality of Saudi undergraduate curricula, that led me to identify this particular research project.

### 1.3 Aims and Objectives

This study is concerned with quality in the Saudi higher education system. It will investigate the development of undergraduate curricula in respect to job-related skills acquired and required by undergraduates in the context of their employability. Its objectives are mainly concerned with the analysis of the opinions and activities of the most relevant stakeholder groups in the process of curriculum change. These are closely linked to the development of useful and practical knowledge, attributes and behaviour, and specific job-related skills among university students. It is evident that such development constitutes a prime factor in determining the employment of graduates and their transition from learning to the work environment.

In view of the outline provided in the previous sections of this chapter and given the changes currently occurring (worldwide, as well as in Saudi Arabia) especially in relation to the quality of undergraduate curricula, the employment of graduates and the important role that higher education is expected to play in society, the main aims of this study are:

- A. To make a contribution to existing knowledge in the field of curricula and the development of employability.
- B. To assess the significance of developing employability skills in study departments of King Saud University.
- C. To examine the possibility of specifying certain criteria for the employability of graduates, which can be used to examine the quality of undergraduate curricula.

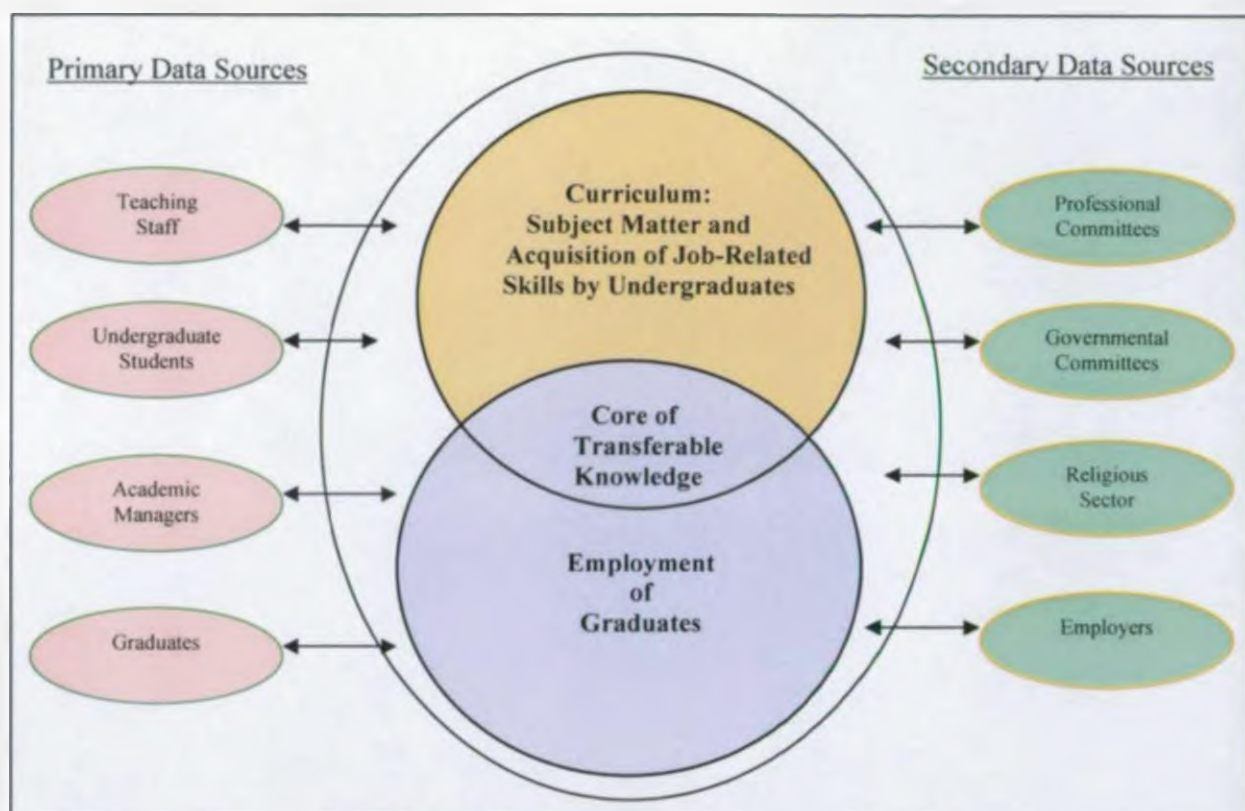
D. To formulate recommendations concerning the direction of proposed changes to undergraduate curricula and to outline a strategy to implement these changes.

In order to fulfil these aims, it is necessary to achieve the following objectives:

- A. To identify and examine the views of the most relevant groups of stakeholders.
- B. To review Saudi higher education policy, both at government and institution levels.
- C. To identify the reasons for, and to assess the significance of the changes currently taking place in the Saudi higher education system.
- D. To identify and assess the influence of curriculum developments elsewhere on Saudi undergraduate curricula.
- E. To compare models and practical skills of employability in the Saudi Case Study with international literature.

Among the several groups of stakeholders which influence Saudi higher education issues relevant to the aims and objectives of the present study, the following eight are the most important and have therefore been selected for analysis: the teaching staff, undergraduate students, the academic managers, graduates, professional committees, government committees, the religious sector and employers (Figure 1.1). These groups represent a wide range of sub-divisions in Saudi society – academic, managerial, economic, social and religious – and they are comparable to the stakeholders in many other societies, in both the East and West.





**Figure 1.1:** Diagrammatic representation of the scope of the research. The two circles at the centre represent the “core” focus of the study, with respect to development of the undergraduate curricula and job-related skills and hence, the “quality” or “employability” of graduates. The smaller areas to the left and right symbolise the primary and secondary data sources (stakeholders).

The religious sector has been included in this study after careful consideration, mainly because certain specific factors relevant to Saudi undergraduate curricula are cultural and linguistic in nature and therefore comprise elements which, for example, may be incapable of being separated from the organised system of a Muslim’s faith and worship (Niblock, 1982; Asad, 1996; Abdullah, 2002). Such strong elements are expected to be maintained within the curricula of every Saudi university and college, either in the form of a compulsory or optional subject, and to be taught in the Arabic language (KSA, 1980-2001; KSU, 1999a, 2001; Al-Kami, 1999; Al-Khedair, 1999). Al-Ruweili (1990) refers to a curriculum containing a religious factor of this type as a “selective curriculum”, since it is designed to take account of the needs and aspirations

of a particular sector. It would be highly interesting to the researcher, of course, to see how these specific factors could be related to the employability framework as an indicator of the quality of undergraduate programmes.

The researcher can state with confidence that this work will be original. The originality will be borne out by the recommendations made for the modification of the general curriculum. In addition, the final recommendations of the study will be directed towards clarifying important issues like the management of change in undergraduate curricula in order to accomplish the goal of employability development.

#### **1.4 The Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is comprised of nine chapters. The next chapter (Chapter 2) is concerned with the concept of quality in higher education. It discusses the current international interest in quality and outlines the opinions of specialists, professionals and academics regarding the definition of the term. It also considers a number of presumptions underlying the evaluation of quality, the role played by different stakeholder groups in its meaning and the current models for the assessment of quality in the field of higher education. The chapter therefore establishes an essential baseline for the study of quality in a curricular, vocational and employability context.

In Chapter 3 the issue of employability is highlighted. This chapter attempts to impart an understanding of the meaning of the term employability and emphasises the reasons behind it arising as a concept in the context of higher education. The main purpose of the chapter is thus to disclose the principles of employability and underline current international thoughts about its development. The impact of employability on better preparing skilful graduates to match the demands of the work market and the

possible manner of its association with and representation of the quality in higher education are also tackled in this chapter.

Chapter 4 outlines the strategy and methodology of data collection employed in this study. It describes the principles and strategies of the three quantitative and qualitative methods implemented at the Saudi universities: questionnaires, interviews and documentary analysis. Together, these methods provide the appropriate data needed to expose the specific dimensions of the research problem under investigation.

Chapter 5 is devoted to various relevant matters and concerns of the fieldwork. Its chief focus is to produce a link of plausibility between the principles of quality and employability, on the one hand, and their technical applications in the context of Saudi universities, on the other. Therefore, accounts on these points are presented in relation to the study setting and participant samples, as well as on management, processing, retrieval and procedural information, and the data analysis.

Chapter 6 concerns itself with the first part of the results of the detailed analysis of quantitative and qualitative data obtained during the field study. It is related to the responses to questions on quality in the Saudi higher education system. The main issues raised are those related to the meaning of quality to Saudi stakeholders, the factors affecting it and by what means it can be assessed. Appropriate discussion and interpretation are presented relating to any intricate matter emerging from deliberation of the research questions under consideration in this chapter.

Chapter 7 describes the second part of the analysis of the data obtained by the triangulation strategy employed in the fieldwork. It treats the results on curriculum development as direct teaching, learning and research activities carried out in the study

development, whether those activities are accomplished by internal or external stakeholder groups and whether the latter are Saudi or non-Saudi in nationality. The occurrence of a close association between the issue of curriculum development as a whole, on the one hand, and quality in higher education and graduates' employability development, on the other, is clearly delineated throughout the sections of this chapter.

Chapter 8 focuses its attention on the third and last part of the study results. Its foremost objective is to present the issues of employability and desirability in the acquisition of a portfolio of general skills as discerned by different groups of Saudi stakeholders. The chapter deals with the possibility of treating employability as a credible and career-orientated indicator for the development of the quality of curriculum programmes provided for university students. The feasibility of such an indication is based on the idea that better employability development should significantly enhance graduates' employment opportunities.

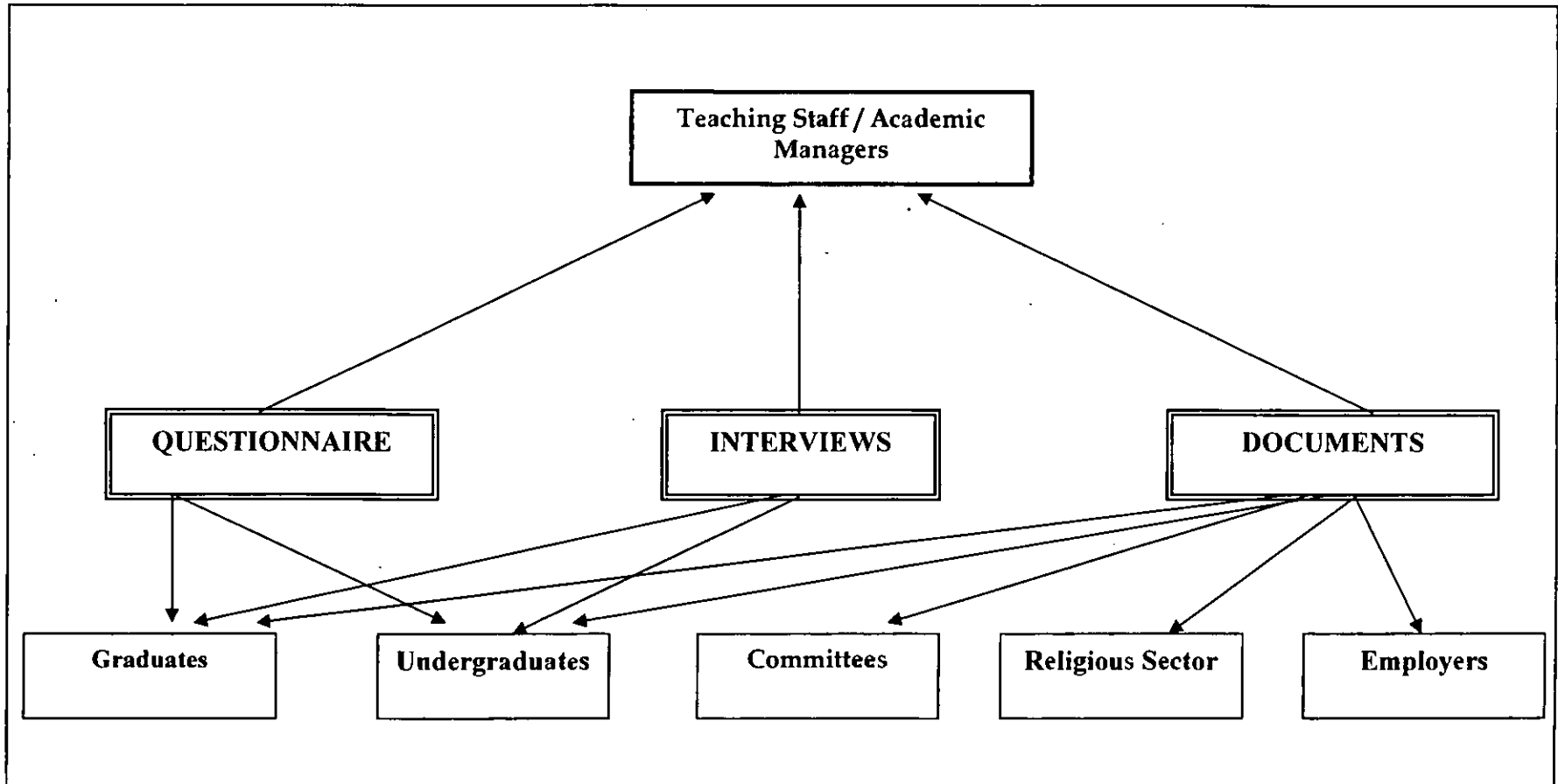
Finally, in Chapter 9, the researcher aims to sum up the research findings in the form of a craft hypothesis. It is hoped this will help to comprehend how these findings are bound to extend systematic knowledge and innovation in the fields of the development of both undergraduate curriculum quality and graduates' employability in Saudi Arabia. From this perspective, the researcher also includes in this summary a number of recommendations which collectively emphasise the potential advantage of this new approach to ethnographic research in the reformation project of the Saudi higher education system.

### **1.5 The Methodological Strategy**

The intention is to develop a working definition of employability as an indicator of quality in the Saudi higher education system. The approach, as conceptually outlined in section 1.3, has determined the selection of a particular methodological strategy needed for coverage of all aspects of the research. This methodological strategy was based first on a literature review and then developed through the pilot study and fieldwork. In its final version, it involved three procedures, namely: questionnaires, interviews, and a study of appropriate documents. It is hoped that together, in triangulation, they will create the information base and specific data to expose the practical aspects of the subject under investigation. The link between these procedures and the selected primary and secondary data sources (stakeholder groups) is shown in Figure 1.2.

The questionnaire was designed in such a way as to make its administration to the participants and the analysis of the data it yielded as systematic and reliable as possible. The focus is on the extent of the contribution of various groups of stakeholders to the development of undergraduate curricula, the acquisition of job-related skills by undergraduates, and the usefulness of defining the quality of education in terms of the employability of graduates. The samples of participants selected for the questionnaire were comprised of four groups of stakeholders, namely the teaching staff, academic managers, graduates and undergraduates. The results obtained through this method are discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

The purpose of using interviews as part of the methodological strategy was to obtain specific information regarding the perceptions and understanding of some key participants in the Saudi higher education system, that is, to highlight further potential ideas and perspectives relevant to the research problem. The intention was to evaluate



**Figure 1.2:** A diagram delineating the link between the data sources (stakeholder groups) and the three research procedures employed by the researcher at four departments of King Saud University.

the reliability of the data obtained by other methods with respect to the development of undergraduate curricula and job-related skills and hence the quality or employability of graduates.

The assessment of documents was undertaken to evaluate the activities of stakeholders and key participants. Again, special attention was given to curriculum development, job-related skills and the employability of graduates.

In sum, these three methodological procedures should be regarded as components of the same overall research strategy, as they collectively produce the range and type of data required. They inform each other with regard to factors that affect curricula and they complement each other in defining the roles played by various groups.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the researcher classified the employers among the secondary sources in as far as the generation of the desirable data in this study is concerned. The main reason behind such a decision is that the employers in Saudi Arabia as yet do not seem to exert a discernible influence in the same way that the other higher education stakeholder groups do (Kamel, 1998; Saegh, 2000; Al-Abdullah, 2002). The situation is different in the western industrial countries, where the gap between the higher education and work market has been significantly reduced and, thereby, the employers in many large enterprises are given an opportunity to play an important role in this respect. Indeed, this is the case whether that be in the development of the curriculum quality (Betts and Smith, 1998), graduates' employability (Harvey *et al.*, 1997b), or acquisition of key or transferable skills which are particularly favoured by the employers (Fallows and Steven, 2000).

Even though at the present time employers appear to have little or no influence on curriculum development in universities, employers are likely to have views on the knowledge and skills that they would like graduates to have for managerial and professional positions in their enterprises. For this reason it would have been desirable to sample their views in this study. However, the need to restrict the study to make it manageable as a Ph.D. project led the writer to focus on those constituencies within the universities having an interest in and influence on curriculum issues.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

The main conclusion drawn from the review of the literature is that there is a gap in the knowledge of the processes influencing undergraduate curriculum development in Saudi Arabia as well as any sense of what should influence the curriculum programmes. Graduate unemployment is emerging as a problem which threatens Saudi national development. There is evidence that the solution lies in the application of the principles of employability in curricula, that is, an organised and well-focused transition of graduates from the learning to the working environment. In Saudi Arabia, there is an additional perspective, namely the conflict between the modern and the traditional culture. The significance of this should not be underestimated, since the consequent antagonisms might be at least partially responsible for the separation between higher education and national economic planning and implementation, and for the modest rate and quality of development regarding employability in the curriculum. This thesis will make the following contributions to knowledge:

1. It will explore how various groups of Saudi stakeholders influence development of undergraduate curricula. In particular, it will do this with regard to the acquisition of job-related skills and the employability of graduates.
2. There is little, if any, published data on the link between the Saudi higher education system and certain specific societal forces and religious culture. The thesis will address this issue.
3. Through research generated evidence from the case study organisation, the extent to which undergraduate curricula can be developed to enhance graduate employability, will be shown.
4. It will review the policy of employability as a basis for improving the quality of curriculum provision in Saudi Arabia.
5. It will make recommendations which concern the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education in those areas that need to be considered to facilitate the internationalisation of the Saudi system of higher education.



**CHAPTER 2**  
**THE CONCEPT OF**  
**QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter concerns itself with the impact of one of the most influential concepts of modern education, namely, “quality in higher education.” This concept is a relatively new one. It emerged during the last two decades, primarily as a consequence of education democratisation, which resulted in enormous increases in student numbers (Harvey and Knight, 1996; Barnett, 2000; Gibbs, 2000). For example, the situation in Britain developed rapidly in such a way that today one in three youths enter higher education, while only a decade ago the rate was of the order of one in six. Thus, in the words of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, 1996):

“The central fact in British higher education is that in 1950 we had an elite participation rate of 5 per cent; today we face a mass system of higher education. As recently as 1989 Britain had the smallest higher education sector of any industrialised country. Today the participation rate in higher education has risen to a staggering 30 per cent”.

Undeniably, undergraduate students themselves are an important factor in concerns over the issue of quality as they look for greater satisfaction from their higher education programmes. Nevertheless, there seems to always be a certain degree of discontent expressed by members of this group. This is clear in the remarks of Radford (1997):

“While students are in a sense perennial, and probably recognisably the same whether in Imperial China, classical Athens, mediaeval Bologna or the present day, student culture does seem to vary to some extent between times and places” (p. 145).

In the opinion of many researchers, such as Watson (1995), Romer (1995), Brennan *et al* (1997), and Morley (2000), another important factor in this regard is the

close association between the higher education system as a whole and cost-effectiveness. In fact, these two factors obviously overlap in many cases and according to Chaffe and Sherr (1992), Green (1994a), Gibbs (1994), and Perry and Smart (1997) they constitute the prime reason for public interest in and concern about quality in the context of higher education. Together, they have also given more urgency than ever to the need for regular evaluation of educational quality. Here, it is discernible so far that at the heart of the matter is the fact that the reduced funding of most of the relevant processes (teaching, learning, research and management) has left assessor researchers with no other alternative than to measure quality in the light of the huge pressure on human and physical resources.

The aim of this chapter is to present a concise account of the current international concern about quality and to profile the opinions of quality specialists and academics regarding meanings and definitions of quality. It will examine various implications relevant to assessment and evaluation of quality in higher education, revealing the role of various stakeholder groups in defining quality in higher education. Finally, it will critically discuss three of the most influential models for the assessment of quality in higher education.

## **2.2 Current Concerns About Quality**

During the last two decades many researchers from various countries have expressed concern over the issue of quality. The signs of this concern and the reasons for it vary from country to country, depending on the culture of the country and its state of socio-economic growth.

In the West European countries and America, concern about quality in higher education has grown in parallel with the increasing attention shown by both public and government sectors since the mid-1980s. Here, the main reasons for the growing concern about quality in higher education are diversified but nevertheless fairly identifiable. For example:

- A greater scale of higher education enterprise, that is to say a rapid expansion of student numbers without a corresponding increase in public expenditure (Scott, 1993; Harvey and Knight, 1996).
- An increased range of students entering universities for the first time. For example, in the United Kingdom, the A-level route still predominates but more entrants now have other qualifications (Stubbs, 1994; Scott, 1995, 1998).
- Increased popularity of modular courses and a consequent decline in the proportion of graduates with single honours degrees. In other words, the diversity of subject content makes assessments by stakeholders more difficult and increases the demand for evaluation and quality (Jenkins and Walker, 1994; Newby, 1995; HEQC, 1997c).
- Appreciating the significance of part-time courses and hence the participation of older students. This is accompanied by dramatic changes not only in the experiences and expectations of students and academic staff, but the entire range of stakeholders (Smith and Saunders, 1991; Barnett, 1992).
- Increased and intense competition within the educational market, for example competition not only for resources which support teaching, learning, research and management processes, but for students as well (Tovey, 1994; Watson, 1997).

- A general quest for better public services. Such a quest inevitably increases the tension between efficiency, management and quality (Lock *et al*, 1998; Hodgkinson and Brown, 2003). This indicates that higher education institutions should not only be more efficient, but they should also be more responsive to the needs of their customers and indeed to all interest groups of stakeholders (Altbach, 1991; Winston, 1994).
- The effect of the recognition that quality of research in higher education institutions is significantly variable. Indeed such variability may be encountered not only in different countries but also within the same country (Green, 1994a; Brennan *et al*, 1997).
- An ideological attitude that claims that quality in higher education is subject of competent measurement (Warn and Tranter, 2001) and also that a better educated workforce is more competent and will therefore sooner or later lead to greater economic success (Barnett, 1991, 1997a, 2003; Watson and Taylor, 1998).

It is noteworthy that in many countries (Western and non-Western) there are less obvious reasons behind the concern for quality in higher education. For example:

- **Snowball effect:** This refers to the effect arising from parents in one generation having experienced the advantage of higher education and wanting it for their children. This often leads to increasing educational demand. The developed countries (Scott, 1995; Girod de l'Ain, 1997; Watson, 1998) as well as some developing ones (Frazer, 1994; Ballard and Clanchy, 1997; Cizas, 1997) have sought to meet this challenge by increasing the number of places available for students. Perhaps the snowball effect has an equal impact on Arabian countries

(UNISCO, 1987, 1992; Qasem, 1990; Nofal and Kamal, 1990; Morsi, 1992). For example, in some Arab Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia, the number of 18-year old students taking undergraduate education is almost double what it was a decade ago (Kisnawi, 1998; Bafil *et al*, 1998; Al-Karni, 1999).

- **Student numbers:** Teaching more students does not necessarily mean lower quality education. However, many researchers, such as Barnett (1994, 1997a and b), Green (1994a), Ashcroft (1995), Radford *et al* (1997) and Biggs (1999) found that interested parties want firm evidence to support such a statement. For example, the funding bodies and students want to be reassured, and teaching and management staff have a responsibility to prove the evidence. The reason for this concern about quality in higher education is at least partially a financial one, that is to say “quality as value for money”.
- **Educational effectiveness:** The impact of educational effectiveness is becoming more apparent after revealing the fact that in some cases, particularly in developing countries, the expansion of higher education has not brought prosperity (Frazer, 1994). The difficulty is that universities are used to considering effectiveness in terms of input (Barnett, 1994, 1997a and b; Brennan *et al*, 1997). The notion of “value added” suggests that quality could be measured by the degree of change in students’ performance (Balla and Boyle, 1994; Thackwray, 1997; Biggs, 1999). But this notion has not been systematically put into operation. That is why many researchers still employ the processes of teaching and learning as if they were features of performance indicators. Indeed, until the late-1980s, education itself was often seen in instrumental terms, rather than as a good thing in its own right. Lately, however, there has been a movement towards considering ways to assess and

evaluate quality in higher education against the objectives set for a programme. Universities are planning policies and guidelines, covering such aspects as the scope, definition and criteria of quality, as well as categories of feedback evidence in support of quality, all in an attempt to achieve real progress in this direction.

- **Educational openness:** The undeniable fact is that academia is no longer seen as a “secret garden” (Barnett, 1997a and b; Zaitoni, 1997; Evans and Abbott, 1998). Universities and colleges can no longer hide behind the defence of autonomy and academic freedom. The art of teaching needs suitable modification (Woods, 1996). Institutions of higher education need to expose and explain to society at large what their principal objectives are, while how they are achieving them and for the benefit of who needs to be assessed.
- **Lowering of national barriers:** This effect is brought about by a number of factors, such as political change, communication and travel. Indeed, the electronic revolution and communication technologies (mail, computer network, and radio and television) are already contributing to the internationalisation of higher education (Van Overbeek, 1997; Lenn, 1998; Cohen *et al*, 2000). No doubt, various nations, whether developed or developing, rich or poor, want their students to learn from and about other nations. The attitude of higher education students is also changing rapidly, as they are becoming more mobile and expressive. Saudi educationists, like many Arab colleagues, are beginning to realise the full impact and consequence of such a massive global change (Saegh *et al*, 1995; Al-Turkestani, 1999; Alzalabani, 2002). The same applies to many other Arab and Moslem countries (Ahmed and Donnan, 1991; Ali, 1998; ALESCO, 2000).

To sum up, quality has emerged as a great challenge to higher education in many countries of the world. It is quality that has to be achieved against decreasing resources, and at a time of expansion, reformation and internationalisation. The greatest European and American universities have already achieved quality that is widely recognised. But they have undoubtedly done this with support and generous funding, mainly from their governments, industry and business (Barnett, 1991; Fincher, 1993; Scott, 1995; Armstrong *et al*, 1997). The issue now is that a newly unified international system of higher education must achieve quality in an increasingly diversified programme.

### **2.3 Meanings and Definitions of Quality**

There is no doubt that universities and colleges over the centuries have become the most important sources of knowledge creation, sharing and distribution. Perhaps for this reason the conventional concept of quality in higher education is frequently equated with most people's perception of certain prestigious universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom, Harvard and Johns Hopkins in the United States, and the Sorbonne in France (for example, in terms of the distinctive and special student experience they provide, the success of their graduates, and their research output). However, it would be totally inappropriate to propose that the programmes of any one of these universities should determine our expectations of higher education, whether in the same countries or in other parts of the world. In other words, as many researchers concede (Goedegebuure *et al*, 1994; Salter and Tapper, 1994; Brown *et al*, 1997; Liston, 1999; Newby, 1999; Harvey, 2002) a single concept of quality is not of much value when it comes to assessing and evaluating quality in higher-education institutions as a whole. Green (1994b) argues that:



“If all institutions were judged by the same criteria as those used to judge Oxford and Cambridge, most would be continually condemned as poor quality. Even if it were possible to make every institution like Oxford and Cambridge, would it be desirable?” (p. 13).

In the educational community, there is no complete agreement either between or within different countries about the meaning of quality. This clearly indicates that in the most eminent universities the quality system is still in the process of early development. Nevertheless, it would be of great help, and also much confusion would be avoided, if there was general agreement nationally and internationally on the meanings of some particular terms closely associated with quality. The most common of these terms are listed below and their meanings and implications for quality are presented:

- **Level:** Level in the academic context refers to a specific position or rank (Frazer, 1994; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996; Dearing, 1997). For example, a doctorate programme is at a higher level than the baccalaureate. This, however, does not imply that the former programme is of higher quality than the latter.
- **Standard:** This term refers to the point (threshold) that must be attained before a teaching-learning programme can be offered or a qualification can be awarded (Barnett, 1992; Watson, 1997). In practice, academic standards are often statements about goals and purposes (such as knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes the students have to reach), and/or facilities (such as staff, buildings, libraries, equipment, transport, and so forth, to assist students to reach the intended goals), and/or achievements (such as what graduates actually acquire in terms of the employability-related knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes).

- **Effectiveness:** Effectiveness is a measure of the match between stated goals and their achievement (Craft, 1994; Cowen, 1996). It is always possible to achieve “easy” or “low-standard” goals. This indicates that quality in higher education cannot only be a question of achievements (outputs) but must also involve judgements about the goals (part of inputs) and development across the processes involved.
- **Efficiency:** In the field of education, efficiency is a measure of the resources employed (for example “costs”) to achieve stated goals (Frazer, 1994; Ashcroft, 1995). It is unfortunate that many governmental bodies (both in developed and developing countries) still frequently confuse quality in higher education with efficiency of the system (ALESCO, 1998, 2000). Low-standard goals might well be achieved at low cost, suggesting that efficiency and quality are of a different nature.

The facts of the matter are that the literature relevant to higher education is becoming increasingly abundant with varied definitions of quality. For example, quality has been defined as: “the degree to which the previously set objectives are met” (Vroeijenstijn, 1990; Ashcroft, 1995), “fitness for purpose” (Ball, 1985; Green, 1994b), “institutional reputations (colleges’ or universities’ rank in the pecking order of institutions)” (Astin, 1990; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996), “value-added (quality is subjectively associated with that which is worthwhile)” (Jacobi *et al*, 1987; Barnett, 1992), “customers’ needs” (Aylett and Gregory, 1996; Brennan *et al*, 1997), and so on. However, it is impossible to pick any single definition, since none is wholly credible and applicable. Indeed, many researchers may simply prefer not to think about defining quality accurately. For example, Harvey and Green (1993) are of the opinion that

quality, in a similar way to “liberty”, “equality”, “freedom”, or “justice”, is an elusive concept. They say:

“We all have an intuitive understanding of what quality means but it is often hard to articulate” (p. 10).

It seems that much of the basis of this argument about quality is that this unique concept is a relative one. Thus, for example, it is often subjectively associated with what is good or constructive. Different stakeholder groups in higher education may have different priorities, and hence may have varied perspectives on quality in this context. No surprise, then, that each group of stakeholders may define quality in accordance with the objectives set by its members. It is hard and perhaps even inappropriate to talk about quality as a unitary concept. Quality in higher education must be defined in terms of different qualities relevant to this context. A university, college, or department, for example, may be of high quality in relation to one factor but low quality in relation to another factor. For this reason, linking quality to activity may serve to validate quality irrespective of what the notion of quality might mean or the statement it is defined through. In other words, the best that can be achieved during this stage of quality development is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each interest group (stakeholder) uses when judging quality, and for these competing views to be taken into consideration when assessment and evaluation in a particular setting or organisation are undertaken.

#### **2.4 Stakeholders' Perceptions of Quality**

It is reasonable to look at all the respondents in an organisation or setting as collaborators or “stakeholders”, despite differences in their roles and views (Simpson

and Lyddon, 1995; Macfarlane and Lomas, 1999). For example, company stakeholders (shareholders, employees, customers and the local community) assess and evaluate company performance, as well as monitor the ethical behaviour of members. Employees, for instance, may “blow the whistle” on unethical activities, such as safety practices. They may also protest and strike over certain environmental issues, redundancy, and so forth. Greene (1994) emphasises that:

“The work of social program evaluators is framed by the concerns and interests of selected members of the setting being evaluated. Evaluation questions about the significance of program goals or about the quality and effectiveness of program strategies reflect not inquirer autonomy or theoretical predictions, but rather a politicized process of priority setting. In all evaluation contexts there are multiple, often competing, potential audiences-groups and individuals who have vested interests in the program being evaluated, called ‘stakeholders’ in evaluation jargon” (p. 531).

In a comparable way, Guba and Lincoln (1989), highlight the role of evaluators in the organisation. They state that:

“If evaluators cannot be clear, direct, and undeceptive regarding their wish to know how stakeholders make sense of their contexts, then stakeholders will be unclear, indirect, and probably misleading regarding how they do engage in sense-making and what their basic values are. Thus, deception is not only counter to the posture of a constructivist evaluator, in that it destroys dignity, respect, and agency, but it is also counterproductive to the major goals of a fourth generation evaluation. Deception is worse than useless to a nonconventional evaluator; it is destructive of the effort’s ultimate intent” (p. 122).

Both of the above views look at a particular group of stakeholders (evaluators) as participants in the process of plausible data creation. But, of course, it is essential for an organisational researcher to seek to empower other groups of stakeholders or participants, besides being open, honest and objective with every one of them.

Whether all ideas derived from profit-centred organisations can be readily transferred to non-profit public-service ones is not clear. The two sectors have different aims and purposes, are funded differently, and face different external factors (Harvey and Knight, 1996; Radford, 1997). An excellent example of such division is the reaction of the majority of academic institutions to the notion that “students” might be seen as “customers” (Raaheim *et al*, 1991; Scott, 1993, 1995; Barnett, 1997a). Several researchers, such as Craft (1992, 1994), Smyth (1995), Cowen (1996), Stephenson and Yorke (1998) and Wright (2003) believe that the central debate about who the actual customers are in higher education and how many interest stakeholder groups are present in this context, is very much informed by the argument about the concept of quality itself.

The suggestion in previous sections of this chapter was that quality in higher education is a relative concept. It not only varies according to who is making the assessment and evaluation, but also according to which aspect of the teaching and learning processes is being considered. Furthermore, variation in quality is expected in respect of the purpose of the study. This indicates that the focus of academic research should not only be on recognising the key stakeholders, but also exploring what criteria these groups regard as important in the process of assessing and evaluating quality. As far as the stakeholders in academic institutions are concerned (Burrows *et al*, 1992; Brennan *et al*, 1997; Radford and Holdstock, 1997; Newby, 1999) the following interest groups are often discernible:

- Students
- Graduates
- Employers

- Teaching staff and sub-staff
- Academic managers
- Governmental departments
- Funding agencies or councils
- Professional bodies (accreditors, validators, auditors and assessors)
- Students' parents
- Political parties
- Religious sectors
- General public

It is possible to simplify the above list into major groups, as some researchers (Barnett, 1992; Green, 1994a; Trowler, 1998) propose. For example:

- Students (undergraduate and post-graduate)
- Employers, including professional bodies
- Academic institutions and their staff
- Community at large

When a reflective higher education institution needs to account for its performance or assuring and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, it has to see to it that all stakeholder groups are and remain satisfied as far as possible (Scott, 1995; Rowley, 1996; Biggs, 2001; Spencer and Schmelkin, 2002). This is because it is the requirements, wishes and expectations of these groups that will determine the continued existence of the organisation and also form the basis for any improvement. It is a well-documented fact (Burrows *et al*, 1992; Barnett, 1997a and b, 2003) that each group of stakeholders has its own “stake” in the progress of the higher-education

institution. This is thought to be due to people themselves, for example, who normally treat each other as entities with desires, motives, institutional allegiances or collective attitudes, and so on, having a “stake” in their actions. Thus, it is expected that every stakeholder group is willingly prepared to make a certain contribution to the welfare of the institution. In exchange, a certain form of incentive or reward is expected, and as long as that is in reasonable proportion to the contribution, the stakeholders will be prepared to continue their participation, including settlement of any conflicts between them. In other words, a successful educational institution would do its best to prevent the development of situations characterised by irreconcilability or antagonism, which more commonly arise because of opposing thoughts such as religious, political or economic ones.

The phrase “organisation equilibrium” (Keuning, 1998, p.99) is used when an organisation succeeds in rewarding its stakeholders in such a way that they remain motivated to play a positive role towards its progression. Thus, despite possible contradictory interests, various groups of stakeholders have a common concern and that is the survival and advance of their organisation. The organisation itself allows its stakeholders to realise at least some of their goals, in exchange for their contributions. The management of the organisation is very important in this respect. For example, it needs to see to it that the contributions which are made and that the rewards received are, and remain, in balance. In Keuning’s (1998) opinion:

“Organisational equilibrium is certainly not a static concept; it is more a matter of shifting and dynamic equilibrium which has to be attained over and over again under changing circumstances and the shifting needs and demands of external and internal stakeholders, and as the organisation goes about its activities” (p. 99).

The basis of the main argument about quality in higher education, therefore, is that different stakeholder groups have different priorities and consequently their focus of attention may vary. For example, the focus of attention of students and teaching staff might be on the curriculum programmes and process of education, while the focus of employers and governmental bodies might be on the output of higher education. Several researchers and organisations, such as Goodlad (1995), Aylett and Gregory (1996), CVCP *et al* (1998), AGCAS (1999), Gelbert (1999) and HEFCE (2000a and b, 2001, 2002) have arrived at a conclusion that the prime aim of researching higher education institutions should be to create a set of quality criteria. These criteria are expected to rank in order of preference, for instance in conformity with the opinions of the stakeholder groups. In spite of the fact that there might be disagreement amongst these groups, it is often hoped that a set of core criteria will eventually emerge. It is around these criteria that there will be common consent, and also against them that quality assurance procedures should be assessed and evaluated in order to determine their appropriateness. For example, as maintained by the aforementioned researchers, organisations and others (Gibbs, 1996; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996; Thackwray, 1997; HEQC, 1997a and b; HESA, 2000) several core criteria can usefully be employed in the process of quality assessment and evaluation in higher education institutions. These are compiled and presented as following:

- Human (teaching and managerial staff) and physical (library, workshops and so forth) resources; that is to say, the basic assets which support the teaching, learning, research and management processes.
- Curriculum content, organisation, and aims and objectives. These elements should be made clear and understandable by all the stakeholder groups in a particular setting.



- The degree of guidance for students and encouragement for them to be interested, responsible and actively involved in the learning process; as well as skills acquisition and employability development.
- The relative standards of the higher education programmes to be offered to students and the degrees to be awarded to them.
- The criterion that the assessment and evaluation of quality covers the full range of curriculum purposes. In addition, both of the above activities must be valid, objective and fair.
- Students should receive useful feedback information relevant to the learning process and pattern of their progress.

A critical analysis of various procedures adopted for the measurement of quality in higher education may suggest that often there is no consensus amongst stakeholder groups towards a particular set of core criteria. For example, for employers a key criterion may be effective links with them as a means of influencing the characters of programmes of higher education. While the funding councils may also regard this issue as important, it may not be so for students and academic staff. In addition, it may not be considered a key criterion for quality assessment and evaluation by government departments. Green (1994c) states that:

“Research supports the view that a ‘product’-based notion of quality may be inappropriate to education and other services and points to the need to take into account service delivery” (p. 115-116).

In general, the majority of stakeholders give a high priority to the development of portfolios of general skills besides the subject matter (AGR, 1995; DfEE, 1998a; Shepherd, 2000). However, even in this respect, their views might vary, for example in

relation to the employability of graduates (see next chapter). Not surprisingly, employers and governmental agencies put a bonus on the output of higher education, especially on how efficient the learning processes. Consequently, they are more interested in what students learn and how transferable their knowledge is (Harvey and Knights, 1996; Bennett *et al*, 1999, 2000). Indeed, such an emphasis on output has already emerged as a prevailing feature of the quality assessment and evaluation movement in many European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark (Neave, 1991; Craft, 1994; Goedgebuure *et al*, 1994; Cowen, 1996; Brennan *et al*, 1997, 1999), the United States (Johnstone, 1995; Dill, 1997), Canada (Smyth, 1995) and Japan (Frey, 1991; Thurow, 1997). It is also an important feature in many other countries, including some of the developing ones, such as Australia (Baldwin, 1997; Massaro, 1997), New Zealand (La Rocque, 1995; Woodhouse, 1997), Hong Kong (Sensicle, 1992; Kember and Gow, 1994), Korea (Naisbitt and Aburdene, 1989; Ryoo *et al*, 1993), India (Chandra, 1992) and South Africa (Maharasoia and Hay, 2001).

It is interesting to note that many agencies and employers in several Arabian, Moslem and other developing countries are also beginning to pay attention to the outputs of higher education programmes offered by their universities and colleges, for example, in order to maintain a balance between the skills list and subject-specific knowledge acquired by graduates (ALESCO, 1998, 2000; Qasem, 1998; Nofal, 1998). No doubt, the same is true, for example, as revealed by ABEGS (1998), KSA (1998-2001) and Al-Hamidi *et al* (1999) of the situation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.

## **2.5 Quality Assessments and Evaluation**

Numerous benefits are associated with the assessment and evaluation of quality in higher education. However, here too, because there is no common consent regarding the meaning of quality, it is not surprising that there is considerable confusion and overlapping about the processes and activities aimed at measuring quality in this context. The purpose of the terminology and descriptions included in the present section is to provide a better understanding of some of the quality processes and also to indicate the variety of quality definitions or models.

**1. Quality control:** This process involves all the methods used to manage, maintain and enhance quality (Shores, 1988; De Vries, 1997; Gokusiling and Dacosta, 2000). Accordingly, every modern organisation needs to have a system to check that the raw materials it uses, the products it makes, or the services it provides, reach pre-defined standards. Many organisations, however, have already judged that this type of quality control is insufficient to enhance further development. For example, many employees may feel that the quality of the product or service is not their responsibility, that it does not matter if a substandard product is passed to the controllers, and that improving quality is simply not their concern. For this reason, it is necessary to introduce another concept called “quality assurance”.

**2. Quality assurance:** The quality assurance dominates educational debate at the present time. This is due to the fact that this concept provides a guarantee that the teaching staff, academic managers, students, courses, and settings in the form of a whole meet certain standards (Craft, 1992; Hawarth, 1993; Shanker, 1996). In other words, quality assurance has emerged in the form of a self-critical community,

comprised of several groups of stakeholders, each of whom contributes to and strives for continued improvement of his or her institution. Many researchers, such as Trowler (1998), Newton (2002), Biggs (2003), and Wright (2003), believe that adopting new politics are needed in order to enhance the quality assurance in a particular university, for example, using scientific approaches of managerialism and professionalism in the control of performances and cultures.

Many researchers and organisations, such as Pfeffer and Coote (1991), Yorke (1991), Woodhouse (1996), DfEE (1996a), Newby (1999) and QAA (2001a), concede that quality assurance cannot function adequately without the following two components:

- Managers have a responsibility for maintaining and enhancing the quality of the product manufactured or the quality of the service provided, so that, for example, substandard products or services rarely reach quality controllers, never mind consumers.
  - Managers and peer reviewers regularly check the validity and reliability of the methods employed for examining the quality of products or services.
- 3. Quality audit:** This term specifically refers to analysis by an external group checking that the quality control and quality assurance processes in a particular setting or organisation are appropriate (Webb, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Aylett and Gregory, 1996). The concept of quality audit is a recent one, largely developed in the United Kingdom during the early 1990s (DES, 1991; Williams, 1992). Many educationists believe that quality audits should solely concern themselves with the processes by which the university checks on the relations

between inputs and outputs (Power, 1997; QAA, 2000, 2001a and b; White, 2000). In other words, this concept has nothing to do with a university's mission (objectives, inputs) nor with how successfully these objectives have been attained (outputs).

4. **Quality inspection:** Inspection in the context of education is concerned with standards of teaching, learning and associated processes. It is hence based on gathering evidence through the direct observation and evaluation of students and their teachers at work (Perry, 1987; Melia, 1994; Barnett, 1997a and b; Biggs, 2001). This activity involves professional judgement, which, as a rule, is collective rather than individual, and consequently draws on knowledge of national, as well as regional and local standards. An example is peer reviews which are common in academia such as in dealing with journal articles and assessment reports.
  
5. **Accreditation:** Until recently, this term was most frequently used in the United States of America (Longanecker, 1994; Dill, 1997). It can apply either to programmes or to institutes, that is to say either to subject or to professional areas. According to the above sources, and also to Cherney (1990) and SEDA (1994), the main purposes of accreditation are to assure the educational communities, the general public, and other interested agencies or organisations that a particular institution or programme is accomplishing its objectives substantially and is expected to do so over time. The American accreditation system, however, does not reveal a requirement to judge whether the objectives of a programme are to meet any specific standard (Adelman and Silver, 1990; Morse and Santiago, 2000). In many countries, accreditation would imply that at least a threshold standard was

intended and being achieved. For example, in the United Kingdom, the quality assurance agencies (CNAA, HEQC, HEFCE, and now QAA) accredit courses, subject to certain safeguards and regular review (Harris, 1990; Radford *et al*, 1997). Likewise, both the Australian Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) (Baldwin, 1997), and the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) (Sensicle, 1992) use accreditation to mean that an institution is self-validating. India, since the mid-1980s, set itself the task of accrediting its higher education by establishing a National Board of Accreditation (Chandra, 1992). It has been confirmed by several Saudi researchers that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is determined to achieve the same goal (Addawood, 1996; Al-Hageel, 1998; Al-Zahrani, 1998; Al-Trairy, 1998; KSA, 1998-2001). Such attempts by developed and some developing countries constitute a formidable task and, if successful, this approach may well prove a model for accreditation in the higher education system as a whole.

- 6. Validation:** Validation in higher education is the process which deals with approving a new programme, or allowing an existing programme to continue (Church, 1988; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 1996). Alternatively, validation is a check that the predefined minimum standard will be, or is in fact, reached. It seems that many Western universities take responsibility for approving their own programmes and occasionally do not involve external validating agencies. Frazer (1994), however, pointed out that this is not the case for “non-university” institutions in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, and this is also true of several other countries, such as the Republic of South Africa and Hong

Kong. The same seems to apply to Saudi Arabia (Saegh *et al*, 1995; KSA, 1998-2001).

7. **Peer review:** This activity describes the involvement of educational specialists in development of particular programmes. For example, the university staff, as experts and practising professionals and researchers, offer advice, make appraisals, and take decisions about many important matters. Among them are the following:

- Curriculum design, content and organisation, as well as development of academic teaching and support staff (Biggs, 1996; Blackwell and McLean, 1996; Gibbs, 1996).
- Assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of teaching, learning, research and management processes (Topping, 1996; Braxton *et al*, 1996; Grunwald and Peterson, 2003).
- Students' guidance, support, progression and achievement (Gibbs, 1992; Ashcraft, 1995).
- Resources and facilities needed to achieve the institutional change (Brennan *et al*, 1997; Brennan and Shah, 2000).
- Quality control, assurance, audit, and related activities (Bannett, 1992; Brown, 1998).
- National and international comparisons between universities (Zijderveld, 1997).

It is likely that all universities and other higher education institutes, whether in Western or non-Western countries, employ one method or another for peer review. This undoubtedly constitutes part of their challenging task for the enhancement of

quality in their educational programmes, following the incompetence of conventional methods employed for the assessment and evaluation of such programmes.

## **2.6 Three Models for the Assessment of Quality**

Assessment in higher education is by no means a new strategy (Astin, 1990; Cave *et al*, 1991; Thackwray, 1997). It has always been implemented. For example, good teaching staff always use performance indicators to monitor whether students have met course objectives adequately. Of course, the general model of “quality as perfection” is no more than a traditional notion that equates quality with excellence or flawless service (Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey and Knight, 1996). In recent years, however, performance assessment has gained tremendous popularity, for instructional, accountability, and student–certification purposes. Indeed, some educationists are already referring to this type of assessment as an “education reform” that can help bring about better quality of learning (Cappelli, 1992; Kane and Khattri, 1995; Barnett, 1997-2003). Perhaps the most important models currently employed to assess quality in higher education are the three described below:

### **A. Quality as Fitness for Purpose:**

The definition of higher-education quality adopted by many analysts and agencies is that of “fitness for purpose” (Barnett, 1992; Perry, 1994; McDowell and Sampbell, 1999). Such a definition provides a model for determining what the specification for quality in this context should be. Exponents of this model argue that quality has little value except in relation to the purpose of the product manufactured or service offered. Fitness for purpose may be employed to analyse quality in higher education at a number of levels (Rowley, 1996; Barnett, 1997a and b; Harvey, 1998); for example, in



terms of curricula that provide the right balance of knowledge, skills and understanding, or in terms of supplying an appropriate workforce and the precise number of graduates, or in terms of institutions achieving the purposes it set for itself in its mission statements.

The notion of “fitness for purpose” is a developmental one (Oakland, 1993; Green, 1994b; Ashcroft, 1995; Thackwray, 1997) as it recognises that purposes may change over time, thus requiring constant re-evaluation of the appropriateness of the specification. In other words, the main problem with this model of quality assessment when specifically applied to the context of higher education is that it is difficult to be clear about the purposes or priorities. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Robbins Committee (Robbins, 1963) stated that the main purposes of higher education are:

- Instruction in skills.
- Promotion of the general powers of the mind.
- Advancement of learning.
- Transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship.

Since the publication of the Robbins Report, however, there have been several attempts amongst policy makers to re-define the purposes of higher education in the United Kingdom (Taylor, 1981; Billing, 1986; DES, 1987, 1991; Moser, 1988; Dearing, 1997; Brown, 1998; Harris, 2001). In the light of national needs, these purposes were generally directed to sustain a learning society. Since the Dearing Report was published in 1997 (Dearing, 1997), there has been a strong emphasis on meeting the needs of the economy, as the four main purposes specified in the report (p. 13) were:

- To inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment.
- To increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application for the benefit of the economy and society.
- To serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels.
- To play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.

Researchers of quality in the context of higher education ought to carefully consider the stated purposes of a particular institution. Different groups of stakeholders may have different views. For example, who should define the purposes of a higher education institution? Should it be the government's administrative, political and economic bodies; the academic professionals, the senior managers of the institution, the students and graduates, the employers, or the religious and societal sectors? It is, of course, possible to contemplate that all these groups would normally co-operate in the formulation of purposes of higher education. Nevertheless, there will always be some difference in their opinions. This is to be systematically researched and the results obtained explicitly reported.

#### **B. Quality as Effectiveness in Achieving Institutional Goals:**

A special version of the "fitness for purpose" model focuses on assessing quality in higher education at the institutional level (De Weert, 1990; Goodlad, 1995; Biggs, 1996; Harvey and Knight, 1996). Bergquist (1995) proposed that:

“Quality exists in a college or university to the extent that adequate and appropriate resources are being directed successfully toward the accomplishment of mission-related institutional outcomes and that programs in the college or university make a significant and positive mission-related difference in the lives of people affiliated with the college or university and are created, conducted, and modified in a manner that is consistent with the mission (and values) of the institution” (pp. 43 – 44).

Thus, a high quality institution of higher education is one that clearly states its mission and is both efficient and effective in meeting the goals that it has set for itself. This model always make it clear that there is no “gold standard” within the context of higher education. This implies that individual universities ought to determine their own definitions of quality. For example, each university, through its Academic Audit Unit, ought to evaluate whether its quality assurance system is successfully achieving its objectives.

In the United Kingdom the model of “quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals” has been actively employed since the publication of the 1991 White Paper (DES, 1991; Barnett, 1994, 1997a and b; Radford *et al*, 1997; Woodley and Brennan, 2000). This can be see, for example, in terms of the government’s desire to ensure that new funding arrangements should be related to and safeguard the best of the distinctive missions of individual institutions. In Green’s (1994b) opinion, this model is no less important than the previous one. She says:

“This model has significant implications for higher education as it broadens the spectrum of issues deemed relevant to the debate about quality to include performance in areas such as efficiency in use of resources or effective management” (p. 16).

But, of course, it is essential to recognise that the goals of any institution of higher education are multiple in nature. Indeed, some of these goals may contradict each

other, resulting in conflicts when they are employed in the assessment of quality. Thus, as Green (1994a), Harvey and Knight (1996), Price and Rust (1999) and Tam (2001) concede, the unreserved collaboration of all interested stakeholder groups is essential both to determine the priorities of a particular institution of higher education and, at the same time, to enhance its quality.

### **C. Quality as Meeting Customers' Needs:**

The definition of quality most often used in the manufacturing industry has improved enormously during the last decade, for example, by virtue of becoming more customer orientated. Such a definition is no longer applied exclusively to conformity to a specific standard but, rather, to meeting customers' stated or implied needs. High priority is placed on identifying customers' needs as a decisive factor in the process of designing a product or providing a service. In Ashcroft's (1995) account:

“The language of the market-place is not value-free. The attempt to assure quality and standards means that the need to be clear about values is urgent, since what counts as quality and standards is evaluated in terms of them. The idea of customer satisfaction can only take us so far. The UK Government's and employer's needs have to be weighed up as only on part of the picture (albeit an important part). The need for effectiveness and efficiency has to be balanced against the need for those conditions that research has shown leads to the optimal conditions for learning, including lifelong learning. It may be that the drive for efficiency, value for money, and customer satisfaction results in some of these optimal conditions not being met. As an educator you may feel quality in education should be uncompromised. The dilemma is how to maintain quality and standards in the face of reduced resources and student diversity” (p. 52).

Many experts on quality and standards in higher education, such as Vroeijenstijn (1990), Harvey and Green (1993), Scott (1995), Barnett (1997a and b), and Van Overbeek (1997), believe that quality as both “fitness for purpose” and as

“effectiveness in achieving institutional goals” should be related to quality as “meeting customers’ needs”. The reason behind such a belief is a number of complications in defining quality as “meeting customers’ needs” alone, particularly in the public service sector. For example, in the area of higher education who should be considered a customer? Is it the students or those who pay for this service (the government and employers)? And, leading on from this, is the student a consumer, a product or both? Accepting the view that it is the student who is the customer creates a difficulty in the evaluation of the educational service. For example, while it may be simple to recognise many of the physical needs of students (in terms of access to libraries, accommodation, transport, and so forth), the crux of education is the intimate relationship between the academic staff and students in the teaching-learning process (Romer, 1995; Trowler, 1998; Rust, 1998; Biggs, 1999). Thus, in higher education the producers (academic staff) and customers (students) are both part of the production process and that is what makes this process so unique. In other words, production in the context of higher education should be looked upon as an individual or personal process, since it largely depends on the characteristics of both the producer and the consumer. The net outcome of these characteristics is that standards of quality are often difficult to state or maintain precisely.

Several analysts on the models of assessing quality in higher education (Robert and Higgins, 1992; Harvey and Green, 1993; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996), are in fact critical of the idea that students truly know the full scope of their needs. They claim that students may be able to identify their short-term needs, but they have insufficient knowledge and experience to know what they need in the long term. Furthermore, students are in no position to judge whether their needs are being met or not. It may be

that satisfying students' needs is not exactly the same as satisfying their wants (Harvey *et al.*, 1997c). It is also important to make a distinction between various concepts of educational quality and the most appropriate methods for assuring or assessing this quality. The latter notion suggests that defining quality "as meeting customers' needs" does not necessarily imply that the customer is always placed in a typical position to determine what quality is or even whether it is present or not. This model, therefore, also leaves open the question of who amongst the stakeholder groups should best define quality in higher education so as to facilitate the process of its assessment in the most appropriate way.

The implications of all three models for the assessment of quality in the context of higher education point towards a need for further research, perhaps most urgently into the impact of assessment on students' and graduates' performance in both developed and developing countries. This would provide proof of the fulfilment of individual institutional goals and curricula relevant to the programmes adopted.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

It is reasonable to conclude that quality in higher education is largely about students' learning, even though the actual status of students may depend on their interaction with teachers, departments, and universities as a whole. The researcher's approach to the assessment of quality in higher education is from the perspective of undergraduate curriculum development in relation to graduates' employability in four departments of King Saud University. It is felt that generating and collecting reliable data through researching the following aspects will help to fulfil the study objectives in this regard:

- A The opinions of the main stakeholder groups regarding undergraduate education in the study departments. This would help to judge how far curriculum purposes and specifications satisfy the educational and vocational goals planned by the Saudi authorities.
  
- B The nature of the factors that affect students' choice to develop their general skills package. This will help to work out the list of subjects of prime interest to students that might broaden their experience and transferable knowledge.
  
- C The status of guidance services provided to Saudi students, for example, in relation to choices of their specialities, vocations available for them following their graduation, and their mood towards work either in governmental or private sectors.
  
- D The sort of national (Saudi and Arabian) and transnational (foreign) procedures which the Saudi educational authorities rely on when assessing and evaluating the role of curricula in defining quality in higher education.
  
- E The extent of research and related activities in Saudi Arabia, which are primarily devoted to designing, organising, and renewing the undergraduate curricula, as well as developing graduates' quality characteristics.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**THE CONCEPT OF**  
**GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY**



### 3.1 Introduction

The principal objective of this chapter is to discuss the concept of graduates' employability and its main themes. This concept gathered force only about a decade ago (Tamkin and Hillage, 1999; Mason *et al*, 2000; Harvey, 2001). But it has quickly established itself as a leading issue in the strategic direction of "graduateness" in higher education. This is because many universities and colleges, throughout both developed (EC, 1995, 1997; ILO, 1998/99; OECD, 1998, 2000) and developing (Tan and Batra, 1995; Finlay *et al*, 1998; Gill *et al*, 2000) countries, are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of finding suitable jobs for their new graduates in today's very competitive labour market.

It is discernible, however, that the argument on the issue of employability so far has almost completely focused on the development by university students of a job-related skills-agenda or "portfolio". The suggestive policy for such an educational acquisition is through incorporation of a variety of general skills, attributes or knowledge applicable to most areas of the work market into mainstream subject programmes (Bennett *et al*, 2000; Brennan, 2000; Shepherd, 2000; Fallows and Steven, 2000). The consensus among different stakeholder groups seems to be that any real progress in the field of graduate employability is beneficial at institutional, national and global levels (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Atkins, 1999; Harvey, 1999, 2003; Strivens and Grant, 2000). Yet, the actual development of employability by the majority of university students is inevitably associated with the systematic development of quality in the context of higher education. For example, in Morley's (2001) opinion:

"Arguably, employability is a decontextualised signifier in so far as it overlooks how social structures such as gender, race, social class and disability interact with labour market opportunities. Within the

context of quality assurance responsibility for employment potential is seen as an organisational and pedagogical responsibility. It is not linked to the socio-economic context” (p. 132).

This chapter addresses the current debates which surround the issue of graduates’ employability. First, it considers the various definitions of employability that have been adopted by both researchers and the organisations concerned. Secondly, it classifies job-related skills into categories which the employability development programme is trying to incorporate into the curricula of different disciplines. It then examines the acquisition of certain transferable skills which make graduates more attractive to the work market, followed by some specifications regarding institutional employability development and recent approaches to its measurement. Finally, it sets the scene for linking the quality of higher education to the employability of graduates.

### **3.2 Meanings and Definitions of Employability**

The current debate on graduates’ employability indicates that this concept, like that of quality in higher education (De La Harpe *et al*, 2000; Morley, 2001), is multi-faceted. Several researchers, as well as some educational and management bodies, especially in developed countries, have recently attempted to map out the various dimensions of employability (LTSN, 2002; Little, 2003). The results reveal that this concept comprises a variety of general and specific elements, such as generic competencies (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Klink *et al*, 2000), national key skills (Bloys and Williams, 2000), firm-specific competencies (De Geus, 1997; Nordhaug, 1998), networks (Nohria and Eccles, 1992; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), teamwork (Greenhaus and Callanan, 1994; Sullivan *et al*, 1998), performance (Newell and Dopson, 1996; Noe, 1996), management of knowledge and resources (Antonacopoulou and Fitzgerald, 1996;

Garrick and Clegg, 2000), feedback from employers (Feldman, 1996; Smith, 1996), organisational culture (Estienne, 1997), teaching and learning assessments and portfolios (Dachy and McDowell, 1997; Romaniuk and Snart, 2000) and student's personal qualities (Knight, 2001; Yorke, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2002).

Clearly, the great attention paid to graduates' employability has also been very useful in exploring its diverse meanings. However, the formulation of this concept into a single comprehensive definition, even in the context of developed countries, like Britain and America, has yet to be achieved. Finn (2000) recognises this problem:

“Given that ‘employability’ is central to the policy goals of the Labour Government and the term is used extensively in Government statements and programmes, it is surprising that there is no single definition. Different Government departments, agencies and interest groups tend to use it in ways which reflect their programmes and concerns, leading to much confusion” (p. 386).

Nevertheless, the vast majority of researchers West and East tend to define employability in terms of graduate skills, attributes and attitudes, that is, personal capabilities and knowledge which enable them to acquire and maintain appropriate employment.

It emerges from the literature on employability that the conceptions of key stakeholders regarding the issue vary and this, no doubt, is the chief reason for the lack of a relevant and conclusive definition. However, the framework recently suggested by Harvey (1999-2003) identifies the principal factors which may help to provide explicit and implicit definitions of employability, namely: job type, timing, attributes at recruitment, employability skills, students' achievements, and further learning.

Consequently, the definitions of employability which this researcher has encountered may be outlined as follows:

- A. Employability implies getting any job, even if graduates are overqualified for them. Therefore, it is no longer possible to fix the limits of “graduate jobs” (Brennan *et al*, 1996; Stewart and Knowles, 1999). In the Western World, this approach to defining employability has been widely used by governmental agencies in the construction of “performance indicators” for higher education institutions (Blackwell and Harvey, 1999; Harvey, 2000a).
  
- B. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.2), “employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work”. In contrast to the definition above, this refers to graduates’ fundamental ability to be properly employed; that is, their securing what are sometimes referred to as “graduate-level ” or “career orientated” jobs (Harvey, 2000a). This definition also has a lot in common with the notion of graduate capability (Stephenson, 1998), for example, to be self-fulfilled and able to move within the labour market in order to present skills to employers with whom they seek employment.
  
- C. Employability is about graduates securing desirable “graduate-level jobs” within a limited period of their graduation. In the case of graduates from British universities for example, this is about six months (Purcell *et al*, 1999a and b) before any retraining is required (Harvey *et al*, 1997a and b).

- D. Employability is about the ability based curriculum (OBU, 2002) including acquisition of a wide range of key or core transferable skills, as well as relevant generic attributes and knowledge (Harvey, 2000a, 2001; Lees, 2002b), which most employers find explicitly valuable to their enterprises (Bennett *et al*, 2000; Fallows *et al*, 2000).
- E. Employability is seen by some sources as synonymous with “career management” (DfEE, 1997a; AGCAS, 1999), for example, the quality of graduate in carrying out the process of skills and knowledge transition and overcoming the difficulties.
- F. Employability, especially from the employers’ standpoint, is about inspiring undergraduates and motivating them to learn better (Harvey *et al*, 1997b; Fallows and Ahmet, 1999; Van Der Heijden, 2001). That is to say, besides enthusiastic graduates displaying at the time of recruitment of their true desire to develop further those attributes which are favoured by employers for better functioning of their organisations and for a long time. As Harvey (1999b) states:
- “Employability is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for future effective functioning of their organisation” (p. 4).
- G. Employability is about people’s characteristics or natural inclination and the possibility of converting them into organisational competencies (Sparrow, 1995) or corporate interests (Bagshaw, 1997). In this light, Civelli (1998) defines employability as follows:

“Generally speaking, what we mean by employability is the possibility to use or employ a series of competencies and knowledge in new or different areas of organizations by an individual or organization” (p. 49).

H. Employability is a long-term strategic challenge (Allison *et al*, 2002). Therefore, it is about high-quality experience, where subject-specific skills are taught in relation to high-level generic skills and personal attributes and knowledge, in order to enhance graduates’ ability to secure jobs within a limited period of post-graduation and at later stages during their working lives. The International Labour Conference (ILC, 2000) defined employability as:

“A key outcome of education and training of high quality, as well as a range of other policies. It encompasses the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker’s ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if she/he so wishes or has been laid off, and enter more easily into labour market at different periods of the life cycle” (p. 1).

I. In Harvey’s (2000a, 2001) view, there are other conceptual meanings of graduates’ employability which have not been elaborated upon in as much detail as those listed above. One of these emphasises students’ achievements at graduation, another maintains the view that undergraduates’ qualifications or degrees are by no means the end of the learning process and, therefore, values graduates who seek continuous learning.

It is also evident from the above definitions of employability that perspectives on human capital are far more profound and complicated than the straightforward judgement of this concept by outcome; that is, whether the graduate will or will not get a job. Furthermore, as remarked by Gaspers and Ott (1998), Ranson (1998) and Verhaar and Smulders (1999), the general notion of employability is basically practical

and needs a good deal of management and hence focuses on the possibility of transferring skills from the individual to organisational level.

Competencies, attributes or knowledge, which the concept of employability synergistically combines with understanding or subject matter, are repeatedly identified in the literature as skills general in type but highly diverse in nature (Purcell *et al*, 1996; DfEE, 1998a; Fallows and Steven, 2000). In the views of Keep and Mayhew (1999), Bennett *et al* (2000), Blake *et al* (2000), and Dunne and Rawlins (2000), such skills include information and communication technology (ICT), self-awareness, improving one's own learning and performance, team-work and solving complex problems. Because each of these competencies goes beyond those traditionally associated with academic disciplines, they are also regarded as highly adaptable and practical in a variety of settings (Harvey, 1997a and b, 1998; AGR, 1993, 1995, 1999; Gibbs, 2000). The reason for including some personal abilities (such as graduates' propensity, adaptability, self-reliance, self-awareness, self-fulfilment and self-interest) within the skills agenda, and hence in the definition of employability, lies in the suggestion that they may have a significant influence on students' learning and performance, as well as their future achievements at work (Rust, 1998; Miller *et al*, 2000).

There has been considerable discussion, over the last few years, on the classification of the general elements (skills, attributes and knowledge) upon which the employability concept has been built and through which its various definitions and meanings have been formulated (see 3.2). It is believed that the main reason behind separating employability into a large number of elements is to provide a solid foundation against which their quality can be assessed (Harvey, 1998-2003; Dweck, 1999; Fallows and Steven, 2000). For example, student performance can be evaluated

through these general elements as effectively as through the specific elements of the academic discipline.

It is interesting to note that in some Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, the belief that employability is synonymous with “career management” prevails. Thus, several influential educational and career management bodies in the U.K., such as the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) (Dearing, 1997), the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP, 1998), the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC, 1998), the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS, 1999), the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR, 1999), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2001b), and Universities UK (UUK, 2002), tend to support the idea that the most important general skills, attributes and knowledge connected to graduates’ employability are those related to career management. For example, the following four categories are considered of primary importance: key/core transferable skills, such as information and communication technology (ICT); learning skills and language; intellectual skills, such as critical evaluation, problem solving, and the ability to convert theory into practice; personal attributes and attitudes, such as adaptability, self-reliance and self-awareness; and the knowledge of how organisations operate and are managed competitively.

However, in the United Kingdom, like elsewhere, the literature pertinent to the concept of employability as a whole is becoming increasingly abundant with skills-related terms (CVCP, 1998; Hustler *et al*, 1998; Gill *et al*, 2000; Shepherd, 2000; Lees, 2002a and b). The problem is that these terms are variously, and sometimes even reciprocally, used by different researchers and interest groups, which may obscure the



particular definition as well as comprehensive meaning of the concept of employability that contains them. The following list is a good example of the magnitude of this problem: key skills, core skills, generic skills, general skills, generalisable skills, common skills, transferable skills, process skills, personal skills, personal transferable skills, personal qualities, career management skills, employability skills, enterprise skills, firm-related skills, intellectual skills, non-specific skills, portable skills, non-conventional skills, capabilities and competencies.

The debate over what is meant by any one of the above skills and the necessity to sort them out, as well as to identify the best way for undergraduate students to acquire them and make use of them after graduation, continues among all the stakeholder interest groups. However, many higher education institutions, especially those in Western developed countries, have already initiated the task of restructuring their academic curricula and included special skills and employability courses or vocational modules within their conventional programmes (Gumport, 2000; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Miller *et al*, 2001). The implicit focus is always on skills and employability development, in preparing undergraduates to enter the workforce with more confidence than their counterparts who lack such skills.

### **3.3 Types of Job-related Skills**

Several terms have come into use in the context of higher education to describe the competencies specifically pertinent to the issue of graduate employability. The most important of these can be tentatively classified as follows:

## **A. Key Skills**

Key or “core” skills represent a concept of general skills which is widely supported by researchers, such as Kingsley (1995), Tribe (1996), Dunne *et al* (1997), Little (1998,2001), and Bloys and Williams (2000). The main purpose of these skills is to increase students’ motivation and enhance the development of their personalities, for example, by encouraging them to participate more actively in the process of learning and the discovery of new knowledge. Several researchers, such as Brown (1997), Bradford (1999), Blake *et al* (2000), and Shepherd (2000), believe that it would be better to classify the most common personal skills, such as the ability to work with others and the initiative to improve one’s learning, alongside basic competencies like the application of numerical and information technology (IT). It is interesting to note that the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997), CVCP (1998), Coppers and Lybrand (1998), Hillage and Pollard (1998) and Yorke (1999) all clearly recognise the significance of key skills as a necessary foundation for a candidate’s success in the world of work. Therefore, these skills can serve to improve the quality of higher education and this is well worth the effort of profound investigation (De La Harpe and Radloff, 2000; Harvey, 2000; Morley, 2001).

## **B. Employability Skills**

These include a wide variety of generic skills, attributes and knowledge. Some British national bodies, like the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR, 1995, 1999), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 1995), the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE, 1998a and b, 1999), the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP, 1995, 1998), Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 1998, 2000), Qualifications and Curriculum

Authority (QCA, 2001) and Universities UK (UUK, 2002), and international bodies, like the European Commission (EC, 1995,1997), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1996, 1998) and the International Labour Office (ILO, 1996/97, 1998/99, 2001), believe that these skills are essential elements in making graduates flexible, attractive to assessors, marketable to motives employers, increase the ability to learn the job more quickly, and successful in the work environment.

The researcher has come to know from the available literature that employability skills are often conveniently divided into three categories, as briefly defined below:

**i. Proper skills:** These are the basic skills required by all graduates. They are more easily understood transferable nature (Strivens and Grant, 2000; Shepherd, 2000; Atlay and Harris, 2000). In addition to those mentioned above under “key skills”, this category may include the following competencies:

- Evaluation and interpersonal skills
- Error-free reasoning
- The ability to reach an appropriate conclusion
- Analytical skills
- The ability to contrast theoretical explanations
- The ability to think in a flexible manner
- The ability to model problems mathematically

**ii. Attributes:** These comprise a wide range of individual traits, mainly related to opinions and morale, which can be discovered and developed into competencies indistinguishable from those which are acquired. The importance of these skills became more apparent when assessing the individual motivation and job satisfaction (Reeves and Harper, 1981). Like other types of generic skills, attributes have recently been given a boost by the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) and subsequent reports on British education strategies. Barnett (1997a and b, 2000), Harvey *et al* (1997a,b and c), Bentley (1998), Gibbs (2000) and Little (2003), among others, support the idea that with a combination of several attributes of the kind listed below, an undergraduate student might be able to develop a positive approach to change. Consequently, upon his or her graduation and employment, such a person is expected to be more adaptable, to respond appropriately and to be strong enough to deal with unpredictable circumstances in the world of work. These attributes include:

- Adaptability
- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Responsiveness
- Professional integrity
- The ability to work in a team
- Open-mindedness toward challenges
- Self-reliance
- The ability to improve one's learning
- An awareness of ethical issues

**iii. Knowledge:** This category refers to acquired knowledge; for example, that gained by students through practical experience in the work environment (CVCP, 1998; DfEE, 1998b; AGR, 1999) or even during periods of graduate apprenticeship (Weller, 1999). Without doubt, such knowledge is helpful for undergraduates in starting their future careers on the right track (Assiter, 1995; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Miller *et al*, 2000; Smith *et al*, 2000). It is evident that the best way for undergraduates to familiarise themselves with the structure of a particular organisation and how it operates is by undertaking a placement or joining a relevant work-experience programme. Both the student's theoretical knowledge and that gained from his or her life experience will also be of help here. For example, with regard to the employability development of a Saudi student, some knowledge about 'projected national goals' would be helpful (ABEGS, 1998; KSA, 1998-2001; KSU, 1999a, 2001) and could, for instance, comprise awareness of some of the following:

- Economic change
- Social change
- Cultural change
- Political change
- Religious beliefs and values

### **C. Career Management Skills (CMS)**

The skills belonging to this category cover some of the basic competencies, somewhat similar to, if not occasionally overlapping with, those listed in the previous sections. As illustrated by Hustler *et al* (1998), NICEC (1998), AGCAS (1999) and Bennett *et al* (2000), CMS are currently more intensely focused on networking and decision-making. It therefore appears that CMS – in distinction to both key skills and employability

skills, which are, in general, more relevant to life – provide more direct help to students with regard to the development of their careers. For example, Cross's (1997) list of CMS comprises the following:

- Communication skills
- Transferable skills
- Decision-making skills
- Key (core) skills
- Self-reliance skills
- Self-evaluation skills
- Job-hunting skills
- Personal attributes and qualities

#### **D. Self- Reliance Skills**

This category comprises a number of efficacy beliefs and other personal competencies. They are thought to assist graduates in taking responsibility for both their personal development and the management of their relationship to the work environment (AGR, 1995, 1999; Brown, *et al*, 1997; Greaforex, 1999; Yorke and Knight, 2003). They are therefore seen as helping graduates to maintain and develop what they have learnt and thereby be successful at work; they also encourage them to take on the responsibility of lifelong learning (Ahier and Esland, 1999; NAGCELL, 1999; Fallows and Steven, 2000). Like employability skills, self-reliance skills encompass a variety of competencies, attributes and knowledge; for example:

- Actively seeking out opportunities
- Action planning

- Networking
- Decision-making
- Negotiation
- Political awareness
- Transferable skills
- Attributes (such as self-awareness, self-promotion, coping with uncertainty, development focus, and self-confidence)
- Knowledge (such as an awareness of current national and international affairs)

In contrasting self-reliance skills with CMS, it becomes obvious that there is a considerable amount of overlap between them. This, for example, is illustrated by both lists' inclusion of decision-making and personal and interpersonal competencies. Furthermore, both categories seek to equip undergraduate students with skills that enable them to manage their learning and future careers. On the other hand, the list of self-reliance skills appears to overlook the key or core skills, which are considered by many researchers to be the most important type of generic skills (Jarvis *et al*, 1998; Bennett *et al*, 1999,2000; Fallows and Steven, 2000). It is also interesting to note that the British higher education system places emphasis on the significance and quality of self-reliance skills in enabling student profiles to flourish (DfEE, 1998a and b, 2000; CVCP, 1998; HESA, 1998, 2000; QAA, 2001a and b), in spite of the fact that some eminent national bodies, such as the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR, 1993,1995,1999), find it wasteful to spend too much time and money providing undergraduates with the more general skills needed to fulfil their target.

### 3.4 A Perception of the Requirements for Employability Skills

The aim of every group of stakeholders, especially in the context of higher education in developed countries, is to identify the range of skills which allow students to make a successful transition from education to employment (Bennett *et al*, 2000; Gibbs, 2000; Gill *et al*, 2000; Strivens and Grant, 2000). For example, the present situation in the United Kingdom is well reflected in Chapple and Tolley's (2000) statement:

“The development of skills relevant to employment and future learning is an integral part of the university's teaching and learning strategy and it is a general requirement that all modules be written in terms of the transferable skills to be developed . As a consequence of this remit all schools have made a move towards integrating skills development into their teaching, although institutional practice is varied and difficult to quantify” (p. 68).

As suggested by several authors, such as Dearing (1997), Atkins (1999), Tait and Godfrey (1999), Fallows and Steven (2000) and Shepherd (2000), non-specific subject skills are often competencies of self-reliance which are supposedly subject of definition and assessment. It is this category of skills which employer expect university graduates to possess, including well-developed communication, information and technology (IT), team-work, problem-solving and self-management.

However, since the difficult problems in higher education currently lie in the increasing number of undergraduates wanting to enter the labour market after graduation and the fierce competition for limited jobs (Harvey *et al*, 1997a,b and c; Sausman and Steel, 1997; Nunan, 2000), a satisfactory solution to the question of graduate employment necessitates defining the nature of employability skills and the requirements for their acquisition. For example, in the present circumstances of insufficient funding and facilities, student surpluses and irregular engagement with



employers, British universities and colleges are unlikely to make radical changes to their curricula in favour of programmes comprising such skills (Bosworth, 1999; Blake *et al*, 2000; Holmes, 1999, 2000, 2001). Noble (1999) argues:

“Whether institutions have adopted integrated or stand-alone programmes, there has been debate as to whether such modules should be a compulsory part of the curriculum. Academic staff often resist giving up ‘valuable curriculum time’ to skills-based modules. However, experience has shown that when modules are optional or voluntary, students in need are the least likely to attend” (p. 125).

It is also important to note that what is taught and learnt in the context of higher education, whether subject-specific or skill-specific, remains in the hands of small teams of academic stakeholders (Slowey, 1995; Readings, 1996; Jarvis *et al*, 1998), while the implementation of a curriculum that encompasses employability skills demands the collaboration of all relevant teams of stakeholders and on a much wider scale. De La Harpe and Radloff (2000) offer the following suggestion:

“Institutional issues can help or hinder the willingness of staff to start down the path of change. To help this process, staff in leadership positions must first themselves be committed to skills development and understand the need for change. They must also publicly support professional development activities, encourage staff to take responsibility for ongoing professional development, convince staff that part of their role is to ensure that graduates develop necessary skills, overcome staff resistance to change, and manage those staff who are unwilling to change” (pp.172-3).

In other words, the shift towards the policy of identifying employability skills and embedding them in conventional university curricula requires the existence of a supportive environment in order to maintain continuous graduate development. For example, it requires a set of carefully aligned attitudes to teaching and learning, the

management of student performance at every level and the evaluation of outcomes by quality assurance committees of specialists.

No doubt, the task of providing undergraduates with key employability skills has become much harder and even more complicated due to the recent development of a number of learning and career concepts, as indicated both by the critics and proponents of the conventional academic curriculum. One of these concepts tends to regard the undergraduate experience as a “once-and-for-all” learning activity ending with student graduation, rather than “one step on a long career path” (Barnett, 1997a and b; Jarvis *et al*, 1998; Gibbs, 2000). In contrast, there is the concept that lifelong learning offers greater scope for skills development, for example, the pursuit of professional excellence and continuous personal development (Berkeley, 1995; NAGCELL, 1999; Seltzer and Bentley, 1999). Then there are concepts such as “ability-based education” (Walker, 1995; O’Brien, 2000), “graduate identity” (Wright, 1996; Holmes, 1999, 2001), “career portfolio” (Fallows and Steven, 2000), “intelligent careers” (Arthur *et al*, 1995), “learning productivity” (Johnstone, 1995), “learning in groups” (Jacques, 1997), and “group working” (Mutch, 1998; Goldfinch, *et al*, 1999), which are prized to various extents by employers.

It appears that the main incentive for the development of the above concepts, has been changing employment policies and, more precisely, the down-sizing of many modern enterprises (Brockner and Lee, 1995; Swigart, 1995). In other words, as suggested by Harding (2000), the requirement for skills acquisition and transfer processes is actually based on the learning vocation concept of employability.

In spite of all the above barriers, the embedding of what have recently been called “key”, “core” or “general transferable” skills in academic curricula is still widely believed to result in greater satisfaction among students and staff, as well as ensuring that graduates acquire the personal competencies needed for work and life (Gibbs *et al*, 1994; Whitstone, 1998; Gill *et al*, 2000; Shepherd, 2000). Atkins (1999) reflects on the issue of the requirement of employability skills and, indeed, the demand for treating all types of skills, irrespective of their technical terminology, as part of the process which prepares graduates for entering the real world of work:

“It is possible, therefore, that some elements of the key skills, such as use of IT, could transfer quite well, while some process skills, such as the study skills needed to get a ‘good’ degree, may transfer not at all. Training students to transfer their skills, knowledge and understanding between contexts might help, though it is easier to see how this can be done for skills in relation to objects, such as using search engines to obtain information on the World Wide Web, than to the soft skills interacting with and managing other people effectively” (p.275).

With respect to the requirement for graduates to have employability skills, it is interesting to note that the views of research specialists (career theorists and managers) (Arthur *et al*, 1995; Berkley, 1995; Smith, 1996; Stewart and Knowles, 1999, 2000; Wright, 2001) do not contradict those expressed by several of the United Kingdom governmental agencies (AGR, 1995,1999; DfEE, 1996-2000; HEQC, 1997a and b; CVCP, 1998; NICEC, 1998; AGCAS, 1999; HEFCE, 1999, 2000a and b, 2001, 2002; HESA, 2000; QAA, 2001a and b; UUK, 2002), as well as agencies of other Western countries (EC, 1995, 1997; EJE, 1995, 2000; ILO, 1996/97, 1998/99, 2001; OECD, 1996, 1998, 2000; ILC, 2000). For example, it is agreed that the fulfilment of undergraduate employability development through the acquisition of general skills in higher education is not exactly what employers want. In fact, it is expected by some

that the gap between employers and other stakeholders in this respect may widen further in due course (Harvey and Green, 1994; Purcell *et al*, 1999; Pearson *et al*, 2000), as more enterprises begin to initiate different criteria for graduate recruitment, which may very often change in response to the demands of the work market. In other words, the employability skills which are demanded by employers are actually increasingly becoming more and more specific in nature and, as has recently been pointed by Harvey (2001, p. 98), sometimes these employability skills can be described as “discipline-linked, sector related and, company-type”.

On the other hand, several researchers, such as Bandura (1997), Drummond *et al* (1998), Dweck (1999) and Evans (2000a) sense the inevitable emergence of a consensus among different groups of stakeholders regarding the importance of a broad range of personal self-reliance skills and attributes (see 3.3 above). It is believed that many of these skills and attributes are transferable in nature (Shepherd, 2000) and, therefore, will help graduates in their employment as well as in developing their professional careers, regardless of the particular technical skills involved in their particular programmes or degree disciplines. Thus, such skills and attributes, whether they are integrated into the conventional curriculum or not, are thought to be predominantly favoured by an increasing number of employers (Bates and Bloch, 1995; Finlay *et al*, 1998; Fallows and Steven, 2000), particularly at the early stages of job development and progress.

In terms of undergraduate capability (Stephenson and Yorke, 1998; Fallows and Steven, 2000), it is reasonable to argue that the employability concept must effectively encompass newly-introduced key or transferable skills, as well as any relevant attributes and knowledge besides conventional academic education. The importance of

this understanding lies in its providing a way forward between various conflicting theories regarding the effectiveness of the higher education system and its potentially influential contribution to the workplace, including graduate employment and economic competitiveness. This is bound to resolve the debate conclusively in that even if different groups of education stakeholders, including assessors and employers, are unlikely to meet undergraduate requirements or expectations exactly, they still have a very significant role to play together in the process of the development of specific or specialised skills. To effect a real change, such skills have to be smoothly transferable across occupational contexts, for example, from the initial stage of employment to the final level of career development. This objective may only be achieved through the cooperative efforts of all the relevant teams to work according to the guidelines listed below:

- A Radically reforming “subject-focused” undergraduate curricula through “process skills”; that is, embedding in them generic transferable skills, as well as selected attributes, and making all these competencies an integral part of the teaching, learning, evaluation and employment processes (Armstrong, *et al*, 1997; Barnett, 1997a and b; Harvey *et al*, 1997a and b; Smith *et al*, 2000). For example, information retrieval with regard to the labour market is believed to enable students to acquire systematic vocational thinking, as well as an informed perspective on future achievements in the contexts of work and life (Anderson and Marshall, 1996; Bennett *et al*, 1999).
  
- B Adjusting existing undergraduate curricula towards more strategic study of subjects, thereby facilitating the acquisition of various types of key or transferable skills, including those of self-reliance (Dearing, 1997; AGR, 1995, 1999). This approach

may also promote graduate employability by helping students to find ways of transferring their skills to the workplace (Bruce, 1999; Harding, 2000).

- C The inclusion of an adequate number of skills-awareness courses or learning modules in mainstream undergraduate programmes. This is thought by many skills researchers, such as Assiter (1995), Brockbank and McGill (1998), and Bennett *et al* (2000) to add to the comprehensive skills-base of students and, at the same time, enhance their understanding of what constitutes employability. In the Arab World, designing some “culturally-orientated courses” might also improve graduate marketability to relevant employers (Qasem, 1998; Nofal, 1997, 1998; ALESCO, 1998, 2000).
  
- D Enabling undergraduates to apply their theoretical knowledge to the realities of life (Little, 1998, 2003; Bruce, 1999; Dweck, 1999). For instance, this may be achieved by offering students an opportunity of work placement so that they can exercise their key or general transferable skills and intellectual attributes, many of which are essential elements of the employability skills agenda.
  
- E Advancing an effective method of peer assessment by committees of specialists regarding the perceived quality of a range of key or general transferable skills, attributes and knowledge (Woodruffe, 1993; HEQC, 1997a and b). Not only does this make it easier for students themselves to understand staff enrichment strategies but it also facilitates assessment of their own abilities in relation to what is required to obtain a job in accordance with their qualifications and employability skills (Walker, 1995; Seltzer and Bentley, 1999).

- F Supporting academic staff and fulfilling their professional needs by developing among them further awareness and expertise, as well as facilitating the development of a more virtual environment for their students (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992a and b; Biggs, 1999). For example, the development of information literacy and specific employability skills may take place in accordance with staff perceptions and opinions regarding the best way to incorporate them into the undergraduate curriculum. They would also be able to monitor the results of the changes they have made as well as document them, and disseminate their experiences (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992; Biggs, 1996; Cowan, 1998).
- G The effective involvement of all relevant groups of stakeholders, besides academic staff, in the processes of skills and attribute development and their acquisition by undergraduates (Finlay *et al*, 1998; Fallows and Steven, 2000). As recommended by Ahier and Esland (1999) and Milne (2000), this approach should certainly make advances in elaborating a shared understanding of the agenda for implementing skills-curriculum integration at various stages. It may also help in assessing students' attributes and identifying graduates as persons with profound employability skills and hence as prospective marketable employees.
- H Demonstrating how various types of key skills, attributes and knowledge are actually developed and assessed within the context of higher education and how it is possible to promote graduate employability through them (Sutherland and Bonwell, 1996; Walker and Finney, 1999). As explained clearly by several researchers, such as Thackwray (1997), Cowan (1998) and Goldfinch *et al* (1999), it becomes essential to involve undergraduates in innovative ways of learning and

action assessment which require self-reflection, self-awareness, critical thinking and metacognition.

- I Promoting the tasks of lifelong learning, for instance, by instructing undergraduates how to synthesise a wide range of information and recall what is needed (Bentley, 1998; NAGCELL, 1999), as well as providing them with insights on how to use quality learning and the best way to obtain tenable knowledge which is essential in obtaining and retaining suitable jobs (Berkeley, 1995; Jarvis *et al*, 1998).

### **3.5 Specifications on Institutional Employability Development**

In recent years, there have been a number of attempts at measuring graduate employability in several developed and developing countries (EJE, 1995, 2000; ILO, 1996/97, 1998/99; OECD, 1996-2000; UNIDO, 1997). However, instead of developing a standardised criterion for employability through in-depth information and reasonable judgement, such as that regarding shareholder performance indicators (Cave *et al*, 1997; Yorke, 1998) or through an audit of the developmental opportunities of the institution (Power, 1997), it has surprisingly been routinely measured through a ready-made set of graduate employment rates (Yano, 1997; Paul and Murdoch, 2000; Schomburg, 2000; Teichler, 2000, 2002; Mallough and Kleiner, 2001). Thus, the percentage of new graduates employed 6-12 months after graduation is taken as an indicator of the quality of higher education. However, as recently suggested by some British researchers, such as Bowes and Harvey (1999), Harvey (2000a, 2001), Paul *et al* (2000) and Little (2001), the measurement of employability is by no means a straightforward and easy task, especially when it is carried out in relation to comparative international standards of higher education. For example, Maharasoa and



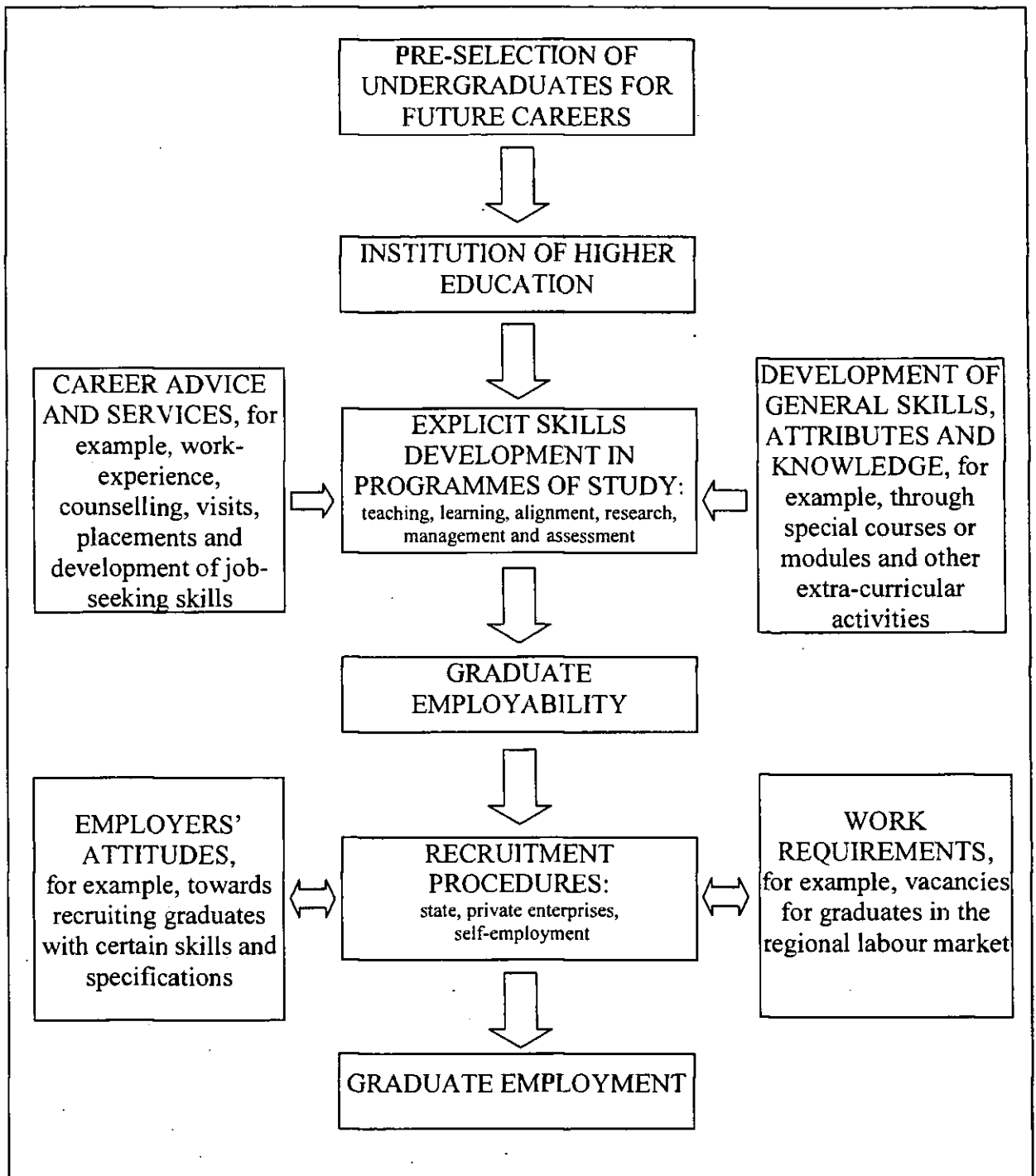
Hay (2001) argue that the fundamental differences which undeniably exist between developed and developing countries should be considered in any such study:

“This difficulty is increased by the diversity that exists between various types of institutions, types and names of courses and programmes, different types of qualifications, modes of delivery and study” (p.140).

In reality, the development of employability in the context of a higher education system is an extremely complex operational process, since it systematically links together institutional aims, strategies and actions (Harvey *et al*, 1997a and b; Hillage and Pollard, 1999). Indeed, one can argue that the institutional development of employability is ideally reflected in the continuous provision of skills to undergraduate students from the time of their admission to the time of their graduation.

As demonstrated in Figure 3.1, many students are actually pre-selected for future careers, often by the end of their secondary studies. They are then offered a range of employability-development opportunities by institutions of higher education. The acquisition of the required competencies is a well-established practice, since they are already incorporated into the curricula of the subjects. Other opportunities, however, are not as well incorporated and need to be made more explicit to the students. It has been suggested by other academic researchers, such as Dearing (1997), Gokusiling and Dacosta (2000), Miller *et al* (2000), Smith *et al* (2000) and Gumport (2000), as well as several interested educational bodies, such as CVCP (1998), DfEE (1998b, 2000), HECFE (1999, 2000c, 2001, 2002), and HESA (1998, 2000), that the best method for the acquisition of the latter category of key or general transferable skills is to develop them through special courses or modules intentionally added to the study programmes

**Figure 3.1:** A mechanism of undergraduate development and conversion of skills acquisition and graduate employability into employment \*



\* Modified from Harvey (2001), Witte and Kalleberg (1995), Ahola and Kivinen (1999), and discussions in several other sources, such as Arthur and Rousseau (1996), Brennan *et al* (1996–2001), Teichler (1996–2002), Purcell *et al* (1999a and b), Connor *et al* (2000), Smith *et al* (2000), Little (2001,2003), Yorke (2001–2003) and Yorke and Knight (2003).

to enhance graduates' employability. According to some opinions, such as those of Barnett (1991), Metawally (1994), Al-Hamidhi (2000), and Connor *et al* (2000), the appropriateness of a student's choice in selecting his or her discipline of higher education programme is an important factor in the process of employability development. Employment opportunities created by activities such as career advice and services units are also helpful in this respect, especially when the students are ready to take advantage of them. However, ultimately, perhaps it is employers' assessment of labour market requirements that enables the effective transfer of graduate employability skills to the professional arena (Bill, 1992; Tamkin and Hillage, 1999; Murray and Robinson, 2001).

The approach adopted by employers in the recruitment of graduates is usually based on their own mindsets. Nevertheless, it is also commonly based on an evaluation of the individual graduate's skills and personal qualities (Keep, 1997; Coopers and Lybrand, 1998, Blake *et al* 2000). This can therefore be seen as a favourable indicator of graduate employability and, hence, the employability-enhancement activities offered by higher education institutions and other interested establishments in graduates' learning environment. However, for the reasons outlined below by Harvey (2001), this, in reality, is not the case:

“It is rather surprising that intelligent people have rushed to use employment rates of graduates as measures of the employability-development impact of institutions. In part, in the UK, there has been political pressure to produce an ‘employability performance indicator’ and the clear preference is a simple quantitative measure based on outcomes, irrespective of whether it actually measures anything that the institutions can directly affect” (p.106).

In other words, the current approach adopted by the majority of employers is actually based on a limited and arbitrary set of criteria and is, therefore, no more than a superficial indicator of the overall process of developing graduate employability. The outcome certainly needs to be interpreted with caution and responsibility because, even within the context of developed countries, like the United Kingdom and America, there exists a wide range of independent factors that can arbitrate the recruitment process.

These factors include:

**A. The type of discipline studied:** Without doubt, subject combinations considerably influence the graduate employment rates of many institutions. Indeed, as shown by several researchers, such as Blackwell and Harvey (1999), Purcell *et al* (1999a and b), Barnett (2000) and Gibbs (2000), data is already available on the actual occurrence of pronounced differences in the employment process in relation to subjects or fields of study. For example, some institutions or departments belonging to them have consistently good employment rates because the programmes or apprenticeship schemes they offer are highly specialised in areas that have a greater public advantage, such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, optometry, and computer science, as opposed to subjects such as classics, ancient history, sociology and oriental studies.

**B. The type of institution attended:** It is a traditional belief that students' decisions about which higher education institution to choose is as important in terms of employment as their chosen discipline. At the present time, institutions range between "good" and "poor" with respect to the employment rates of their graduates, the vast majority of them being classified as "average" (Befield *et al*, 1997; Bowes and Harvey, 1999). However, it has been suggested by some academics (Reay, 1998; Teichler,

1999a and b; Gelbert, 1999; Harvey, 2003), as well as interested organisations (CVCP, 1998; HEFCE, 1999; HESA, 2000), that this variation is largely created by the attitudes of employers and their tendency to recruit graduates from institutions with a good reputation, rather than basing their decision on how satisfactory the employability development scheme is at a particular institution.

**C. Graduate experience:** Contribution to a labour market is an important social policy objective in many countries. Consequently, previous work experience, independent of employability development through a higher education institution, whether as a full-time job or work undertaken on a part-time basis, is considered to enhance the employment prospects of a new graduate. Students' educational experiences before entering higher education is also suggested to have some impact on employability development (WEB, 1998; Ward and Pierce, 2003). However, in the opinion of some researchers such as Harvey *et al* (1997b, 1998), Hustler *et al* (1998), Blackwell *et al* (2000) and Gill *et al* (2000), graduate recruiters in various types of enterprises (small, medium and large) are increasingly becoming more attracted to new university graduates whose main programme of study has included work experience.

**D. Methods of undergraduate study:** It is generally assumed that the data on employment rates is unrepresentative because of the presence of part-time students who are already part of the work market as full-time employees. This is due to the fact that the employability of such students may have little if anything to do with their higher education experience (Brennan *et al*, 1999). On the other hand, it is suggested by some researchers (for example, Little, 2001) that excluding such students from employment

rate statistics overlooks the role played by the institution of study in the enhancement of graduate employability.

**E. Postgraduate students:** The number of enrolled postgraduate students has to be taken into consideration in the graduate figures of any institution before assessing employability rates. According to Little (2001), this factor is especially important when comparing international employment rates, since there is a much greater tendency in some countries to pursue further study or vocational training than in others.

**F. Geographical factors:** Even in the most developed parts of the world, such as America, Europe and Japan, a considerable number of graduates refuse to take jobs far away from their region of domicile (Veum, 1997; Scott, 1998). Moreover, employers themselves avoid taking on graduates who they think will not quickly adapt to the location (Bill, 1992; Tamkin and Hillage, 1999). Thus, employment rates may not be absolutely independent of the fluctuations in local economies.

**G. Gender:** In the modern settings of many industrial countries there has been a steadily increasing tendency to recruit as many female graduates as males, particularly in areas such as clerical and related work, public services, medical aid, banking and insurance, and clothing manufacturing (Nicolson, 1996; Silvestri, 1997; Morley, 1999; OECD, 2000). However, in the majority of other countries the workforce is still male-dominated; for example, in those which specialise in industrial and medicinal chemicals, fabricated metal industries, electrical and mechanical machinery, transport equipment, precision bio-products, and printing and publishing (Lynch, 1994; Schmid *et al*, 1996; Yano, 1997; UNIDO, 1997). There is also evidence of salary bias against

female graduates especially in traditionally male domains, such as engineering, information technology, financial sector and even in the field of art and design (Harvey and Blackwell, 1999; Harvey, 2003). Furthermore, the figures for female graduates at senior levels of employment are still significantly lower than those for males in various settings and in both developed and developing countries (Luke, 1997; Walby, 1999). It is often expected that the professional disadvantages of employing female graduates will become more evident after marriage and during parenthood.

**H. Age:** Among the areas of discrimination against graduates wishing to enter the labour market, perhaps age is the most significant. The results of several studies carried out in the Western world, such as those of Purcell *et al* (1996, 1999a and b), Harvey *et al* (1997b), HEFCE (1999) and Egerton (2001), indicate that many graduates are subjected to avoidance by recruiters due to age rather than employability deficiencies. The propensity of employers towards recruiting younger graduates is based on the presumption that older graduates have probably already had a career change and this might not be enduring or reliable in the settings they are applying to work in.

**I. Social class:** Brown and Scase (1994), Brennan *et al* (1996), and Blasko *et al* (2002) argue that although the socio-economic background of graduates in some countries might be less of an issue regarding future employment prospects than in others, it still has a considerable bearing on recruitment. The influence of this factor largely stems from its implication for students' general educational development and the ways in which some employment opportunities are experienced, such as through extra-curricular activities and networking. Thus, in various countries, including the United

Kingdom (Little, 2001), good parental occupation is still considered to be an advantageous factor in creating work opportunities for some graduates.

**J. Ethnicity:** In Brennan and McGeevor's (1990), Modood's (1993) and Perna's (2003) opinion, the direct bias against recruiting graduates belonging to ethnic minorities in many developing and developed countries is still a serious difficulty facing the democratic representation of employment rates among this important sector of society.

The information provided in this section highlights the fact that a better understanding of graduate employability and the efforts towards developing an effective tool to measure it are important issues regarding the connection between education, work and society. They are of special relevance not only to the future of the higher education system but also to the implementation of government policies in any country (Gumport, 2000; Peters and Roberts, 2000). In other words, as specified by Gelbert (1999), Henkel and Little (1999), and Morley (1999, 2001), these issues relate to a number of factors which may have a significant impact on the relationship between supply and demand with regard to the graduate workforce. Little (2001) realises the importance of defining various dimensions of graduate employability before attempting to reduce it to a single indicator of the quality of higher education:

“Such measures cannot be taken as simple ‘proxies’ for indicators of the quality of higher education. An understanding and appreciation of the intervening factors is needed in interpreting information on graduate employment, rather than taking any such figures at face value, especially when trying to infer anything about the quality of higher education from such bald statistics” (p.128).



A number of British researchers, such as Harvey *et al* (1997b), Purcell *et al* (1999a and b), Brennan (2000) and Little (2003) have emphasised that it is essential, above all else, to identify the indicators of employability development relevant to various groups of graduates. Such indicators can then be formulated into a set of measurable variables with greater validity than simple employment rates, such as those which systematically prepare undergraduate students for their future work (for example, the relevance of programmes of study to the jobs that graduates seek to obtain, perceptions of students and staff of general job-related skills and other competencies, and the employment destination of graduates), and those which facilitate the actual process of obtaining work (for example, work-specific demands, speed in gaining employment, the range of jobs entered, job seniority and level of earnings).

### **3.6 The Quality of Graduate Employability**

Until a few decades ago, the general belief in many countries was that through pedagogy and mainstream academic activities, undergraduate curricula and student learning were properly orientated and managed by the respective national educational systems. A university degree was considered not merely a personal achievement but also as the system's contribution to the acquisition of skills which would secure fulfilling jobs for students. The quality of the programmes offered was thought to be reflected in the future adjustment of graduates to the world of professional practice. However, this straightforward notion of education is rapidly changing in both developed and developing countries, mainly due to two factors: first, the wide gap between what the education sector is providing what is required by employers (Tamkin and Hillage, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001) and second, the influence of globalisation and revolutionary technologies in creating innovative modes

of skills acquisition (Trowler, 1998; Caselli, 1999; De La Harpe *et al*, 2000). Thus, a new type of university qualification is required which not only provides a higher order of subject-related skills, but also addresses the dramatic changes facing higher education. For example, in order to succeed in its new role of matching the requirements of the work market, it needs to equip future employees with flexible minds, a willingness to continue learning throughout their life and the ability to remodel themselves in accordance with new needs.

It was highlighted in the previous chapter that the main focus of quality lies invariably in the outcomes of teaching and learning. Therefore, studies on quality in higher education are expected to be highly useful in preparing undergraduates for employment and work management. In fact, it was this necessity that led to the rapid development of employability-linked learning, as predicted a few years ago by Harvey *et al* (1997b) and Hillage and Pollard (1998). On the other hand, as shown in section 3.3, many types of job-related competencies have already been identified in the attempt to improve the quality of undergraduate curricula. This is steadily being achieved through the promotion in higher education institutions of a holistic view of graduate development (Evers *et al*, 1998; Gelbert, 1999, Barnett, 2000); that is to say, a view which looks upon the graduate as a person who has been subjected to explicit preparation regarding an awareness of opportunities in the workplace, the ability to gain access to the right circles, and the competency to combine many qualities in various circumstances.

However, as has been discerned by a number of researchers, such as Assiter (1995), Hustler *et al* (1998), Yorke (1999) and Fallows and Steven (2000), not only is it difficult to define an exclusive set of employability skills that can be transferred across

occupational groups and contexts, but the definite classification of these skills in terms of their quality (for instance, priority, capability and graduate identity) is also proving problematic. The reason for this limitation in in-depth information, which is pertinent to the quality of individual skills acquired by graduates, lies in the inadequacy of the methods currently used to assess the importance of the skills involved (Harvey *et al*, 1997b; Biggs, 1999; Wright, 2001), that is, to adequately evaluate, differentiate between and assess or quantify them, in order to highlight their importance to all interested groups. Thus, as many other profound studies, such as those of Stephenson and Yorke (1998), Price and Rust (1999) and Bennett *et al* (2000) recognise, the best of the available methods is no more than a semi-arbitrary means which collects the opinions of some of the stakeholder groups (mostly academic staff, students, graduates, governmental agencies, and employers) and ranks the importance of a particular skill rather than assessing undergraduates' own ability in it.

It is important to note that such speculative guidelines used to rank the levels of importance of some employability skills produce notable variations depending on who among the key stakeholders is evaluating them. Academic groups tend to regard the vast majority of skills and attributes required for employment as competencies relevant to improving the quality of the educational process which should, therefore, be considered as useful ingredients in the development of graduate careers, the students' own abilities commonly being above average in many of them (CVCP, 1995, 1998, Blundell *et al*, 1997, Coopers and Lybrand, 1998). Meanwhile, employers and career managers often perceive a shortage in the skills agenda among the graduate population and, therefore, continuously demand improvements (DfEE, 1998a and d, 1999, Atkins, 1999; Bradford, 1999). As for the results of quality assessment of employability skills

by other members of the stakeholder community, they may be roughly situated at various points between these two opinions (Harvey, *et al*, 1997a and b; Dweck, 1999; Gibbs, 2000).

The disagreement in perceptions among the main stakeholders regarding the quality of skills, attributes and knowledge required of graduates raises the appealing possibility that the development of many of these competencies may be modulated according to such opinions. For example, in the case of the United Kingdom, as suggested in several publications (Dearing, 1997; DfEE, 1998a-d, 1999, 2000; Fallows and Ahmet, 1999), a real possibility has been created to improve the levels of quality of skills-development programmes through a well-planned scheme involving the co-operation of higher education institutions, assessors from government agencies and employers.

Throughout the present discussion on the issue of employability, it has been maintained that the undergraduate experience concerns employment as much as anything else. This notion, in turn, suggests that obtaining a better quality of higher education is extremely important in maintaining reasonable career aspirations among graduates. In other words, good quality higher education should guide graduates in many disciplines towards gaining more suitable employment, for example, in identifying opportunities for securing “fulfilling work”. Indeed, it is possible to gather from the results of a number of research studies in the United Kingdom, such as those of the AGR (1993, 1995, 1999), DfEE (1996-2000), Harvey *et al* (1997a and b), Harvey (1998-2003), HESA (1998, 2000), Little (1998, 2001) and Morley (2001) that the missions for quality and employability are basically indistinguishable.

Undoubtedly, the development of employability skills by undergraduate students comprises a variety of activities on the part of stakeholders (see 3.5). All these activities are directly related to students' fulfilment of the skills-agenda which can be successfully transferred to the workplace (Bennett *et al*, 2000; Gibbs, 2000). However, if the employability of students is going to be recognised and warranted as a criterion for graduation and training, and, after graduation, as a means of assessing the performance of the enterprises in which they work, its complex relation to the "skills-agenda" has to be explicitly analysed and understood.

It is also necessary to think about a specific and serious difficulty that may be faced by graduates of many countries, namely that their employment might not necessarily be an accurate reflection of their career development or skills-dependent employability. For example, turning employability into employment might be dependent on unequal access to vacancies in the local labour market and its preferences for certain groups of graduates. As has been categorically stated by several researchers, such as Harvey *et al* (1997a and b), Purcell *et al* (1999a and b), and Pearson *et al* (2000), favouritism does exist in this respect, especially in relation to institutional reputations and parental occupations, at the cost of discrimination against others, such as those from ethnic minorities and older age groups.

Despite his assertion that graduate employability will be a key issue of quality in higher education for many years to come, Holmes (1999, 2000, 2001) identifies a dangerous strain in its discourse. He claims that the skills-agenda is being depicted in terms of personal traits even though employers have their own expectations about how graduates should behave or perform in the workplace. Holmes's prime emphasis is based on presenting evidence-based curriculum development which makes available to

graduates other modes of support, thereby enhancing the relationship between quality in higher education and graduate employability:

“Despite the rhetoric surrounding the skills agenda, it is by no means clear that employers should want skills *per se*, rather, they want the graduates they recruit and employ to perform in desirable ways—competently and effectively. It is the behaviour, or performance that is required. Employers also talk about the sort of person they want, for example, ‘proactive’, a ‘self-starter’, ‘confident’, ‘enthusiastic’, and so on” (Holmes 2000, p.112).

Another important matter to arise from the current employability debate is that absolute comparisons between different higher education institutions can prove more elusive than expected. For example, in some cases, such comparisons can be less significant than analysing the changes taking place within a single institution. In his appraisal of the collective thoughts at a recent seminar on “Employability”, Harvey (2000a) remarks:

“Rather than an emphasis on external comparative benchmarking, delegates considered internal longitudinal benchmarking that allow them to compare changes over time and even evaluate outcomes (employment of graduates) against input and process (effort in developing employability opportunities) far more worthwhile than comparison of one institution with other” (p.106).

Harvey is obviously advocating the use of a semi-quantitative approach for measuring quality in higher education, for example, by applying an indicator of the added efforts made by an institution. He specifically underlines taking into account monitoring students’ performance during their learning years and graduates’ performance in obtaining appropriate jobs during a certain period after their graduation:

“Rating students intake on a 1-5 scale and then rating employment (at a specific time) also on a 1-5 scale” (p.109).

Nonetheless, the incorporation of the skills-agenda into the higher education systems of various nations, and, by extension, their cultures, economies, and so on, may help to pinpoint specific elements in each case. This approach should allow reflection upon the different employability and employment patterns and their indicators which actually exist (Manson and Finegold, 1997; Gelbert, 1999; Brennan *et al*, 2001; HEFCE, 2001). In other words, the development of a culture-specific approach regarding students’ acquisition of skills should positively contribute not only towards linking the quality of higher education with the employability of graduates, but also provide a better definition of the complex relationship between the two. Furthermore, the extent of variation in the opinions of key stakeholders towards both quality and employability might also be better defined and evaluated by putting into effect this more internationally-orientated research approach.

In their comparative study on the relationship between undergraduate qualifications and job-related skills in five selected European countries, Manninen and Hobrough (2000) reveal some very interesting differences with respect to the top graduate skills expected by small and medium-sized enterprises. They illustrate the characteristics of each country in terms of the same system of qualification (for instance, the same range of skills): the United Kingdom’s priorities are motivation and teamwork, Ireland’s are teamwork and individual expertise, Germany’s priority is flexible workers with good learning skills, Denmark’s is a flexible work pattern, and Finland’s is individual professional skills.

By only taking into consideration the “post-modern qualities”, that is, the soft skills (such as learning, teamwork, adaptation, and writing), Manninen and Hobrough (2000) arrive at a very decisive conclusion: both university graduates and enterprises in the United Kingdom and Denmark are best equipped to work in the modern style, whereas in Finland, both groups of stakeholders see qualifications as more closely related to professional or vocational skills, such as knowledge and competencies necessary in actual work practice.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

In the researcher’s view, a valuable inference to be drawn from the issues discussed in this chapter and indeed much of the relevant literature on the employability discourse, is that the development of performance or behaviour indicators, which may help not only in the measurement of graduate employability but also linking it in a better way with quality in the context of higher education, is not merely of academic interest. At the very least, this approach is likely to have a favourable impact on the funding of higher education institutions and hence on all the activities related to the teaching, learning, research and management processes provided by those institutions. Without doubt, the best way to differentiate between various institutional employability indicators is through their effectiveness in producing employable graduates who will be successful in the workplace.

The framework that has recently been developed by academic educationists suggests that graduates’ employability is a multi-dimensional concept, for example, by virtue of the fact that it identifies a number of definitions which could represent valid quality indicators in the context of higher education. If, for example, the preferred



definition of employability is related to the ability of the new graduate to obtain and hold on to an appropriate job (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), within a specific period of time (Purcell *et al*, 1999a and b), then the quality this reflects could be quantified through the assessment of institutional effectiveness, such as the fulfilment of work demands, the speed with which employment is secured, the first place of employment, the types and levels of job entered, earnings, promotion and so on; or, as suggested by some researchers (Harvey and Green, 1993; Fitz-Gibbon, 1996; Brennan, 2000) it might simply be reflected by the proportion of graduates in each subject discipline who succeed in gaining graduate-level jobs. If the preferred definition of employability relates to graduates' ability to demonstrate desired attributes at the point of recruitment (Harvey, 1999a), then quality might be indicated by the results of elaborate and comprehensive procedures which audit the practice of the institution (Harvey and Knight, 1999b; Harvey *et al*, 1997a and b; Harvey, 1998), or, more directly, in Harvey's (2001) terms:

“By measuring the extent to which students from a particular institution or programme have developed appropriate attitude” (p. 106).

Again, if the preferred definition of employability relates to graduates' satisfaction with their employment, then, as proposed by Brennan *et al* (1996), Harvey *et al* (1997c), HESA (1998), Horsburgh (1999) and Little (2001, 2003), quality can be assessed by studying the views of graduates themselves, for example, through a quality assurance mechanism which takes into account factors like the match between degree course and type of job, graduates' perceptions regarding the importance of the skills-

development scheme, and the extent to which they are prepared to enter the labour market.

It is clear that the best way to enhance graduate employability is to focus on it in conjunction with the way in which the quality of student learning is improved. This suggests that the job-related skills-agenda may turn out to be a very important element of the present study. In order to increase interest in the question of reforming Saudi undergraduate curricula in terms of recently formulated quality and employability concepts, providing systematic data on the following issues is considered to be useful:

- A. The opinions of Saudi stakeholders (students, teaching staff, graduates and academic managers) regarding the status of undergraduate curricula and the means for developing graduate employability, as well as perceptions towards strengthening the bonds between graduate employability and the quality of higher education and perhaps indicating the latter in terms of the former.
- B. The significance of integrating general skills, attributes and knowledge into the curricula of professional disciplines and emphasising how this process is likely to increase students' motivation and enhance the shaping of their personalities, as well as improving the approach of new graduates towards obtaining and keeping appropriate jobs.
- C. To find out the proportion of the general skills-agenda that may be prioritised as Saudi job-related skills and delineate the reasons for their desirability especially among student and graduate populations. It is also important to reflect upon the

relationship between such culture-specific skills and the employability pattern of Saudi graduates.

- D. The nature of the gap separating the Saudi higher education system and labour market and the means by which it can be narrowed. It is reasonable to consider that any effective indicator relating graduate employability and quality in higher education should concern itself not only with a superficial link between the education sector and the work market (for instance, in the mere citing of employment rates), but also with details concerning the execution of quality/employability development.
- E. It is important not to overlook the anticipated consequences of the growing number of Saudi graduates, for example, the possibility of demands for their levelling off and, perhaps soon or later, arriving at a situation of surplus supply. These are the kinds of issues which may lead to a mismatch between graduates and their employment and may even produce a change in employers' attitudes towards work assignments.

**CHAPTER 4**

**METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Over the last two decades, amazing progress has been made in the collection and analysis of data in social sciences and related disciplines. This progress is referred to as the “qualitative revolution” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. ix). In addition to technical issues, qualitative research involves other important matters. For instance, it actively equips researchers with a set of tools and a mode of analytical thinking, which help them to understand, evaluate and use evidence in their academic work. Smith (1975) preferred to describe the prerequisite for first-class sociocultural research as “the methodological imagination” (p.1). In short, qualitative researchers present the sociocultural world as a dynamic process continuously moving forward. They are capable of demonstrating how the research study develops and proceeds from one stage to the next, how the ongoing decisions are made, how options are chosen, and how conclusions are drawn.

In this chapter the researcher will highlight the methodological direction that he will be following to collect the desired data for this project. Owing to the scarcity of systematic studies pertinent to the issue of undergraduate curriculum quality and graduates’ employability development in Saudi Arabia, field research will be the mainstay of the present study. The researcher’s interpretation of events, behaviours and interactions taking place in the settings of Saudi higher education will form the focus for data collection and analysis. Three of the most influential quantitative and qualitative designs will be employed to gather as much relevant information as possible. These designs are described under the headings: questionnaires, interviews and documents.

The main focus of the researcher will be on the principles, strategies, strengths and weaknesses of the aforementioned methods. The broader ethical issues, that are important at all stages of research, will be briefly dealt with too.

Since a particular research design is best learned by using it in practice (Maxwell, 1996, p. xi), the procedures described in this chapter will be adopted to reconceptualise what the researcher will specifically be doing in the course of his field research. In this way he will be able to identify the key issues relevant to his project. This will certainly help in understanding the intellectual, practical and ethical implications of different means of resolving the encountered problems. Put simply, it will help to make his research design more implicit and explicit, thereby uncovering curriculum quality in Saudi higher education, its development within this context and its possible relationship with employability.

#### **4.2 Rationale for the Use of Triangulation**

It is becoming increasingly popular among ethnographic researchers to combine different methods of data collection, even when studying the same social case. Such a combination is known as “triangulation” and is described by Brewerton and Millward (2001) as:

“The use of different research methods (e.g. qualitative and quantitative) within the same study to collect data from alternative sources. These data can be used to assess the validity of findings from alternative sources, and can enrich and inform findings collected using a single research approach” (p. 200).

The concept of triangulation has been widely studied, especially in the applied social sciences. The most important reasons for adopting such a methodological approach are discussed below.

**4.2.1 The Ontological Perspective:** Ontology is a distinct discipline of perception concerned with the theories of “being”. Gill and Johnson (1997) define it as:

“The study of the essence of phenomena and the nature of their existence” (p. 178).

Triangulation allows social researchers to create the appropriate framework for the phenomena being studied. For instance, in examining the activities and interactions of a group of participants in a particular setting, researchers might differ in their focus and this may demand the simultaneous use of more than one research method. While some may be interested in the performance of various groups of stakeholders (Judd *et al*, 1991; Lee, 1999; Al-Naeem, 2002) others might also be interested in certain socio-cultural dimensions (Frame, 1987; Zamanou and Glaser, 1994; Cohen *et al*, 2000). Furthermore, some researchers may not only be interested in studying participants but also the setting in which they are placed (Cummings and Worley, 1993; Brewerton and Millward, 2001) and they will therefore depend on triangulation or the application of different methods to study the structure, development and changes in that setting.

**4.2.2 The Epistemological Dimension:** It is the belief of some researchers, such as Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), Gill and Johnson (1997), Hughes and Sharrock (1997), and Merriam (1998) that the notion of being (ontology) is intimately associated with the notion of knowledge (epistemology). In other words, the concern with the former

may lead directly to an engagement with the latter as each complements the other and the two are not mutually exclusive. Epistemology is defined by Anderson (1998) as:

“A branch of philosophy that studies how knowledge is acquired and validated. Asks the question: What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?” (p. 251).

Such a definition supports the idea that the socio-cultural setting can only be exhaustively perceived and depicted through triangulation research. However, to achieve this goal, ethnographic researchers must have real life experience of the setting they intend to study (Schutz, 1990; Silverman, 1997; Cohen *et al*, 2000). This impression is surely based on the assumption that the sort of settings, interactions and problems studied will yield authentic or valid data and also that it is possible for a researcher focusing on “experience” to be an “interpreter” of the data obtained (Mason, 1996; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), at least as a direct result of his or her active participation. In other words, it is imperative for the researcher not only to gain access to the reality as well as the totality of experience and practice in a particular setting but also to develop an understanding of them

**4.2.3 The Socio-cultural Dimension:** This reason is associated with the previous one in that it also aims to explain the way in which a perception of the real world is attained and emphasises the diversity as well as the depth of the data obtained (Erlandson *et al*, 1993; De Vaus, 1996; May, 1997). It thus differs from the use of a single method, often through direct comparison, for example of participants’ responses to a set of questions (Fink, 1995; Arksey and Knight, 1999) or the researcher’s analysis of a number of textual documents (Finnegan, 1996; Atkinson and Coffey, 1997). This approach yields situationally-created, multi-dimensional data covering all aspects of the study, as



opposed to data based solely on a few limited observations and experiments. Again, as with other forms of ethnographic data, the researcher is expected to construct his or her explanation through what is called the “second order of interpretation.” This is because many researchers, such as Hofstede (1984, 1991), Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), Sacks (1995), and Babbie (1998), believe that this type of analysis is the most suitable and accurate when dealing with data related to human cultures, for instance, in contrast to the “first order of interpretation”, which is the concern of natural scientists (Schutz, 1990). In other words, as distinguished by Balnaves and Caputi (2001):

“The job of anyone working in the human sciences is to interpret the interpretations that people have already made of their lives (individually) and their cultures (collectively)” (p. 5).

Thus, while the “first order interpretation” concerns itself with objects that the natural scientists have not defined until they themselves appear on the scene, such as new elements, compounds, genes, and so on; the “second order interpretation” concerns itself with various objects of knowledge, that is, matters which have already defined themselves before the ethnographers come to study them systematically.

**4.2.4 The Ethnographer’s Active Role:** This relates to the ethnographer's conceptualisation of himself or herself as an active researcher in the setting he or she is studying (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992a and b, 1996; Sarantakos, 1998). In this case, the researcher's judgement may be that the data required to complete his or her project can only be obtained by employing more than one mechanism. For example, it is customary for the ethnographer researching a higher education setting to undertake surveys (questionnaires and interviews), to utilise specific textual documents, generate some audio or audio-visual material and to attend relevant meetings. In addition, some

authors, such as Whyte (1991), Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), and Cohen *et al* (2000), believe that a triangulation approach will sometimes be adopted by ethnographers because pertinent reviews of past events and interactions are either insufficient or cannot otherwise be satisfactorily attained.

**4.2.5 The Ethical Incentive:** Social research is principally based on cooperation, responsiveness and mutual trust between researchers and participants (Bailey, 1988; Homan, 1991; Babbie, 1998). The possible adverse effects of this kind of research on any of the parties involved is controlled through a large number of codes and legislation produced by national as well as international associations (Kimmel, 1988; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996). Clearly, the majority of these ethical codes are intended to guide the attitudes of researchers and guard them against making mistakes. The rest are concerned with the best way to provide protection for participants, for example, with regard to sensitive issues like anonymity, privacy, confidentiality and non-traceability. This is the case regardless of the nature of social research or the type of method employed to accomplish it; that is, whether it involves observation (Mitchell, 1993), questionnaires (Oppenheim, 1992), interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999), analysing documents (Scott, 1990) or carrying out experiments (Cohen *et al*, 2000). Many of today's ethnographic researchers, such as Frame (1987,1991), Gill and Johnson (1997), Sarantakos (1998), and Balnaves and Caputi (2001) have reported that it is more ethical to conduct one's research overtly and become directly involved in the particular socio-cultural setting, rather than to study it either in a covert manner or situate oneself outside the setting and rely completely on second-hand documentary sources. All this suggests that, in many cases, a multi-method strategy is more likely to

conform to the ethical code of conduct than a single method strategy, particularly since the former has the advantage of the researcher adopting a more participatory role.

The above discussion about triangulation suggests that the use of this strategy in ethnographic research improves the quality of data, especially if it is applied correctly and more for the purpose of completeness than cross-checking. However, other researchers criticise this view. Their main arguments may be summarised as follows:

- A. The theoretical justification of triangulation poses problems (Blaikie, 1991); For instance, some critics believe that it is not suitable to combine methodological techniques based on the different ontological and epistemological theories to measure or describe a particular socio-cultural object, event or behaviour.
- B. It is a much more difficult exercise to analyse data obtained from multiple sources than to add together the data sets obtained using a single-method procedure (Bryman and Burgess, 1994).
- C. The most common generalisation made by the triangulation proponents may prove to be incorrect (Silverman, 1993, 1997, 2000). This refers to the idea that the expansion of the methodological spectrum employed to collect the data should necessarily result in obtaining more valid and reliable results.
- D. Fielding and Fielding (1986) and Mason (1996) suggest that it is better in many cases to test the validity and reliability of each research method separately rather than all methods collectively.

- E. It is more difficult to replicate the findings obtained by a triangulation procedure (Sarantakos, 1998), and, to compare them with those of other studies, than in the case of a single-method procedure.
  
- F. Triangulation may not be suitable for every issue of social research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), and as suggested by Mason (1996), it may not even be significantly more meaningful in answering certain questions than a single-method.
  
- G. It is not unfamiliar for researchers to find that triangulation is a tedious, time-consuming strategy to follow, with resource implications (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

It is clear that the process of collecting valid and reliable data in the context of ethnography is a complex and diversified one. The number of methods required in order to accomplish a particular piece of research must be carefully decided in respect of the nature of the problem under investigation (Flick, 1992; Nunn, 1996). In general, applying more than one procedure at the same time, whether they come from related or different methodologies, should not be considered a negative thing to do (Crawford and Christensen, 1995; Keeves, 1997). It is also understandable that the minimum advantage for adopting triangulation is to provide a three-dimensional answer to the research problem, with its eventual quality depending on the quality of each method involved. The reader has already seen that some researchers argue against triangulation, but this strategy is still, nevertheless, prevalent, being supported by the point of view of many researchers' that the conclusions derived from different data sources are often far stronger than those derived from a single data source.

### 4.3 Questionnaires

Questionnaires are widely used to collect data from respondents in various types of studies (Reeves and Harper, 1981; Flick, 1998; Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Kent, 2001). They constitute an important part of analytical or explanatory surveys and, according to Gill and Johnson (1997) are an

“attempt to test a theory by taking the logic of the experiment out of the laboratory and into the field” (p. 79).

This suggests that the main purpose of a questionnaire is to study the variations relevant to the research problem among the stakeholders in a particular social setting. It is thus more likely that any data analysis on the study sample will be accurate and that the findings will have a general applicability to the entire population under investigation

In this section, the researcher aims to present the principles and strategies of the questionnaire method. This is because he intends to employ this method to assess the opinions of stakeholders regarding the quality of higher education curricula in Saudi Arabia, with particular reference to the acquisition of job-skills and the employability of graduates.

#### 4.3.1 Structure

A questionnaire must give the impression of being a competent document and be comprised of three elements: a covering letter, instructions and the main body.

**A. The covering letter:** Every questionnaire should be introduced by a covering letter. The purpose of such a letter is to reveal to respondents the aims and benefits of the study in order to neutralise their scepticism about the nature of the research, to encourage them to reply to all the questions, and to assure them of anonymity and

confidentiality (Oppenheim, 1992; Fobby, 1993). The covering letter should also include instructions for returning the completed questionnaire.

**B. Instructions:** Instructions regarding the way in which questions should be answered are often given in the covering letter. These should be formulated very carefully, since they might affect the response rate as well as the quality of the data obtained (Couper, 1997). As reported by Verma and Mallick (1999), encouragement as a means of drawing respondents' attention to certain features in the questionnaire is generally acceptable in the field of social and educational studies. Further instructions may be included in the questionnaire to remind the respondents about certain other things, for instance, that they should express their views clearly, that the questionnaire should be returned to the researcher by a certain time, and so on.

**C. The main body of the questionnaire:** This is the most important part of the questionnaire as it enables the researcher to create and collect the substantive data required to complete his or her study (Sanchez, 1992; Wilson and McLean, 1994). It includes all the questions to be answered by the respondents. As well as following the usual steps in constructing a successful questionnaire, such as preparation, formulation, evaluation, piloting and revision (Oppenheim, 1992; Patten, 1998), everything related to its layout, content and format must be exhaustively worked out.

#### **4.3.2 Layout**

Because the self-administered questionnaire is largely controlled by the respondents, a more sophisticated layout is required than that, for example, of the interview which is subject to the researcher's administration. The layout involves a number of interrelated factors, the most important of which are discussed below:

- A. Ordering:** The ordering of the questions within the questionnaire must take into consideration the following points:
- a- The order should be as natural and logical as possible in order to minimise the effect of the question position on the response rate (Krosnick and Alwin, 1987)
  - b- All questions and sub-questions must be numbered sequentially (Payne, 1951).
  - c- Early questions must be motivating enough to encourage participation (Cohen *et al*, 2000).
  - d- It is better if the general and factual questions precede narrow, detailed questions and questions of opinion (Gill and Johnson, 1997).
  - e- The most difficult questions should perhaps be situated towards the middle of the questionnaire (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982).
  - f- The last few questions should be of high interest to the respondents in order to encourage them to return the completed questionnaire (Verma and Mallick, 1999).
  - g- It is preferable to place the demographic questions – including those relating to professional and educational qualifications – towards the end of the questionnaire (Peterson, 2000). This is due to the fact that such questions are regarded as sensitive by most respondents and they may resent them.

**B. Visual presentation:** Care must be taken regarding the quality of the overall presentation of the questionnaire, its conciseness and attractiveness (Hudson and Miller, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For example, questions and sub-questions must be as simple, short and easy to understand as possible. Individual questions should be kept intact on a single page, printed on good quality paper and in a colour and size acceptable to the respondents for the sake of maximising their cooperation.

**C. Identification:** Both the questions and response sets must be easy to distinguish from each other. Verma and Mallick (1999) argue that crowded layouts constitute a source of disorder in the questionnaire and are, therefore, not favoured by respondents.

**D. Comments:** Whenever the questions require long answers, the researcher should invite additional comments (Farrall *et al*, 1997). For example, sufficient space should be left for the respondent to answer open-ended questions or make relevant comments, if required.

**E. Instructions:** To ensure a high completion rate, general and specific instructions regarding the way to answer questions must be given in the appropriate section(s) of the questionnaire. Such instructions, like many other topics pertinent to the layout of the questionnaire (Patten, 1998; Verma and Mallick, 1999), may draw on the socio-cultural background of the study population. This suggests that the researcher needs to take into account the intelligibility as well as the sensitivity of the issues raised by his or her questionnaire with regard to the respondents. Cohen *et al* (2000) support this notion, arguing against any simplistic psychological ordering, they say:

“What is being argued here is that the logical ordering of a questionnaire has to be mediated by its psychological ordering. The instrument has to be viewed through the eyes of the respondent as well as designer” (pp. 257-258).

**F. Sub-sectioning:** As suggested by Oppenheim (1992), Anderson (1998) and Cohen *et al* (2000), organising the main body of the questionnaire into sub-sections, may render it more clear. By thus indicating the overall coherence of the questionnaire, the researcher may help respondents find their way in answering the questions he or she



has administered to them. This approach may also facilitate the task of data processing and analysis.

#### **4.3.3 Content**

The most important factor in a questionnaire is the content of its questions and sub-questions. This is due to the fact that although other factors such as questionnaire structure, layout and format may influence the accessibility to information, it is the content of the questions that will more significantly affect the quality of data obtained in the study. Thus, the construction of the questions must take into consideration certain criteria and requirements, such as the following:

**A. Composition:** Each question should be as brief as possible and clear in addressing its specific purpose. It should be worded objectively and should ask about a single item only. If not, it has no place in the domain of a successful questionnaire (Foddy, 1993; Anderson, 1998). As suggested by Babbie (1998) and Balnaves and Caputi (2001), many publicly used questions should be excluded, such as those which are double-barrelled.

**B. Relevance:** This refers to the appropriateness of the questionnaire or, according to Gill and Johnson (1997):

“The extent to which the questions intended to be asked cover the various aspects of the research problem adequately and in sufficient detail” (p. 89).

In other words, every question must be relevant to one or more aspects of the research and, collectively, the questions should clearly serve the aims and objectives of the study. Labaw (1980) and Farrall *et al* (1997) suggest that if a question with content not strictly related to the research has to be administered to the respondents, then it should serve a particular purpose at least indirectly related to its topic.

**C. Regularity:** It is acknowledged that a regular arrangement of questions, which address various aspects of the research, is the hallmark of a successful questionnaire (Fink, 1995; Hudson and Miller, 1997; Verma and Mallick, 1999). Researchers are encouraged to adopt a symmetrical distribution of questions throughout the different sections of their questionnaires, with each section corresponding to the regular order of the questionnaire as a whole.

**D. Clarity:** The rule is that the more unambiguous a questionnaire is the better will be its response rate (Cohen *et al*, 2000). This means that every question must be easy to understand and free from confusion. Therefore, as suggested by De Vaus (1996), Mason (1996), Patten (1998) and Peterson (2000), questions that could be described as unethical, vague, misleading, suggestive, non-specific, hypothetical, embarrassing, offensive, intrusive, threatening, insulting, patronising, biased, and so on, are to be avoided. Personal questions should be employed very carefully and only if they are really necessary, for instance, for statistical purposes.

**E. Language:** Since many questions are largely word-based, their components ought to be phrased in a comprehensible manner appropriate to the respondents' linguistic ability, educational interest and intellectual capacity (Scipione, 1995; Rubini and

Kruglanski, 1997; Semin and De Poot, 1997). This also means, as advised by Payne (1951) and Gill and Johnson (1997) that a questionnaire must be free from scientific jargon, slang, complicated expressions, esoteric terminology and inappropriate assumptions.

**F. Attitude:** All of the questionnaire's contents must reflect a positive attitude towards the respondents (Krosnick and Schuman, 1988; Oppenheim, 1992; Lavine, *et al*, 1998) based on friendliness and congeniality. This necessitates considerable caution when constructing the covering letter, instructions and questions, as well as when interpreting the respondents' answers. Researchers employing the questionnaire method should also be mindful of ethical issues since they are important in all types of ethnographies.

#### **4.3.4 Format**

The format of a questionnaire should be modelled on adequate guidelines regarding the best way to place questions within its framework. The significance of this lies in the fact that the success of the questionnaire depends, to a large extent, on the motivation of the respondents to read, complete and return it (Hudson and Miller, 1997; Patten, 1998; Cohen *et al*, 2000). This suggests that a successful questionnaire is one in which the components have been carefully adjusted, not only to the needs of the research aims and objectives, but also to the characteristics of the respondents. Therefore, one has to consider how intelligible the questionnaire will be to the respondents (Gill and Johnson, 1997) and, at the same time, ensure that it has a logical progression, lacks distortions and problems and fulfils ethical requirements.

The required criteria for a successful questionnaire have been widely debated and several researchers, such as Oppenheim (1992), Babbie (1990, 1998), Anderson (1998) and Peterson (2000) have formulated a number of models. The three most popular format models are described here:

**A. Funnel format:** This form involves filtering and contingency so as to sort out the responses and thereby guide the respondents to different branches. The funnelling direction moves from the general to the specific, from the impersonal to the personal and from non-sensitive to sensitive questions. For example, the researcher may first ask broad questions, with the questioning funnel narrowing gradually through increasingly specific questions. Thus, as a whole, a set of funnel questions takes the shape of a “contingency tree”, in that each succeeding question is conditional on the respondent’s answer to the preceding question. It is believed that through this method of questioning both the quantity and quality of data obtained will be maximised, while any potential bias will be minimised. However, in concluding his remarks on funnel questioning, Bailey (1982) claims that:

“The funnel technique can work if the general or open-ended questions asked first are easy to answer. But I think it is preferable to ask easy-to-answer, close-ended factual questions first and the specific sensitive questions and open-ended questions later. In any event, there is consensus that the beginning of the questionnaire should serve to put the respondent at ease” (p.142).

Peterson (2000) is also of the opinion that the funnel format often requires plenty of space and could confuse respondents, which is why it is not widely employed in self-administered questionnaires.

**B. Inverted funnel format:** This format is opposite to the previous model. Here, the funnelling sequence begins with specific questions and then proceeds to those which are more general (Anderson, 1998). This is because it is thought that respondents may gain more confidence by dealing with specific questions first and that this will enhance the possibility of greater expression later on.

**C. Mixed format:** Several other formats, based on the above models, are available, in which questions appear according to the nature of the research problem involved (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Oppenheim, 1992; Patten, 1998). A “diamond format” combines funnel and inverted funnel questions, where the process of questioning moves from specific to general, back to specific, and so on. The so-called “X-format” is another known combined device, where the first part of the questionnaire is in funnel form and the second is in inverted funnel form, and where the mechanism of questioning changes from general to specific, back to general, and so on. Taken together, the answers to an X-format question will provide the necessary data in response for a particular research topic. A mixed questionnaire may also contain branches, each of which adopts one or another of the aforementioned formats. For example, the first section may employ a funnel format, the second an inverted funnel format and the third an X-format.

#### **4.3.5 Types of Questions**

The relevant literature is abundant with the types of questions that may be selected for inclusion in a particular questionnaire. The variation among them relates to issues such as the aims and objectives of the research topic, the methodological strategy to be employed, the nature of the data the researcher seeks to collect, the characteristics of

respondents, and the statistical analysis to be carried out on the responses. However, the vast majority, if not all, of the conventional questions can be classified into four categories: open- and close-ended, multiple-choice, scale and rank. A brief description of some of the most important types of questions is given below:

**A. Open- and close-ended:** Questions can be either open-ended or close-ended, the latter of which are also called “pre-coded” (Oppenheim, 1992; Farrall *et al*, 1997; Patten, 1998). Open-ended questions are the most widely used in everyday life. They require no response categories; rather, the questionnaire simply asks the question and leaves a space for a free response considered to be appropriate by the respondent. Open-ended questions are thought to be more difficult to answer than close-ended ones, as they require more effort. However, open-ended questions are very versatile and if they are properly designed and administered, they may disclose insights into relevant issues and thereby provide the most informative data on the research problem (King *et al*, 1994; Silverman, 1997). The obvious disadvantage is that open-ended questions lack structure and, therefore, most of the information obtained through them can neither be easily coded and analysed, nor can it be that helpful in comparisons between groups of respondents (Gill and Johnson, 1997; Cohen *et al*, 2000). Meanwhile, in close-ended questions specific response categories are provided by the researcher, and the respondents are expected to choose the option with which they agree most. The structure of these response categories must be one-dimensional, mutually exclusive, and compatible with the method employed for data analysis. Regarding answers for close-ended questions, Peterson (2000) says:

“Possible answers for a close-end question can be derived from a variety of sources. They can be based on criteria supplied by the sponsor of a research project, a researcher’s prior experience, theory, preliminary focus group or in-depth interviews, pilot studies, or even other research projects. By prespecifying possible answers, a researcher can emphasize those answers that will result in relevant and actionable information and exclude those that will not provide such information” (p.36).

It is evident that by precoding the requisite measures into close-ended questions, the data obtained through them can be readily analysed and compared. However, such questions have the disadvantage of restricting the replies of respondents to a fixed set of responses and hence prevent them from expressing their own opinions.

A voluminous body of research exists on whether to choose open- or close-ended questions (Foddy, 1993; Diamond, 1994; Fink, 1995; Cohen *et. al*, 2000). It has been concluded that open-ended questions are to be recommended in the following cases: where the researcher’s aims and objectives are to generate new ideas; he or she wants to obtain a fundamental understanding of the topic under investigation; it is necessary to obtain as much information as possible; the attitudes and motivation of the respondents are not known well; the respondents are not well-informed on the research topic and therefore have not yet formed clear-cut opinions on the matter; the researcher considers that close-ended questions may bias the answers. On the other hand, if the researcher's concern is to classify and compare the responses, and if the respondents’ situation is well known to him or her and they are well-informed and have formulated opinions, close-ended questions are advisable. Consequently, it is clear that both types of questions have advantages and limitations. It is perhaps for this reason that many researchers (Oppenheim, 1992; Wilson and McLean, 1994; Farrall *et al*, 1997; Patten,

1998) prefer to incorporate both types of question in their questionnaires, regarding them as complementary, rather than as substitutes for each other.

Both open- and close-ended questions can take several forms. The most popular ones, which are utilised in the present study, are as follows:

**a. Comment-on:** The chief characteristic of this type of question is its ability to elicit a lengthy and far-reaching answer, by way of posing a question and leaving plenty of space for the respondents to express their views (Anderson, 1998). The general impression of the extensive use of comment-on questions is that the researcher has followed the easiest way to construct his/her questionnaire. However, it is frequently difficult to analyse the answers to comment-on questions, and the data sought can often be more easily obtained through asking other questions.

An example of a comment-on question is:

*“How are employability skills developed in your department?”*

**b. List:** This is another popular form of open-ended question, where the researcher asks the respondents to list a number of specific items according to their judgement (Patten, 1998; Verma and Mallick, 1999). The content analysis of such a question is produced by counting the number of times each item is mentioned by the respondents. An important modification of this type of question is to ask the respondents to list items in order of their significance.



An example of a list question is:

*"Can you list four of the most important groups of stakeholders who participate in the development of the curriculum in your department?"*

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

**c. Dichotomous:** These questions are a very popular form of the close-ended device (Youngman, 1984; Cohen *et al*, 2000). In this case, there are only two possible response categories, for instance, "Yes" or "No". The usefulness of a dichotomous question is that it allows the respondents to pick one of two categories and the researcher to code responses quickly. Furthermore, such a question is useful during the funnelling process.

An example of a dichotomous question and subsequent funnelling is:

*"Do you yourself develop employability skills in your department?"*

*Yes [ ], No [ ]. If yes: "What do you do?", "How do you do it?" and "Why do you do it?"*

**B. Multiple-choice:** This type of question presents the respondents with a choice of answers from which one is to be selected (Oppenheim, 1992; Wilson and McLean, 1994; Patten, 1998). On average, about five or six response options are provided. The presentation of a multiple-choice question is considered to be important (Anderson, 1998). Perhaps the best format is that which presents the response options in a single column following the question stem, using a box that follows the answer choice rather than preceding it.

An example of a multiple-choice question is:

*“When was the curriculum in your department last evaluated by a professional committee?”*

- a. 1 – 2 years ago*
- b. 3 – 5 years ago*
- c. 5 – 7 years ago*
- d. More than 7 years ago*
- e. I do not know*

**C. Scale:** A wide range of scale questions may be employed in the questionnaire, for example, “nominal scales”, “ordinal scales”, “numerical scales”, “graphic scales”, “interval scales”, “ladder scales”, or a combination of some of these (Kidder and Judd, 1986; Oppenheim, 1992; Peterson, 2000). Perhaps the most meaningful format of scale questions is the “verbal scale” (Dillon, 1982; Gannon and Ostrom, 1996), where the response set is formulated in words and the respondent is expected to tick a box opposite one of these words. The most familiar version of the verbal scale is the “Lickert scale” (Babbie, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001). This device was invented by Rensis Lickert, in 1932. It is composed of multiple-choice response categories which range between two extreme positions divided into five labelled points. Because of their particular strength in the measurement of the research variables related to organisational structure and perceptual performance (Gill and Johnson, 1997), Lickert scales are widely used in all branches of the social sciences.

An example of a Lickert scale is:

*“The attitude of Saudi private employers towards graduates from your department is (Please tick the most relevant number):*

- i. Very positive*
- ii. Positive*
- iii. Neutral*
- iv. Negative*
- v. Very negative*

**D. Rank ordering:** These constitute another form of commonly asked questions. Here, a list of close-ended factors is provided and the respondents are required to place them in rank order, for example, from highest to lowest (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Wilson and McLean, 1994; Patten, 1998). This is different from the scale and multiple-choice formats where the respondents are asked to mark only one item. An important variation on the rank ordering device asks respondents to check all appropriate answers (Anderson, 1998). If too many items have to be listed in a particular question, the researcher may decide to modify it, for instance, by asking the respondent to rank the four most significant items.

An example of a rank ordering question is:

*“What is your ranking of the teaching methods employed in your department from 1 (most preferred) to 5 (least preferred)?”*

(Please enter number in the boxes provided)

- |                                      |                          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>a. Text-based</i>                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>b. Lecture-based</i>              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>c. Debate-based</i>               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>d. Project-based</i>              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>e. A mixture of all the above</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

#### 4.3.6 Advantages and Limitations

The previous sections reveal that questionnaires are widely employed across many areas of the social sciences. However, this method has some limitations as well as advantages. Researchers must be aware of these factors, since they may strongly influence their decisions concerning whether to adopt questionnaires in their studies or not.

The important advantages attributable to questionnaires over other methods of data collection in the social setting, namely face-to face interviews, document analysis, attending meetings, and personal observations, are as follows:

**A. Appropriateness:** Questionnaires provide a relatively more simple, consistent and uniform procedure (Pererson, 2000; Kent, 2001); they are capable of producing more data on a wide range of issues, often in a shorter period of time, at a relatively lower cost and with less effort (Oppenheim, 1992; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001); they sensitise the researchers to further possible properties and dimensions of the data, for example, by suggesting interview questions or the study of particular documents (Fink, 1995; Cohen *et al*, 2000), and they can facilitate the process of data analysis and interpretation (Sapsford and Jupp, 1996; Verma and Mallick, 1998), for example, by identifying and linking together all the important variations and patterns discovered.

**B. Credibility:** The data obtained through questionnaires do not seem to be undermined by the aspect of “no contact” between the researcher and study respondents. According to Erlandson *et al* (1993) and Gill and Johnson (1997), this may be due to their superior design which gives them unique control in scrutinising the respondents' opinions and attitudes.

**C. Effectiveness:** Questionnaires are relatively efficient in tackling the critical research questions (Sudman and Brabdum, 1982; Wilson and McLean, 1996). This may be due to the fact that many respondents prefer to write their views rather than talk about them, and, in many cases, they prefer to be given the opportunity to consult their files before replying to the most important questions.

**D. Assurance:** Questionnaires offer a high degree of assurance to respondents regarding issues of anonymity, privacy, confidentiality and non-traceability (Bailey, 1992), while other methods are obviously less effective in doing so.

**E. Convenience:** It is possible for respondents to complete the questionnaires administered to them on their own terms and at their own convenience (Kidder and Judd, 1986; De Vaus, 1996). This indicates that there is less chance of the researcher perpetrating mistakes or misrepresenting the responses than, for example, in the case of interviews.

Conversely, questionnaires have a number of limitations, some of which might be more obvious in quantitative studies and others in qualitative studies. However, since these limitations are all related to questionnaires as a method of data collection, they can be considered in a systematic manner. It appears from the literature that the following are the most significant limitations of questionnaires:

- A. It is believed that questionnaires are usually not very effective mechanism either in motivating respondents to answer the questions or returning the completed questionnaires to the researchers (Foddy, 1993; Bassili and Scott, 1996). The fact that the average response rate to many questionnaires is below 50% tends to support this belief.
- B. All types of self-administered written questionnaires lack proper oversee or supervision (Oppenheim, 1992; Anderson, 1998). This means that they neither permit researchers to carry out the charge of direct probing and prompting in the questions they ask the respondents – as is common in semi-structured interview

inquiries (Wilson, 1996; Arksey and Knight, 1999) – nor can they verify the answers received.

- C. In many cases, researchers have no way of ensuring that the right respondents have been included in the random sample selected for their questionnaires (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Patten, 1998). However, such a limitation is qualified by the fact that both the conditions under which a questionnaire will be dealt with and the identity of the respondents must remain unknown.
- D. It is not possible for researchers to be certain of the way the respondents have replied to the questions (Labow, 1980; Farrall *et al*, 1997; Cohen *et al*, 2000); for example, whether they have followed the order in which they are presented in the questionnaire or not.

#### **4.4 Interviews**

This section concerns itself with the principles and strategies of another method of data generation and collection, which the researcher is going to use in his study. This involves interviewing or questioning participants in a face-to-face manner in order to enhance effectiveness of outcomes. Many researchers, such as Reeves and Harper (1981), Oppenheim (1992), Arksey and Knight (1999), Keats (2000), and Balnaves and Caputi (2001) accept the idea that the interview method is fundamentally similar to the questionnaire one. However, it is often more flexible in presenting the research questions to respondents. For example, interviewees may allow the researcher to add more issues and even monitor the progress of deliberation with them.

#### **4.4.1 Definition**

The term “interview” is commonly applied to any form of meeting between the researcher and one or more of the participants he or she is studying. So, for example, Bailey (1982), Fontana and Fry (1994), and Dickens and Fontana (1994) consider this term to mean a data-collection encounter, in which one person (an interviewer) asks another person (an interviewee) a list of questions, with the former then writing down or recording the answers of the latter on the schedule. In Bailey’s own words, an interview schedule is:

“A list of question read by an interviewer to a respondent, with the interviewer then writing down the respondent's answers on the schedule; this is in contrast to questionnaire that is self-administered by the respondent” (p. 492).

Many qualitative researchers (Mason, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998) seem to understand “qualitative interviewing” as a means of in-depth, semi-structural or loosely structured forms of interviewing.

#### **4.4.2 Advantages**

The common belief is that interviews constitute one of the most important qualitative designs for obtaining information relevant to various sorts of sociocultural studies (Silverman, 1997; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 1997; Cohen *et al*, 2000). Indeed, these workers support the idea that some of the most common qualitative methods, such as observations, meetings and documents, are no more than secondary sources for gathering knowledge pertinent to particular topics. In other words, they are typically employed to provide themes and/or generate new questions for interviews and thereby extend the range of knowledge, with the aim of understanding the nature of complex

systems such as colleges and universities. According to Tierney (1987), Kember and Gow (1994), Edonborough (1996), and Brewerton and Millward (2001) detailed interviews following multiple formats are supplemented with a variety of other qualitative techniques. They further pointed out that structural or semi-structural interviews, open-ended interviews, follow-up sessions, where specific questions are raised that relate to initial findings, as well as interviews that seek to confirm perceptual evidence, all provide formats for research interviews. Follow-up interviews allow interviewers to re-check the validity of their initial findings and also stimulate the interviewees to add data they have omitted during the initial interviews.

According to Wilson (1996), the reliability of the data generated through an interview lies in its duplication by other researchers using the same method and sample of respondents. He says:

“The idea in using interview method is to show that the methods used would produce similar results from the same sample of respondents if repeated by another interviewer using the same methods. This is reliability and is an important criterion in assessing and evaluating research products” (pp. 117-118).

The significance of interviewing as a knowledge-provoking activity both for the interviewers and interviewees is generally acknowledged. The interviews, however, might occasionally turn out to be tedious, inconvenient, less anonymous, less standardised and even biased. Indeed, as Bailey (1982), Mason (1996) and Keeves (1997) recognised, interviews might also be seriously consuming in terms of effort, time and resources. Kuh (1995) and Whitt and Kuh (1991) appreciated the participation of more than one experienced interviewer for the sake of overcoming the above problems at least partially, and in order to maximise the quality of their research. It may be advantageous for the sake of authenticity to set about conducting interviews



with a colleague; especially if the case being dealt with is of a sensitive nature. Bechhofer *et al* (1984) suggested that in such an approach there might be benefits other than mere confirmation of the interviewees' direct responses, for a co-worker may provide checks on memory, particularly when note-taking is difficult, and may also bring a different perspective and working hypotheses to the investigation.

#### **4.4.3 Conduct of interviews**

Many researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Gill and Johnson, 1997) seek concurrent collection of data, claiming that the data obtained in the first round of interviews could influence additional data collection and interpretation as interviewing progresses. That is to say, as the researchers analyse the data they may gain the perception that important issues, events, persons or even potentially groups, have been overlooked. Hence, as Crowson (1987) pointed out, they may revise their understanding of specific topics and even expand the participant pool as a whole.

The way interviews are conducted may vary with different researchers and the social views of participants. For example, some researchers, such as Groves and Kahn (1979), Harvey (1988), Frey (1989), Thomas and Purdon (1995), and Miller (1995), economically applied the telephone as a useful tool to facilitate covering a wide area such as big cities. Telephone interviews were also used by Whitt and Kuh (1991), but only in cases of emergency. The majority of other researchers, however, show a preference for using face-to-face interviews (De Vaus, 1996; Wilson, 1996; Al-Medlej, 1997; Arksey and Knight, 1999). This latter group claim that their mode is more effective for understanding the participants' feelings and expressions. In addition, it might also enable the interviewers to avoid focusing on certain factors which do not

reflect the interests of their interviewees. Moreover, as Padilla and Pavel (1994) point out, in face-to-face interviews, the interviewers themselves have a greater chance of clarifying any responses with informants and steadily drawing upon the actual and sustained experiences of the interviewees, not on information that they might have received second- or third-hand. Whitt and Kuh (1991) even found it useful to ask participants at the conclusion of each interview to identify other potential interviewees whose opinions, activities or experiences differ from their own. Also, some researchers (Crowson, 1987; Maxwell, 1996; Holstein and Gubrium, 1997) emphasise the notion that lively interactions and discussions among the participants themselves in response to open-ended questions can yield rich information regarding their experiences, and facilitate interpretation of the results obtained.

#### **4.4.4 Limitations**

As one would expect, because the dynamics of all the individuals, events and activities in a setting cannot be studied, some sort of sampling process is often needed. The general principle of such a selection is a well-documented phenomenon – that is, the researchers want as many diverse perspectives as possible (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Robson, 1997; Atkinson, 1998). For example, in studying higher education institutes, researchers have sought, at the least, to interview samples of such essential groups as students and teaching staff. Any degree of selection may, of course, limit the scope of the research and restrict the researcher's attention (Firestone, 1993; Weiss, 1994; Schofield, 1996). The knowledge of the well-informed researcher, however, should guide him or her in the process of sampling the participants and hence whom to interview and at what stage in the course of study, taking into consideration that the interviewer might actually need, at one stage or another, to filter out some of the

respondents, such as those who do not have personal experience or appropriate knowledge of the subject under study.

Some researchers (Kvale, 1996; Sarantakos, 1998; Cohen *et al*, 2000) have recommended that it might be more useful to record and transcribe interviews verbatim. The main reason for this is that all the information collected can then be quickly and accurately retrieved. From a practical point of view, however, the majority of interviewees consider the issues included in the interviews to be sensitive matters. It is not surprising, therefore, that they feel much more at ease when confidentiality is guaranteed, for instance when there will be no audio or video-tape recording, and the institution will not be identified by mentioning names. In Dobbert's (1984) opinion, it is of further help if interviewees are assured that their participation is a voluntary action and that they can withdraw from the study at any time if they wish to do so. No doubt, skilled interviewers ensure that all questions relevant to a particular topic are answered as fully as possible and that the respondents fully understand the set of instructions presented to them. However, as pointed out by Kvale (1996), Gill and Johnson (1997), and Keeves (1997), interviewers do commit some mistakes. For instance, they may misunderstand the respondents' answers, may understand them but make clerical mistakes in recording them, or may simply record an answer even when the respondent failed to reply. In addition, the respondents' answers can be affected by their reaction to the interview conditions and interviewers' attitudes.

In the course of his exploration of decision making in Saudi universities, Al-Medlej (1997) found it constructive to initiate his research with a pilot study involving the use of communication technology (facsimile machine and telephone). During the final stage of his study, however, he adopted a face-to-face interview schedule and

hand-recorded the responses to the questions he asked the interviewees. Al-Medlej (1997) was able to minimise the cost of the interviews he held (a total of 67) by precisely scheduling them in advance and then editing and transcribing the fieldstones or observations as soon as possible thereafter.

It is evident that the most common limitation associated with interviews emerges from some interviewees' lack of means to react helpfully towards interviewers' inquiries (Wilson, 1996; Robson, 1997; Babbie, 1998). For instance, Briggs (1986) observed that in some cases interviewees either do not adequately understand the question and, therefore, cannot answer it, or they understand it but cannot, or rather choose not to, respond. However, according to Bryman (1988, 1989) the most frequent obstacle to deal with in studies involving interviews in organisations is that of persuading interviewees to participate in the responsibility of discrediting the accuracy of specific information regarding certain individuals or groups that the interviewer suspects or mistrusts. Al-Medlej (1997) claimed to have overcome such a problem partially by learning early during his research to be flexible enough, and partially by adopting either Pezeshkpur's (1978) or Lawrance's (1988) tactic. The first tactic requires the researcher to explain to the informants the significance of their honest participation. The second tactic involves the interviewer informing the interviewees that he or she has already come across specific phenomena in another comparable organisation and wonders whether or not this might be the case they themselves have experienced in their own organisation. Such an approach is particularly valuable as it illustrates the actual form of an interview, as well as the mechanism by which it accomplishes its results.

## **4.5 Documents**

The sources of data generation discussed so far are all widely employed by qualitative researchers. However, there are other sources of information gathering, whether in writing, figures or electronic form. These are collectively referred to as “documents” (Mason, 1996; Sapsford and Jupp, 1996; Anderson, 1998), and may function both as main sources for the researchers’ conclusions and to supplement information from other sources. The researcher used such sources in his study and, therefore, the principles and strategies of employing them are the subject of this section.

### **4.5.1 Application and Relevance**

Documents can be employed in nearly all aspects of research, provided that relevant sources are available in the first place, and in most cases, relevant documents can be either found or generated. Lincoln and Guba (1985) captured the essence of the document hunt very well when they suggested that there is an

“assumption that if an event happened, some record of it exists (especially in today’s heavily documented society). To put it another way, every human action leaves tracks” (p. 278).

Generally speaking, as emphasised by Hodder (1994), Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), and Finnegan (1996), understanding of documents is relevant to modern research in three ways:

A Documents often constitute a major source of data in sociocultural research. That is, such research may depend extensively on the existence of government reports, official and unofficial records, private papers and statistical collections.

- B Documents are often employed in assessing research, and so may come in at various stages of the research process. For example, one phase is that of the preliminary “literature survey and evaluation”, a second phase is that of “data collection and construction”, and a third phase is that of “data analysis and report”.
- C Documents are by no means a neutral source whose significance is necessarily self-evident. For instance, their selection and interpretation are affected not only by practical restrictions like access or timing, but also by the researchers’ aims and viewpoints. For example, a piece of research building on documentary material at least requires to be judged by how carefully the researcher considers and explains the data.

The important point, then, is that the different types of documents have to be understood in the context of their conditions of production and reading (Van Maanen, 1988; Ball and Smith, 1992; Jupp, 1996). Perhaps this is the main reason why the majority of considerations relevant to the use of these sources question not only what a particular document is intended to say, but issues of evidence and proof too. For instance:

- Why, by whom, for the use of whom, under what circumstances, and according to what rules, was a particular document produced?
- Was it solicited or unsolicited, edited or unedited, signed or anonymous?
- Was it produced as an act of firsthand experience or derived from secondary sources?
- What is its representativeness? For example, is or is it not representative of the totality of material of its class?

- Is or is not its description or display reliable, accurate and valuable?
- By what means is it possible to establish the authenticity of the document?
- How is it decided what possible conclusions can be made from the document about matters other than the truth of its factual assertions?
- Should a researcher consider a particular document biased, because, for instance, it reflects the opinions of its author or producer?

The researcher may not know the answers to all the above questions, but he will need to pursue them as fully as possible as they will help to situate the document under consideration in the context of its nature, production and use. It is these factors that will influence the service the document can provide. Actually, this is the prevailing view amongst researchers. For example, Scott (1990) remarked that:

“Textual analysis involves meditation between the frames of reference of the researcher and those who produced the text. The aim of this dialogue is to move within the ‘hermeneutic scale’ in which we comprehend a text by understanding that frame of reference from which it was produced, and appropriate that frame of reference by understanding the text. The researcher’s own frame of reference becomes the springboard from which the circle is entered, and so the circle reaches back to encompass the dialogue between the researcher and the text” (p. 32).

Furthermore, according to Jupp and Norris (1993), Feldman (1995), Atkinson and Coffey (1997), and Perakyla (1997) it is important to bear in mind some other dimensions of documentary sources. For example, the relevant documents may well be available to the researcher, but their number may be great, or they may be so diverse in quality as to make their sampling, retrieval and analysis very hard to deal with in the face of limited time and funds. Alternatively, the researcher may wish to gain access to only a few textual or visual materials but be unable to find what he or she requires due

to the large quantity of them. In brief, a researcher needs to work out not only the viability of what he or she is aiming to accomplish, but also the value of what a particular document can provide.

Frame (1991) investigated, over a period of time, the perspective of three groups of British managers: Directors Management Team, Field Work Management Team, and Residential and Day Care Management Team. In addition to interviewing every one of them and observing them in action and at meetings, he examined several of their written documents. He noted the usefulness of overcoming some of the weaknesses of over-depending on documents. His judgement is that:

“Reservations about the use of written material as a source of data often focus on the disadvantages of retrospection when no one involved either in producing or receiving them is available to interpret their meanings except with hindsight. This criticism often also applies to recent documents in cases where the researcher has no access to the producers and their intended meanings, nor the recipients and their interpretations. But such criticism is less relevant if the researcher has access to producers and recipients, as I did. This is not to argue that documents have only one set of meanings. What is of interest is the intended purpose of such documents and how they are interpreted by the audience for which they are produced” (p. 25).

Another case along the same line was that of Al-Medlej (1997) who chose his textual documents on the basis of two main prerequisites:

“A document should be strongly connected to the decision-making process, and the researcher should be able to communicate with the producer of such documents in order to avoid misinterpretation” (p. 84).

Thus, whilst Al-Medlej had free access to producers and several written documents relevant to Saudi Arabian higher education, he was very selective in choosing the most



appropriate ones (like hierarchical charts, books of authority, budget reports, recruitment papers and reports, of development plans). That is, he considered only those documents which highlighted some important aspects of the decision-making process, which was the focus of his research.

#### **4.5.2 Types of Documents**

Researchers often deal with sociocultural documents as “secondary sources” of information. This is due to the fact that these materials are not primarily generated for the study in which they are employed. Their analysis is therefore known as “secondary analysis” In general, documents are either textual or non-textual (visual), either category of which may demonstrate variation in form and quality. According to their construction, interpretation and representation, documentary sources can be tentatively sorted out into five categories (Feldman, 1995; Mason, 1996, Sapsford and Jupp, 1996; Silverman, 1997; Sarantakos, 1998):

- A Public documents: such as census statistics, year-books, court archives, prison records, and mass media and literature (plays, novels, poetry, and so forth).
- B Archival records: such as service records of hospitals, doctors and social workers, and records of various companies and factories.
- C Personal documents: such as life stories, diaries, memoranda, confessions, autobiographies, private letters, diagrams, photographs and lists.
- D Administrative documents: such as proposals, institutional memoranda, progress reports, agendas, minutes of meetings, announcements, and many other internal

documents (for example, statements, certificates, licences, contracts, advertisements, forms and account sheets).

- E Formal reports: such as those related to the research topics, comprising books, manuals, printed files, journals, magazines, pamphlets, brochures, newspapers, and so forth.

Some researchers, like Mason (1996) and Sarantakos (1998) also found it useful if the documentary sources were further categorised on the basis of whether they are:

- A Primary: like those compiled by eye witnesses of the described events, such as meeting papers, bank statements, books and periodicals, and advertisements.
- B Secondary: sources derived from the primary ones, such as written diaries, accounts, stories, biographies, charts, tables and lists.
- C Contemporary: sources compiled at the time the events took place, such as contemporary archives and world events; personal diaries, memoranda, confessions and letters; and diagrams, photographs and slides.
- D Retrospective: sources of past events, such as reviews, surveys, and reassessment reports or appraisals.

One might think that it would be more useful if the above two schemes of documentary classification were combined. However, something of the difficulty of achieving such a goal might be judged from considering attempts to classify recent documents, such as those referred to by Finnegan (1996) for British “contemporary documents” alone (Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1:** A classification of British contemporary documents (see Finnegan, 1996, p. 140)

**Box 6.1** Summary of types of source for the contemporary recent UK

Standard and official sources

- Work of reference, e.g Whitaker's Almanack, Statesman's Year book, Annual Abstract of Statistics, The Times Index, Keesing's contemporary Archives, Who's Who, Annual Register of World Events
- Government reports including (a) parliamentary papers (i.e all papers ordered by or laid before either house of parliament and papers printed by command of the government, including reports of Royal Commissions); and (b) non-command papers (e.g reports of departmental committees)
- Statistical records, including the Census and the Registrar-General's statistical Review of England and Wales and Annual Report of the Registrar-General for Scotland). For further examples see Box 5.1 in the previous chapter
- Annual and special reports, local and unofficial, including reports by local Medical Officers of Health, and reports of companies, societies, schools, universities, political parties, trade unions, etc.
- Parliamentary debates (Hansard)
- Documents on foreign policy issued by, or with the cooperation of, the Foreign Office

Cabinet and other papers

- Cabinet records (because of the "30 year rule" these cannot be consulted for the most recent period)
- Other government document (the same difficulty applies)
- Private papers, e.g. private papers of politicians many deposited in libraries throughout the country), trade unions or political parties

Memoirs, diaries and biographies

(These may be particularly useful for the period for which government records are closed by the "30 year rule")

- Biographies and autobiographies
- Diaries (not very many available)
- Memoirs (available in abundance: a sometimes informative but hazardous source to use)

Letters, contemporary writing

- Currents affairs, including works by journalists as well as by social scientists
- Social surveys, including public opinion polls
- Novels, poetry, plays (imaginative writing provides source material of a particular kind, more useful for answering some kinds of question than others)
- Newspapers and other periodicals

Images, sound and objects

- Film
- Photographs, maps and pictures
- Sound and video recordings (including audio and video cassettes; also programmes currently going out via radio and television and the records of these - if preserved - in the archives)
- Interviews, tape-recorded and other
- Museums their contents
- History on the ground: townscapes, landscapes, aerial photographs

Computerized records

- Any one or more of the above stored or distributed electronically (e.g the BBC "Domesday" interactive video-disc; statistical records stored as computer databases)

Source: derived from Mowat, 1971

It appears that whatever strategy for documentary classification the researcher of social sciences might adopt, it would imply that the ways of generating data from these sources will vary from one case to another. For example, some of these sources exist before the act of research by virtue of being already published. Other forms of documents demand creation through the research process. Evidently, the data or images from the latter source can be created by the researchers themselves, or they may invite key participants in the research to collaborate in producing them. Distinguishing between various forms of documentary materials may be relevant. For example, the researcher may be able to gain access to texts, whereas access to tapes may be restricted by law for reasons of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

A considerable number of sociocultural researchers still focus mainly on textual sources. The reason is that these written sources often exist in large numbers, both of a private or personal kind, and frequently of more convenient forms or of what Hakim (1987) refers to as “administrative records”. Thus, written documents, in particular, are commonly considered to be text-based sources (Patton, 1990; Hodder, 1994; Jupp, 1996) but, in fact, many of them will also contain non-text-based components, which may be of interest (Scott, 1990; Van Der Does *et al*, 1992; Harper, 1994). Some of these analysts prefer to include non-text-based documents (typically photographs) in their discussion of textual materials. Other non-text-based forms fit to a lesser extent under the heading “documents”, and there is more limited agreement for employing them as data in qualitative analysis (Yin, 1994; Wolcott, 1995; Mason, 1996). Examples of these are many, including films, video-tapes, slides, graphic arts, sculptures, drawings, paints, pictures, visual arts and artefacts, styles and fashions, diagrams, illustrations, sketches, and indeed even the so-called “cognitive maps”. The

distinction between data generated through the research process and those already in existence also applies to these forms of visual data (Weiss, 1994; Robson, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). So, for example, the researcher may produce certain pictures, or he may conduct an analysis of a particular type of tape, alone or jointly with his informants. But since these images do not take a text-based form, he has to consider their visual, spatial and design components and try to derive relevant information from them.

The idea that other types of qualitative methods produce data is a very influential one in many cases. However, this feature most probably has the double effect of over-stressing the credibility of textual data and underplaying that of visual and any other form of non-text-based data. The general impression, then, is that “text” is higher in quality than other styles of qualitative data (Thomas, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Babbie, 1998). This does not necessarily imply that the researcher should critically accept such a claim about any particular documents, even if he has participated in its production. Instead, assuming the researcher will comply with what others have performed (Hodder, 1994; Jupp, 1996; Perakyla, 1997), he should subject all the textual and visual sources to exactly the same degree of careful inspection, validation and criticism.

It is essential for a qualitative researcher to understand that in many cases documents should not be interpreted as data in a simplistic sense. In addition, same degree of awareness should be maintained about what counts as data in the context of these sources as for questionnaires, interviews, meetings and observation (Maxwell, 1992; Oppenheim, 1992; Morse, 1994a and b). Treated in such a manner, the derivation of data from text-based sources looks no less problematic than from visual sources. For

example, for both categories, the researcher will be making critical analyses and judgements regarding how, why, and by what means various qualitative components (literal, interpretative and reflective) are representative or suitable for transformation into data (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Alasuutari, 1995; Hathaway, 1995). The principal difference is that visual documents, in a literal sense, may contain no text whatsoever (Ruby, 1989; Tilley, 1990; Edwards, 1992). This may imply that once a researcher moves past the point where he or she views textual or visual sources as data in themselves, he or she will start thinking about what else can be gained from them in the process of data analysis. In other words, a qualitative researcher needs to think carefully about what he or she anticipates from various forms of data, so as to be successful in observing, recording, analysing and interpreting naturalistic or ethnographic phenomena, or reflecting on them, in the most relevant ways.

#### **4.5.3 The Process of Documentary Research**

Basically the same as the research processes of other data sources, the research process relevant to documents is best accomplished in four steps (Brannen, 1992; LeCompte *et al.*, 1992; Robson, 1997; Sarantakos, 1998). These steps are summarised below:

- 1. Selection of documents:** This step normally depends on a number of factors, such as availability, accessibility, relevance and the researcher's personal interest. In some cases only a single document may be employed; in other cases, several sources may be chosen. Also, while in the majority of cases the use of documents may constitute part of a larger study, occasionally it might make up the main study.

2. **Data collection:** The content of this step is largely related to the method of data analysis. When description is the principal aim of the study, and when the methodology of the research is largely qualitative, reading the documents and taking notes may be adequate to meet a need. If, however, methods such as content analysis are employed, management of the data, as well as their analysis, become more strict and specific.
3. **Data analysis:** This is a very diverse step. The type of evaluation required depends on the nature of the documentary sources under consideration, the methodological choice, and the purpose of the study. Generally speaking, the generated data will be related to the assumptions being made before or during the research and assessed with regard to the degree to which they are valid. Whether the results will or will not be generalised in statistical terms depends on the evidence obtained and the method adopted.
4. **Data interpretation:** Interpretation of the documentary results will normally be made in the context of the research topic. It will, therefore, also be dependent on such factors as the nature of the study, the purpose of the project and the type of methodology being employed. While in some cases inductive generalisations can be made, in other cases statistical generalisations will be produced.

#### **4.5.4 Advantages and Limitations**

Documents demonstrate a number of advantages and limitations. Any one of these sources, therefore, can be employed only when its advantages outweigh its limitations. Below is a list compiled of the most common documentary advantages (Mason, 1996; Sapsford and Jupp, 1996; Silverman, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000):

- Documents enable the study of past events and issues.
- The availability of data banks, sophisticated computer programmes and the Internet has made documents a valuable source of information.
- Documents are often produced by the author without being requested to do so. This feature may reduce the researcher's bias.
- A research method that employs documents is often more economic than any other method of data generation and collection.
- A feature of documents is their non-reactivity. For instance, the method employed in their study does not affect the findings.

In contrast, documents may demonstrate a number of limitations, some of which are not critically different from those of research methods utilising other data sources. Generally speaking, the implication of any particular document should be a subject of authenticity, credibility and representativeness. The most common documentary limitations mentioned in the literature (Platt, 1981; Crowson, 1987; Patton, 1990; Sarantakos, 1998) are listed below:

- Some documents may not be representative of their kind, and thus may not allow generalisations to be made.
- Some documents are not easily accessible, for instance private letters, personal diaries, and so forth.
- Some documents are biased, since they represent the views of their authors or producers.
- Some documents are not subject to evaluation; for instance, they are not liable to be compared with each other.



- Some documents demonstrate methodological problems, such as coding problems and state of presentation.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a concise account of the rationale for the use of a triangulation strategy as well as the general principles and benefits of questionnaires (a quantitative method), interviews, and the study of documentary materials (qualitative methods). The information included provided evidence that assisted the researcher to attain the appropriate attitude. Further, it guided him to adopt a practical combination of the above methods and to use this in the development of the procedures employed to collect the data required for his study. The first step of such a strategy was to select a population from which samples representing the relevant groups of Saudi stakeholders were to be drawn. The second step was to carry out a pilot study in order to standardise the procedures, for example, to minimise the impact of any errors made in the design of the questionnaires or interviews and thereby maximise their strength in understanding the meaning and implications of the participants' responses.

In view of the scarcity of the systematic research pertinent to the topics of the present study in Saudi higher education, the fieldwork became the main source of data generation. Thus, the researcher faced the fact that it would be largely on the basis of such firsthand data that he would base his important judgements through the course of analysing and discussing the results of his study. For this reason, and in order to manage the operation of his inquiry, the researcher's thoughts centred around fulfilling the following requirements beforehand:

- A To design, largely based on Western style and theories, a combined research approach, involving questionnaires, interview schedules and examination of relevant documents, to be applied in all four study departments. At the same time, to take into consideration the social constitution of Saudi Arabia, as instanced by the language and attitude of its people, as well as other relevant socio-cultural and religio-philosophical elements. Inevitably, in the course of the research, both written and recorded notes will be made. This will be done as explicitly and objectively as possible on what he actually observes, hears or feels or experiences; and in each case what the events, phenomena or criteria really indicate. Of course, this will be done on the basis of the researcher's interpretation of participants' responses or what goes on during the field study.
- B To produce an effective balance with regard to the main topics of the research, namely, development and quality of undergraduate curricula, and graduate employability in the context of the Saudi higher education system, and the relationship between these three aspects.
- C To decide the degree of structure that should be built into the process of data collection using the questionnaire and interview schedules; for example, the proportion, of and relationship between, close-ended and open-ended questions.
- D To be cautious about any source of invalidity that might result from employing either of the aforementioned methods of data collection; for example, to be careful in selecting the documentary data (whether from sources produced by Saudi governmental bodies or privately) to be included in the study.

It is the researchers' belief that, the triangulation methodology he developed and employed for his fieldwork study was effective in answering all the research questions. In other words, the procedures he employed enabled him to generate and collect the required firsthand data. The information obtained through the use of different methods was, in general, complementary, and supported by or validated through each other.

## **CHAPTER 5 FIELDWORK**

## 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapters of this thesis have revealed that there is little, if any, published research data on the topics of quality in higher education and employability of graduates in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the researcher paid significant attention to the fieldwork in the hope that it would produce adequate quantitative and qualitative data that would answer the research questions.

Following the review of literature, carrying out two rounds of pilot studies, and holding discussions with his supervisors and colleagues, in order to meet the requirements of this study, the researcher decided to make the questionnaires the mainstay of his research. In other words, the interviews and the study of the documentary material were more or less treated as complementary or supporting methods.

In Chapter 4, it was shown that the preferred approach to modern research in social sciences involves the use of triangulation (multiple methods). Thus, it was thought that a questionnaire study might be carried out to get the responses of the target stakeholder groups at large. Then, an interview study might be employed to discover more about what really lay behind certain specific findings, that is, to get an insight into the meanings of some data gathered through the questionnaires. Finally, the researcher should, whenever possible, further assess the validity and significance of the data by comparing it with what the relevant documents may contain. In the opinion of many researchers in social and organisational settings (Hammersely, 1993; Anderson, 1998; Lee, 1999; Silverman, 2000), triangulation in this sense is bound to represent a strength in research, especially when the results of different methods tend to reinforce rather than contradict each other.

Before talking about the technicalities of the sampling procedures adopted by the researcher for each of the research methods, it is necessary in this chapter to give a brief account of the importance of both the selection of a suitable setting for the study and an accurate representation of the samples drawn from the sites of sub-populations in such a setting.

This chapter also intends to explain how the raw data collected using different methods was managed, processed and made ready for retrieval. The procedures adopted for the analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative sets of data are also described.

## **5.2 The Pilot Study**

The researcher decided to carry out this study to obtain a better picture of the methodological designs he was adopting. He wanted to be sure that he was employing an adequately effective strategy to generate reliable data in an ethically appropriate manner among the targeted groups of Saudi higher education stakeholders. Furthermore, there was a feeling that piloting the main research method might be very useful in discovering those areas which the researcher should focus upon. Finally, piloting helps to identify potential problems that might be encountered during the actual study.

In this section, after indicating the main principles behind the use of the pilot study, especially in the field of social sciences, the researcher proposes to outline the course through which his two rounds of pilot study went, with particular emphasis on the development of the questionnaires he used.

### 5.2.1 Rationale for Using the Pilot Study

A large number of researchers, including Reeves and Harper (1981), Oksenberg *et al* (1991), Bell (1993), King *et al* (1994), Sarantakos (1998) and Cohen *et al* (2000) believe that many different types of social and educational research projects are bound to benefit from a prior exploratory study, such as a pilot study. Wilson (1996) states that:

“A pilot investigation is a small-scale trial before the main investigation, intended to assess the adequacy of the research design and of the instruments to be used for data collection; piloting the data-collection instruments is essential, whether interview schedules or questionnaires are used” (p. 103).

The role of piloting a particular study will inevitably vary depending on several factors, largely to do with the nature of the study itself and the type of methodological procedures and techniques adopted to bring it to completion. For example, Light *et al* (1990), Oppenheim (1992), Manson (1996), Anderson (1998), and Seale and Filmer (1998), among several other authors, most significantly look at the function of a pilot study in terms of the researcher's own interest. That is to say, they see in the piloting process a trying tool, to which the researcher is beneficiary in a variety of ways, for example:

1. familiarising oneself with the actual environment in which the real fieldwork is to be carried out;
2. testing the researcher's assumptions, his or her competencies and the effectiveness of the setting and participants intended to be studied;

3. estimating the systematic management of time, cost and effort required to complete the research project;
4. checking the suitability of the research plan, the technical procedures, and any facilities, equipment or tools involved;
5. assessing the level of response in respect to the research population and its sub-population and, hence identify the drop-out cases among participants;
6. gaining valuable information about the research population (for example, its size, distribution, sub-populations, and so forth) and, consequently, the best way to sample from it in order to achieve representative and reliable results.

It is also anticipated (Janesick, 1994; Presser and Blair, 1994; Peterson, 2000) that the knowledge, experience and awareness built up during the course of the pilot study will contribute to offering satisfactory answers to many of the researcher's questions. This suggests that the results of a pilot study in the field of social sciences are particularly relevant to the improvement of the research methodology and technicality. Gill and Johnson (1997) precisely depicted the importance of piloting in planning a research project, carrying it out successfully and thereby improving the quality and validity of its results. They reported that:

“Planning is an important factor in determining the effectiveness and efficiency with which research is carried out. It is especially useful and motivating for students when stages in the work can be identified and dates agreed with supervisors. As with all plans, it will need to be revised from time to time but with an adequate plan progress can be assessed at any time, problems are more likely to be foreseen and contingencies can be taken care of” (p. 20).



This is in line with the researcher's hope, while it is also important to test a set of questions, intended to be included in his questionnaire, or a version of them in his interview schedule, for such things as their wording and ethical suitability. Piloting them should additionally help to check both their design and effectiveness in the generation of reliable data.

### **5.2.2 Designing and Piloting the Questionnaires**

There is no doubt that design is one of the most serious parts of research in the field of social sciences (Lipsey, 1990; Creswell, 1994; Marsden, 1994; Rubbin and Babbie, 1997), especially if studies are qualitatively orientated (Maxwell, 1996; Neuman, 1997; Silverman, 2000). The researcher's decision to make the questionnaire method a starting point for his fieldwork was largely based on the inferences made from the literature review (see 4.3) and its influential role in triangulation (see 4.2). For instance, in comparison with the qualitative methods often used in social science researches (such as interviews, studying documents, attending meetings, following cases of decision making and general observation), quantitative methods are more capable of achieving the following goals:

1. covering a wider range of research issues and thereby providing the researcher with an insight to focus better in his real study on the most important of them;
2. tackling a relatively larger sample of the targeted population of participants, within a shorter period of time and with less effort and cost;

3. totally securing the anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants and consequently motivating them to be more cooperative and trusting in answering the questions presented to them;
4. generating data in a form that can generally be more easily collated, analysed, displayed and interpreted.

The researcher carried out this stage of his pilot study at the College of Administrative Sciences, King Saud University. To ensure that an adequate target population size was available to sample from, he visited the above college and informed its officials about a formal letter he had from the Saudi Cultural Attaché in London to Saudi universities in order to facilitate his study. The researcher also briefed the officials as to the content and purpose of his study. Consequently, all the departments collaborated with the researcher. For example, they approved the distribution of the questionnaires, provided him with lists of students and staff from which he could draw samples, advised him about the most appropriate times to approach potential respondents and even gave him access to the college's library and journal.

The first draft of the questionnaire prepared by the researcher included questions for two groups of participants, namely, undergraduate students and teaching staff. Both groups were comprised of male subjects only and for both, 20 questions were designed. Sixty copies of the students' questionnaire and 30 copies of the teaching staff's questionnaire were distributed.

Almost all the questions posed at this stage of the pilot study probed the opinions of the participants about certain specific issues regarding the research topic; for example, the definition of quality in higher education, its present status in Saudi universities and the developmental plan for undergraduate curricula in relation to such quality.

The researcher intentionally increased the number of questions to accommodate simplification of the questionnaire both in terms of composition and language (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Denscombe, 1998; Patten, 1998). He also avoided any questions that might yield confusing or misleading answers (Foddy, 1993; Hague, 1993; Peterson, 2000). Thus, for example, he not only avoided questions described as being ambiguous and sensitive, but he was also conscious not to use one-sided, slanted or twisted terms. Among other reasons, the questions were arranged within the main body of the questionnaire in a logical order to keep the participants motivated and interested in answering as many of them as possible. Furthermore, the researcher clearly indicated the purpose and nature of the study in the covering letter, carefully phrased the questions and expressed gratitude to the participants for helping him with his research task.

The questionnaire was translated into Arabic and typed ready for distribution among the participants. It is perhaps noteworthy that as early as this stage of the study, the researcher considered the fact that it would be very difficult to carry out a systematic and successful fieldwork study in the context of the Saudi higher education system in a foreign language, including English.

The researcher found attentiveness to details such as that discussed above very useful in enhancing communication with participants and this ensured a high response rate from both groups. In fact, response rates were approximately 100% and 80% for students and teaching staff, respectively. As suggested by Oksenberg *et al* (1991), DeVaus (1996), Robson (1997) and Lee (1999), familiarity with, and awareness of questionnaire studies are essential factors in preventing, as far as possible, both misreading and misunderstanding.

It is possible to argue that the high response rates obtained for the pilot questionnaires at this stage of the study were attributable to the fact that the majority of participants were very interested in the nature of the study. But, undoubtedly, the time and effort the researcher invested in designing, organising and carrying out the pilot study also had a positive impact. However, there is also a possibility that traditional Saudi and religious values had some effect on the participants, particularly the students. For example, many of them were motivated to respond to the questionnaire having been advised by an elder or an official to do so. In addition, contrary to the teaching staff's questionnaire, the students' questionnaire included only close-ended questions, making it easier to answer.

It emerged from the tentative results obtained during this stage of the pilot study that neither group of participants was specifically aware of recent developments in the West regarding the definition of quality in higher education and models for its assessment. Thus, many of them tended unreservedly to equate quality in this context with such measures as "level", "standard", "effectiveness", "efficiency" or even "performance of academic stakeholders". Their answers suggested that in addition to the academic factor there were at least half a dozen other factors which possibly had an

impact on the quality of higher education in Saudi universities and hence on the preparation of undergraduate students for employment, including political and financial factors, limited student access, and managerial and employers' influence.

### **5.2.3 Redesigning and Piloting the Questionnaires**

As mentioned in the previous section, the first draft of the questionnaire for students and teaching staff was constructed by the researcher according to the theoretical outline and general principles and strategy discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Among useful and recent references in this respect were Anderson (1998), Cohen *et al* (2000), Peterson (2000), Kent (2001), and Balnaves and Caputi (2001). The main interest was the curriculum and quality in higher education, especially in the scope of current Western understanding and the perception of these two concepts.

The researcher felt that the previous stage of the pilot study was a very useful trial in that it identified the most relevant themes that he should focus on in his real study. But, naturally, there was much to be done in scheming the methodological questions and sub-questions to fit correctly with the topics and objectives of the project under investigation.

Thus, the first main aim of the researcher during this stage of the pilot study was to identify the most important dimensions for the questionnaire redesigning process (Martin and Polivka, 1995), which eventually covered the following areas:

1. Taking into consideration the Saudi cultural heritage; for example, in relation to the construction of questionnaires in the context of higher education in general (Addawood, 1990; Ajaji, 1995; Al-Medlej, 1997; Al-Kahtani, 1998b), in relation to

using language in the questionnaires pertinent to the curriculum, quality in higher education and graduates' employability (Al-Karni, 1994, 1999; Khateeb, 1994, 1999; Al-Ajmi, 1999, 2000), and in relation to the intimate association between academic and religious education (Khalil, 1994; Sultan, 1994). It might be argued that socio-cultural and religio-philosophical impacts are valued differently in different countries (Hofstede, 1984, 1991; Hofstede *et al*, 1990; Ellis, 1996; Mathews *et al*, 2001), but as shown by several researchers and with respect to a variety of issues (Ali, 1992; Al-Meer, 1996; Hunt and Al-Twajjri, 1996; Yasin, 1996; Al-Mubarak, 1998), the Saudi case is obviously unique.

2. Expanding the questionnaire, for example in terms of sub-questions or sub-sets, in order to encompass all the specific issues intended to be covered under the main topics of the project, namely: development of curriculum quality and employability of graduates in Saudi Arabia's higher education system.
3. Selecting samples of adequate sizes not only of male undergraduates and teaching staff, but also samples representing three other groups which are considered significant sectors by Saudi authorities, namely: female students, graduates and academic managers (KSA, 1990-2001; ABEGS, 1994, 1998; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999).
4. Selecting a research setting which could confidently be described as the best representative of the Saudi higher education system, that is King Saud University (Alghafis, 1992; Addawood, 1996; Al-Khedair, 1999; also see Tables 5.2 and 5.3).

5. Choosing a diversified set of undergraduate specialities, that is, more than one major from more than one college of the targeted setting (see Table 5.4), for the sake of widening the research representation relative to the Saudi higher education system.
6. Deciding the issues to be addressed through the interview's questions, in preparation for testing them on a small sample of key informants during this second round of the pilot study. As discussed in section 4.4, interviews together with the study of relevant documentary sources (section 4.5) are generally thought to "inform" the fieldwork questionnaires' results in a very positive way.

All this indicates that the redesign of the questionnaires in the present study meant more than making them more comprehensible and attempting to perfect their questions and sub-questions technically as far as possible as quantifiable tools. That is to say, it also aimed at motivating the targeted groups of Saudi participants and key informants by identifying specific educational issues that make sense to them. It was considered imperative for the questionnaire to be presented to respondents in a friendly format that was easy to read and understand.

The second main aim of the researcher during this stage of the pilot study was to test the effectiveness of the redesigned questionnaires among the five groups of participants identified. A decision was made that this would be better carried out in one of the two colleges chosen for the real study, namely: the College of Humanities, King Saud University, in Riyadh.

During this second round of the pilot study, five copies of each type of questionnaire were randomly distributed to the respective groups of participants, namely: male undergraduates, female undergraduates, graduates, teaching staff and academic managers. Participants were informed that they should feel completely free to correct any unsuitable questions or sub-questions besides attempting to answer all of them.

Some minor corrections and suggestions were made for the sake of improving the questionnaires' style and language. Students, more than the other groups of participants, demanded further clarification of certain questions and sub-questions, as well as the possible shortening of a few questions, especially question No. 15, and explanation or simplification of specific terms used in connection with "quality in higher education" "curriculum quality" and "employability of graduates".

The questionnaires were revised, making the appropriate alterations requested by participants. They were re-typed, checked and sufficient numbers of copies printed for use in the real study.

The final copy of each questionnaire type was comprised of 15 questions. The questionnaires were presented as a 6-page leaflet with a covering letter very similar to that referred to in the account of the first pilot study. Due to the obligation of ensuring that the questionnaires would be distributed, answered and returned in an anonymous manner, the participants were assured of complete confidentiality. The researcher asked for the questionnaires to be returned as soon as they were completed and the majority of participants did so within an hour.



Upon return, each copy of the questionnaire was coded by the researcher. That is to say, each was given a serial number to identify the participant group to which it belonged, as well as the name of the college and department of the respondent.

For the purpose of inclusion in the thesis, the main questionnaire employed in the real study has been translated from Arabic into English, and is presented in Appendix 1.

#### **5.2.4 Choosing and Piloting the Interview Questions**

The researcher relied on choosing the list of questions for the interviews based on several pieces of information. For example, in the light of the central aims of his research topic and its themes; based on the outcomes of piloting the questionnaires, as described above; his personal notes and observations made in the context of the Saudi higher education system; his discussions with supervisors; and the general guidelines found in the literature in relation to the possible contribution of interviews to triangulation studies (Edonborough, 1996; Denscombe, 1998; Arksey and Knight, 1999; see 4.4).

The interview inquiry adopted the same questions employed in the main questionnaire inquiry. However, they were often slightly redesigned or appropriately modified to suit the circumstances of an interview meeting. All the questions started with an open-ended or qualitative inquiry (Seale, 1998b). The researcher took care to use exactly the same phrase for all the targeted groups of participants or key informants, to ensure, for instance, that the type of information gathered could be subjected to comparison.

The piloting of the interview questionnaire was carried out on a small sample of five male students and five members of each of the teaching staff and academic managers. It took place at the College of Humanities, King Saud University. Generally speaking, the views expressed and suggestions made about improvement of the interview questionnaire for employment in the real study were similar to those taken into account in relation to the main questionnaire inquiry. In other words, they concentrated on the Western perception of quality in higher education, development of graduates' employability and job-related skills. Any additional questions and sub-questions added to the questionnaire inquiry during the interview session are dealt with directly in the relevant sections of the three chapters that follow.

### **5.3 Selection of the Setting**

Several researchers, such as LeCompte and Preissle (1993), Morse (1994a and b), Sapsford and Jupp (1996), Flick (1998) and Cohen *et al* (2000) have suggested that in a variety of cases, sampling decisions demand a considerable knowledge of the setting or milieu under study. The reference here is to those types of decisions, which take into account the relationships with the participant groups, the feasibility of data collection, validity concerns and ethical issues. Then, due to the fact that research in social sciences often does not proceed from a fixed set of assumptions directly related to statistical probability (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Seale, 1998a; Lee, 1999), the selection of a setting must also proceed from assumptions which might be different from those which guide probability assessment about any given population.

Thus, it seems that it is widely believed that whatever the sampling strategy is, the choice of setting is a topical area which must be carefully explored and taken into

consideration whenever researching in an ethnographical style. This implies that it is not the case that a particular research setting should be selected on the basis of its access, convenience or cost. Indeed, it has been identified that two of the most important issues regarding sampling in social sciences are “critical case sampling” and “maximum variation sampling” (Tierney and Lincoln, 1994; Mason, 1996). For the first issue, the researcher intended to fulfil the requirement of choosing a setting among the Saudi universities, which has a characteristic or suitability of better support of the research topic under investigation. For the second issue, the intention was also to fulfil the requirement of choosing a setting where there is likely to be found the widest variations around the given aspects of the research.

There is no doubt that the main aim of the researcher in choosing King Saud University as his research setting was to collect adequate fieldwork data and to validate it in order to enable him to answer his research questions. It is possible to argue that the researcher was inevitably operating in a way which might be described as both selective and using a particular perspective. But the truth of the matter is that the researcher managed to understand how he would be using such a selective perspective in an objective way, for example, by being adequately informed by the outcomes of his pilot studies. In other words, it required the researcher to have at least some sense beforehand not only of what sort of setting he was looking for but also what he would be likely to be looking for in that setting. Furthermore, the researcher was fully aware of how his selection of the setting may inform him and that what he would see there may be interesting and relevant to his research inquiry. Light et al (1990) state:

“With only a limited number of sites, consider purposeful selection, rather than relying on the idiosyncrasies of chance” (p.53).

In short, despite the fact that the qualitative studies are used to explain in an interpretive way some social processes or experiences and the quantitative ones to analyse mathematically the connections between some factors or variables, the selective perception for the two designs is basically the same. This is why the researcher aimed to apply the same principles and logic which were applied to the selection of research methods and sampling of respondents to the selection of the research setting.

#### **5.4 Representativeness**

In social science researches, it is not always necessary for the total population to be homogeneous in order to sample successfully from it (Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Kuzel, 1992; Litwin, 1995; Miller and Dingwall, 1997). But, of course, it is necessary that the range of data or information of interest to a particular study is well represented in any validated sample. In fact, this issue is so important to many qualitative researchers that much of the debate involved in sampling concerns itself with establishing a relationship between the sample and the population. For example, many ethnographers will at some stage during their works be engaged in sampling people. Their propositions in this case are based on the notion that people are distinguishable units. The same may apply to any other "common sense" or "real life" units, such as responses, events, behaviours, documents, and so forth (Robson, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1997; Cohen *et al*, 2000). In the case of sampling people, it is often necessary to categorise them further for analytical purposes, and it is thought that this approach was basically established as a scale for measuring randomness (Kish, 1965; Edgington, 1995). This implies that the chief criterion for assessing the quality of a sample is actually the degree to which it is representative, that is to say, the extent to which the characteristics of the sampling

units are similar to those that describe the total population, even if it is actually heterogeneous in nature.

It is also important to bear in mind that a representative sample is meant to be so only in terms of some known characteristics of specified sampleable units (Cheek, 1996; Schofield, 1996; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001). In other words, such a sample might not necessarily be representative in every theoretical or even empirical sense, but only in relation to the particular classification scheme being adopted. The kind of classification meant here is that which is also used in exploring the relationships between variables during the process of data analysis (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Silverman, 2000). The term “variable” in this context refers to certain “factors” or “attributes” on which the sampleable units may differ.

Thus, in the light of the above sampling perception, the researcher intended to focus behind and beyond all the relevant dimensions in order to assess how various factors and attributes were meaningful to the different aspects of his fieldwork. Specifically, the researcher was aware of the fact that whilst each of respondents, key informants (interviewees) and documents seemed to him like a realistic unit, they might well not be so from a sampling point of view. In other words, he ought to think about how to sample from each available unit, so as to make the data obtained subject to the analytical logic and purpose demanded by the specific themes of his study. King, *et al* (1994), Merriam (1998), Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Lee (1999) point out that occasionally the researcher of a social or organisational setting ends up using a good sense and judgement classification for practical reasons even though it may not appear ideal intellectually.

It is reasonable to say that the researcher conformed to the method and ethics adopted by several qualitative researchers, such as Burgess (1988, 1998, 1990), Firestone (1993), Flick (1998), Verma and Mallick (1999) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000), in regarding answers to the close-ended questions as expressions of characteristics, that is to say, variables with which the sampling units may agree or disagree. Hence, they may also be fashioned on the basis of data analysis to reveal the possible connections between them. The same, occasionally, applied to comments made by the questionnaire respondents, transcriptions of the interviewing sessions, or information cited in relevant documents.

It appears that the main obstacle to representativeness of qualitative data in particular is produced by inadequacy of the coding, labelling and processing procedures, in other words, in what is demanded in turning the mixed collection of observation, ideas, thoughts and impressions into variables (Adler and Adler, 1994; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Seale and Kelly, 1998; Silverman, 2000). The seemingly superficial nature of the social explanation for the encountered problems adds to this difficulty. But, of course, all-out interest and effort from researchers, as well as exhaustive responses from participants working qualitatively are often adequate to secure data validity and reliability.

## **5.5 The Research Sample**

### **5.5.1 What is a Research Sample?**

The research sample is a device commonly used in many fields of science and education to study populations and their sub-groups. The rationale behind constructing such a device, or executing it (sampling) as a standard procedure of research in the

context of social sciences in particular, is considered by many researchers a straightforward notion (Judd *et al*, 1991; Seale, 1999; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001). For example, this notion is affirmed by the fact that even within the limits of a single ethnographical case it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to examine everyone everywhere doing everything.

It is understandable, then, that a sample is basically meant to deal with a portion of the total population under investigation, or, as Schofield (1996) put it succinctly

“a set of elements selected in some way from a population” (p. 25).

Anderson (1998) also concisely defined a sample as

“a subset of a population” (p.256).

While Kent (2001) defined it as

“a subset of cases or other units from a total population” (p. 245).

Brewerton and Millward (2001) agreed with the above three definitions, saying that a sample is

“a set of individuals selected from a population and intended to represent the population under study” (p.199).

Sarantakos (1998), on the other hand, summarised the nature of and the main objective behind employing sampling as

“the process of choosing the units of the target population which are to be included in the study” (p.139).

The notion of this process was also specified by Seale (1998a), who stated that it concerns itself with

“the selection of units of analysis (for example, people or institutions) for study. Sampling can involve attempts to statistically represent a population, in which case a variety of random methods are available. Alternatively, sampling can be opportunistic, or formed by emerging theoretical concerns of a researcher” (p. 329).

It is very important to recognise that in spite of the fact that sampling theory has been applied to social research for several decades (Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, 1915) and that this theory is firmly based on the laws of probability and statistics (Gephart, 1988; Abelson, 1995; Agresti and Findlay, 1997) the sampling designs themselves are largely governed by the qualitative logic of purpose and reasoning. This implies that if some mistakes are committed during the process of using a sample for data generation, then their extent should generally be known to the researchers (Hopkins *et al*, 1996; Ross and Wilson, 1997). In fact, it is precisely for this reason that the quality of sampling in qualitative studies is less clear-cut or less well established than in quantitative ones (Kuzel, 1992; Bryman, 1993; Black, 1999; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001).

However, understandably, in qualitative studies the social processes or experiences often demand no strict mathematical analysis of connections between static variables or factors, but rather explanations in interpretive and reflective ways (Denzin, 1997; Howe, 1998; Merriam, 1998). This means that even taking all the encountered limitations into consideration (Strauss and Corbin, 1994,1998; Strauss, 1995; Feldman, 1995; Cohen *et al*, 2000), when appropriately designed and employed, the sampling procedures should be very useful to qualitative researches.

### **5.5.2 The Population from which the Samples were Drawn**

The prerequisite pieces of information included in the previous sections of this chapter were very helpful for the researcher to make his final decision about the identification, selection and gaining of access to the population and sub-populations for his study.



Some basic data about the total population of the Saudi higher education system has been prepared and is presented in Tables 5.1 and 5.2. On the basis of this data and his personal knowledge of the system, gained for instance, through pilot studies and the study of relevant documents, the researcher selected King Saud University as the most suitable available setting to carry out his study.

It is clear from some recent Saudi official documents, such as KSU (1999a and b, 2000) and KSA (2000a and b), that the overall share of King Saud University in teaching, counselling and research services provided by the whole of the Saudi higher education system is about 17%. The assigned budget of this university is also greater than the budget of any of the seven other national universities. It is also a comparatively more diversified university, for example in terms of major educational specialities (Table 5.3). It encompasses 19 colleges and institutes, which in turn comprise 125 departments and 2 teaching hospitals. Al-Karni (1999) estimated that up to 1998, some 68,133 students had completed their studies and graduated from this university with a bachelor's degree, 1,815 students with a master's degree and 32 students with a doctorate.

Some statistical figures directly related to the populations of the stakeholder groups engaged with the undergraduate curriculum programmes at the two colleges and four departments, from which the samples for the present study were drawn, are shown in Table 5.4.

This means that the total population of King Saud University available to hand, was 63,025 persons, comprising 48,664 undergraduate students, 5,026 graduates, 2,809 teaching staff and 6,526 academic managers.

**Table 5.1: Some demographic statistics and parameters of the Saudi higher education system \***

Year Description	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000/2001
Number of universities	7	7	7	7	8	8
Number of colleges	112	138	139	160	213	~219
Number of new undergraduates	67,789	68,027	86,407	85,543	82,271	93,355
Total number of undergraduates	197,698	225,345	264,484	299,456	347,899	367,512
Number of graduates with a bachelor's degree	27,831	31,811	33,622	35,517	43,926	48,307
Number of teaching Staff	13,301	14,321	15,061	17,378	19,389	~20,424
Number of academic managers	13,229	~13,500	13,849	14,541	15,868	12,638
Students/staff ratio	~14.9:1	~15.7:1	~17.6:1	~17.2:1	~17.9:1	~18.0:1
Students/managers ratio	~14.9:1	~16.4:1	~19.1:1	~20.6:1	~21.9:1	~29.1:1

\* Based on data in official Saudi documents (KSA, 1996-2001).

~ Data is approximate.

**Table 5.2: A summary of the Saudi higher education system for the year 1998\***

Stakeholder group	New students			Registered students			Graduates			Teaching staff			Academic managers		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
King Saud University	12,433	4,550	16,983	33,122	15,542	48,664	3,175	1,851	5,026	2,204	605	2,809	3,936	2,590	6,526
Islamic University	974	0	974	3,425	0	3,425	608	0	608	351	0	351	491	8	499
King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals	1,491	0	1,491	7,573	0	7,573	693	0	693	805	0	805	820	0	820
King Abdul-Aziz University	6,619	3,789	10,408	21,850	15,050	36,900	3,139	2,643	5,782	1,456	683	2,139	1,061	219	1,280
Imam Mohammed Bin Saud University	6,493	1,964	8,457	40,341	12,302	52,643	3,575	1,928	5,503	1,598	120	1,718	1,450	42	1,492
King Faisal University	1,589	1,238	2,827	5,738	4,991	10,729	510	511	1,021	629	169	798	935	675	1,610
Umm Al-Qura University	3,589	2,432	6,021	12,672	9,135	21,807	1,661	1,782	3,443	954	288	1,242	549	110	659
Girls' Colleges	0	32,753	32,753	0	98,478	98,478	0	10,388	10,388	343	3,692	4,035	-	--	1,132
Teachers colleges	5,320	0	5,320	18,820	0	18,820	2,884	0	2,884	1,696	0	1,696	282	0	282
Technical Colleges**	309	0	309	417	0	417	169	0	169	1,641	144	1,785	241	0	241
Grand Total	38,817	46,726	85,543	143,958	155,498	299,456	16,414	19,103	35,517	11,677	5,701	17,378	-	-	14,541

\* Based on data in official documents (KSA, 2000a and b; KSU, 1999a and b).

\*\* Inseparable teaching staff and academic managers for many bachelor and sub-bachelor colleges.

-Exact data is not available.

**Table 5.3: The existence of major educational specialities in the higher education institutions of Saudi Arabia\***

Description Name of Institution	Location	Date of foundation	Agriculture	Administration & Economics	Applied Sciences	Architecture & Planning	Humanities	Ass. Med. Sciences	Computer Science	Dentistry	Education	Engineering	Environmental Sciences	Islamic Sciences	Linguistics	Medicine	Ocean Sciences	Pharmacy	Pure Sciences	Shari'a/Law	Social Sciences	Veterinary Medicine	Other Specialities	
King Saud	Riyadh	1957	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				Astronomy, Geology	
Islamic	Medinah	1961					✓							✓	✓					✓				
King Fahd of Petroleum And Minerals	Dhahran	1963			✓	✓						✓							✓					Applied Engineering, Industrial Administration, Environmental Designs
King Abdulaziz	Jeddeh	1967		✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				✓			✓					Meteorology and Weather Forecasting, Applied Geology
Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic	Riyadh	1974					✓							✓	✓					✓	✓			
King Faisal	Al-Hasa	1975	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓			✓		Construction and Planning
Umm Al-Qura	Makkah	1979	✓		✓		✓				✓			✓	✓				✓	✓				
Girls' Colleges	In Various Cities	1970-82					✓				✓								✓		✓			

\*Based on information in Al-Salloom (1995, 1996), Qasem (1995), KSA (1996-2001) Al-Khedair (1999) and GPGE (2000).

**Table 5.4:** The populations of the colleges and departments from which the research sample was drawn. The total populations of King Saud University and the Saudi higher education system are shown in the two bottom lines\*

Stakeholders Institutions	New students			Registered students			Graduates			Teaching staff			Academic managers		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
College of Humanities:	931	97	1,850	5,479	4,591	10,070	1,131	708	1,839	223	95	318	79	1	80
Department of Information	-	-	-	1,030	0	1,030	231	0	231	-	-	-	-	-	-
Department of Social Studies	-	-	-	642	1,323	1,965	157	193	350	-	-	-	-	-	-
College of Engineering:	516	0	516	2,517	0	2,517	322	0	322	173	0	173	105	0	105
Department of Civil Engineering	-	-	-	282	0	282	69	0	69	-	-	-	-	-	-
Department of Petroleum Engineering	-	-	-	177	0	177	15	0	15	-	-	-	-	-	-
King Saud University	6,784	3467	10,251	29,790	17,328	47,118	4,462	2,658	7,120	1,973	639	2,612	3,936	2,590	6,526
Saudi Higher Education	38,817	46726	85,543	143,958	155,498	299,456	16,414	19,103	35,517	11,677	5,701	17,378	-	-	14,541

\* Based on data in official Saudi documents (KSU, 2000; KSA, 2000a and b).

-Data is not available or is not complete.

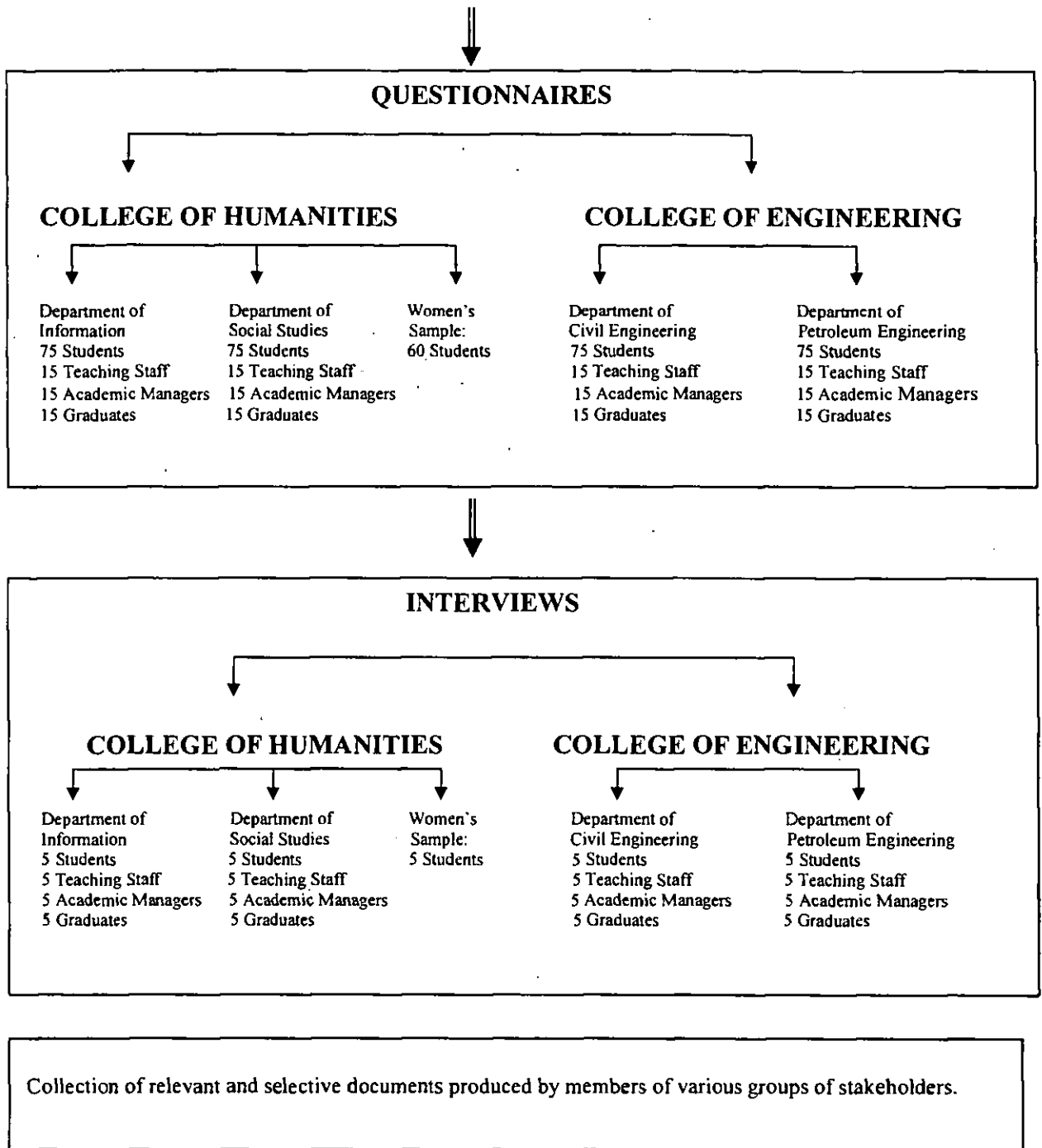
The researcher considered this population heterogeneous as a whole but each of its sub-populations (stakeholder groups) as homogeneous (Al-Ajmi and Frame, 2000). He proceeded to select samples for both the questionnaires and interviews, in accordance with the plan outlined in Table 5.5. The types and characteristics of these samples, as well as of the documents will be detailed in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

### **5.5.3 Sampling for the Questionnaires**

For the questionnaire studies of all the five groups of respondents, the researcher employed the method of random sampling (Eisner, 1991; Thomas, 1993; Ross and Rust, 1997). That is to say, each member of the targeted population was given an equal probability of being selected for inclusion in the sample of its respective sub-population. However, with respect to students, only those who were in their 4<sup>th</sup> year were included. This decision was made on the assumption that undergraduate students in their final year of study are expected to be more aware of the issues of curriculum quality and graduates' employability.

The researcher initiated the sampling process by presenting a formal letter from the Secretary-General of the Saudi Higher Education Council to the Deans of the Colleges of Humanities and Engineering. The latter two officials then informed their relevant departments to cooperate with the researcher in every possible way. All the departments gave the researcher access to their lists of undergraduate students and employees (academics and managers), to select from them the random samples of respondents for the questionnaire studies. They further helped the researcher by making recommendations about who to approach as key informants or interviewees.

# King Saud University



**Table 5.5:** An outline of the sampling procedures adopted in the present study

The graduate sample consisted of respondents, many of whom had graduated less than five years ago.

Although 540 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the participants, the number returned completed was 405, making an overall response rate of about 75%, which is regarded as very good in comparison with average rates obtained in England and most other western countries (Meier, 1991). Babbie (1998) is of the opinion that a response rate of 50% for a questionnaire study in the context of social sciences is “adequate”, 60% is “good”, and 70% is “very good”.

Table 5.6 summarises the process of distribution of the questionnaires to various groups of respondents or stakeholders, their returns and respective response rates. When these response rates are compared to relevant Saudi data, it appears that Saegh *et al* (1995) obtained a significantly lower rate for students (69.8%) and a significantly higher rate for teaching staff (78.7%); whereas al-Kahtani (1998b) obtained a slightly higher rate for students (86.9%) and a significantly higher rate for academic managers (88.2%). Nevertheless, the response rate in both cases was considered adequate to execute the study.

It is perhaps worth recalling that for all groups of respondents involved, the questionnaire was considered the main research method employed in the present study. The following two sections of this chapter are intended to debate the sampling process adopted for the qualitative methods, namely, the interviews and study of documentary sources.



**Table 5.6:** Distribution of the study questionnaires, their return and response rates

Stakeholders Institutions	Male students			Female students <sup>a</sup>			Graduates			Teaching staff			Academic managers <sup>b</sup>		
	Distribution	Return	Response (%)	Distribution	Return	Response (%)	Distribution	Return	Response (%)	Distribution	Return	Response (%)	Distribution	Return	Response (%)
Dept. 1 <sup>c</sup>	75	69	92.0				15	13	86.7	15	11	73.3			
Dept.2 <sup>d</sup>	75	65	86.7				15	14	93.3	15	9	60.0			
Dept.3 <sup>e</sup>	75	56	74.7				15	9	60.0	15	9	60.0			
Dept.4 <sup>f</sup>	75	64	85.3				15	9	60.0	15	8	53.3			
Total	300	254	84.7	60	38	63.3	60	45	75.0	60	37	61.7	60	31	51.7

<sup>a</sup> From various departments of the College of Humanities/King Saud University

<sup>b</sup> From various departments and offices of King Saud University

<sup>c</sup> Department of Information/College of Humanities/King Saud University

<sup>d</sup> Department of Social Studies/College of Humanities/King Saud University

<sup>e</sup> Department of Civil Engineering/College of Engineering/King Saud University

<sup>f</sup> Department of Petroleum Engineering/College of Engineering/King Saud University

#### 5.5.4 Sampling for the Interviews

Despite criticism, especially because of problems of validity and reliability, which may be encountered in finding representative samples of interviewees (Brannen, 1992; Weiss, 1994; Seale, 1998b), many researchers in social sciences (Oppenheim, 1992; Denscombe, 1998; Keats, 2000) believe that the results obtained through interviewing properly chosen informants tend to complement the results of questionnaires and thereby reinforce them. Thus, although the researcher felt that the range of close- and open-ended questions he employed would be enough to cover all the issues under investigation, he decided to make use of qualitative interviews in the hope of achieving better explanations of some of these issues.

For the interviews, the researcher adopted a sampling procedure, which can best be described as “purposive” or “selective” (Patten, 1990; Heriot, 1991; Cohen *et al*, 2000). That is to say, a non-probability strategy was employed in which the researcher’s prior socio-cultural knowledge of the sub-populations under investigation should enable him to judge them correctly. For example, members were approached without much difficulty and hence those respondents who could best meet the requirements of “key informants” and thereby the needs of his study were selected. Kent (2001) acknowledged the usefulness of such a selective sampling strategy, and as he put it:

“Purposive samples are generated when the selection of units is made by the researcher using his or her own judgement. The selection may be made on the basis of contacting those units that are easiest to access, those that are deemed to be the most important, those that reflect a variety or extremes, or those that are typical” (p. 139).

It is a widely accepted idea among many of today's researchers, such as Finch and Manson (1990), Marshall and Rossman (1995), Robson (1997) and Anderson (1998), that what the majority of the qualitative studies really require is not a sample in its very strict sense but what could be better termed a "panel". The characteristics of the qualitative interviewing panel have been well determined in the relevant literature (Babbie, 1990, 1998; Sarantakos, 1998; Keats, 2000). Weiss (1994), for example, defined the interview panel by saying that it is composed of:

"People who are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event" (p.17).

The above notion of qualitative interview sampling, which was adopted by the researcher, clearly suggests that it is reasonable to rely on key informants. It is such purposefully selected respondents who are expected to have a greater reputation in the research issues and, therefore, they can possibly provide the researcher with higher quality answers to some of his questions. On the other hand, many researchers, such as Foddy (1993), Rosenfield *et al* (1993), Strauss and Corbin (1998), and Silverman (2000), believe that the trustworthiness of the data obtained by the above non-probability approach should significantly improve by coupling it with that of a probability design such as random sampling of a questionnaire. This implies that a researcher of a qualitative fieldwork study (Delamont, 1992; Wolcott, 1995; Becker, 1998) must always have to hand sound evidence which allows him to claim that the views or other statements of the key informants are actually closely relevant to those of the targeted population or its pertinent sub-populations as a whole.

In conjunction with the use of questionnaires, the researcher obtained official permission to carry out all the interviews needed to complete his study. However, on several occasions he had to depend on his personal contacts to gain the confidence of the interviewees, especially among members of the more junior groups of stakeholders. In other words, establishing an appropriate atmosphere for free talk was essential in securing successful interviews (Briggs, 1986; Alasuntari, 1995; Kvale, 1996). Cohen *et al* (2000) pinpoint the interview procedure for achieving this goal:

“There is the need to address the cognitive aspect of the interview, ensuring that the interviewer is sufficiently knowledgeable about the subject matter that she or he can conduct the interview in an informal manner, and that the interviewee does not feel threatened by lack of knowledge” (p.279).

Thus, the researcher soon realised that it would be more convenient if his meetings with some interviewees were arranged by a senior member of either the managerial or teaching staff. Moreover, some of the interviewees were relieved when they received an assurance from the researcher that their privacy would be totally respected, for example, through informed consent, guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity (Bailey, 1988; Homan, 1991; Procter and Radfield, 1998). Trust was particularly required when the researcher asked interviewees for permission to use a cassette recorder (LeCompte *et al*, 1992; Kvale, 1996). Such a device is very helpful in the effort to obtain richer data. Besides, recording should help to overcome the problem inherent in much research through the propensity of interviewers not to transcribe every statement given by the interviewees, leading to the possibility of data reduction, distortion or even loss.

Unfortunately, only a few interviewees agreed to be recorded. Others suggested that they were ready to talk “off the record” slowly enough to enable the researcher to

write down their answers. The vast majority of interviewees chose to conduct the interviews in Arabic, although graduates of Western universities tended to incorporate some English terms within their answers.

Perhaps it is also important to remark that the on no occasion did the researcher either resort to intentional deception, or exert influence on his interviewees (Procter and Radfield, 1998). For instance, in order to promote trustworthiness and confidentiality with interviewees there was no use made of “red herrings”, which involve the introduction of irrelevant matters to distract attention from the real issue being discussed (Baumrind, 1985).

All the interviews in the present study were carried out after the questionnaires were distributed and returned. The reason for this was that the researcher would then have some idea about the responses of different groups of stakeholders and, therefore, be able to focus on the most crucial questions of the research, during the interview sessions. In order to overcome the obstacle of spending a very long time in interviewing the respondents (Denzin, 1989; Edonborough, 1996; Arksey and Knight, 1999), the researcher arranged the schedules of interviews beforehand. Furthermore, he interviewed the students and most of the graduates in 5-person discussion groups, so that only the teaching staff and academic managers were left for individual discussions. By the end of his fieldwork study, the researcher managed to conduct 50 interviews (see Table 5.5).

The researcher certainly felt that through the completion of face-to-face interviews with selected key informants, either as individuals or in small groups, he was successful in winning the trust of many of them. Their opinions should help to find

the best from the data in order to answer certain research questions, for example, those related to the definition of curriculum quality in higher education, development of employability of Saudi graduates and the link between the two themes.

### **5.5.5 Sampling for the Documents**

The researcher's decision to carry out his fieldwork study in the context of the Saudi higher education system gave him an opportunity to utilise documents from his own culture in addition to international sources. However, despite the fact that documents in this case, as in many other cases throughout the world (see 4.5), are factual material, are almost always available and, indeed, constitute the most common data source, they are often produced for a particular goal or purpose (Hodder, 1994; Jupp, 1996; Gill and Johnson, 1997). That is to say, regardless of their content and appearance, documents may be unrepresentative of their type, be of unknown validity and possibly even deliberately deceptive and, therefore, be a cause for confusion to those who have a different idea in mind than what the documentary data alone may suggest. The unsuitability of many documents for research purposes and hence the difficulty to work with them because of certain limitations inherent in their production was underlined by Bailey (1982). He relates:

“Documents are generally written in words rather than numbers and are quite difficult to quantify. Thus analysis of them is similar to analysis of open-ended survey questions or of observational field notes” (p.306).

Denscombe (1998) also warns researchers about the fact that many available documents are actually partial with respect to what they report about overall events. That is, they may emphasise certain things and neglect others. Thus, he points out that:

“Publicly available records reflect upon matters in a way that is publicly acceptable at a given time and in a given social sphere. They tend to offer a version of reality massaged to meet public expectations” (p. 162).

Nonetheless, several types of documents are still widely used in social science researches and a considerable number of them are regarded as valuable sources of information. Indeed, several researchers, such as Finnegan (1996), Atkinson and Coffey (1997), Anderson (1998), and Cohen *et al* (2000), suggest that some documents may help in achieving an insight into the main research topics by means of providing important data from alternative sources. Thus, the study of documents may contribute to assessing the validity of findings obtained by other methods, such as those which depend on asking questions (questionnaires and interviews) as well as those discerning activities and behaviours (observations and meetings), providing that there is an adequate awareness about the condition of documents' preparation and the limitations inherent in depending on their data. No doubt, the strongest arguments in favour of using documents arise from their usefulness in exploitation of past events and issues in present-day research, for example, as the researcher has done in Tables 5.1 – 5.4. Thus, for example, in Sarantakos' (1998) opinion:

“Despite their limitations, documentary methods are a very useful tool of social research and an indispensable one, particularly when the research is focused on events of the past. In such cases documentary methods are the only way of collecting data on this issue. This is one of the reasons why documentary methods are relatively popular in social sciences” (p.277).

As far as the collection and study of the Saudi and other countries' documents is concerned, the researcher basically employed this method of research with the aim of adding further relevant information to what he had already gathered by means of the

two other methods. But, of course, one should bear in mind that while the collection of information through both the questionnaires and interviews only happens by way of creating a response from groups of participants towards a specific set of questions (Oppenheim, 1992; Foddy, 1993; Peterson, 2000), in the case of documents the researcher's task is merely to look along certain pre-defined lines for the relevant pieces of information (Platt, 1981; Scott, 1990; Jupp, 1996). That is why the researcher was very careful in selecting documents for inclusion in his thesis from a huge number of such sources. For example, he had to be absolutely sure about published information, especially with respect to such things as the authority and producer of the document, and to consider that as a prerequisite or obligation for its inclusion in the study (Van Maanen 1988; Al-Medlej, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

It was possible for the researcher to carry out a survey of the bulk of the literature pertinent to Saudi higher education, at least for the last three decades. This task enabled him to collect several documents generally relevant to the research topics of his study. The majority of these documents could be described as research-based written sources, that is, being in the form of original research articles published in scientific journals or in the proceedings of professional conferences. Others are unpublished theses, published books and manuals related to various aspects of Saudi higher education, but which may include some information that reflects on government policy and the evaluation of research projects in the context of higher education. Also included are some Saudi pamphlets and reports, often prepared by official bodies or committees of specialists on certain issues of national interest. The list of references for this thesis reveals that a considerable number of Saudi documents were originally prepared in Arabic.



The limit of usefulness of the data content of the Saudi documents of the types described above may be tentatively judged, for instance, since they enabled the researcher to construct an up-to-date statistical model of the Saudi higher education population and sub-populations, in general, and those of King Saud University, in particular (see 5.5.2). Such statistics and the parameters derived from them were found to be very helpful as a background against which the specific results of the present study on curriculum quality in higher education and employability development of graduates could be systematically presented and discussed and worthwhile recommendations formulated.

To sum up, it is possible to say that the study of documentary sources during the course of the present work helped to provide a framework for the researcher's project. This task was found to be directly related to the other two research methods employed in two different ways:

1. It constituted a starting point for particular pieces of information to be focused upon more systematically and specifically using other methods.
2. It served to confirm, or otherwise disconfirm, some of the data generated by the other methods.

## **5.6. Data Management and Retrieval**

Following the previous steps of planning the methodological strategies and piloting and assessing them, the researcher proceeded to the step of actual action. It was during this latter step that the methods were systematically employed in the study setting. For instance, the samples of respondents and key informants were approached and

eventually the data required, in the form of answers to the research questions, was gathered.

The management and retrieval of data in the field of social science researches are often carried out according to the nature of the method employed (Maynard and Clayman, 1991; Wolfe, 1992; Verma and Mallick, 1999). However, they are, without exception, tedious processes which demand a laborious undertaking, mainly because of the length of time they take and the effort devoted to them in order for them to be adequately accomplished. However, it has been suggested by several researchers, such as Fetterman (1991), Miles and Huberman (1994), Mason (1996) and Silverman (2000), that these processes are almost always as important in qualitative studies as they are in quantitative ones. For instance, they are very helpful in the analysis of data by means of keeping track of it, as well as permitting a systematically manageable and reliable use of it in the subsequent steps of the research.

The researcher facilitated the retrieval of the data he gathered through the questionnaires, interviews and study of documentary sources by managing it in the best possible way. This particular process is obviously a subjective one and is familiar to many researchers in social science disciplines (Sayer, 1992; Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995; Emerson *et al*, 1995; Seale, 1998a) since it involves such things as labelling of all field notes, cassette tapes and documents; dating and pagination of all notebooks and interview conversations; cleaning, categorising and indexing or coding of all data sources; organising topic headings and filing.

Managing the data in a transparent manner also demanded that the researcher sort out the large amount of data collected from different groups of respondents and

key informants, for example, so that “like is with like” as far as possible (Carspecken, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1997; Brause, 2000). The researcher also took the advice of some researchers, such as Strauss and Corbin (1998), Taylor (1998) and Cohen *et al* (2000) to further improve data management by writing “memos” for himself, for instance, about such things as the descriptive and numerical data, as well as duplicate information, in case something needed to be indexed under more than one heading.

Notes and memos were also made by the researcher regarding methodological problems encountered in the course of his study. Furthermore, interesting ideas among the questionnaire answers by the respondents, and particularly their assumptions about the existence of possible relationships or patterns, were noted (Keeves, 1997; Cohen *et al*, 2000). The same procedure was applied to the quotations transcribed and translated from relevant verbal data gathered in the course of interview sessions with the study’s informants.

Retrieval of data was mainly facilitated by the categorisation of all the information relevant to particular research issues; that is to say, the indexing done under the same codes or headings during the data management step (Bryman and Cramer, 1990; Patton, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). This perhaps implies that retrieval should initiate the investigation of the relationships or patterns between the results obtained by the researcher (Seale, 1998a; Kent, 2001). For example, in the case of the present study, the sets of data belonging to the sub-populations of stakeholders, represented by teaching staff, students, graduates and managerial staff, were prepared for further examination and comparison.

It is a generally held belief among social science researchers that contextual knowledge and awareness are very important issues in a deep understanding of the cultures, attitudes and opinions of the stakeholder groups from which samples of respondents are to be drawn (Hofstede *et al*, 1990; Ellis, 1996; Lucas, 1997; Seale, 1998b). It is worth noting that this belief is also embraced by many Saudi researchers who look forward to seeing a variety of up-to-date ideas steadily incorporated into the teaching, learning and research processes of their national institutions (Al-Karni, 1990; Alghafis, 1992; Al-Ansari, 1995; Saegh *et al*, 1995; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999), for example, to ensure a high standard of education and employment (Al-Jabr, 1994; Al-Kahtani, 1998a and b; Kamel, 1998; Saegh, 1999). This situation signifies that culturally-orientated familiarity has already materialised as an indispensable factor to acquaint the researcher with a particular case and hence is a prerequisite for a successful fieldwork study. For example, according to Arksey and Knight (1999) it helps to illuminate various aspects of the problem under investigation. Therefore:

“This is a useful check on becoming too close to the data, with the result that you can overlook certain aspects of the evidence, as well as a check on the general plausibility of the interpretation” (p.169).

Thus, while always keeping in mind the goals of his study when working with the data obtained (Peters, 1995; Anderson and Poole, 1994; Corbin and Strauss, 1996), the researcher found it useful, even at this early stage of data correlation and analysis, to share certain interpretations with others. His supervisors and colleagues, who are experts on certain educational themes, as well as some respondents and key informants, were all helpful at different levels.

## 5.7 Data Analysis

Most of the fieldwork data gathered by the researcher was in the form of raw material (Denscombe, 1998; Sapsford, 1999; Cohen *et al*, 2000). It was usually expressed either in notation on the questionnaire response sheets, in comments made in response to open-ended questions, in notebooks of transcribed material relevant to interview sessions or in documentary scripts. Such data needed to be translated and afterwards to be carefully processed, that is, subjected to reduction, display, interpretation and conversion into meaningful statements in view of the research themes. Many researchers, such as Swift (1996), Cramer (1997,1998), Silverman (2000), Balnaves and Caputi (2001) and Kent (2001) consider this collective task a necessary part or prerequisite for successful “data analysis”.

It is clear that the best way to make sense out of a set of social-science fieldwork data during its groundwork analysis is to identify among its content any interesting trends, patterns and relationships (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1997,1998; Redman, 2001). But, of course, this step is usually bound to follow an important one in which the response notation, comments and transcriptions, as well as any interesting scripts, will need to be elaborated into purposeful propositions. That is to say, the original information must be developed into a form that will best disclose the actual meanings hidden behind the lines and paragraphs. Thus, for instance, the researcher looked at the interesting propositions suggested by his fieldwork data as preliminary conclusions which helped him to reveal what was going on in the case of his study. Eventually, such conclusions are also bound to help confirm, or otherwise disconfirm, the validity of the data generated by different research methods and hence should contribute to the process of answering the study questions.

The researcher aimed to fulfil the requirement of a social research by employing mixed quantitative and qualitative methods (triangulation), for instance, for the sake of formulating the propositions suggested by the fieldwork data in the best possible way (Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991; Hannerz, 1992; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Accordingly, a quantitative mode of analysis was mainly used for the responses obtained to the close-ended questions, whereas a qualitative mode was used to analyse the responses obtained to open-ended questions and most of the data generated both through the interviews and the study of relevant documents. In the end, however, the researcher, in many cases, had to rely on an interplay between quantitative and qualitative results in order to theorise his ideas in a common-sense way.

The analysis of the quantitative data was carried out using a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Healey, 1997; Green, 2000; Bryman and Cramer, 2002). Initially, the researcher made use of the facilities available at the Computer Centre in the city of Riyadh, belonging to King Saud University. The answers included in every returned copy of the questionnaire were entered digitally. The computer was then commanded to tell the researcher about such basic things as the total response among all the participants in the study and the overall response for each group of participants in every department of the collegiate settings under investigation. The questionnaire data was also analysed, as required, in terms of such statistical parameters as the arithmetical average (mean), frequency distribution, standard deviation, and test for the significance level or probability of error. These latter steps were performed at Middlesex University.

The SPSS programme to which the quantitative data of the questionnaire were subjected in the way described above was certainly a productive one. For example, it

enabled the researcher to evaluate and display the data in a very useful fashion (Wainer, 1992; Murdoch and Barnes, 1999; Pure, 2002). Thus, several tables and figures were constructed which expedited all the matters relevant to the process of data interpretation and selection of themes for discussion.

In order to test the reliability and validity of the quantitative data statistically, on many occasions the researcher relied on the level of significance (Calder, 1996; Boruch, 1997; Howell, 1998). This method employs a special mathematical formula in order to provide the tabulated columns of data with the degree of acceptance or chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) scores. In the case of the present study, the observed  $\chi^2$  values were of the order of  $<0.01$  or  $<0.05$ . These values are well within the expected range commonly employed in the field of social sciences (Sarantakos, 1998; Seale, 1998a; Cohen *et al*, 2000). The literal meaning of this is that there was a 1%–5% probability of not accepting the data as authentically true findings (Abelson, 1995; Cramer, 1997,1998; Kent, 2001). That is to say, if the researcher was to randomly ask a number of participants from the same group of stakeholders a particular question or sub-question, a difference as great as that at the 0.01 level would occur by chance only once in 100 participants and only once in 20 participants for the 0.05 level.

Concluding from the discussions presented in Chapter 4, and especially if compared with the quantitative data, the analysis of data obtained by the best of the qualitative methods is not always an easy task to achieve. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence from various social research studies which confirms the validity of using such methods (De Vaus, 1996; Strauss and Corbin, 1997,1998; Lee, 1999; Silverman, 2000). Thus, for example, Brewerton and Millward (2001) recognise that the use of qualitative methods is acceptable insofar as:

“The scientist-practitioner who ‘grounds’ his or her theories or models of organizational life in interpretative or experiential data is operating fundamentally within the qualitative paradigm. This does not invalidate the process or render it less ‘scientific’. Equally the researcher in a more formal sense need not necessarily operate within the quantitative paradigm. He or she can potentially draw on a whole range of different techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, in addressing the issues of interest” (p.12-13).

The researcher decided not to subject the sets of qualitative data of his study to the burden of a complex mathematical analysis, especially in view of the relatively small samples employed. However, this did not undermine his belief that whenever there was agreement between the quantitative and qualitative data it tended to increase the reliability and validity of the results obtained. That is to say, such results were not by any means of the kind that can be attributed to artefact production, whether that be due to sampling errors (Wolcott, 1990; Wilson and McLean, 1994; Ross and Wilson, 1997) or other types of errors associated with the research methods or procedures employed.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

The researcher’s purpose throughout this chapter was to describe his fieldwork in such a way as to show that he aimed to generate meaningful data to cover all the themes of the project under investigation. This, he believes, has been achieved in looking at the planning and execution of the quantitative and qualitative methods, their logical combination to fit the objectives of the study, the common sense sampling procedures adapted to the circumstances of the Saudi higher education population and its sub-populations (stakeholders), the sample sizes required to reliably assess the responses of the participants and key informants towards the full-range questionnaire inquiry and interview schedule, as well as in testing the validity of the results obtained whenever it was felt necessary to do so by the application of appropriate statistics and, in some



cases, just by depending on the enforced evidence produced by the triangulation approach and data interplay.

The scarcity of published data pertinent to the issue of curriculum quality in higher education and development of graduates' employability in Saudi Arabia was influential in establishing the direction of the present study in such a way that it relied heavily upon data coming directly from original sources. Thus, in order to bring about an implicit understanding of a particular issue while carrying out the fieldwork, a close acquaintance with the study setting was essential. For instance, the researcher, in addition to his effort and time spent in selecting and systematically employing the three methods of research, as shown in this chapter, and in the light of the general principles, advantages and limitations detailed in the previous chapter, also devoted a lot of effort and time to travelling more than once from the United Kingdom to Saudi Arabia to collect relevant documents, attend meetings and conferences, as well as to have discussions with Saudi educational experts.

It is further possible to say that the researcher during his pilot and real fieldwork studies managed to accomplish the state of knowing what he was looking for in the relevant sites of the setting under investigation. Such familiarity, which comprises both general awareness and specific knowledge, is undoubtedly required beforehand in many socio-cultural studies. This aspect of research is receiving a great deal of attention in the West, particularly in connection with the researcher's active role and hence being a "participant observer", "experiencer" and "interpreter" (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Waddington, 1994; Foster, 1996; Denscombe, 1998). This confirms the fact that the researcher of a particular higher education institution is bound to become a better knower, observer and interpreter as a direct result of his or her

participation; that is to say, through gaining access to and an understanding of what the totality of experiences and practices of the research setting feels like. Thus, for example, the researcher should know the structures of the sites under investigation (Burgess, 1988, 1990; Becher and Kogan, 1992; Keeves, 1997), the day-to-day activities and interaction witnessed in the context of each of them (Bales, 1999; Cohen *et al*, 2000; Silverman, 2000) and the problems that are encountered by various groups of their stakeholders (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1997, 1998; Sarantakos, 1998). In addition, all of these should have an indispensable impact on the development of the researcher's awareness and speculation.

Besides tackling the description of two pilot studies, the selection of the research setting and sites, the issue of representatives, and application of the quantitative and qualitative methods in the course of the fieldwork, the researcher underlined in this chapter the procedures he followed for the management of the raw material he obtained, its retrieval and its analysis.

The main reasons the researcher engaged himself in a long process of designing and developing the quantitative method (the questionnaires) through two rounds of pilot studies were:

1. For the sake of making this method as comprehensible as required by the research themes; for example, suitable for use in the real study of the Saudi higher education system in the light of its unique social, cultural and religio-philosophical characteristics.
2. To facilitate the task of using other methods (interviews and study of documentary sources), for example, by means of focusing attention on certain issues more than

others. Thus, eventually, the complementary combination and interplay of the results of all three methods should work in favour of validating the data and answering the research questions in the way the researcher planned originally in the aims and objectives of his project.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**QUALITY IN THE SAUDI HIGHER**  
**EDUCATION SYSTEM**

## 6.I Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to deal with the results of the fieldwork analysis of quality in the Saudi higher education system together with an interpretation of the relevant data obtained. The following sections present successive accounts of the meaning of quality in higher education, how it is influenced by various factors, the opinions of study participants regarding quality at departmental level, the impact of teaching methods on it, and its assessment. At the end of the chapter conclusions will be drawn.

The justification for following the procedures used to produce the data for this study is provided in the following paragraphs. Such data was generated and gathered through a combination of questionnaire, interviews and the study of documentary material. The subjects of the study were undergraduate students (both male and female), graduates, teaching staff and academic managers. Samples of these stakeholders were drawn from the respective sub-populations of King Saud University (see 5.5).

It has already been shown in the previous chapter (see Table 5.6) that the response rate for the questionnaire method was over 75% for male students and graduates. The rate for female students and teaching staff was around 67%, while it was just over 50% for academic managers.

It was also mentioned in the previous chapter that no significant inter-collegiate or inter-departmental differences were noticed in the responses of stakeholders. Detailed analysis of the fieldwork data strongly supports this observation. The breakdown of the results for the male student sample in question no.5 of the main questionnaire inquiry serves as an example. The association of responses with the

different departments is analysed using the chi-square test. The outcome is shown in Table 6.1

**Table 6.1:** Chi-square test between the four departments of the study

Expected counts are printed below observed counts

Category of response	Dept1	Dept2	Dept3	Dept4	Total
<b>Examination results</b>	13 14.07	17 13.25	11 11.01	12 14.68	53
<b>Questionnaire</b>	9 8.49	7 8.00	5 6.65	11 8.86	32
<b>Employment rate of graduates</b>	6 8.76	7 8.25	8 6.85	12 9.14	33
<b>Graduate performance at work</b>	27 25.74	23 24.25	21 20.15	26 26.86	97
<b>Graduate further studies</b>	14 11.94	11 11.25	9 9.35	11 12.46	45
<b>Total</b>	69	65	54	72	260
Chi-Sq = 0.081 + 1.061 + 0.000 + 0.488 + 0.030 + 0.125 + 0.408 + 0.516 + 0.868 + 0.189 + 0.192 + 0.896 + 0.061 + 0.064 + 0.036 + 0.028 + 0.355 + 0.006 + 0.013 + 0.171 = 5.589 DF = 12, P-Value = 0.935					

Department 1: Department of Information, College of Humanities

Department 2: Department of Social Studies, College of Humanities

Department 3: Department of Civil Engineering, College of Engineering

Department 4: Department of Petroleum Engineering, College of Engineering

The null hypothesis that “there is no association between the responses of male students as to how best to determine that students benefit from the undergraduate courses offered by the different departments in which they study” is accepted. This is equally applicable to other stakeholder groups despite the fact that their sample sizes are smaller.

Consequently, the analysis in this chapter, as well as in the subsequent two chapters, concerns itself with the collective data for all four departments and in respect to different groups of stakeholders employed in the study.

It is a well documented fact that the analysis of results pertinent to a particular piece of social or educational science research often depends on the nature of the specific method employed for this purpose (Cohen, 1988; Agresti and Findlay, 1997; Cramer, 1998; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001). Thus, the breakdown of the quantitative results was statistically derived from the participants' responses to the close-ended questions within the domain of the main questionnaire inquiry. The outcome of this breakdown is treated as the principal data of the study. In other words, the outcome of the qualitative methods (interviewing of informants and study of relevant documents) is generally intended to be complementary to the quantitative one, instead of being a substitute for it.

The analysis, interpretation and discussion of the results obtained by the researcher during the course of the fieldwork study are divided into three chapters (6,7 and 8) according to the nature and purpose of the questions employed in each part of the inquiry. Each of these chapters is supported by tables, figures or charts, as well as any relevant documentary transcripts. The present chapter mainly concerns itself with the first part of the fieldwork results while many issues are more thoroughly discussed and reflected upon in the last of these chapters (Chapter 8), where the scope of the participants' responses in relation to the topics of the research becomes more discernible. Chapter 9 presents an appraisal conclusion on the overall findings of the thesis.

## 6.2 What is Quality in Higher Education?

Respondents from the five groups of Saudi stakeholders studied were asked (question no.1) to rank what quality in the context of higher education means to them. Table 6.2 shows that all of them, with the exception of female students, ranked “the level of qualification achieved” as the most important issue. Females thought that the educational quality is primarily about “the students’ effectiveness in the learning environment.”

The idea that quality in higher education is about “the efficiency of the education system” is the option ranked second highest by respondents. Quality in higher education being about “the students’ effectiveness in the learning environment” ranks as the third most important idea, except among female students, as mentioned above. The breakdown of the top three rankings of what quality in higher education is about, and hence what can possibly measure it, is also shown in Table 6.2.

Some interesting results regarding the meaning of quality in the context of the Saudi higher education system were also obtained through the use of the two qualitative methods. A series of interview meetings, in particular, was found to be very useful in providing the researcher with face-to-face experience with the participant subjects, facilitating close examination of their opinions on some important aspects of the study. In some cases, the data obtained were not discernible through the quantitative data analysis, so the qualitative presentation as a whole is aimed at strengthening insight into the differences and similarities between the stakeholders groups regarding their understanding of the term “quality”.



**Table 6.2: Percentage figures for respondents' top three ranking ideas of what quality in higher education is about**

Idea	Ranking by male students			Ranking by female students			Ranking by graduates			Ranking by teaching staff			Ranking by academic managers		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
a	36	17	10	21	37	16	55	14	16	53	25	5	50	19	10
b	7	20	11	8	5	13	2	27	2	8	17	11	10	26	3
c	21	18	25	29	11	21	12	23	23	14	19	16	13	6	24
d	16	15	22	24	18	26	14	19	16	14	14	22	27	29	14
e	9	18	17	13	26	8	7	5	19	3	14	38	0	13	38
f	11	12	15	5	3	16	10	11	12	8	11	8	0	6	10

- Key:
- a Quality is about "the level of qualification achieved"
  - b Quality is about "the standard of student grade achieved"
  - c Quality is about "the student effectiveness in the learning environment"
  - d Quality is about "the efficiency of the education system"
  - e Quality is about "the performance of teaching staff"
  - f Quality is about "the employability of graduates"

Regardless of their groups, all the interviewees expressed views about the importance of educational quality and verified the reliability of the questionnaire responses. It is possible to say that the range of variation among the participants' responses regarding the meaning of quality in the context of Saudi higher education reflects their perceptions about the relative significance of the various facets of quality presented to them. However, the difference between female students in the questionnaire and interview groups is striking, much more so than in the other groups of respondents. From the researcher's recollection of the interview deliberations it appears that such a difference may be attributed to the distinction between the education provision for the two sexes, as well as the limitations imposed by Saudi tradition on the female gender, in particular. However, further confirmation is required

through the participants' responses. before this issue is thoroughly discussed and brought to a conclusion in the light of all the possibilities.

The data included in this section also indicates that the junior groups of respondents (students and graduates) tend to rank quality as being virtually equivalent to "the level of qualification achieved". This is lower than the ranking suggested for it by the mature groups (teaching staff and academic managers), possibly due to the existence of a difference among these groups in valuing the academic qualification offered by the Saudi universities in view of their actual experience.

It is also interesting to note from the data that some responses, contrary to that mentioned above, were expressed by junior/mature groups in relation to the two ideas that quality is about "the employability of graduates" and "the performance of teaching staff." This evidence perhaps suggests that the overwhelming priority for Saudi students at the present time is the development of their employability through the instruction and guidance of their tutors/managers, rather than total quality in higher education as such.

On the other hand, the study groups of stakeholders tended to attribute the cause or origin of any difference regarding the meaning and implication of quality in higher education between the Saudi and the Western models to the idiosyncrasies of the two cultures. This is, perhaps, a reflection of the fact that such differences are apparent beyond doubt in certain fields of human activity, such as management (Al-Meer, 1996; Wilkins, 2001a), business (Al-Mubarak, 1998; Kavoossi, 1995), political-economy (Al-Khafaji, 1994; Choudhury and Al-Sakran, 2001) and the use of information and educational technology (Addawood, 1990; Ahmed and Donnan, 1994).

The researcher asked the interviewees to describe to him in what way Saudis and other Arabs differ from Westerners in their perception of quality. Their answers varied, perhaps beginning with a definition, followed by a development pattern and, finally, an evaluation or assessment outlook.

Students of both sexes, more than other groups of interviewees, appeared not to be acquainted with the exact meaning of quality in higher education. They thought that quality in this context could be regarded as comparable to any one of the options discussed in reference to the question under investigation in this section. For example, a group of them said to the researcher:

“We are really mixed up. This terminology is completely new to us. Therefore, we are unable to distinguish which one of the statements provided in your question describes precisely the idea of quality in the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia.”

There is, of course, a possibility that such an attitude shown by some participants towards the meaning of quality complies with the general belief that people have a tendency to answer questions presented to them sometimes without understanding the full scope of the issue(s) under investigation.

A considerable number of graduates agreed more or less with what was expressed by students regarding the meaning of educational quality. A group of them remarked that:

“Unquestionably, any systematic educational activity that helps a graduate to get a suitable job as soon as possible after completing his or her university programme has something to do with the quality in this context. In other words, both the quality of this performance and its relative importance are inseparable parts of the whole process directed towards building up the graduate.”

Furthermore, some of the graduate participants commented on the Saudi public understanding that the term “quality” corresponds to the Arabic word “jāwdā” which denotes “goodness” or “good”. They perceived quality as a kind of measure across a wide range of academic activities, and often expressed it as being “good” or “poor”. Hence, in our community there is common use of such phraseology as “good quality”, “medium quality” and “poor quality.”

However, some members of the senior groups of interviewees (teaching and managerial) did not agree precisely with either the students’ or the graduates’ understanding of the term “quality”. Their opinions may be exemplified by the following statement expressed by one of them:

“Quality is not strictly equivalent to the Arabic word ‘jāwdā.’ It is likely that the term ‘nāwāiyyā’ fits its meaning as well, if not better. Quality in the context of higher education specifically aims at preparing the students scientifically and morally in order to be transferred successfully to the field of work.”

The researcher consulted the relevant literature on this seemingly controversial issue and arrived at some interesting conclusions on the subtle differences in the Arabic-English meanings of quality. For example, successive Saudi Development Plans have almost always equated “quality” with “nāwāiyyā” (KSA, 1990-2001), but a reference book, which was recently translated from English into Arabic by two members of the teaching staff in the College of Education, King Saud University, specifically equates the term “quality” with “jāwdā” (Freedman, 1987). Another Saudi book on higher education (Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999) designates to “quality” both the Arabic terms “nāwāiyyā” and “jāwdā”. A similar meaning of quality exists in many other Arabian publications (Abdel-Daām, 1983; Al-Tall, 1993; Madkour, 1998; Al-

Lakani and Al-jamal, 1999). In fact, some other sources use the two terms in combination, that is, “jāwdāt al-nāwāiyyā” (ALESCO, 2000). Finally, Hamdan (1984) equates “quality” with “efficiency” (Kifayā); Jalal (1993) believes that “quality” (jāwdā) matches “effectiveness”; while Flih (1997) sees “quality” as being the same as “standard” in the context of higher education.

Moreover, many of the more specialised sources on Arabic language (Assaran, 1967; Alkhuli, 1981; Baālbaki, 1983; Al-Monjid, 1998), some of which are among the references most used by study participants, uncovered the fact that the former two quality terms mentioned above are widely used by Saudis and indeed by Arabs at large, and that these terms are almost synonymous, if not exchangeable with each other. However, it also appears to the researcher that a similar synonym exists in the English dictionaries (Doniach, 1972, p.1017; Oxford, 1999, pp.602-603). For example, it is interesting to note that both these sources have been translated into Arabic. The latter, lists the meanings of quality and their corresponding translations into Arabic as follows:

1. how good something is: نوعية
2. a high standard or level: مستوي عال, نوعية جيدة

A high level of ambiguity about the meaning of quality in the context of higher education still exists in the West (Green, 1994a; Nordvall and Braxton, 1996; Barnett, 2000, 2003). This issue was debated by Al-Ajmi (1999) in his M.Phil./Ph.D. report.

One should not exclude the possibility that the different meanings of the term quality will not constitute a source of confusion over the development or implication of its processes in the context of higher education. However, while a senior member of the teaching staff, who also has managerial duties, agreed with the remarks that language and culture are expected to have some impact on student education (Hofstede, 1991; Alasuutari, 1995; Seale, 1998a; Barnett, 2003), he reckoned that the essence of quality is the same in higher education institutions throughout the world. He added that:

“If you put together the current ideas about quality in higher education, such as those you named in question no.1 of your main questionnaire inquiry, you should practically approach its real meaning and aspiration. This is true whether the evaluation or assessment of quality takes place in the East or West.”

Among the members of teaching staff who were involved in the interview meetings, perhaps those in the two departments of the College of Humanities, slightly more than their counterparts in the College of Engineering, pointed out that the terminology of the questionnaire in relevance to quality should not be looked upon as a serious problem in Saudi Arabia. For example, Arabic is a language rich in synonymous words (Fatani, 1998; Konjo, 1998). In addition, the dictionaries tend to describe things in general and as they are accepted at the present time and, if the quality issue is really materialising as a new socio-linguistic discrepancy then it is a good idea to research it in a systematic way.

### **6.3 Factors Affecting Educational Quality**

There are many potential factors which may affect quality in Saudi higher education institutions (Saegh *et al*, 1995; Al-Abdulla, 2002; Al-Baker, 2002). The second

research question undertook the task of relating six such factors. These factors are: a. political influence; b. financial constraints; c. academic tradition; d. limited student access; e. managerial influence; and f. employer's influence. A five-point semantic scale, in which +2 was very important and -2 was not very important, was used to analyse the outcome of the data obtained. The average scores for each of the different factors of influence are shown in Table 6.3.

**Table 6.3:** Average scores for factors of influence on the quality of higher education\*

Factor of influence	Male students	Female students	Graduates	Teaching staff	Academic managers
Political influence	0.79 (1.06)	1.3 (0.92)	0.47 (1.24)	0.75 (0.95)	0.73 (1.35)
Financial constraints	0.65 (1.13)	0.34 (1.06)	0.63 (1.18)	0.78 (0.75)	1.04 (0.80)
Academic tradition	0.34 (1.14)	0.89 (0.94)	0.14 (1.11)	1.03 (0.83)	1.04 (0.80)
Limited student access	<b>0.80</b> (1.18)	1.11 (1.04)	<b>0.88</b> (0.95)	<b>1.06</b> (0.91)	0.91 (0.80)
Managerial influence	0.76 (1.05)	<b>1.16</b> (0.78)	0.63 (1.24)	0.56 (1.16)	<b>1.27</b> (1.01)
Employer's influence	0.46 (1.21)	0.66 (1.15)	-0.02 (1.47)	-0.33 (1.13)	-0.36 (1.11)

Figures in brackets are standard deviations.

\* The scores are based on a five point semantic scale:

Very important = 2  
 Important = 1  
 Neutral = 0  
 Not important = -1  
 Not very important = -2

The range of the participants' judgments would suggest lower figures for male students and higher ones for academic managers, with the judgments of other groups lying between these two. It is possible to think of the negative judgments as a

representation of reality experienced by some participants; whereas, the positive judgments are more about the wishes and hopes to accomplish the aimed for quality.

Three groups of stakeholders, namely male students, graduates and teaching staff, considered “limited student access” the most influential factor affecting the quality of higher education in Saudi Arabia. Female students and academic managers considered “managerial influence” the most important factor in this respect. It seems that these two factors operate in close interaction with each other in the context of the Saudi higher education system, as also indicated by other Saudi researchers (Mahdi, 1998; Kanjo, 1998; Al-Ghamdi, 2001).

There was no clear-cut agreement among the stakeholders regarding the second factor in terms of significance. But, it is interesting to note that while academic managers tended to attach equal importance to “financial constraints” and “academic tradition”, graduates attached equal importance to “financial constraints” and “managerial influence”. “Academic tradition” was recognised as the second most important aspect by teaching staff, while in the opinion of female students, “limited student access” was the second most important factor influencing the quality of higher education. “Employer’s influence”, as a factor affecting quality in higher education was not recognised as important by either teaching staff or academic managers, while graduates were indifferent regarding its impact. However, students seemed to attach some importance to “employer’s influence” on quality in the Saudi higher education system.

The results obtained when the qualitative data relevant to the different factors influencing quality in higher education were broken down were similar to those dealt



with in the quantitative part of this section. That is to say, such results clearly suggest that three of the stakeholder groups in Saudi Arabia, namely, male students, graduates and teaching staff show a clear-cut inclination to rank the factor “limited student access” as the most important in influencing the quality of higher education, whereas the other two study groups (female students and academic managers) tend to rank the “managerial factor” as the highest in importance in this respect.

Furthermore, many Saudi researchers, such as Al-Karni(1994, 1999), Alhammad (1995), Husseiny (1997), Al-Kahtani(1998a and b), Al-Medhari (1998) and Khateeb (1999) believe that the massive increase in the number of students entering undergraduate programmes (see 5.5), and hence the strong competition for good quality education, is largely to blame for the impact of the above factors. Al-Hamidi *et al* (1999) in depicting the present situation of the Saudi higher education system and the scale of the problems it is facing, remarked that:

“Despite the expansion of higher education institutions in the Arab World, in general, and some states of the Co-operation Council, in particular, which is exemplified by an increase in the numbers of new students in them, there is still a shortage in the admission of all those who want to continue their studies and for whom there is a social demand after graduation. Besides, such expansion is accompanied neither by an improvement in educational quality nor a significant increase in the number of settings, with the consequence that they are incapable of responding to the social, economic, educational and political needs of Arabic and Gulf societies. It is also not accompanied by the developmental features witnessed by the Arab States in recent years, especially members of the Co-operation Council” (p.5).

The researcher felt that there was no consensus among the interviewees about the second most important factor influencing the quality of higher education. Moreover, no group of interviewees in any of the study departments considered the factor of

“employers” as significantly influential in educational quality. This may be due to the perception of higher education stakeholders that, at the present time, quality in this context is merely an institutional responsibility. However, this is a perception which is plainly seen to be in contrast with the policy of the Saudi government. For example, many of the documents pertinent to the last three Development Plans, such as KSA (1990-2001), strongly encourage direct relations between the universities and community, in general, and industry and the work market, in particular. For example, one of the Fifth Development Plan (1990-1995) initiatives was stated to be:

“Private sector employers will be encouraged to provide higher education students with on-the-job practical training during their summer vacations” (KSA, 1990, p.263).

Also, several specifications are to be found among the strategic policies of the Seventh Development Plan (2000-2004) in order to improve the relationship between universities and the work market, such as:

“Developing the curriculum and programmes in line with the needs and requirements of the labour market, reviewing them on a regular basis and ensuring coordination between higher education institutions and the private sector” (KSA, 2001, p.263).

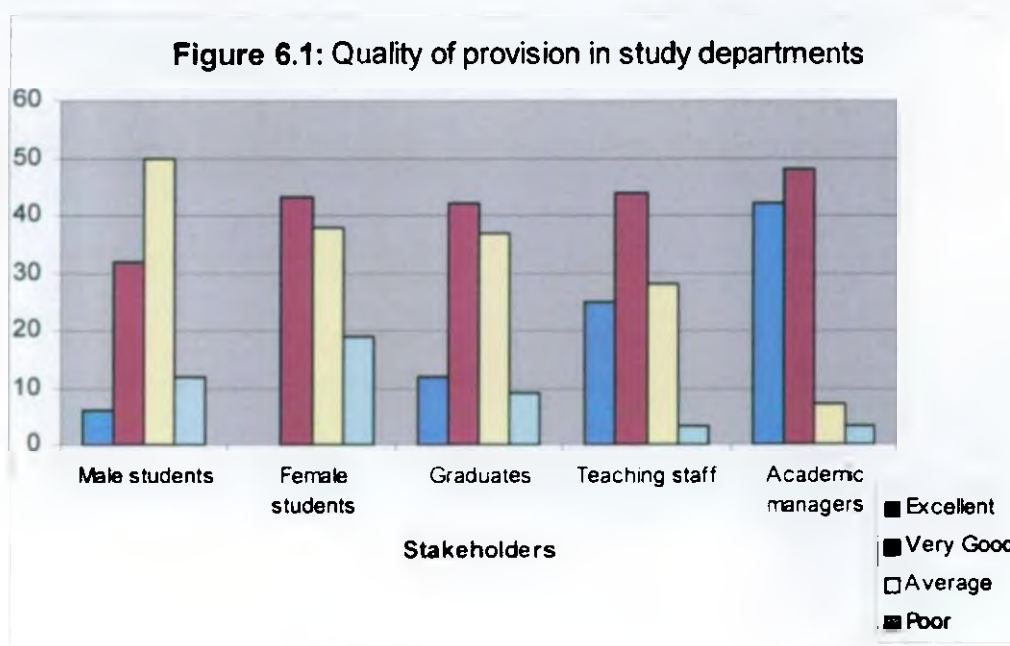
The relationship between the higher education system and employers has witnessed a fundamental change in the developed countries (Goldfinch *et al*, 1999; Teichler, 1999a and b, 2002; Blake *et al*, 1999, 2000). It is likely that the aim of the Saudi government in encouraging the higher education/employer link is to enhance national development (KSA, 1998-2001; KSU, 1999a, 2001). As expressed by several researchers, such as Al-Shami (1997), Nofal (1998, 1997), ABEGS (1998), Qasem (1998), and ALESCO (1998, 2000) the cooperative relationship between higher

education and employers is uniformly embraced by other Arab and non-Arab developing countries.

How this contemplation, which is supposedly carefully considered by Arab official bodies, as well as affiliated educational researchers, has been turned into reality is not fully clear to the researcher. For example, during the period of his research, he discerned little if any “on-the-job practical training” schemes in the study departments serving as an extra curricular effort (see 3.5) to enhance students’ acquisition of either disciplinary or general employability-related skills.

#### 6.4 Quality at Departmental Level

The respondents were asked (question no. 3) what they thought about the quality of higher education provision in their departments. Compared to graduates and students, significantly high percentages of academic managers (90%) and teaching staff (70%) thought it to be either excellent or very good. This percentage was not so high for graduates and students. A detailed breakdown of the analysis is shown in Figure 6.1.



Amongst current male students, only 38% thought that the quality of provision in their departments was either excellent or very good. Although the rate for female students was 43%, none of them perceived quality as excellent. 54% of graduates thought that the quality of provision in the departments they graduated from was either excellent or very good. What is equally interesting to note in this connection is that only 3% of staff (teaching and managerial) thought that quality at departmental level was poor, while at least 10% of male students (current and graduate) thought quality was poor, with this percentage nearly doubled for female students.

The researcher asked the student and graduate interviewees about the reason(s) for their poor to moderate rating for quality in their departments. In reply, they referred to the existence of elements of weakness in provision, management and students/tutors relationship. For example, a group of female students responded by stating:

“Our department is relatively poorly supplied with the needed resources, and the same applies to the equipment and necessary facilities. Further, we are having some problems of communication with the managerial officers almost at every level, while it is not unusual for our tutors to provide moderate to poor instruction and guidance.”

With respect to the level of quality in study departments, the teaching staff and academic manager interviewees expressed views which are very similar in broad analysis to those revealed by their stakeholder groups through the questionnaires. Both groups were greatly interested in the evaluation of their departments and viewed the quality of the programmes they taught as very good or even excellent. For example, an academic manager stated emphatically:

“I do not think we have a single serious problem with the issue of quality in our department. The vast majority of our graduates year after year are capable of getting jobs in good positions. Indeed, our records show that the brilliant among them are either already studying at post-graduate level in our universities or abroad, or they are planning to do so.”

However, during the course of his fieldwork study, the researcher did not notice the existence of either a specialised quality assurance committee or external evaluators in any of the four study departments. In other words, the researcher had no access to an independent opinion on this issue.

It is very interesting to note that students of both sexes shared a similar view regarding the assessment of quality at departmental level. This is because since their original establishment in the late 1950s and early 1970s, respectively (see Table 5.3), the male and female Saudi higher education systems have developed in their own special ways. For example, their academic settings are different in diversification and management and they even study on separate campuses (Alghafis, 1992; Addawood, 1996; ABEGS, 1998; Al-Khedair, 1999). Thus, despite the organisational difference there might be some widespread problems facing both genders of Saudi university students. Almandil (1999) noted that:

“The provision of female education has been limited compared with that of males. There is a clear disparity between the numbers of male and female students, and the educational facilities available to each at all educational levels” (p.13).

Furthermore, the education of the two sexes in Saudi Arabia is influenced by traditions and customs imposed by social and religious attitudes (Al-Farsi, 1991; Al-Salloom, 1996; KSA, 1996-2000). Thus, for example, male students are admitted to many more

colleges and departments than female students (see Table 5.3). Generally speaking, the percentage of male students studying science and technology is high, as is the percentage of female students studying various branches of humanities (Al-Rashid, 1998; Al-Ramizan, 1999; Al-Naeem, 2002).

What the researcher also noticed among the interviewees from the student population was that the opinions of many of them regarding departmental quality were by no means purely thematic. For example, particular aspects of the courses in the curriculum programmes undertaken, such as attendance, language, instruction, homework assignments, supervision, guidance, and the size of tuition groups, were perhaps looked upon as more important quality indicators than the main themes dealt with in respect to those courses. In other words, the researcher felt that the processes of higher education were more important to Saudi students than the subjects studied.

Such self-evaluation as that outlined above should not be considered of limited value. This is because the expectation of many researchers (Green, 1994a; Brennan *et al*, 1997; Tam, 2001; Hodgkinson and Brown, 2003) is such that no university department will be able to develop appropriately in terms of its quality without integrating students' perceptions in the process of course evaluation. The researcher will be presenting more information about the Saudi students in this and the following chapters of this thesis.

### **6.5 Impact of Undergraduate "Teaching Method" on Quality**

Respondents' preference for different methods of teaching was the subject of the fourth question of the present inquiry. A breakdown and analysis of the results revealed that of the various methods utilised, which are widely and universally thought to have a

significant effect on the quality of higher education (Goodlad, 1995; Barnett, 1997a and b, 2003; Biggs, 1999, 2001; Fallows and Steven, 2000), male students and teaching staff prefer the traditional lecture-based method. Female students and academic managers like a mixture of methods better, while the debate-based method was the preference of graduates. Preferences of this type are believed by some researchers to represent a reflection of the method of assessment employed (Scouller, 1996, 1998; Brown, 1997; O'donova *et al*, 2001) and/or to be related to the strategy adopted in teaching and learning processes by the stakeholder groups of a particular setting (Bourner and Flowers, 1997; Saada, 1998; Brown and Glasner, 1998; Rust, 2001,2002).

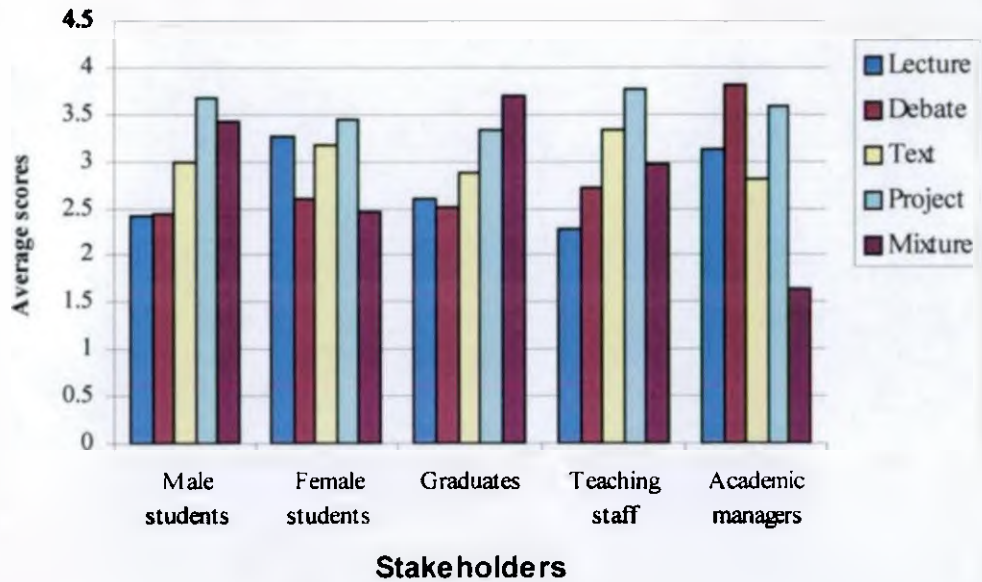
The researcher found that the second most preferred teaching method for students (male and female) and teaching staff was the debate-based one. Most of the stakeholders, except academic managers, ranked project-based learning as the least preferred method of teaching at undergraduate level.

The breakdown of the preferences for all study groups by method of teaching is given in Table 6.4 below and the average scores are presented in Figure 6.2.

**Table 6.4:** Rank ordering of preferences for teaching method by group

Male students	Female students	Graduates	Teaching staff	Academic managers
Lecture-based	Mixture of all	Debate-based	Lecture-based	Mixture of all
Debate-based	Debate-based	Lecture-based	Debate-based	Text-based
Text-based	Text-based	Text-based	Mixture of all	Lecture-based
Mixture of all	Lecture-based	Project-based	Text-based	Project-based
Project-based	Project-based	Project-based	Project-based	Debate-based

**Figure 6.2: Average scores for preferences of teaching method**



In comparison with the participants' responses regarding the issue of teaching methods in the main questionnaire inquiry, interviewees revealed no more than a slight variation in their opinions. Thus, teaching staff and male students consistently believed that a suitable form of the lecture-based method is still the most informative approach, with the greatest impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning processes at undergraduate level.

The lecture-based mode of teaching is undoubtedly the oldest and most popular one in Saudi schools, colleges and universities (Al-Shami, 1994; Addawood, 1996; Al-Subahi and Banjer, 1997; Saada, 1998), as in other Arab states (Abdel-Daām, 1987; Al-Tall, 1993; Flih, 1997; Madkour, 1998). Its advantages were satisfactorily discussed by Rashid (1988), who stated that:



“The lecture-based method is considered the direct way for university teachers to impart information and experiences to students. It is characterised in the context of teaching and learning by human communication in one direction and often begins with the teacher and ends with a group of students” (pp.102-103).

A statement by a member of the teaching staff at the College of Humanities may also sum up the perceptions of his stakeholder group about teaching method preference:

“I am really unable to see in the near future an alternative to the lecture method. However, I should appreciate any improvement in facilities which makes the delivery of my lectures more effective for teaching and, at the same time, which has a more positive impact on students’ learning and performance.”

Another senior member of the teaching-staff group commented on the method of teaching he himself follows at the present time by saying:

“I am aware of the fact that I should make more of one or two of the other methods of teaching, besides the lecture one, in order to increase the quality of what I am offering to my students. But the reality on the ground is such that under the present circumstances defined by limited resources and facilities, increased number of undergraduates, supervision of post-graduate students and inadequate assistance, the lecture method is more a matter of practicality than of enhancing educational quality.”

The relatively small sample of female students interviewed (5 students) were inclined to have a different preference for teaching method than that revealed by their female counterparts (37 students) in the questionnaire study. That is, those interviewed revealed a preference for a lecture-based method instead of the mixed method preferred by those in the quantitative part. They explained this shift in opinion as being subject to two requirements; first, a greater specialisation in the courses undertaken by the female students in their respective departments and, second, the fact that more time should be

given for debating especially to satisfy the discussion of the themes involved in any topic during the course. One of the female students interviewed, relative to her peer group, perhaps overstated the issue of irrelevance in the programme she is undertaking:

“No doubt the lecturing approach to teaching is essential in influencing the educational quality in any branch of knowledge, business or profession. The main problem is that we are burdened with too many theories and hypotheses, the majority of which are, in my opinion, unrelated to our specialities and, therefore, of no obvious empirical consequences in terms of the jobs which may be assigned to us after graduation.”

The interview meetings confirmed that the most influential teaching methods in the opinion of Saudi graduates and academic managers were the same as their respective groups in the main questionnaire inquiry, that is, debate-based and mixed methods, respectively. However, academic managers, in particular, acknowledged the leading role of lecturing in the mixed method they chose as their top priority.

As mentioned earlier in this section, the vast majority of respondents ranked the project-based method for undergraduates as the least useful means of improving the quality of teaching and learning in Saudi institutions. Academic managers represented a possible exception, however, since they ranked this method as the fourth (second last) preferred one. This result hints at the degree of restriction in the scope for preparing students to undertake scientific research in Saudi universities, including what is called “research exercises or praxis” (Morsi, 1990,1992), that is, making observations in certain well-defined cases and writing reports about the outcomes. No doubt, training undergraduates to be more enthusiastic towards research will help them to improve their employability. Further, research is a prerequisite for the development of a cognizant generation of stakeholders who are capable of bridging the gap between the

higher education institutions and work market (Wood, 1990; Nofal, 1998; Qasem, 1998; ALESCO, 2000). About a decade ago, Alghafis (1992) embarked on researching the above fundamental issue and its impact on the future of both higher education and national development in Saudi Arabia, as well as enhancing international co-operation. He said:

“The most valid current theoretical model for university research is one that integrates research with teaching, beginning at the early undergraduate level. As the student specializes, we are told, this research component should become more important and more interdisciplinary in procedure, turning into genuine research at the graduate school level. By this process, research will become an integral part of the university curriculum as well as essential component of the university’s contribution to national development and international co-operation” (p. 25).

### **The Significance of Modularisation**

What the researcher also noticed among many interviewees, regardless of their stakeholder groups, was that they envisaged modularisation as an endeavour for improving the methodology of teaching and learning in Saudi undergraduate education. The main reason behind such a thought was said to be the noticeable success of the modular scheme in some institutions in America, the United Kingdom, some other Western countries (Squires, 1990; Duke, 1992; HEQC, 1994, 1997c), and, indeed, even some Arabian countries (ALESCO, 1998).

A group of graduate interviewees from the College of Engineering listed a number of advantages attributed to modular programmes, such as the provision of a greater choice of courses for students, coherent course objectives and delivery, a credit accumulation scheme, suitable timetable and availability of full- and part-time schedules. What they did not realise is that going modular is not an overnight business.

For example, in the experience of many higher education institutions it demands very serious curricular change, wider access, rationalisation of administration and perhaps even greater effort in maintaining the quality of the programme taught (Jenkins and Walker, 1994; Newby, 1995, 1998; Betts and Smith, 1998; Brennan and Shah, 2000).

Haslum (1994) depicted her personal experience of the modular system as follows:

“A major advantage of modularization is that it invites, if not demands, a review of the curriculum. Some courses try to avoid this by just doing a little repackaging, drawing boxes around already existing units of study and calling them modules. This is ‘linear modularization’ and does not allow for student choice. Others insert some options in an otherwise linear model, whilst still others genuinely offer alternative pathways of modules for students to follow to a named award” (p.107).

Interviewees among the staff (both teaching and managerial) seemed to agree with the above notion of modularisation, that it is more than caring about the division of the academic year into two semesters or smaller terms. However, they are still not convinced that the modular scheme will significantly enhance the quality of the teaching method currently applied.

A member of teaching staff who specialises in the area of education curricula pointed out that:

“It is true that the introduction of modularisation for the first time to a particular higher education institution may produce a change and perhaps even improve quality *per se*. But this is, in some cases a temporary result arising from better preparation by the teaching staff, academic managers, students and, indeed, all those concerned with the implementation of the new scheme. However, once the activities are routinised everything may return to its previous state.”

This indicates that contrary to what some participants thought short modular courses are not always better than semester or year-long schemes at enhancing quality in higher education. Quality assurance requires improvements in every aspect of students' development in addition to changing the structure of knowledge presentation to them.

## **6.6 Assessment of Quality**

One of the best available means for university students to assess quality is to define their experience in terms of the development of skills or competencies. This may involve self-assessment, assessment by other groups of stakeholders and, preferably, by both (HEQC, 1997a; Harvey, 1998, 2002; Keep and Mayhew, 1999, 2001; Peterson and Einarson, 2001).

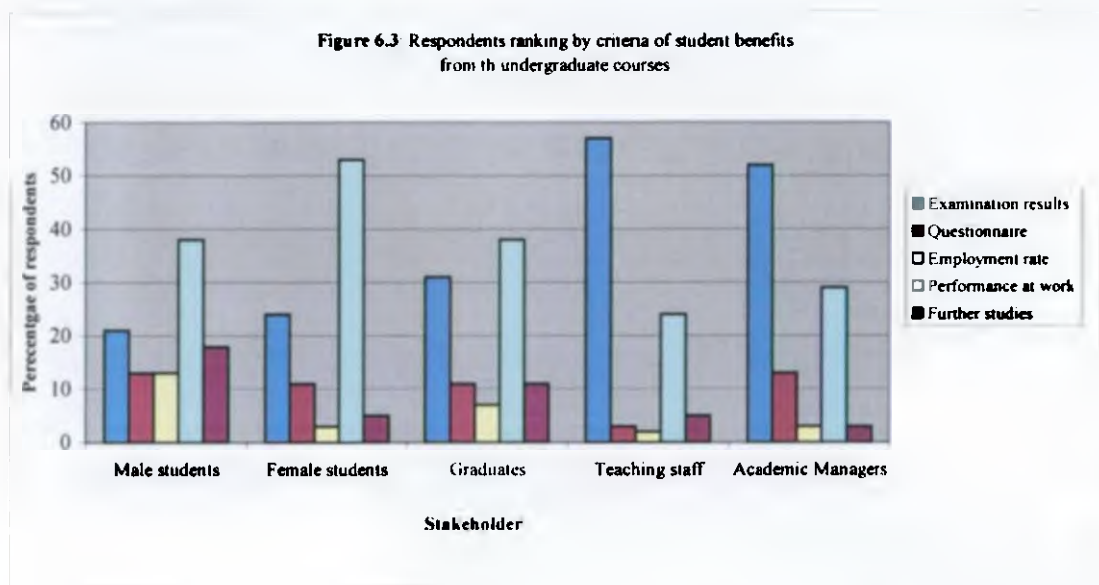
Table 6.5 shows how best to determine that students benefit from the undergraduate courses offered to them by their departments. As shown earlier in this chapter (see 6.1), no significant inter-departmental differences were detected in the course of the present study. However, it is interesting to note that in ranking the most informative criteria, students (both male and female) and graduates differed significantly from teaching staff and academic managers. Students and graduates ranked the option "graduate performance at work" as the most informative indicator of the benefit to students of undergraduate courses, while teaching staff and academic managers, as one would expect, ranked "examination results" as the most informative indicator of the benefit to students of these courses. This is obviously a very clear difference and its significance will be examined in subsequent paragraphs.

**Table 6.5:** Percentage of respondents' ranking criteria for measuring student benefits from the undergraduate courses

Criteria	Ranking by male students			Ranking by female students			Ranking by graduates			Ranking by teaching staff			Ranking by academic managers		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
a	21	20	17	24	32	18	31	13	18	57	11	5	52	10	6
b	13	14	20	11	13	13	11	7	18	8	22	27	13	21	13
c	13	18	31	8	8	24	7	24	18	5	24	32	3	29	36
d	38	26	15	53	24	10	38	20	18	24	29	22	29	13	29
e	18	23	20	5	21	21	11	33	27	5	19	11	3	19	16

- Key:
- a Examination results
  - b Questionnaire
  - c Employment rate of graduates
  - d Graduate performance at work
  - e Graduate further studies

Figure 6.3 graphically demonstrates the most informative ranking by respondents of the different criteria and shown the groups of stakeholders side by side to make comparison between them more discernible visually.



The interviewees' opinions about the assessment of quality in higher education reflected the patterns shown by the respective groups of respondents in the questionnaire study. Thus, the most informative criterion for assessing the benefit to students and graduates of the courses taught at undergraduate level was "graduate performance at work", while it was "examination results" for teaching staff and academic managers.

Different groups of students and graduates attributed their priority selection to certain reasons. Their thoughts are reflected in what a group of male student participants said to the researcher:

"Our choice about the most informative criterion for the assessment under investigation reflects our belief that the overall academic effort made by a university student, as well as his or her endeavour, should, one way or another, be embodied in performance at work in due course. It is thus a criterion which could be very useful indeed for both internal and external assessors of quality in any higher education institution."

This reveals that both Saudi students still studying at university and those who have recently graduated consider the criterion of "graduate performance at work" the best standard on which to base a judgement about higher education quality. This is, by virtue of the fact that such a criterion reflects the student's overall educational development, performance and innovation (Al-Khedair, 1999; Biggs, 1999; Gelbert, 1999). For that reason, it may also be taken as an indicator of both general and subject-related skills acquisition by the individual graduate (Miller *et al*, 2000; Shepherd, 2000; Little, 2003). Moreover, this criterion is an effective practical measure of the relevance of curricular themes dealt with in the academic context to employability development, the world of work and reality of life (Al-Jabr, 1994; Tiechler, 1999a).

Thus, it is also a means of exerting extra pressure on those running the higher education system to update its curricula, care about the quality of its programmes and employment of its graduates, as well as to think about the importance of maintaining an effective balance between its input and output (Slowey, 1995; KSA, 1998-2001; Al-Turkestani, 1998, 1999; Lock *et al*, 1998). Finally, the criterion of “graduate performance at work” may even help in achieving a fair distribution of graduates according to the circumstances of the region or country (Veum, 1997; Harvey *et al*, 1997b). Indeed, as also suggested by some researchers (Bynners *et al*, 1996; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999), it may even provide an opportunity to evaluate and compare the performance of the two sexes in the real work environment.

Teaching staff and academic managers, in turn, attributed their priority selection of “examination results” as the most informative indicator of students’ benefits from undergraduate courses to certain reasons. A statement by an experienced member of the teaching staff may illustrate the opinion of both these groups. He said:

“My judgement in this respect is based on both my personal participation and knowledge gained from others in the field of undergraduate teaching in many institutions all over the world. The idea that this assessment criterion is more efficient than others of its kind becomes particularly evident with the increase in students/tutors ratios.”

Thus, it is clear that in the opinions of these alter groups of participants there is no practical criterion that competes with “examination results” when it comes to the mass assessment of the benefit to undergraduate students’ of their study programmes. The reasons behind such opinions were affirmed to be familiar in the domain of higher education. For example, the feasibility of assessment by staff, the development of students’ learning in a systematic and competitive way and, hence, the development of



their educational quality and employability (Brown *et al*, 1997; Keep and Mayhew, 1999). This approach may also help to improve the performance of staff themselves, especially if they are evaluated by other groups such as students and peer committees (Cave *et al*, 1997; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Grunwald and Peterson, 2003). Next, the criterion of “examination results” is justified by the expertise of producing results within the settings of a particular higher education system, which is a vital balance between the theoretical and practical knowledge related to the programmes offered. This is because these two activities complement each other in almost every branch of science and education (Yorke, 1998, 2003; Barnett, 2000, 2003). Moreover, evaluation by staff of their students puts them in a better position than outside groups of stakeholders (such as employers and socio-cultural sectors) to lay the foundation of some, if not all, the practical and vocational courses, and thereby strengthen the process of skills acquisition and integration (Assiter, 1995; Murtada, 1996; Bennett *et al*, 2000). Last but not least, several of the Saudi teaching staff and academic managers, who the researcher met through the interview sessions, also suggested the possibility that other criteria for measurement of students’ benefits from undergraduate courses, including the one most favoured by students and graduates (graduate performance at work), would be better looked upon as consequences of “examination results” rather than competent assessment substitutes for it. The perceptions of some other Arab researchers (Al-Tall *et al*, 1997; Zaitoni, 1997; Ali, 1998) seem to be in general agreement with the above notion of Saudis.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

The majority of study respondents, with the exception of female students (most likely because of some socio-cultural, religio-philosophical and academic distinctions),

tended to rank “the level of qualification achieved” as the number one measuring indicator of quality in the Saudi higher education system. The second and third most important ideas regarding what quality in this context is about were thought by the respondents to be “the efficiency of the education system” and “students’ effectiveness in the learning environment”, respectively.

Interestingly, the data obtained also indicate that there is a direct exchange in the quality of phraseology between Arab (including Saudi) and Western (including British), higher education systems. Amongst the most sound cross terms relating to the meaning of quality between the English and Arabic languages are:

Quality = Nāwáyyā	نوعية
Good, Goodness = Jāwdā	جودة
Good quality = Jāwdāt al-nāwáyyā	جودة النوعية
Efficiency = Kifayā	كفاية
Effectiveness = Fááliyyā	فعالية

Overall analysis of respondents’ opinions concerning the relative importance of several factors relating to quality in higher education suggests that “limited student access” is number one factor for male students, graduates and teaching staff. The focus of ambition here is seemingly to accomplish competitive entrance for a small cohort of good quality students, which is already achieved in some famous Western universities. In contrast, female students and academic managers considered “managerial influence” as the highest rating factor in this respect. On the other hand, respondents’ views were at odds with each other regarding the second most influential factor for achieving quality in higher education. In plain contrast with official Saudi policy, as well as with

the established approach in many developed countries, respondents did not pretend to put any significant weight on “employer’s influence”. The majority of them, perhaps because of the present stage of Saudi higher education development, said that quality is an institutional responsibility more than anything else.

By and large, the academic managers and teaching staff rated the quality of higher education provision in the study departments as excellent or, at least, very good. However, graduates perceived such quality to be just average or slightly higher. The perception of both sexes of students, despite their noticeable differences regarding educational provision and the impact of Saudi orthodox traditions and customs upon them, was that departmental quality ranges between average and poor.

Responses of study participants, both through the questionnaire inquiry and interview sessions, revealed no compatibility between groups regarding choice of preferred teaching method. Nevertheless, such a choice appears to exist in association with the position of the stakeholder group within Saudi higher education. Teaching staff and the majority of students preferred the traditional lecture-based method, academic managers chose a mixture of different well-proportioned methods, while graduates singled out the debate-based method. However, the majority of respondents agreed that the project-based method is the least suitable teaching and learning method as far as quality improvement for Saudi undergraduates is concerned. All this hints at the necessity of thinking about modifying the current teaching method at the undergraduate education level in the light of those who directly take part in it and benefit from it.

Finally, the patterns of questionnaire and interview data were found to match very well in respect to the assessment of quality of the courses offered by the study participants. Thus, graduates and students of both sexes ranked “graduate performance at work” as the most informative indicator to assess the benefit to students of undergraduate programmes, while the most relevant informative ranking by teaching staff and academic managers was “examination results”. The discernible difference in quality perception between the two parties of Saudi stakeholders was analysed and discussed subject to their own reasoning and justification. In any case, such an assessment of evidence is very important to all the developmental processes currently operating within the arena of the Saudi higher education system, particularly if attention is turned towards making good use of the data obtained to augment the developmental issues of both curriculum quality and graduate employability. For example, Dill (1997) envisages that:

“The new competitive environment of higher education in the United States, in contrast to the period of the 1980s when the academic assessment movement was born, now provides clear incentives for using assessment information to improve academic performance and productivity. Assessment information can thereby become a powerful force for academic improvement, but only if it is systematically linked with curricular design, academic planning, and budgeting processes” (p. 33).

Higher education quality, the impact of factors upon it and those indicators which best define it as a concept subject to evaluation and assessment, will be referred to within the domain of the findings of the research as a whole. As for the next chapter, it is concerned with the development of Saudi undergraduate curricula, which will be looked upon as a means of linking curriculum quality with graduate employability, and the possibility of expressing the former in terms of the latter.

**CHAPTER 7**

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAUDI  
UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULA**

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the presentation and discussion of participants' responses to the second part of the present research inquiry. The five questions employed here collectively aimed to examine the development of undergraduate curricula in different departments as a direct activity of their personnel and any other relevant groups of stakeholders. It is anticipated that curriculum quality, graduate employability and general skills concepts will sooner or later demand that higher education systems change their curricula dramatically. This suggests that such systems and several of their stakeholder groups will be confronted with a new challenge of re-developing some of their traditional courses and innovating to provide new ones. Special emphasis is placed here on the articulation of students' learning through teaching and research processes, as well as on the principles underlying the impact of internal and external factors. Baldwin (1997), of Monash University, in Australia, remarked, as follows, on some of the difficulties facing the higher education system in its new venture:

“The higher education sector is faced with fundamental questions about the nature of university education, the ‘gatekeeping’ role of institutions and the importance of stakeholders. To what extent should stakeholders determine educational programmes and approaches? What weight should be given to the views and interests of different stakeholders? How should we balance the immediate needs of, say, employers against obligations to society as a whole and to future generations? How does the university’s traditional role of critic accord with the imperative to provide ‘customised products’ for consumers? It is no exaggeration to state that the system is in a state of intellectual turmoil about these issues. It is in this context that the insistence on more rigorous scrutiny of curriculum developments must be understood” (p. 294).

It is reasonable to say that the status of higher education curricula is believed by many researchers, such as Walker (1995), Gaff and Ratcliff (1996), Brown *et al*

(1997), Hawkins and Winter (1997), and Whitston (1998), to affect the foundation of disciplinary or subject-related skills, as well as the acquisition of key or general skills. This implies that undergraduate curriculum development has, at the same time, a profound impact on quality in higher education and the development of graduate employability (Nixon and Freeman, 2000; Knight and Yorke, 2001) and that the latter issue (employability) in particular is primarily a curriculum issue (QCA, 2001; OBU, 2002; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Yorke and Knight, 2003). Indeed, as also recently revealed by Fry *et al* (1999), Bennett *et al* (2000), Milne (2000) and Gibbs (2000), many higher education institutions, especially in developed countries, currently regard the processes of development of general skills as equally necessary requirements for students' qualifications as the subject-related ones.

The above perception is apparently even more widely and profoundly maintained by higher education institutions in some developing countries. For example, in the Arab World (Al-Tall *et al*, 1997; Nofal, 1997; ABEGS, 1998, Qasem, 1998; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999), including Saudi Arabia (Alghafis, 1992; Addawood, 1990; Al-Khedair, 1997; KSA, 1999a,2001), there seems to be no special liking for the development of one set of skills over another (subject-related and general) but rather a preference for integrating them, if not assimilating the latter into the former.

Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data included in this chapter was basically treated as described in the previous one. As for the main themes focused upon during the writing of this chapter, they are those specifically related to the roles played in curriculum development by the different groups of higher education stakeholders (teaching staff, academic managers, graduates and students), the participation of two external stakeholder groups (employers and the religious sector), any possible

involvement by other groups of internal or external stakeholders, and the rate or frequency of undergraduate curriculum evaluation by national and international committees.

Finally, the chapter is concluded by referring to the crux of the relationship between the stakeholder groups and curriculum development programmes in the milieu of Saudi higher education, and how this helps to answer the questions of the present research.

## **7.2 The Role of Higher Education Stakeholders**

Curriculum and learning are inseparable issues in the context of higher education (Eisner, 1982, 1991; Gibbs, 1994; LTSN, 2002). However, all higher education systems are generally thought to witness noticeable variations in the relevance of the contributions of their different groups of stakeholders to the process of undergraduate curriculum development (Trowler, 1998; Miller *et al*, 2000). The degree of contribution (Barnett, 2000; Gumport, 2000) and especially its diversification (Armstrong *et al*, 1997; Fallows and Steven, 2000) may be regarded by institutions as an indicator of the quality or standard of the programmes they offer to their students, as well as of the performances of all those running them.

By means of question no. 6 of the questionnaire inquiry (please see Appendix 1), the researcher wanted to know what respondents would reveal in respect to higher education stakeholders' contribution to the process of curriculum development in their department.

The results obtained are presented below in Table 7.1. They suggest clearly that all members of the teaching staff and 90% of academic managers are involved in the



process of curriculum development. Indeed, 95% and 61% of these two groups, respectively, claimed to make a moderate to large contribution to this process. On the

**Table 7.1:** The perceived extent of higher education stakeholders' contribution to the process of curriculum development in study departments

Extent of contribution	Male students	Female students	Graduates	Teaching staff	Academic managers
a	11 (04%)	1 (03%)	0 (0%)	28 (76%)	10 (32%)
b	24 (10%)	2 (05%)	1 (2%)	7 (19%)	9 (29%)
c	53 (21%)	2 (05%)	2 (5%)	2 (05%)	9 (29%)
d	138 (54%)	29 (76%)	42 (93%)	0 (0%)	1 (03%)
e	28 (11%)	4 (11%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (07%)
<b>Total</b>	245 (100%)	38 (100%)	45 (100%)	37 (100%)	31 (100%)

Key: a To a large extent  
 b To a moderate extent  
 c To a limited extent  
 d None whatsoever  
 e I do not know

other hand, and as one would expect, the involvement of students and graduates is significantly lower than the figures stated above for senior groups. For example, 65%, 86% and 93% of male students, female students and graduates, respectively, responded to the issue under investigation either with “none whatsoever” or “I do not know”. Moreover, the majority of those belonging to these groups contributing to curriculum development are likely to be doing so to a moderate or even limited extent according to their own perceptions.

During a series of interview meetings with members of both teaching staff and academic managers, they talked about their work in partnership and their significant contribution to the development of undergraduate curricula in their departments, for

example, through continual review and updating, as well as the provision of facilities required for the relevant processes of teaching, learning, training and research. They even agreed that curriculum development is reasonably evaluated in the context of the Saudi higher education system, especially by such means as comparison and expression of opinions on performance. A senior member of the teaching staff explains:

“It is true in the case of Saudi undergraduate curricula that many of its versions were originally largely brought in from the Western universities. But Saudi staff, with the help of Arabian and foreign professional experts, were able to modify them by embedding in elements of national culture and interest. The old and new curricula became comparable to such an extent that the difference between them reflects the progress that has been achieved. The improvement in performances of our personnel, students and graduates support this view.”

However, an academic manager reflected on the various phases of curriculum development in Saudi Arabia and the role his group is playing in the managerial parts of this essential process. He said:

“There is a vigorous attempt towards modernisation and internationalisation of the higher education curricula in Saudi Arabia, but at the same time being prudent not to subject the valued elements in our tradition or culture to wear away gradually. Then, since our thought about the university is that it is a common organisation and hence that the development of many of its programmes is a corporative question, we commit ourselves to examine the experiences of others. Indeed, we also work in collaboration in order to achieve the necessary changes with several renowned organisations, such as UNESCO, ALESCO and ABEGS.”

The information presented by students and graduates during the interviews seems to obviously contrast with that provided by their teachers and managers in that the former groups do not feel systematically and adequately involved in the process of

undergraduate curriculum development. A group of graduates from the College of Engineering expressed their contribution as follows:

“Perhaps our sole contribution to the development of curricula in our department was that such a programme was undertaken by us. We utilised a proportion of this programme and finally we passed the assigned examination. But we do not deny that what we learned helped the majority of us to obtain graduate-level jobs either in government firms or private companies. Our assessment is that we are successful in carrying out the services demanded of us and possibly that is our contribution.”

Male student interviewees expressed views similar to those of graduates, but female students differed, remarking:

“We learned from some informational sources that famous universities and colleges pay great attention to the comments of their students, especially when it comes to issues of curriculum development. Ours occasionally, if not rarely, do. In fact this is frequently experienced by us, whether it be in planning the courses for various subjects, explaining in details their purposes and prospects, providing what is needed to implement them, and so on. Of course, the tutors vary noticeably in this respect, but most of them tend to prepare the lectures according to their personal willingness and intellectual abilities and then dictate the students to follow their wishes in what to learn.”

Thus, it appears that dissatisfaction with the extent of their contribution to curriculum development is another problem added to the list of what faces Saudi students in their university life. A detailed discussion of this issue can be found in chapter 8 of the thesis (see 8.5.2). Then it is succinctly reflected upon and presented recommendations to improved it in Chapter 9.

### 7.3 The Role of Employers

Question no.7 of the questionnaire inquiry aimed to examine the possible contribution of employers to the process of undergraduate curriculum development in the study departments. The quantitative results obtained are summarised in Table 7.2, in a suitable form for comparison with those of the other stakeholder groups studied.

**Table 7.2:** Percentage contribution to curriculum development by different groups according to the opinions of study participants

Participants Contributors	Male students			Female students			Graduates			Teaching staff			Academic managers		
	Don't Know	No role	Some*	Don't Know	No role	Some*	Don't Know	No role	Some*	Don't Know	No role	Some*	Don't Know	No role	Some*
Study** respondents	11	54	35	11	76	13	0	93	7	0	0	100	7	3	90
Employers	28	30	42	50	16	34	24	53	23	14	51	35	0	36	64
Religious sector	29	21	50	47	32	21	16	28	56	22	32	46	6	36	58

\* Combined figures for major, moderate and limited roles.

\*\* Data taken from Table 7.1 and included here for comparison.

It was found that, on an average, just over one-third of respondents (male students, female students, graduates and teaching staff) are aware that employers make a contribution at any discernible level (for example, major, moderate or limited) to curriculum development in their departments. However, the above rate is almost double according to academic managers. In view of the nature of their service, there is a possibility that this latter group may have looked at the issue of employer involvement as it applies to the whole range of departments of King Saud University and not specifically to the four study departments.

Interviewees' thoughts on the possible role of employers in the development of undergraduate curricula in their departments were very similar to those deduced from the responses of their respective groups in the questionnaire inquiry and analysed above. That is to say, employers in Saudi Arabia, as an external group of stakeholders, are generally considered to make little, if any, direct contribution in this respect.

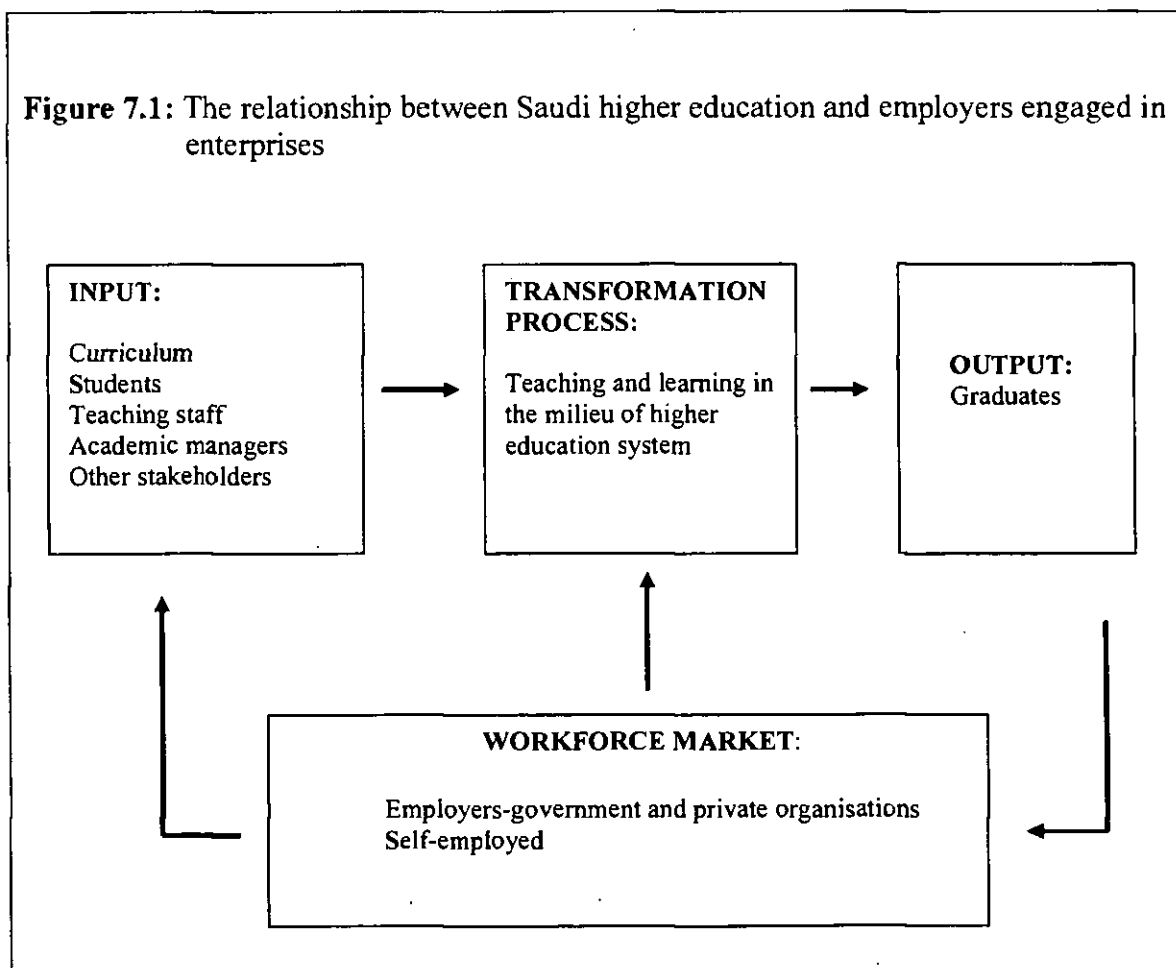
A substantial number of higher hierarchy academic managers seem to be more aware than other members of their own group, as well as members of all other groups of participants, about the role played by employers. This, they said, should be understood as a virtue of centralisation, bureaucracy and development in the Saudi organisation structure as part of the whole social and political system of the kingdom (Al-Awaji, 1971; Niblock, 1982; Al-Medlej, 1997). A senior academic manager, with teaching and research experience pointed out that:

“In this country the Ministry of Higher Education is close to several organisations and agencies, especially those responsible for general education, planning, finance and employment, through which the central authority exercises its policy according to specialisation. These organisations, therefore, are also largely responsible for finding jobs for many, if not all, Saudi graduates as soon as possible. Here, the exchange of ideas on various issues of the national policy is a common practice and the issue of undergraduate curricula is by no means an exception.”

In recent years, several Saudi researchers have aimed to analyse the nature of the relationship between the Saudi universities and employers. They concluded that both sides of this equation must appropriately adapt to full capacity in order to strengthen the links between them (Al-Karni, 1990,1999; Al-Jabr, 1994; Al-Jalal, 1996; ABEGS, 1998), and thereby meet not only the current calculated national demands but

also the predicted future social and development demands (Al-Bazāi, 1998; Hafez, 1998, Kamel, 1998; Khateeb, 1999; Saegh, 1999). Specifically, the need to revise existing undergraduate programmes was invariably marked as being of prime importance in maintaining a positive relationship between Saudi higher education establishments and the relevant groups of employers in the work market (Al-Kahtani, 1998a and b; Al-Rashid, 1998; Al-Turkistani, 1998,1999; Al-Abdullah, 2002).

In the light of his interviews with study participants and the thoughts and perceptions referred to above, the researcher has attempted in Figure 7.1 to outline the current relationship between the Saudi higher education system and employers as representative of the workforce market.



#### **7.4 The Role of the Religious Sector**

Question no. 8 of the questionnaire inquiry probed into the opinions of participants about the contribution of the religious sector to undergraduate curriculum development in their departments. The responses revealed (see Table 7.2) that the contribution of this group is thought to be higher by at least 10% than that of other external Saudi stakeholder group or employers studied (as judged by an affirmative response of over 50% vs. around 40%). This seems to be true at every one of the three positive levels of involvement stated in the question (that is, major, moderate and limited).

An obvious exception to the above result was the opinions of female students that the contribution of the religious sector towards curriculum development in their department was just over 20%. Supported by some firsthand findings by Al-Nimir (1989) Almandil (1999) and Al-Baker (2002), female students seemed to feel that the supply of education for their members is given much less attention by the responsible government agencies than it is for males. This point is further discussed and reflected upon later and brought to a conclusion in Chapters 8 and 9.

The opinions expressed by the majority of the interviewees also indicated that the religious sector does actually play an important role in the development of undergraduate curricula in their departments. But their understanding of the purpose of such development seems to vary and consequently complicate the matter.

Generally speaking, male students believe that religiously-orientated courses are essential elements of their assigned curricula, for example, since they make up about 10% of them. They assert that such courses render the study environment more pleasant and comfortable, as well as providing them with an additional dimension to the

explication of some of the modern themes they are addressing. Furthermore, as a main source of faith solidification, religious discussions and interpretations are believed to help Saudi students overcome many of their problems and anxieties (Alsanie, 2002; Abdullah, 2000) as well as helping to develop their distinctive socio-cultural and religio-philosophical characteristics (Atlas, 1957; Dhafir, 1989; Al-Zaobāi and Bakr, 1995). As revealed by several researchers, such as Bashshur (1964), Jung (1969), Robrbaugh and Jessar (1975), Abdel-Daām (1983), Al-Tall (1993), and Fisher (1994), what applies to Moslems perhaps generally, but not in every sense, may also apply to the enthusiasts of some other faiths. For example, the Middle-East Moslem Society is confronting the idea of changing itself into a post-Islamic one in a similar way to Western society when it changed into post-Christianity. Anyhow, it is reasonable to say that any level of similarity or parallelism in this domain ought to be understood in view of the notion which looks upon many, if not all spheres of culture as being related to and shaped by the principles of religion and tradition. For example, in Izetbegovic's (1993) words:

“Culture is the influence of religion on man or man's influence on himself, while civilization is the effect of intelligence on nature, on the external world. Culture means the ‘art of being man’; civilization means the art of functioning, ruling, and making thing perfect. Culture is a ‘continual creating of self’; civilization is the continual changing of the world. This is the apposite man-thing, humanism against choism” (p. 45).

However, as mentioned earlier in this section, female students ranked the contribution of the religious sector at a noticeably lower level than any other group of participants. The interview study with this group revealed two findings which may explain this difference:



- A. A finding which confirms the observation of Almandil (1999), Al-Naeem (2002) and others, that there is a prevalent feeling amongst Saudi undergraduate females regarding the existence of a variation in supply with educational provisions in comparison with the opposite sex.
- B. A finding related to the understanding of Saudi undergraduate females is that the religious sector, despite its important role in maintaining the faith of believers, is mostly an external group of stakeholders as far as the academic structure and function of higher education is concerned. For example they said:

“There is a difference between this sector and, for example, the employers’ sector, where the latter may inspire academic and professional groups which are directly responsible for the development of curricula through modern systematic planning and research. Further, it is these latter groups which help students to develop their employability skills, and not the religious sector as such.”

Like male students, the vast majority of the members of the three other groups of interviewees, namely, teaching staff, academic managers and graduates, expressed opinions suggesting that the role of the religious sector in the development of undergraduate curricula in Saudi Arabia is an important one. Furthermore, this role has actually been well investigated and judged by several teams of distinguished educationists over about half a century (Shalabi, 1987; Al-Sheik, 1992), besides being ultimately in agreement with the ethics and moral practices of Islam.

A statement by a member of teaching staff may exemplify this general belief outlined in the above paragraph.

“The fact of the matter is that every system of life adopted by the Saudi Kingdom is fundamentally based on the principles of Islam. This literally means that the religion is expected to appropriately modulate the values of all Saudis at all levels of social and cultural development, including the higher education level. There is no doubt that the sector responsible for religious education plays an important role in determining suitable curricula at every level. But may I add that in practice this activity often takes place in total collaboration with other relevant sectors and especially the teaching staff and academic managers.”

It is perhaps understood by the reader that in a conventional society like that of Saudi Arabia, some unavoidable traditional factors are expected to play a very important role in many aspects of life (Niblock, 1982; Al-Farsi, 1991; Alghafis, 1992), regardless of actual demand for urgent economic development (Alkhoul, 1985; Algozaibi, 1995; IEU, 1996; Al-Kahtani, 1998a and b).

The researcher should also mention that the mores and religious values referred to above constitute a pre-eminent part of all the higher education programmes of successive development plans in the Kingdom. For example, the Fourth Development Plan (1985-1990) provided an excellent exposition of the role and responsibility of the religious sector (Ulama or religious leaders) in this respect:

“The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has, since its inception, followed the Shariáh as its governing code. As a protector of the holy places, it has a particular duty to Islam and the Islamic states to preserve Islamic values and to defend the religion through the religious and judicial affairs agencies. The religious affairs agencies are responsible for the Holy Mosque in Makkah and the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. They receive Muslim students from all over the world and train them to be Ulama in their own countries. Other activities include religious guidance to enforce public morality, and the propagation of the faith” (KSA, 1985).

In the ensuing Fifth Development Plan (1990-1995) the main role and objectives were expressed as follows:

“The material and social objectives of the education curriculum in the kingdom are based on the Islamic values and cultural heritage of Saudi society, and constitute the cornerstone of long-term development. All previous development plans placed emphasis on inculcating these values in citizens and on imparting to them the knowledge and skills that will enable them to participate effectively in all social, economic and cultural activities” (KSA, 1990, p. 255).

Thus, education and Islam are firmly joined and their principles are mingled (Ali, 1987, 1992; Cook, 1999). Indeed, the first general objective and strategic basis of the Sixth Development Plan (1995-2000) made it a priority

“to safeguard Islamic values by duly observing, disseminating and confirming Allah’s Shariáh (God’s Divine Law)” (KSA, 1995b, p.13).

Despite the distinguished position of Saudi Arabia among Arab and other Muslim countries (for example, by virtue of being custodian of the holiest of all sacred locations), the role of the religious sector in the development of undergraduate curricula perhaps remains the same (Sardar, 1984; Qasem, 1990,1995; Al-Sonbul and Abdel-Jawad, 1993; Ali, 1998). For example, a Jordanian educationist (Asad, 1996) approves of the important role of the religious sector in innovation, motivation and development of curricula at all levels. His main argument is that:

“Educational systems - including the higher education one - are a cultural product of the nation, an outcome of its history and development, a means for the fulfilment of its needs, and a tool for change and progress. Therefore, such systems are expected to vary with the variation of philosophies and aims of different nations. It is customary that each nation would lay the foundation of its own educational system which responds to the requirements of its society” (p.24).

The opinions of the vast majority of the respondents (both in the questionnaire and interview studies), as well as ideas expressed in relevant documents, indicate that the religious sector does actually play a very important role in the development of university curricula in Saudi Arabia. However, this role is uniquely purposeful; that is, the nature of the intellectual pursuits in this area is obviously orientated towards promulgation of the Islamic faith indiscriminately among all the devotees of this religion. In other words, the interest of the religious sector in curriculum programmes is not specifically focused on the enhancement of total quality or the development of graduate employability and a relevant agenda of general skills. It is, rather, on building the learner's personality through the reinforcement of critical thinking, promotion of social cohesion and, consequently, better reconciliation of competing influences and social control.

To sum up, many of the study respondents agreed that religiousness (and not religiosity) is an effective means of strengthening the ties among the members of higher education stakeholders. This, they thought, should help promote self-control as well as social control, besides maintaining a positive attitude among them, thereby improving their performances.

### **7.5 The Role of Other Stakeholder Groups**

The chief aim of question no.9 of the questionnaire inquiry was to discover if there is a discernible involvement in the process of undergraduate curriculum development by groups and sub-groups of stakeholders other than discussed in previous sections, whether internal or external to the context of Saudi higher education. The question was presented to the respondents in the following style:

*“Do you know of any other group of stakeholders that participates in the development of undergraduate curricula in Saudi universities? If yes, please name it.”*

It seems that only a small proportion of the overall population of participants (11%) know that there are other groups involved in curricula development in Saudi universities. The responses of different study groups in this respect comprise Table 7.3.

**Table 7.3:** Respondents’ knowledge about the involvement of other groups of stakeholders in curricula development in Saudi universities

	Male students	Female students	Graduates	Teaching staff	Academic managers	Total
Yes	19	1	5	9	12	46
No	235	37	40	28	19	359
Total	254	38	45	37	31	405

The data in the above table suggest that the information available to most members of the junior groups (male and female students) is much less than to senior groups (teaching staff and academic managers). As for the graduates, it is possible to say that they may occupy an intermediate position in this respect.

The answers of the interview respondents tend to support the above contention. For example, students predominantly claimed that there has been little development of the curricula taught by various departments of the Saudi universities since they were originally founded. Indeed, some of them even gave names for other groups, which in most cases corresponded to those already mentioned in the previous three questions (higher education stakeholders, employers and the religious sector).

A few respondents among the graduate sample believed that there are other important groups whose ideas already are, or may, in the near future, contribute to the development of undergraduate curricula in Saudi universities. They identified these as relevant government organisations, national and international private companies and a specialised research team for every discipline included in the teaching programme of Saudi universities.

Even more careful consideration and specific knowledge about the involvement of other groups in curricula development in Saudi Arabia were reflected in the responses of some members of the teaching staff and academic managers. They independently listed the following groups as if they were or still are, contributing to this task:

- A. Government bodies, such as Saudi academic, scientific, agricultural, medical and cultural councils or agencies.
  
- B. Peer committees from similar departments in the Gulf and other Arabian and Moslem states, as well as from selected Western universities, such as those in the USA and UK. The collaboration of King Saud University with MUCIA (the Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities) was mentioned as an example (Saegh *et al*, 1995).
  
- C. Saudi, other Arabian and Moslem, and foreign specialists in undergraduate curriculum development, in particular, and national development, in general. For example, from ABEGS, ALESCO, IESCO and UNESCO.

D. The private sector, as exemplified by big companies such as ARAMCO.

Some graduate and a few student interviewees mentioned an area that the researcher believes is worthy of being added to the relevant evidence. They referred to the possible contribution of a number of government, as well as private enterprises, which run particular services or projects pertinent to the nature of subject-related competencies of the undergraduate programmes offered by the university. The main reason for this belief, they claimed, was based on their own experience. For example, some of the students interviewed had recently been registered as voluntary trainees and found the knowledge of their expert trainers worthwhile in improving some aspects of their practical learning. Therefore, such extra-curricular activity deserves to be taken into consideration in the process of development of the curricula in their departments.

Some graduate interviewees reflected on their job performance and how some skills and attributes acquired from other groups through work-related training are very useful. They suggested that such competencies should constitute part of the programme adopted by Saudi higher education for the development of persons well fitted for service as soon as they graduate. For example, one of them revealed to the researcher his own experience, remarking that:

“When you start working you begin the task of testing the power or usefulness of the competencies you acquired while undertaking the university course. Here you often face no serious obstacles with transferring the disciplinary skills to the work environment. In contrast, it is those very general skills which the academic programmes have hardly paid attention to that emerge as extremely important factors in the employee's performance and reputation, such as the ability to adopt oneself to the team work conditions, professionalism, communication, reasoning, networking, decision-making, and so forth.”

It is true that until recently the above area of university student development did not receive sufficient attention by many departments of the higher education institutions, whether in Saudi Arabia (Khateeb, 1994,1999; Al-Saloom, 1995; Murtada, 1996), other Gulf states (ABEGS, 1994,1998; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999) or other Arab countries (Nofal, 1992, 1997; Qasem, 1995,1998; ALESCO, 1998,2000). However, the potential of this particular area has already been recognised by the Saudi government which listed it among the policies of the Saudi Development Plan (2000-2004):

“Enhancing students’ awareness of the importance of voluntary services and encouraging them to participate in voluntary activities through organizing training courses to upgrade their skills and capabilities” (KSA, 2001, p. 263).

There is no doubt that the Saudi higher education system is currently challenged with alleviating the specific problem of the huge increase in the number of new students graduating from secondary schools (Al-Medhari, 1998; Al-Karni, 1999; KSA, 2000a,b and c, 2001). The Saudi government is undoubtedly aware of the magnitude and consequence of this problem and is openly debating it through its official documents, such as those related to the Seventh Development Plan, from which the following excerpt is taken:

“The steady increase of enrolment in universities in excess of their absorptive capabilities has led to a decline in internal and external efficiency. This is reflected in the increased number of years spent by students until graduation and inconsistency between the qualifications of graduates of some specializations and those required by the labour market. Hence, efforts should be intensified during the Seventh Development Plan to improve the internal and external efficiency of this sector” (KSA, 2001, p. 261).

It is reasonable to say that an appreciable number of study respondents did recognise the existence of several overlapping fields of interest between the higher



education institutions and other social organisations, and that the mutual interaction between them should be reflected in the developmental process of undergraduate curricula. However, these fields have often not been systematically explored and utilised for the purpose of enhancing quality in higher education and graduate employability throughout developing countries, especially in comparison with the situation in developed countries (Windle, 1999; Barnett, 2000; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Henkel, 2000). This is more or less the case whether in Saudi Arabia (Addawood, 1996; Al-Khedair, 1999; Al-Oda, 1999), other Gulf states (Al-Jalal, 1996; ABEGS, 1998; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999), other Arabian countries (Fatoni, 1997; Nofal, 1998; Qasem, 1998), or indeed, throughout the Third World (Shahidullah, 1991; Khalaf, 1994; Al-Shami, 1997).

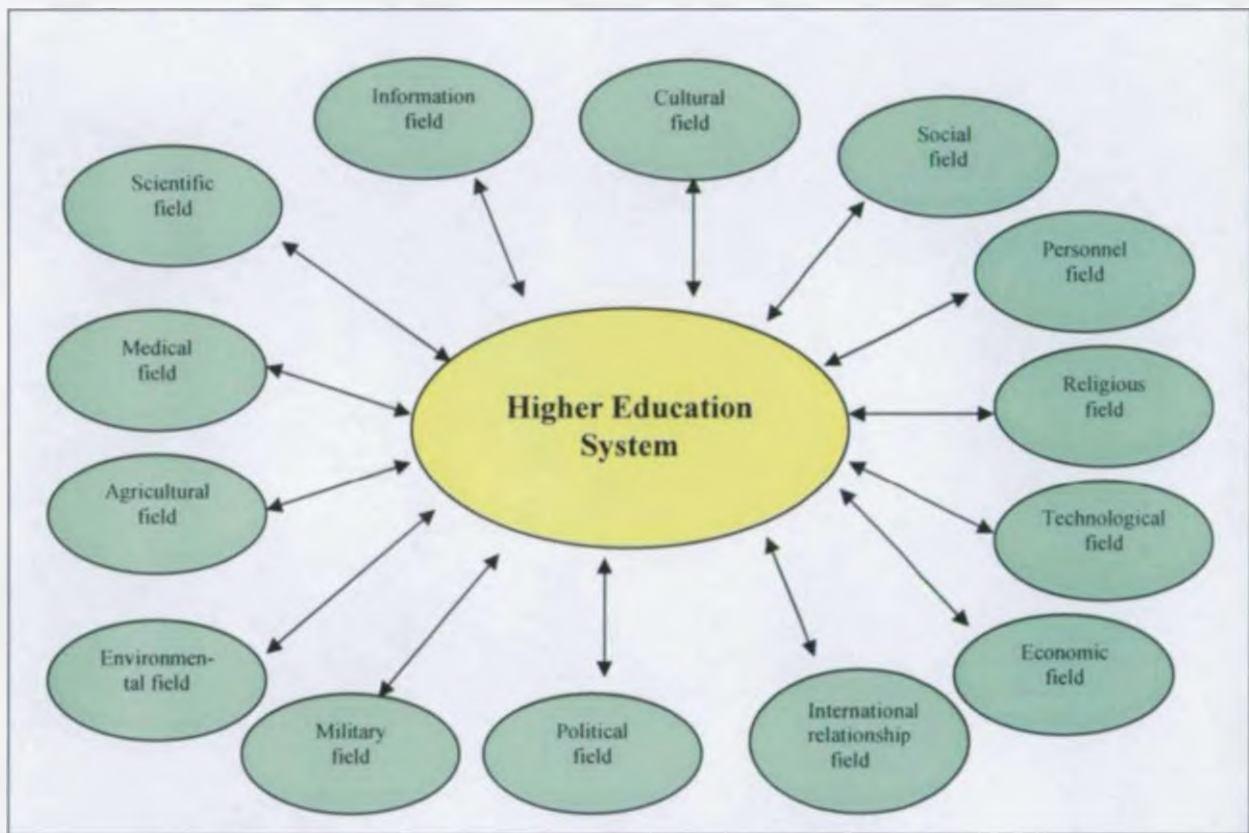
As far as the researcher can discern the possible bodies referred to above by Saudis and non-Saudis in connection with the higher education system, which might have an impact on its curricula, are social organisations. This is to say, they are inseparable parts of its broad contextual environment (Figure 7.2).

In the opinions of the most prominent educational organisations in the Arab World, such as ABEGS (1994,1998), ALESCO (1998,2000), and IESCO (Al-Shami, 1997), consolidation of efforts between the university and its environment, for various purposes including curriculum development, should become an essential part of its responsibility and challenge during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this respect, the present General Director of ALESCO (Al-Sahbani, 2001) remarks that:

“The relationship between the university and its environment presents a number of characteristics relevant to its nature as a teaching establishment committed to the development and provision of specialised personnel demanded by the community in various fields

(which emerge as a result of the environment's pressure on the university in order to meet its requirements). These fields are scientific, economic, social, personal, environmental, cultural, political and informational" (p. 44).

As the researcher has shown throughout various sections of this chapter, the study participants referred to the representatives of some of these fields when mentioning the possible contribution of different groups of stakeholders to the development of undergraduate curricula and graduate employability in Saudi Arabia.



**Figure 7.2:** A perception of the relationship between higher education and the fields of other social organisations with potential relevance to the development of undergraduate curricula. (Based on information and interpretation in: Radi *et al.*, 1994; Al-Shami, 1997; ABEGS, 1998; ALESCO, 1998,2000; Al-Shahrany, 1998; Al-Sahbani, 2001).

## 7.6 Frequency of Evaluation by Different Committees

Table 7.4 condenses the responses of different participants to research question no.10 of the questionnaire inquiry, which asked about the intervals at which the undergraduate curricula of different study departments are evaluated by each of professional, governmental and international committees.

It was found that as many as one-third of the students (male and female), graduates and teaching staff did not know when the undergraduate curricula in their departments were evaluated by any of the three committees named in the inquiry. Further, only about 10% of the students and graduates could identify the period when the evaluation actually took place, compared to about half of the samples of teaching staff and academic managers.

**Table 7.4:** Percentage responses for the frequency of evaluation of undergraduate curricula by different committees

Committee	Male students			Female students			Graduates			Teaching staff			Academic managers		
	Years			Years			Years			Years			Years		
	1-2	3-5	5+	1-2	3-5	5+	1-2	3-5	5+	1-2	3-5	5+	1-2	3-5	5+
Professional	65	13	22	67	0	33	40	0	60	68	21	11	75	19	6
Governmental	32	15	53	0	0	100	0	0	0	30	70	0	40	60	0
International	0	11	89	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	14	14	72
Number of respondents	23			3			5			19			14		
( % of total respondents)	(9)			(8)			(11)			(51)			(45)		

Students and graduates mostly thought that professional and international committees had evaluated the curricula under consideration in the last 1-2 years and 7

years, respectively, while evaluation by government committees, to their knowledge, was in the last 5-7 years.

The overall response of teaching staff and academic managers shows a somewhat different pattern from that outlined above for students and graduates. According to these senior groups, the undergraduate curricula in their departments are evaluated regularly, that is, more than once during the last 7 years by every one of the three aforementioned committees.

The outcome of the interview study on students and graduates confirmed the questionnaire findings. For example, that their knowledge on this issue of committees' involvement in the evaluation of undergraduate curricula was incoherent to a considerable degree and perhaps even in the best cases, only based on their tentative perceptions. Thus, where participants have responded to the question, the information provided seems to have been inferred from some relevant activities they recalled happening in their departments. A few of the interviewees mentioned that their information was obtained from teaching staff and government officials. Even fewer claimed to know about this issue from other sources such as pamphlets, circulars, leaflets and year books published by their departments, colleges or universities.

As for the interviewees among the teaching staff and academic manager groups, it was noticed that many of them welcomed the evaluation of various aspects of the Saudi higher education system, including themselves, as it already happened on some occasions (Al-Aridh, 1994; Saegh *et al*, 1995; Al-Naji, 1998; Al-Medlej, 1997). Generally, it is possible to say that their opinions agree with each other and also conform with the quantitative data. For example, that the undergraduate curricula in

their departments are evaluated regularly by the relevant committees of specialists. Further, that the evaluation by professional and government committees, that is, those formed within the departments, colleges, universities or Ministry of Higher Education, often take place at shorter intervals of 1-2 or 3-5 years, whereas, international committees' evaluation was said to be at longer intervals, sometimes of up to 7 years.

A staff member qualified in education curricula and methods of teaching carefully explained to the researcher his insights into the significance of such an evaluation. He said:

“The process of development of a particular curricular programme is extremely important, but at the same time is complex. Its theoretical design heavily depends on the previous national and international knowledge and experiences in the field under consideration, while its application is subject to the human and physical resources to hand. As for its main indicators of development, they are certainly factors involved in the process of evaluating it in terms of teaching and learning processes and by teams of specialists. The more professional and expert their members are in a particular programme the better the final outcome of the evaluation is predicted to be.”

The perceptions of the senior groups in the study, as outlined above, seem to be in general agreement with the published data regarding the very great need for evaluation of curricula in Saudi universities (Al-Najada, 1994; Al-Karni, 1995; Al-Subahi and Banjer, 1997; Al-Babtin, 1998) and both are strongly motivated by the policy of the Saudi government regarding improvement of curricula. The key issues of this policy have been concisely discussed in successive development plans (KSA, 1995, 1990, 1996a, 2001) as well as documents reflecting on the objectives, strategies and achievements of such plans (KSA, 1993, 1995b, 1998a, 2000c). This also seems to be the general policy adopted by other Arab States (Fatoni, 1997; Madkour, 1998; Hindi

and Alyan, 1999; Bokahos, 2000) and perhaps many other developing countries too (Bengston, 1989; Simpson, 1994; Bennell and Segerstrom, 1998).

Thus, among the general policies and main programmes of the Fifth Development Plan (1990-1995) the issue of improving the instruction and quality of education through curriculum evaluation was clearly stated in a number of initiatives.

For example:

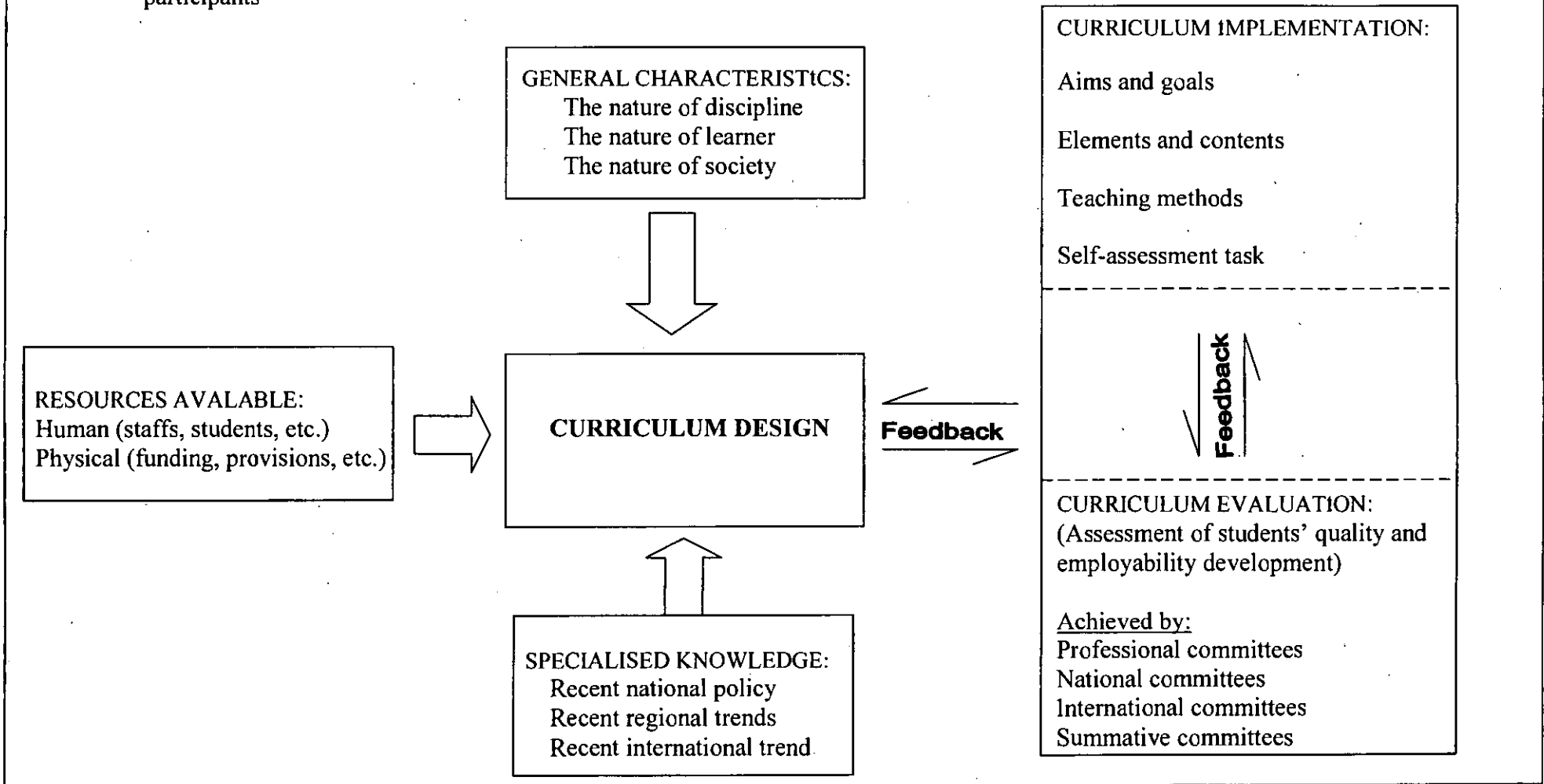
“Effective evaluation methods will be implemented to monitor the quality of education and the performance of students in terms of specific competencies related to the Kingdom’s development needs” (KSA, 1990, p. 266).

In sum, the researcher found that curriculum evaluation in study departments has actually received some attention by the relevant committees in recent years. Such a development seems to be in general agreement with government policy and to be welcomed, especially by senior groups of participants (Figure 7.3). However, junior participants know little about curriculum evaluation in their departments.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the undergraduate curricula within the Saudi higher education system have developed within a matter of a few decades from a handful of closely-related courses to hundreds of diversified ones. This relatively short period of time has witnessed not only the adoption of Western models by newly-established Saudi universities and colleges (Shabrami, 1996; Bayuk, 1987), but also creative thinking by national stakeholders and committees in finding many new courses, especially those of a linguistic, religio-philosophy, humanities and socio-cultural interest. In this chapter,

**Figure 7.3:** The processes of undergraduate curriculum design, development and evaluation; especially as perceived by the senior participants



the researcher focused upon the roles of different groups of stakeholders in influencing the processes of curriculum development and evaluation in recent years.

Analysis of the results obtained suggests that the senior groups of personnel (teaching staff and academic managers) work together closely and are also significantly involved in the relevant developmental processes. In contrast, the involvement of junior groups (students and graduates) is limited and, on average, even with the most affirmative responses taken into account, does not exceed a moderate extent.

Amongst external groups of stakeholders, the involvement of the religious sector in the process of curriculum development was found to be higher than that of employers. This is an area which raised considerable uncertainty among some respondents, especially female students. In the researcher's view, the religious sector is neither privileged in this regard nor is its role used as a concession to any kind of public denomination. Islam encourages dialogue and interpretation among all members of the community, and curriculum development in the context of higher education is an ideal realm for carrying out communication of high quality between spiritual teachers and university students. Thus, the interest in this case, in curriculum and its quality, is not for the purpose of improvement of graduate employability but to achieve greater social cohesion, for example, through more effective interpretation of religious ideas and to reconcile them with the reality of modern life.

Generally speaking, the respondents thought that the evaluation of undergraduate curricula in their departments by three specialised committees was fairly well planned, especially in terms of duration. A number of them also believed that there are other groups of stakeholders which, in one way or another, may contribute to the



process of curriculum development. But it is reasonable to conclude that several of these groups were often hesitantly named, and their possible areas of contribution to curriculum development were not confidently stated. In the researcher's judgement, the majority of these extra groups are not completely independent even in their members, from the ones already dealt with.

As discussed throughout the sections of this chapter, and reflected upon above, the overall extent and approach to undergraduate curriculum development in the context of the Saudi higher education system may look impressive. But undeniably there are issues of further concern and challenge which need to be addressed. Concluding from the analysis of participants' responses to the questionnaire and interview inquiry, as well as the study of relevant documentary sources, the most important of these issues in the researcher's opinion are the following:

- A. Like many other higher education systems throughout the world, the Saudi system is by no means withstanding the huge problem of the continual increase in the number of students who want to pursue a university education (Kisnawi, 1998; Al-Medhari, 1998; Al-Khedair, 1999). The participants wished for a further expansion of the system in various ways including disciplinary diversification, as well as utilising the multimedia pedagogy, in order to alleviate the problem. This unavoidably demands prompt development of undergraduate curricula both in terms of quantity and quality.
- B. The present study offered further substantiation that Saudi higher education for females is, in many respects, distinct from that for males. The female participants,

in particular, believed that such a distinction is not restricted to the range of specialties available (see 5.5.2) but also applies to general provision (Almandil, 1999; Al-Naeem, 2002; Al-Baker, 2002), student-staff relationships, curriculum development and even research (Majed, 1992,1998). Rapid growth in this area surely requires radical planning and expansion, the provision of all the necessary facilities, and diversification and re-orientation of current programmes. Female graduates constitute half of the actual higher education product in developed countries (Nicolson, 1996; Morley, 1999). To satisfy the needs of female participants, it is about time that higher education in Saudi Arabia engaged in a similar pursuit.

- C. It appears from the participants' responses to the triangulation inquiry that an effective balance is far from being achieved in respect to the involvement of different groups of Saudi stakeholders in curriculum development. In view of the nature of this system and its responsibility to develop graduates to meet the demands of the whole society, perhaps as well as to fulfil the aspirations of future generations of the Saudi Kingdom, its senior stakeholders (mainly teaching staff and academic managers) should always have an upper hand in the determination of subject-related curricula. However, the opinions and interests of all other groups, such as students, the religious sector, employers and others, should also be taken into consideration. This approach clearly allows for a better relationship between all these groups and therefore it should help to fulfil the obligations of Saudi higher education to provide for satisfactory student development.

D. In order to closely monitor the situation within the context of the Saudi higher education system, to maintain momentum in the process of undergraduate curriculum development and further shape it according to the needs of its community, such courses of study must be subject to systematic and coherent assessment by specialised committees. The schedule for each type of committee should be well worked out (for example, for the national committees every 1-2 years and for the international committees, every 3-5 years). The outcomes in both cases should be subjected to evaluation and be quickly analysed in order to make propositions available to all concerned, including students, graduates and even external groups of stakeholders. There is no organisation which is capable of maintaining a stability in quality and standards despite changes in its surrounding environment.

**CHAPTER 8**

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAUDI UNDERGRADUATES'**  
**EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS**

## 8.1 Introduction

This chapter reports and discusses the results of participants' responses to the last part of the questionnaire and interviews, as well as relevant documentary sources. The five questions employed in the final section of the questionnaire focus on employability and its significance as an indicator of curriculum quality. They also ask about the way that certain skills, which are often labelled employability skills, are developed in Saudi higher education. The desirability of such competencies for undergraduates and their differential advantages to graduates, as perceived by different groups of stakeholders will be dealt with too.

Throughout this thesis employability has been referred to as if it is a type of pragmatic expression of quality in higher education, specifically to better prepare graduates as a workforce. The researcher believes that this is reasonable on the assumption that the employability concept is potentially capable of fulfilling the following educational and career-development functions:

- A. Bringing about a focus for purposeful debate with all relevant groups of internal stakeholders (Barnett, 2000; Brennan *et al*, 2001; Rust, 2001), an essential activity that could generally inform the processes of teaching, learning and research in the context of higher education.
- B. Meeting the needs of many more students through better planning, management and application of undergraduate curricula (Joostens *et al*, 1993), with a focus on implementation (Armstrong *et al*, 1997) and review (Fallows and Steven, 2000), as well as better selection of transferable skills portfolios or a range of

diversified sets of general skills, attributes and knowledge to be embedded in mainstream courses (Atlay and Harris, 2000; Morey, 2000; Raven and Stephenson, 2002).

- C. Providing undergraduates with a better choice of study programmes (various designs of courses or modules) many, if not all of which are influenced by the work-related mode of teaching, learning and skills development (Bailey *et al*, 1999; Purcell *et al*, 1999a and b; Harvey *et al*, 2002).
- D. Motivating undergraduates to take a more active role in their learning, self-evaluation and personality development (AGR, 1999; Harvey, 2002; Spencer and Schmelkin, 2002), since it is the impact of such quality that will help them upon graduation to present themselves as more attractive and marketable subjects.
- E. Enhancing the employment rate of new graduates through matching their qualifications and abilities with the requirements of employers (Witte and Kalleberg, 1995; Silvestri, 1997; Mason *et al*, 2000).
- F. Advising the bodies responsible for higher education funds to view the realistic demands of workforce development, as part of the growth of the work markets, industry, business, media and social services (Dearing, 1997; Harris, 2001; NCWE, 2002). That is to say, employability development aids should be treated as requisite qualities for any successful plan and for national (governmental and private) initiatives.

The reader of this thesis will notice that some of these points were raised with the subjects of this study. What this characterisation of employability development tends to suggest is that in today's turbulent world of work, in which there are significant fluctuations in employment patterns, more than ever before undergraduate curricula need to be accurately modified, for example, in order to deliver employability skills to individual students. Elements of discipline need to be expertly combined in curricula with general competencies, and managed in such a way that employability itself becomes a rational tool for the assessment of graduates' strengths and weaknesses or the "level of quality" of a particular institute.

There are already available a number of ideas presented both by academic researchers (Thurow, 1997; Teichler, 1998, 1999a and b, 2002; Harvey, 2000,2001; Smith *et al*, 2000) and official organisations (AGCAS, 1999; AGR, 1999; CSU, 2000; DfEE, 2000; HEFCE, 2000c, 2001, 2002), that tend to treat the issue of employability as a series of linked issues that are looked upon as closely related educational, economic and sociological factors. This indicates that the action over any one of the above factors will influence the others. Thus, in describing the world of assessment and evaluation of prior and experiential learning, Evans (2000) reflected on the unique role of the concept of employability by saying that:

"There are two groups of factors: the global economy and equity. The first is essentially about productivity, competition, skills, skill shortages and how to correct them. The second is about labour market factors-employment and unemployment levels, pay and conditions, labour mobility and the changing distribution of occupations across the entire working population and the effect all that has on society generally. These two ways of looking at national policy overlap-the economic and the sociological. They even interlock, and one interlocking mechanism is employability. It is not inconceivable that the concept of employability can inform policies for lifelong learning, to give substance to the rather vacuous rhetoric which is used to trumpet the idea" (p. 200).

If sceptical elements about employability in the above quotation are put aside, it is possible to recognise that the current approach to this concept emphasises the importance of students' interests, aspirations and interactions with relevant stakeholders and encourages better performance and high quality education (Bennett *et al*, 2000; Harvey *et al*, 2000). Any change in the domain of higher education, which is bound to improve employability, is undoubtedly favoured by the work market and may prove its success for graduates in the short term. This is certainly a step forward compared with the trend in thinking just over a decade ago when many processes pertinent to the development of undergraduate education were looked upon as being characterised by elusiveness and thereby difficult to work out sufficiently for their specific requirements. For example, in reflecting on this basic educational challenge, Squires (1990) argued that:

“Development is currently one of those halo words which tends to disarm our critical faculties, whether in the field of economics, psychology or education. It implies that there is something to be developed; that the development of that something can be at least partly planned and influenced; and that such development is, by definition, for the better” (p. 123).

The main concern of this chapter is to present the data obtained on employability skills, attributes and knowledge in the Saudi Arabian context. Multi-dimensional evidence, that the researcher accepted as the best available, was produced for example, by collecting firsthand information relevant to how and why some competencies are developed by undergraduates in their study departments. Thus, this chapter places emphasis on the feasibility of considering employability as a realistic indicator of curriculum quality, the elements that make employability a factor of

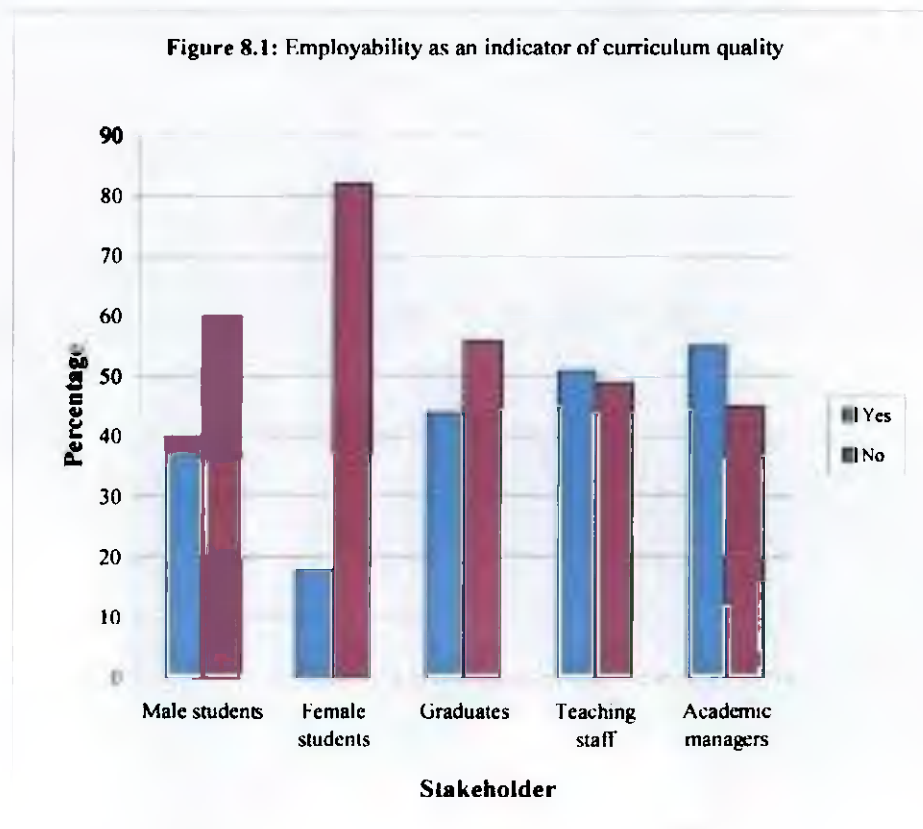


significance in undergraduate curricula, the value placed by respondents on employability skills, and the importance of a wide range of such competencies.

The chapter ends with a conclusion summarising the main points on the issue of employability. Particular emphasis is placed on the development of skills and attributes among Saudi university students and the ways they may help to improve both educational quality and employment opportunities.

## 8.2 Is Employability an Indicator of Curriculum Quality?

In response to question no. 11 of the main questionnaire inquiry (see Appendix 1), employability is thought to be an indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality in the context of the Saudi higher education system by just over 40% of the total number of respondents. Figure 8.1 details the responses of various groups of stakeholders in this respect.



The data in the above figure shows that female students think significantly differently from other Saudi stakeholders, since only about 18% of them consider employability as an indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality. In contrast, between 40-55% of respondents from other groups think that there is an association between employability and curriculum quality. The above gender variation may be partially explained on the basis (amongst other factors that will be discussed later in relation to the problems facing Saudi female students) that the prospects of female students getting degree-level jobs are significantly less than those of male students.

A chi-square test of the association between stakeholders and indicators of employability showed that there is an association between stakeholders and employability as an indicator at a 5% level of significance (see Appendix 3).

The interview sessions were useful in shedding more light on the pattern of participants' responses regarding the question of whether or not employability should be considered as an indicator of curriculum quality. However, the researcher occasionally found his qualitative discussions with interviewees focused on a comparison between the feasibility of quality and employability in this respect, that is, which of them is most capable of being carried out practically.

The vast majority of the members of two of the study groups, namely male students and graduates, expressed views suggesting that in the system adopted by Saudi Arabia the differences between the processes attributed to the development of quality in higher education and employability of graduates are hardly distinguishable from each other. The outlook of these participants is exemplified by what an individual in a group of undergraduates said:

“Assuming that the circumstances are ideal in respect to the notion of your question, it really does not matter whether you measure the graduates’ employability and consider it as an indicator of curriculum quality or you measure the quality of a particular higher education programme offered to undergraduates and consider it as an indicator of employability. This indicates that both of the issues under consideration are closely related to undergraduate curricula and presumably each is capable of reflecting the status of the other. However, which of them is most convenient to measure is difficult for us to tell unless they are put into practice and compared side by side in our educational system.”

Graduate interviewees also affirmed that despite the fact that this issue of employability development is new to them, they feel there is a low risk of mistakenly thinking of it as being closely related to curriculum quality. Indeed, one of them categorically stated that:

“Quality and employability in the field of higher education seem to me to be so alike that it is possible to describe them as being two sides of one coin. That is why I credit them equally and believe that each could serve as an indicator of the other.”

Some academic managers with little or no teaching experience appeared to the researcher to be influenced by an idea similar to that expressed above by male students and graduates. That is, they consider employability as an indicator of curriculum quality and vice versa. According to one of them:

“Curriculum quality can be represented by a few other measurable criteria, like the performance of various groups of stakeholders and perhaps employability development is one of them. This is a new and apparently good novelty, that is, if it really can bring about greater student involvement in, and responsibility for the learning task and study skills.”

However, more than half of the respondents among the group of academic managers agreed with the majority of teaching staff. That is, all these interviewees look upon the process of development of graduate employability as being more specific than that of curriculum quality. A proponent of this idea stated:

“To tell you the truth, thinking about measuring curriculum quality is an ordeal for us. The speculative aspects in this process seem to dominate the practical ones. The latter could well be represented by employability development which would make assessment in the context of higher education more plausible.”

However, opponents of considering employability in terms of curriculum quality claimed to have a real issue in hand. They believe that such a suggestion is a major challenge and may undermine academic values in Saudi universities one way or another. For example, if the process of employability development is not accurately gauged with the demands of the work market and/or if the development of employability is not carried out in conjunction with the maintenance of higher education quality, things may turn out to be different from what is intended. One such interviewee summarised his opinion as follows:

“Post-secondary education in Saudi Arabia is fast growing into a multi-disciplinary and joint enterprise. There are already several sub-bachelor vocational colleges, and other colleges sponsored and directed by ministries other than the higher education one, such as industry, agriculture, health and defence. Several of the universities' colleges could be described as professional, such as education, medicine and allied branches and engineering. This suggests that such settings accept students more or less according to the nation's demand and that undergraduate curricula have been subjected to enormous changes. Thus, in the fields of the pure sciences, humanities, social studies, linguistic studies and similar disciplines, it is better to maintain a very high quality. Dealing with the conventional disciplinary curriculum as part of a checklist of vocational skills is not a good way of looking after quality in our institutions.”

A small number of respondents even indicated that employability is by no means an isolated phenomenon in the context of higher education. For example, graduates' employability might sooner or later, instead of developing in conjunction with quality in higher education, attempt to compete with it. Perhaps they considered this possibility because of the difficulties posed by the significant expansion of Saudi higher education, the increase of student numbers and the shortage of experienced staff (Saegh *et al*, 1995; Al-Medhari, 1998; Al-Abdulla, 2002). The important point here is that this batch of respondents do not see employability as a factor which might replace quality, but rather as an important aspect of it.

Another opponent looked upon the possibility of considering employability as an indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality from a different perspective. He posed the question:

“Don't you think on the basis of employability, which at the present time seems indistinguishable from the employment rate, that there will be more problems spotting brilliant students and encouraging them to be our future generation of innovative scientists? I reckon that in many Western universities they have strictly preserved this academic tradition in one way or another. But, of course, we are debating in the context of higher education and accept that the question should be considered from both angles. This is the most popular way in which the issue can progress positively.”

Many of the above issues concerning the association between curriculum quality and graduates' employability, uncovered by the researcher amongst respondents in the groups of teaching staff and academic managers, seem to echo the analysis of Western researchers over the past decade (Barba, 1995; Walker, 1995; Harvey and Knight, 1996). For example, Boccock and Watson (1994) reflected on this issue as follows:

“We have not fully justified our claim that the curriculum is a source of renewal of common cause. Despite the necessary concessions to interests which steer it in the direction of externally driven instrumentalities (‘professional’ requirements, ‘transferable skills’, even ‘enterprise’) we remain committed to that set of academic values which makes the curriculum a profoundly democratic area of activity. In devising its detail and content, presumptions of superiority on the basis of seniority or other standing within the institution fall. Questions of content are settled by argument between equals for this purpose and on merit. All contributors are members of an academic peer group” (p. 133).

As far as female students are concerned, the data which was displayed in Figure 8.1 and the analysis of the individual values of chi-square (Appendix 2) confirm that the responses of this group differ significantly from those of other participants. Indeed, the magnitude of such variation is so great that even when a new group was created by combining all students together (males and females), the chi-square test was still not significant at a 5% level (see Appendix 3). Therefore, it is justifiable to conclude that in females’ opinion there is not a strong correlation between employability and quality of undergraduate curricula and hence the former cannot be considered an indicator of the latter.

The outcome of an interview held with a group of 5 female students was comparable to the result obtained from their counterparts who responded to the questionnaire. Their view was:

“We feel that the issue of employability is somehow a separate activity from the implementation of much of the undergraduate curriculum. So, if such a curriculum is subjected to a change to deliberately encompass the process of curriculum development, it might lose much of its academic credibility.”

They clearly anticipate that excessive focus on the issue of employability is bound to convert the university into a mere technical institution, if not a centre for vocational training. Thus, in the exact words of one of them:

“Equating the quality of an academic programme offered by a particular university department with the employability of its graduates is like comparing the university professors with demonstrators in a private-company training centre.”

The researcher referred in the previous chapter (see 7.4 and 7.7) to some of the difficulties experienced by Saudi female undergraduates and their possible impact on the satisfaction of this group of stakeholders. It appears that the same applies to the female-student responses to the inquiries made in this section. The females' somewhat contrary answers to the research questions in the present study may be attributed to the existence of a distinction between the men and women studying and working in Saudi Arabia. This point will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (see 8.5.2).

### **8.3 The Significance of the Employability Issue in the Curriculum**

Table 8.1 shows the response to question no. 12, regarding the significance of the issue of employability in undergraduate curricula. The responses designated highly significant and significant were combined together into one “significant” category, while those of little significance and no significance were combined into one category entitled “of no significance”, in order to obtain more meaningful numbers of responses for different scales in the measurement of significance.

Across all groups, over 70% of respondents viewed the issue of graduates' employability as of significant value in undergraduate curricula. This is reflected in the average scores for all the groups involved. The scores for both teaching staff and

academic managers are the same at 1.74, followed by the scores for male students and graduates, respectively. The score for female students (1.57) is the highest of all the scores obtained. Interestingly, this score contrasts with their previous response where they did not consider employability as an indicator of the quality of undergraduate curricula. It is likely that this shift in the females' opinion was a direct result of a greater seriousness on their part in responding to this question than the previous one.

**Table 8.1: Significance of employability as an issue in curricula**

Significance of employability	Male students		Female students		Graduates		Teaching staff		Academic managers	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Significant	178	70	32	84	34	76	27	70	24	77
Moderate	27	11	4	10	3	7	4	11	2	7
Of no Significance	32	13	1	3	7	16	5	14	5	16
Do not know	17	6	1	3	1	1	1	3	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Average*</b>	<b>1.97</b>		<b>1.57</b>		<b>2.08</b>		<b>1.74</b>		<b>1.74</b>	

- \* The average score is based on a five-point semantic scale and calculated excluding those who did not know.

A large proportion of participants asserted that it is self-evident that students enter higher education as a means of preparing themselves for a better career than they would otherwise achieve. This reason was clearly stated by the following male student:

“When I graduated from secondary school and came to university, I did so not only to obtain a quality education but also to be employed after graduation and be successful in carrying out my responsibilities towards my faith, nation and family. Both my four years' experience as an undergraduate student and my instinct tell me that this formula which connects curriculum quality and graduates' employability holds in more than mere speculation.”

The above approach to thinking obviously has a positive impact on female as well as male students. They openly expressed their views about the significance of



quality and employability being interlinked parts in the process of development of undergraduate curricula, with possible consequences for the progress of female higher education in Saudi Arabia. For example, a member of this group said:

“We see in such an association a significant advantage for Saudi undergraduates. But it is still necessary to comment that in order to maintain an effective balance between all the curricular components, there must be a commitment from all the responsible bodies to adequately provide for their simultaneous development, that is, in all the establishments of the Saudi higher education system, without any favouritism or distinction. Otherwise, we expect that there will be no unanimity of satisfaction either with quality or employability, as we revealed in relation to previous research questions in this study.”

All graduate interviewees rate highly those undergraduate curricula which simultaneously work on matters of discipline and the development of employability.

According to one of them:

“Just think how useful it would be for the Saudi graduates from many departments if their disciplinary curricula were systematically reinforced with an employability scheme. Perhaps a course in each of the last two years of the programme would be enough. I believe that such a change would enable graduates to know more about the job situation in the work market, how to approach employers in various governmental and private enterprises, and how to present themselves to them in terms of ability in a competitive environment.”

In bringing together the ideas presented by the academic manager interviewees, the researcher concluded that they also regard the relationship between employability and undergraduate curricula as very significant. As one of them stated:

“Gradually developing employability within the elements of disciplinary curricula may increase students’ awareness in more than one way. For example, it will help them to strengthen their personal abilities and skills, to evaluate their own employment sense which will enable them to identify the main problems within the work market, and finally, to apply theoretical concepts for the benefit of the jobs they undertake.”

The clarification provided by a member of the teaching staff perhaps indicates the way this group of interviewees look upon and rate the issue of employability development within the context of undergraduate curricula. His main remarks were:

“If you inspect the relevant national literature, whether that produced by official or by Saudi and non-Saudi academic researchers, you will be convinced that members of teaching staff always were in favour of allowing curriculum quality to develop first, hoping that graduates’ employability development would follow closely in parallel. I believe that any modern university which disregards the significance of this approach will be undermined by all groups of its own stakeholders. Perhaps the main difference here is that our higher education system is relatively new and that these three components (curriculum, quality and employability) are still far from being perfect in their interaction with each other. You would find it most useful to read the 1995 comprehensive report on the activities of King Saud University where you will notice that there are undeniably some serious problems confronting our efforts. But I should also emphasise that we are attempting to solve many if not all of these problems.”

The report referred to above was also mentioned during interviews with other members of the teaching staff, as well as two of the academic managers. It is a 267-page evaluation document (Saegh *et al*, 1995) which concerns itself with many activities of King Saud University before the mid-1990s. Information, mainly gathered from several self-assessment inquiries, was utilised in its preparation. Clearly, this report made a valid contribution to the debate on quality care and control in higher education institutions (AAU, 1991; Barnett, 1992; Green, 1994a), although it makes no mention of either of the two valuing concepts: key or general skills and employability. Despite its importance in describing the *status quo* of Saudi higher education, the report is not an isolated case in this respect. For example, the researcher has referred throughout this thesis to many more recently produced Saudi sources that provide little explanation for the link between curriculum quality and graduates’ employability.

Further, no data whatsoever was found in these sources that considers the latter concept as an indicator of the former.

#### **8.4 Appraisal by Respondents of Employability Skills**

Employability is a concept that comprises general or key skills, personal attributes and knowledge (Atkins, 1999; Bennett *et al*, 2000; see 3.3). Due to the fact that many of these competencies are transferable in nature and therefore likely to help undergraduate students in the process of developing their employment capability (Gibbs *et al*, 1994; CVCP, 1998; Shepherd, 2000; Strivens and Grant, 2000), as well as helping them to enter the work market with more confidence (EC, 1997; OECD, 1999; ILO, 2001), they are currently receiving significant attention in many universities of various countries.

Questions 13 and 14 of the questionnaire aimed specifically to examine the opinions of study respondents about a number of employability-labelled skills. Slightly different versions of the questions were posed to suit the position and responsibility of each group of stakeholders in the milieu of Saudi higher education system (see Appendix 1).

Analysis of the data obtained once more indicates that the response pattern for female students is significantly different from those of other groups. For example, only about 18% of female students seem to value the integration of employability skills into mainstream curriculum programmes. Further, only about the same percentage have ever been asked about the desirability of such skills. In contrast, approximately 40% of male students put a value on employability skills and a similar percentage of them have been asked about the desirability of these skills.

As for graduates' responses, about 44% of them evaluated employability skills as an essential factor in their employment task. Furthermore, 74% of them felt that these skills were actually developed in the undergraduate programmes they undertook themselves.

The responses of male students and graduates may, in a general sense, be understood in view of the findings revealed by the teaching staff and managers regarding their contribution to the development of employability skills. For example, just over 50% and 60% of the above two groups, respectively, appear to be practically contributing to the process of development of such skills within their respective teaching and managerial activities. Further, about 55% and 65% of these two groups, respectively, felt that employability skills are being developed in the undergraduate programmes they teach or the departments they manage.

The questionnaire findings were reinforced by the interviewees' comments. All the female students, without exception, affirmed that it is difficult for them to identify employability skills amongst other general skills or even reveal their particular desirability if asked about them. To start with, when they explained that the exact advantages of these skills is not clear beyond doubt to them, the researcher explained the importance of employability skills in helping graduates to secure career-orientated jobs (Harvey, 2000). On this issue one of them said:

“The name of some of these competencies may have been mentioned to us by our tutors every now and then but they were far from teaching them systematically or training to develop them either in the university or in other human resource development settings.”

A substantial number of male students, graduates and academic interviewees presented more informative views which help establish a causal connection between

employability skills and quality education. Many of them value these skills and see that they are developed to a certain extent in the departments of King Saud University. Indeed, some of them claim to have witnessed deliberations involving employability skills, but not necessarily as separate elements of the subject matter currently taught. For example, in the view of one male student:

“Certainly, I evaluate employability skills and have been asked about their desirability. But what I have become informed about so far is that the development of certain general skills is much more discernible in programmes of vocational colleges than in university ones.”

One graduate’s explained that he valued the development of employability skills in undergraduate curricula but did not feel that such skills were adequately developed in the programme he undertook. He witnessed that the present Saudi university curricula intentionally devote much more time to the development of subject-related knowledge than to other aspects of higher education. Thus, in describing his personal experience of such a programme, this graduate revealed that:

“It is true to say that there are not many gaps in the undergraduate curricula of a Saudi university department that would allow for systematic activity related to the development of employability skills. That is to say, curricula need to be critically modified to bring into action the vocational effect of these skills.”

The above thoughts by male students and graduates indicate that these stakeholders believe that the focus of Saudi universities is on the development of the theoretical basis and sense of innovation in their students. As for the development of professionalism, communication with the public and flexibility towards work, these are the responsibility of vocational colleges more than academic university colleges. In other words, male students and graduate interviewees believe that general skills in the

context of Saudi academic departments are developed as an integral part of subject matter, that is, through a knowledge-based curriculum.

There is a possibility that an increasing availability of background knowledge tends to put in the mind of Saudi youths that the development of general skills, including employability skills, separate from subject matter, is better achieved through technical education and training schemes (Albonyan, 1991; GOTEVOT, 1996; Alzalabani, 2002). Whether the task devoted to employability development is accomplished through the activities of some sort of hidden curriculum (Kuh, 1995; Bentley, 1998), incorporated within the domain of the assigned curriculum, or through systematic vocational courses or training, its purpose remains the same. Thus, an academic manager said:

“Development of employability skills is a means of increasing the student’s awareness, for example, by presenting to him or her extra relevant knowledge.”

In the opinion of Whitston (1998) key skills help to shape students’ knowledge and realisation in more than one way. He advocates that:

“Key skills are called upon to compensate for narrowness and early specialisation in schools, establish links between academic and vocational courses, provide transferable skills to complement subject knowledge, ensure a place for personal skills, and meet the need of employers for vocational relevance” (p. 317).

Another academic manager with more than a decade’s experience in teaching as well, claimed that he himself contributes to the development of employability skills. This interviewee also revealed to the researcher that he felt that such skills have been developed in the undergraduate programme of the department he manages:

“Let me give you an example from which you can conclude that employability skills are actually being developed in our department. A high percentage of our graduates each year secure professional occupations soon after graduation either in private or governmental enterprise. This hints that we are proportionally and strategically developing these skills in the programme offered to our undergraduates. So, if the demand for such skills increases, it is our duty to work accordingly.”

However, a third academic manager proclaimed that Saudi university programmes are largely dedicated to the development of discipline-related skills and not to general or employability skills as such. He explained the situation, as he knows it, in some of the departments of King Saud University:

“Approximately 65% of the teaching units are devoted to the specialised courses of the particular subject, 15% to basic and supplemental courses, 10% to languages (Arabic and English) and 10% to religious education.”

With reference to the comments of the teaching staff interviewees, it is possible to say that the vast majority of them contribute to the development of employability skills and that such skills are well developed in the courses they teach. But the researcher compared these interviewees' expressed views with the opinions of other stakeholders (which generally suggest that the development of employability skills is not adequate for the purpose of today's work market or development plan). These opinions are unlikely to be wrong since they are supported by a substantial body of evidence, in terms of comparison with what is happening in universities in developed countries (Fallows and Steven, 2000; Manson *et al*, 2000; Shepherd, 2000). Various research results show the massive difficulties facing Saudi undergraduate students (Al-Karni, 1994; Al-Ghamdi, 2001; Al-Baker, 2002), obstacles which prevent Saudi teaching staff and academic managers from perfecting their duties (Al-Shami, 1994;

Al-Aridh, 1994; Al-Khedair, 1999) and, finally, the overall assessment outcome by several Saudi researchers themselves (KSA, 1990-2001; Saegh *et al*, 1995; Al-Bibtin, 1998; KSU, 1999a, 2001).

The researcher also expressed his worries about deficiency in skills development to key members of the Saudi teaching staff interviewed. Consequently, if the process of development of general non-disciplinary skills in the programmes adopted by our national universities is not discernible to a measurable degree, evaluation in this context will be difficult, if not impossible.

A considerable number of teaching staff interviewees declared that the above view about development of general skills, including employability skills, by Saudi universities, underestimates the effort already being made in this respect. In his detailed explanation, a very experienced member of teaching staff revealed that:

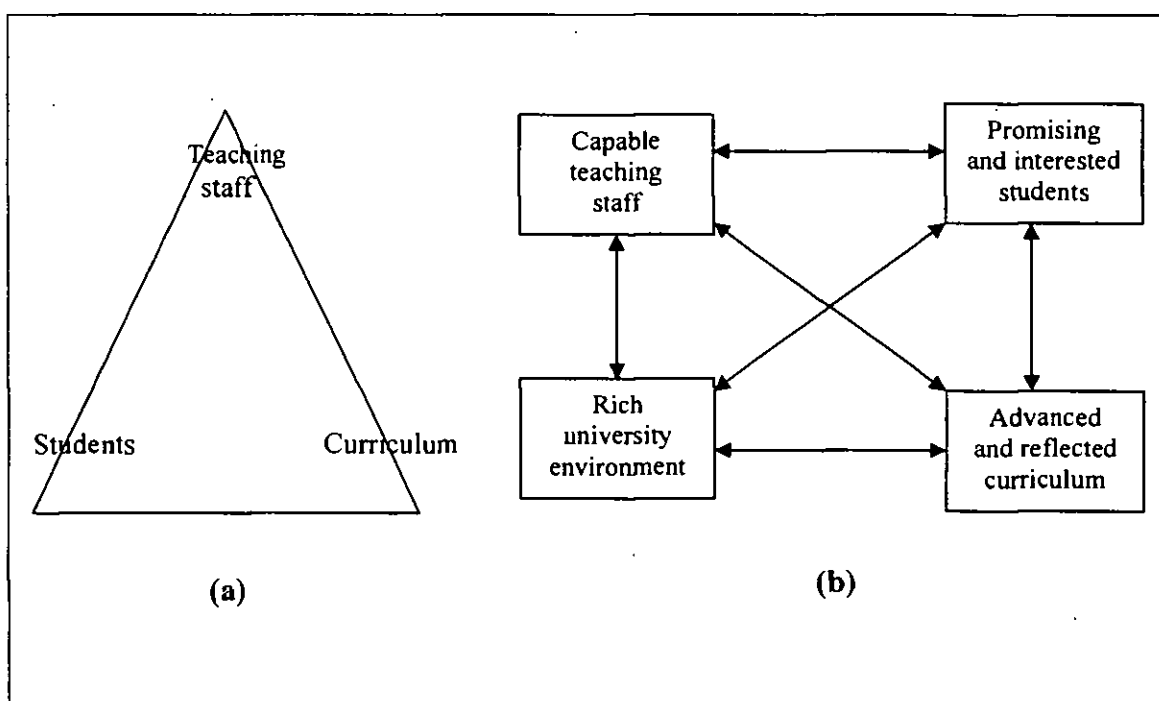
“I believe that Saudi higher education already manages to advance its teaching and learning process from a triadic into a quadratic model. That is to say, the above process is no longer dependent on just three factors (teaching staff, students and curriculum) but on an extra one, and that is the rich university environment. Here, you can add the enormous provision and facilities, as well as the efforts of other stakeholders. So, it is in the context of this comprehensive view that the development of any category of general or subject non-related skills must be understood. But this process is a dynamic one, meaning that all its factors are in a state of flux or continuous interaction, not only with each other but also with the outside world. Of course, if there is enough pressure for a particular set of skills to be developed more effectively than presently we should meet that demand to the best of our abilities.”

The two dynamic models of the teaching and learning process, referred to by the above interviewee, are demonstrated in Figure 8.2. It is easily understood from the view expressed above that the Saudi teaching staff themselves believe that their role in the teaching and learning task is a very important one. Nevertheless, this emphasises



the essential role, which could be played by other stakeholder groups, especially when the process of teaching and learning is coupled with adequate funds and provision.

There is a possibility that the members of the Saudi teaching staff may modify their strategy if the outcome of the evaluation regarding the quality and employability of output is not satisfactory; for example, if the purpose of the employment office and hence graduates are not of the standard that may fulfil the maximum contribution to the services demanded of them.



**Figure 8.2:** Two models of the dynamic process of teaching and learning. (a) the triadic model, which was until recently employed in Arabic universities (Zaitoni, 1997); (b) the quadrifid model, which is currently being adopted by Saudi universities (Al-Khedair, 1999).

### 8.5 The Importance of Different Skills to Employability

International higher education systems are currently actively engaged in the identification, circulation and examination of a very long list of general skills (DfEE, 1998a; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Keep and Mayhew, 2001; Little, 2003). These skills

are actually of a variety of types, whether in terms of their nature or the impact on students' education and employability development (see Chapter 3).

In question no 15, the groups of respondents were asked to rank the importance of different types of general skills, such as key or core skills, intellectual skills, career management skills, self-sufficiency skills, personal attributes, academic knowledge, awareness of national and international issues and awareness of religious beliefs and values, in terms of their relation to the issue of employability of Saudi graduates. Because of the complexity of the question, and analysis of the responses obtained, the results are presented and discussed separately for each group of stakeholders for the above checklist of skills.

#### **8.5.1 Male Students**

Table 8.2 shows the ranking of, and average score for different skills by male students. This group of stakeholders allocates almost equal ranking to self-sufficiency skills and career management skills for employability. Academic knowledge and awareness of national and international issues are seen by the members of this group to be neither important nor unimportant factors. Other skills types were favoured by study participants with rankings between the above two extremities.

Generally speaking, male student interviewees valued the competencies in the same order as their questionnaire-studied counterparts. That is to say, they gave highest importance to personality-related skills (self-sufficiency skills and career management skills) and least importance to academic knowledge and awareness of national and international issues. The other three types of skills were given intermediary degrees of importance.

**Table 8.2: Ranking of different skills in order of their importance to employability  
(Male students)**

	Extremely Important (1)	Very Important (2)	Neither Important nor unimportant (3)	Not very Important (4)	Not at all Important (5)	Average
Skills type	Number of male students (%)					
Self-sufficiency skills	112 (44)	84 (33)	42 (17)	12 (4)	4 (2)	1.89
Career management skills	97 (38)	100 (39)	40 (16)	16 (6)	1 (1)	1.91
Key or core skills	87 (34)	103 (41)	40 (16)	13 (5)	11 (4)	2.05
Intellectual skills	75 (30)	115 (45)	39 (15)	20 (8)	5 (2)	2.07
Awareness of religious beliefs and values	89 (35)	73 (29)	54 (21)	22 (9)	16 (6)	2.22
Personal attributes	71 (28)	97 (38)	48 (19)	28 (11)	10 (4)	2.25
Awareness of national and international issues	40 (16)	83 (33)	74 (29)	47 (18)	10 (4)	2.60
Academic knowledge	30 (12)	85 (33)	78 (31)	52 (20)	9 (4)	2.70

A group of students revealed that they are guided in their evaluation of skills provided by their conscious more than their practical experience with each one of them, as the citation below for one of them reveals:

“It really seems awfully difficult for us to understand how it is possible for any individual type of skills in the list you provided to be developed. I am saying that because in the programme offered by our department the development of these skills is neither distinct for any individual one of them nor from the development of subject matter itself. Yet, the task of treating a limited number of these skills in accordance with which one is more favourable to us than others appears easier than I originally thought.”

In the light of the thinking approach revealed by the above male student, it is possible to say that this group of stakeholders evaluates employability skills. Their

feeling is that they will perform better in their studies with a teaching and learning programme that employs the correct checklist of job-related competencies than with one devoid of them. That is to say, students' perceive employability skills as a source for both their flexibility and heightening their ability to learn their expected work more quickly. For example, in the words of one of them:

“It is likely that if the research succeeds in identifying the types of skills required by a particular undergraduate programme, the task of designing them will not be too difficult. The same may be true of embedding such skills in the process of students' learning.”

Judging from the perceptions of others (Walker and Finney, 1999; Keep and Meyhew, 1999, 2001; Fallows and Steven, 2000, Little, 2003), the assessment of general skills development outcomes is a very difficult task. This is mainly due to the assumption that the acquisition of employability skills for instance is bound to increase the competitiveness and individual critical thinking of learners, to which one should add the difficulty arising from the fact that the best way to develop these competencies is through group-based learning (Jaques, 1997; Mutch, 1998). All this suggests that the development of employability skills and preparation of students for employment is required to be understood within the context of a broader and mixed picture of ideas.

### **8.5.2 Female Students**

The ranking and average scores for different skills by the sample of female students are shown in Table 8.3. The female students assigned almost equal ranking to key or core skills and self-sufficiency skills. This was followed by ranking for other skills types in a distinct downgrading of value. An awareness of national and international issues was given minimum importance.

Female student interviewees had some difficulty selecting a single most important type of skill from an employability point of view. However, they all agreed that the three most important skills were key, career management and self-sufficiency

**Table 8.3: Ranking of different skills in order of their importance to employability**

**(Female students)**

	Extremely Important (1)	Very important (2)	Neither Important Nor Unimportant (3)	Not very important (4)	Not at all Important (5)	Average score
<b>Skills type</b>	<b>Number of female students (%)</b>					
Key or core skills	20 (53)	17 (45)	0	1 (2)	0	1.53
Self-sufficiency skills	18 (47)	17 (46)	1 (2)	2 (5)	0	1.66
Career management skills	18 (47)	15 (40)	2 (5)	3 (8)	0	1.71
Intellectual skills	15 (39)	15 (39)	8 (22)	0	0	1.82
Personal attributes	13 (34)	15 (39)	5 (13)	4 (12)	1 (2)	2.08
Awareness of religious beliefs and values	8 (22)	18 (48)	7 (19)	4 (11)	0	2.24
Academic knowledge	3 (8)	20 (54)	10 (27)	4 (11)	0	2.45
Awareness of national and international issues	1 (2)	12 (32)	16 (42)	7 (18)	2 (5)	2.92

skills, while the least important were an awareness of religious beliefs and values, personal attributes and an awareness of national and international issues. The other two skills (academic knowledge and intellectual skills) were seen as fitting between the above two categories.

The ranking by female interviewees of some skills as “extremely important” was because they are considered indispensable competencies, as well as being essential for the acquisition of other skills. Some other skills, such as academic knowledge and intellectual skills, were thought to be developed through the teaching of subject matter.

Skills like personal attributes, awareness of religious beliefs and values (Oshan, 2001), as well as awareness of national and international issues were regarded by female student interviewees as subject to the development of individuals' general knowledge. One of these students commented that:

“These skills are of the type that any Saudi university student should be working to improve, largely as part of her or his personal effort.”

Thus, it is possible to say that the purpose behind developing the above skills is, in many cases, to reinforce the position of the individual in society.

The sort female students' thinking about the list of employability skills presented for discussion was summarised by one of them, who said to the researcher:

“Whenever it is possible for the university student to come into possession of some essential general skills, such as those we described as ‘important,’ he or she should inevitably have gained by the way enough knowledge and experience relevant to many other skill types. This includes what you mentioned in your list, subsequently. Perhaps the important point here is that not necessarily all such skills are directly and competitively utilised in the employment of Saudi graduates in every sector of the work market.”

The researcher noticed that throughout the data analysis and its discussion in the previous three chapters of this thesis, with the exception of section 8.3, female students expressed varied views. Their different responses were usually statistically highly significant.

A survey of the pertinent international literature revealed little data on the employability skills in general and those of male and female undergraduates in particular (Fallows and Steven, 2000; ILO, 2001; Keep and Mayhew, 2001; Little, 2003). Yet, sometimes, significant gender variations were discernible in terms of the

perceived levels of quality of particular employability skills among graduates. Generally speaking, British males were said to be more successful in managerial jobs and females in clerical jobs (Bynner *et al*, 1996; Henkel and Little, 1999; Henkel, 2000; Morley, 1999), while Trueman and Hartley (1996) found among a sample of undergraduates from the University of Keele, UK, that females possess better time-management skills than their male counterparts.

In their systematically-orientated response study, Nabi and Baghley (1998) found that female undergraduates are inclined to rate most of their secretarial-based abilities (such as time management, planning/organising, flexibility and listening) as more important than their male counterparts. In contrast, they found that male undergraduates tend to rate the quality of other abilities (such as communication, problem-solving and IT skills) more highly than females.

These researchers partially attributed such a gender variation to parental upbringing and societal pressure which assign different social roles and values to males and females. Nabi and Baghley (1998) mentioned that such a sexual division in higher education learning appears to be vanishing in developed societies like the British one, but might still have a positive impact on future planning of skills acquisition. They said:

“It still seems worthwhile for employers and educational institutions to take such issues into consideration when planning skills development courses so that individual needs are targeted more precisely, especially in relation to problem solving and IT skills where the gender gap appears to be most evident for the present sample at least” (p. 35).

The female interviewees expressed views indicating that if their education received equal attention to that of males they might prove to be real competitors to them. In the words of one student:

“Who said that education depends on the sex of the individual? We might be better in certain skills relevant to certain areas of almost every discipline. That is, whether that discipline be humanities, education, science, medicine, engineering, and so forth.”

Further support of the gender variation phenomenon is found in relation to other aspects of undergraduates' learning process. As far as Saudi higher education is concerned, it is well known that boys and girls learn in single-sex milieus (KSA, 1980-2001; Al-Hageel, 1998; Al-Khedair, 1999; Al-Hamidi *et al*, (1999). It appears that at bachelor-degree level, students of both sexes are confronted with a number of problems (Al-Karni, 1994, 1999; KSA, 1998b, 1999a; Saegh, 1998; Al-Ghamdi, 2001). However, some researchers, such as Al-Kurdy (1986), Mahdi (1989), Al-Kadhami (1994), Al-Shami (1994), Al-Zobair (1995), and Almandil (1999) believe that females suffer more than males, as evidenced by their greater dissatisfaction regarding the quantity and quality of services offered to them. The focus of concern was unanimously found to be associated with certain fundamental activities, such as teaching, management and supply of provisions. But in a wider sense, several other problems were recognised by the above researchers, such as social, familial and health ones, feelings of anxiety, especially approaching and during end of year examinations, poor housing and transport, and communication difficulties.

A recent systematic study carried out by Al-Baker (2002) aimed to pinpoint the impact of such problems on a sample of female undergraduates in four female



Humanities Colleges of King Saud University. Similarly to the outcome of the present study, she exposed a low to moderate level of satisfaction:

“The study revealed that the existence of certain problems enormously affected the degree of satisfaction of female students with their university education, which did not exceed 55%” (p. 392).

Among her suggestions to improve the quality of female higher education in Saudi Arabia, Al-Baker (2002) specified the urgency to achieve

“a special focus on studies related to academic affairs in the university, whether that be related to the teaching methods adopted, the themes taught, and the actual skills and acquired intellectual attributes involved in the process of development. It is this approach which will disclose the scientific, economic and social advantages of the university” (p. 393).

A similar female-student discontentment was discerned by Al-Naeem (2002); for a student studying in College of Education of King Faisal University told him:

“It is a good chance to find some one who will listen to our problems, to ask about the course content and how lectures are presented. I hope the finding of the research will not be the same as our assignments. Nobody reads them. I am lucky to be in the third year, which gave me the opportunity to be one of the populations of the study” (p. 232).

The female interviewees certainly felt that their education is often seen from the officials' standpoint, the vast majority of whom are males. Thus, one of them said:

“If we have more role in our education from planning to applying, the situation might be different. Many of our problems will be solved. Sometimes we feel its useless to continue inspecting these problems without finding a complete solution to them. I mean since it is possible to do that by virtue of males' experience.”

In the researcher's view, the crucial point behind the excessive dissatisfaction of Saudi female undergraduates may be a result of a serious limitation in the scope of their

education and development of appropriate skills and employability. Besides the primary data of this study, further evidence which supports such a conclusion was gathered from more than one area and also manifested itself in more than one term. For example, the existence of a significant difference in the range of the disciplines available to the two sexes within Saudi higher education (KSA, 1980-2001; see 5.5.2), a distinction in the quality of enrolment, management and general provision of various types of academic and related necessities (Almandil, 1999; Al-Baker, 2002; Al-Naeem, 2002), poor prospects for student-staff relationships, including the development of curricular skills to match Saudi females' interests and aspirations (Own, 1991; Majed, 1992,1998), unbalanced opportunities for graduates of the two sexes to pursue their postgraduate studies, particularly in international universities (Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999), and even unequal work expectations and outlooks (Al-Nimir, 1989).

The reality of university life for Saudi female undergraduates is also reflected in their actual contribution to the national work market after their graduation. According to KSA (1996a) their net contribution is about 2.6%, compared with about 7.6% for male graduates. Then a number of sources, such as ABEGS (1994), Ajaji (1995), Al-Ramizan (1999), Al-Abdullah (2002), indicated that approximately 70% of Saudi female employers are working in few public and personal fields like education, social, familial and medical services. This hints at the possibility that there is still a deliberate containment, not only in the range of disciplines available to Saudi female undergraduates but also in the scope of skills acquisition and ultimately in employment opportunity. Indeed, it is also possible to say that even if female students developed a wider range of skills they are not always utilised in graduate-level and self-fulfilling

jobs. This may explain the previously noticed moderate level of job satisfaction among Saudi female workers (Asad, 1983).

In various other states of the Arab World, undergraduate students experience a variety of the same general types of tensions as their Saudi counterparts (Ali, 1987; Nofal, 1998; Qasem, 1998; Niblock and Wilson, 1999). Furthermore, there seems to be a similar pattern of gender variation in students' satisfaction with their university education. Thus, for example, a significantly greater academic impact on females than males was recorded in Kuwait (Al-Ghanaim, 1985; Al-Sharif and Mahammed, 1986), Syria (Watfa, 1993), Jordan (Sawana, 1983; Dawood, 1994), Egypt (Abdel-Hameed, 1985; Mohmud, 1993), and Sudan (Motawali, 1991).

On the other hand, Isawi (1984), in his comprehensive field study on the difficulties experienced by undergraduates throughout the Arab World, observed that occasionally males experienced greater difficulties than females. An example was said to be in Alexandria University of Egypt, specifically because of insufficient financial support. Nevertheless, Isawi (1984) still asserted that the reverse was found in respect to other difficulties, such as adaptation to the university environment and hence the consequent burden of anxiety. Amar (1993) revealed that in Egypt, until about a decade ago, the percentage of females pursuing university study was only half that of males.

It is interesting to note that many of the male interviewees during the course of this study admitted that there is a gap between the Saudi higher education for males and females, but they gave a different interpretation. For example, in the opinion of an academic manager:

“You might talk of our institutions for female higher education as being of lower standard or supply than those for male students. But as everybody knows this is basically because of the existence of a difference in the history of these institutions, rather than female education, for one reason or another, being designed to lag behind that of males.”

In conformity with Hofstede's (1984,1991) typology of culture, significant differences between men and women are not unusual regarding their opinions about socio-cultural issues, including educational, economic, political and religious ones. This also seems to be true regarding the gender issue dealt with in this section; for example, the comparable pattern of variation witnessed in the context of higher education systems in many other Muslim and developing countries (Al-Shami, 1997). In fact, this is likely to be the case whether in connection with satisfaction with access to undergraduate education, diversity of disciplines available, or work prospects. Countries representing such cases include Pakistan (Dani, 1986; Khateeb, 1992a), Afghanistan (Unesco, 1986; Khateebb), South Africa (Maharasoia and Hay, 2001), Indonesia (Cumming and McGinn, 1997; Al-Mahdi and Harat, 1998; Baker, 1999), and Malaysia (Ismael, 1996).

Although it is possible to think of female education as being fundamentally a development issue, there is also a religious—orientated way of looking at it. That is to say, there are many eminent educationists throughout Gulf, Arab and other Moslem states who honestly believe that the main focus of female education should be on preparing them to carry out their natural role, which involves responsibility as a respectable wife, management of home affairs, and working to improve various related areas. Thus, according to Al-Gindy (1982), Ahmed (1983), Abdulla (1985), Qutb (1988), Ali (1992), Madkur (1997) and Badawi (2002), this role of a Moslem woman

provides a means of individual adherence to the family, and family adherence to society. Therefore, it is a role of ultimate importance for the future of the Muslim religion itself.

It is worth mentioning that the prerequisite for comprehensive undergraduate student development was clearly recognised by the Western community several decades ago (Mooney, 1941; Williamson, 1961; Evers *et al*, 1998). It basically appears to be the same to this day and involves attention and seeing into the nature of problems and difficulties facing this group of stakeholders and the means to overcome them (Delamont, 1992; McCrum, 1996; Dearing, 1997; Gibbs, 2000; Little, 2003). The type of problems most commonly referred to as being experienced by undergraduate students are easily distinguished to be academic, social, familial and personal.

The detailed nature of problems experienced by university students and their impact on graduates' employment may fluctuate between countries, mainly according to some social, cultural, political and economic factors (Brown and Lauder, 1996, 1997; Unesco, 1998a and b; Radford, 1998; Keeves and Lakomski, 1999; Cohen *et al*, 2000; Pema, 2003). Even so, variation and characterisation of gender division, whether in respect to quality of education, skills acquisition or job prospects are undoubtedly less evident in developed than in developing countries. Indeed, in many of the former countries, the balance between the two sexes appears to have already been attained, with sometimes even more females than males entering higher education, graduating and actively contributing to the work market (Yano, 1997; Teichler, 2000; Woodley and Brennan, 2000; Kellermann and Sagmeister, 2000; OECD, 2000).

A gap as wide as this between the developed and developing countries, particularly in the age of globalisation (Scott, 1998; Peters and Roberts, 2000) is really an alarming signal. Thus, it is bound to create a great deal of pressure on the latter countries to undergo an appropriate and rapid change; that is to say, a pressure much greater than what has previously been experienced (Ahmed, 1991; Nofal, 1997; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999).

In the researcher's judgment, which is based on the situation in Saudi Arabia, already this country is showing encouraging signs that it is not a special case in this regard. For example, the number of female students entering higher education has increased several-fold within the last two decades (KSA, 1980-2001; Al-Medhari, 1998, 1999; Al-Khedair, 1999; GPGE, 2000) and is now in balance with the male figure. According to Albonyan (1991), Al-Aridh (1994), and Khateeb (1999), this situation has been achieved as a direct result of improvement in the overall efficiency of the existing governmental higher education institutions, for example, a significant increase in personnel and facilities. In addition, there has been an increase in the absorptive capacities of the present settings (Alhammad, 1995; Al-Khedair, 1999) and the opening of new government institutes (mostly colleges) throughout the administrative districts of the Kingdom (Al-Hageel, 1998; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999).

Nevertheless, much remains to be done, especially in increasing the extent of academic funding and development of women's colleges in various provinces of the kingdom. Perhaps more importantly, change is required in relation to the widening gap between female educational diversification and their work prospects. It is possible to say that total higher education governmentalisation in Saudi Arabia will not solve the problem. In other words, part of the solution might lie in encouraging the private sector

to support the existing settings (Al-Jalal, 1996; Al-Oda, 1999) and even open its own universities or colleges in appropriate regions of the country (KSA, 1998-2000; Al-Shethri, 1998). Moreover, there is a role for stimulating and aiding distance education in certain disciplines, such as humanities, linguistics and feminist studies (Alrawaf, 1990; ABEGS, 1994, 1998; Cornell and Murphy, 1995; ALESCO, 2000).

### 8.5.3 Graduates

Graduates' ranking of and average scores for different skills are shown in Table 8.4. They allocate greatest importance to intellectual skills of employability. Equal importance is given to career management skills and self-sufficiency skills. Like male and female students, an awareness of national and international issues is seen as neither an important nor unimportant factor. This group also ranks academic knowledge and awareness of religious beliefs and values as neither important nor unimportant as far as their employability development is concerned.

Graduate interviewees believe that their skills ranking reflects both their experience as undergraduates and as job seekers in either private or governmental enterprises. One said:

"I believe that intellectual skills and a couple of other types of competencies I placed at the top of my selection list are highly relevant to the employment of Saudi graduates. This is due to the fact that these skills are capable of shaping the commitment of Saudi youths to discipline as well as to national heritage and aspirations. Therefore, the quality of such skills may be considered a good indicator of the development of employability through the educational programme provided for undergraduates. The quality of skills located in the middle of the list (key, personal and academic) and their relation to the issue of employability are expected to be satisfactory if those before them were good. As for the skills at the bottom of the list, they are a 'must' for every Saudi and hence are not part of the competitive package for the assessment of graduates' quality or employability."

**Table 8.4: Ranking of different skills in order of their importance to employability  
(Graduates)**

	Extremely Important (1)	Very important (2)	Neither important nor unimportant (3)	Not very important (4)	Not at all important (5)	Average score
<b>Skills type</b>	<b>Number of graduates (%)</b>					
Intellectual skills	21 (47)	17 (38)	5 (11)	2 (4)	0	1.73
Key or core skills	19 (42)	13 (29)	8 (18)	4 (9)	1 (2)	1.82
Self-sufficiency skills	19 (42)	17 (38)	6 (13)	3 (7)	0	1.84
Career management skills	16 (35)	21 (47)	7 (16)	1 (2)	0	1.84
Personal attributes	13 (29)	14 (31)	11 (25)	5 (11)	2 (4)	2.31
Awareness of religious beliefs and values	6 (13)	17 (38)	10 (22)	5 (11)	7 (16)	2.78
Academic knowledge	5 (11)	16 (36)	13 (29)	9 (20)	2 (4)	2.71
Awareness of national and international issues	4 (9)	11 (24)	18 (40)	10 (22)	2 (4)	2.89

In the understanding of another graduate interviewee, employability skills may sooner or later materialise into a driving force within the context of the Saudi higher education system. Thus, he positively stated that:

“It appears that this issue of skills acquisition and its special relation to the issue of curriculum quality and employability development may bring undergraduate education closer to the consideration of the work market.”

The above firsthand knowledge points to the idea that Saudi graduates are now not only inclined to argue that the development of a particular package of general skills alongside the curriculum is relevant to students’ quality but also to graduates’ employability. This may lead to better employment competitiveness among graduates as well as to labour market preferences. This idea, in turn, points to the possibility of looking towards the issue of the acquisition of general skills, attributes and knowledge,



in general, and employability development, in particular, as an effective indicator of quality. The source of such an association between quality and employability is very significant and should not be considered as mere speculation, especially if it is independently perceived by other researchers.

#### 8.5.4. Teaching Staff

Table 8.5 depicts the ranking and average scores for different skills by teaching staff. This group, like graduates, allocated highest importance to intellectual skills. Also, like graduates, teaching staff gave equal importance to career management and self-sufficiency skills. Like male and female students and graduates, an awareness of national and international issues was seen as neither an important nor unimportant factor to the issue of employability.

**Table 8.5: Ranking of different skills in order of their importance to employability (Teaching staff)**

	Extremely important (1)	Very Important (2)	Neither Important nor unimportant (3)	Not very Important (4)	Not at all important (5)	Average score
<b>Skills type</b>	<b>Number of teaching staff (%)</b>					
Intellectual skills	27 (73)	7 (19)	2 (5)	1 (3)	0	1.38
Self-sufficiency skills	20 (54)	17 (46)	0	0	0	1.46
Career management skills	20 (54)	13 (35)	4 (11)	0	0	1.57
Key or core skills	18 (49)	17 (46)	2 (5)	0	0	1.57
Personal attributes	12 (32)	16 (43)	8 (22)	1 (3)	0	1.95
Academic knowledge	8 (22)	22 (59)	5 (14)	2 (5)	0	2.03
Awareness of religious beliefs and values	7 (19)	17 (46)	9 (24)	4 (11)	0	2.27
Awareness of national and international issues	3 (8)	17 (46)	10 (27)	7 (19)	0	2.57

Initially, a minority of the interviewees pointed out that the skills list pertinent to the field of higher education is very wide. In the expression of one of them:

“I believe that these general skills count in hundreds. This means that the international higher education system might spend some considerable time sorting them out according to disciplines and demands.”

This seems a reasonable thought and at least explains why many of today’s universities are having difficulty signing up to a limited number of these supposedly transferable competencies, whether in developing (Al-Shami, 1997; Ali, 1998; Tan and Batra, 1995) or developed (AGR, 1995; Walker and Finney, 1999; Gelbert, 1999; Little, 2003) countries. However, the majority of the teaching staff interviewees agreed that the skills included in the researcher’s question were a good representation of what the undergraduates are supposed to develop.

The rank order of skills given by these interviewees seems to reflect, besides personal experience and interest, the nature of the teaching profession at large. For example, in the view of one of them:

“Any one of our university teachers wishes that his students, before anything else, graduates after becoming skilful in their capacity for rational thinking, self-sufficiency and career management. Then comes the need to acquire key skills, personal attributes and academic knowledge.”

The researcher concluded that teaching staff interviewees, like other groups of respondents, put more emphasis on an awareness of religious beliefs and values than on an awareness of national and international issues. An interviewee attributed this preference to a common observation, saying:

“We have noticed that the former skills are more popular amongst university students than the latter. So we must give more attention to them in order to be developed in the right way for the right purpose.”

In a discussion with one of the teaching staff interviewees regarding the importance of skills, he indicated that the best environment for their development in the milieu of Saudi university is through the assigned curricula themselves:

“It is my belief that there is no such thing as a limited or unified list of general skills for the entire population of university students, not even within the departments of Saudi higher education, that would enable one group of them to be compared with another on the terms you defined in your question. Nevertheless, I see that the list you presented for discussion could be tentatively separated into three categories in terms of their relation to development of graduate employability: extremely important (the first three types), very important (the next three types), and neither important nor unimportant or probably not very important (the last two types). Yet, a truly important argument remains unresolved here and that is: is it plausible to evaluate through present Saudi undergraduate learning programmes the development of many such employability-labelled or general and personal skills in isolation of each other and collectively in separation from the subject matter? My answer is definitely no?”

Another interviewee from this group of study participants informed the researcher about his own checklist of skills, which he suggested may offer better development of employability among Saudi university students. He said:

“Generally speaking, yes, I agree with the pattern of ranking of the skills you obtained through your questionnaire inquiry from the teaching staff respondents. But if you wish I will also present to you another version of employability skills in so far as Saudi graduates are concerned: a. personal skills and attributes, such as strong personality, intellectual pursuits, self-reliance, responsiveness, logical thinking and good communication and flexibility; b. academic skills, such as excellent management, subject-related skills, critical analysis and synthesis, use of modern technology and mathematics, assessments of outcome, and innovation and research ability; c. relevant general knowledge, such as firm religious beliefs, ethical awareness, participation in social and cultural discussions, and knowledge of international affairs”.

The majority of other teaching staff interviewees agreed about the importance of many of the employability skills and the appropriateness of categorising them. Further, some of them raised the issue of inconsistency among Saudi higher education staff in general regarding the usefulness of specialisation at the lowest university, or bachelor degree level. Their justification for such an outlook was claimed to be based on personal experience of this familiar matter among many higher education systems throughout the world. Thus, a member of the teaching staff said:

“I see real advantages in not committing the undergraduates to a narrow disciplinary specialisation and hence to a relevant specific form of general skills acquisition at the expense of subject matter.”

In the opinion of another interviewee:

“Early specialisation is advantageous and I am qualified and prepared to teach accordingly, especially since it conforms better with the purpose of the national development plan.”

It was, in any case, pointed out by many interviewees that there is no measure taken beforehand in the Saudi university system towards embedding general skills into the mainstream curriculum. In the view of an interviewee:

“Placing more emphasis within our universities on general skills surely requires additional resources and budgets. Then, most likely, even the type of provision will change. For example, many departments need to modify their strategies of teaching, management, consultation, information and communication technology (ICT), and so forth.”

Furthermore, some of the interviewees remarked that such a project would be difficult to be fulfilled without the help of the private sector; for example, in the words of one of them:

“Implementing a new scheme of higher education is not an easy task and because of a dramatic increase in student numbers and shortage of funding we need an additional source of funding. This means we ought to consider a private finance initiative.”

The above views suggest that a substantial number of Saudi teaching staff strongly believe in the usefulness of developing suitable sets of employability skills together with the development of undergraduate programmes. The results of some studies related to the provision of technical and vocational education indicate that such a transformation towards skills-orientated education is already happening in a number of higher education institutions in the Gulf States (Albonyan, 1991; GOTEVOT, 1996; Alzalabani, 2002). According to Wilkins (2001 a and b), the mode of current British higher education seems to be specially well accepted in this area. But as pointed out earlier, Saudi teaching staff apparently tend to prefer skills development at university level to be planned in proportion with planning related to subject matters. For example, in the reasoning of one interviewee:

“This process should become sophisticated through experience and made intellectually appealing to all relevant groups of stakeholders. That would increase the chance of its success.”

In all probability, the Saudi teaching staff believe themselves not to be blameworthy for not having been able until now to present a satisfactory programme for the teaching, assessment and quality assurance of employability learning. The proponents of skills portfolios believe that this scheme has been proved to help all groups of relevant stakeholders to work in a more systematic and co-ordinated way in order to achieve the ultimate goals behind the current tasks of higher education (Paulson *et al*, 1991; Shepherd, 2000; Wright, 2001). Thus, it is possible to think of an employability and skills development portfolio in helping to put together the efforts of

each student in the learning group. For example, in assessing their progress, the students themselves become more aware of their learning, and become capable of identifying and documenting over time each type of skill, regularly reflecting on what has been achieved and how to improve it, and, finally, the students exhibit their achievements to the assessors before moving into the work market.

In O'Brien's (2000) words:

“The portfolio is a software package that enables students to analyse their own learning sequentially and interactively in a way that reveals learning patterns and characteristics related to the learner's strengths and to areas in particular need of development. It matches student performance against faculty-designed benchmarks to record developmental changes at key points as well as over time” (p. 41).

In summing up, the information included in this section adds to the evidence that a considerable number of participants are convinced that higher education is not a static milieu. New undergraduates need to develop a fresh checklist of employability skills to match the demands of employers, with Saudi undergraduates being no exception. However, the reality on the ground is such that while many universities in developed countries are already engaged in testing the impact of transferable skills portfolios within the academic curricula of various disciplines, Saudi universities still largely depend on the utilisation of academic content alone. However, the reader will notice that a considerable number of respondents are in favour of taking up this new challenge of general skills acquisition.

#### **8.5.5 Academic Managers**

Academic managers' ranking of and average score for different skills are shown in Table 8.6. These participants allocate the highest importance to career management

skills. Like the female students, their second ranking is for self-sufficiency skills, and like the male students, their third ranking is for key or core skills. Similarly to other groups of Saudi higher education stakeholders, they view the awareness of national and international issues as neither an important nor unimportant factor for employability.

**Table 8.6: Ranking of different skills in order of their importance to employability (Academic managers)**

	Extremely important (1)	Very important (2)	Neither important nor unimportant (3)	Not very Important (4)	Not at all important (5)	Average score
<b>Skill type</b>	<b>Number of academic managers (%)</b>					
Career management skills	23 (74)	8 (26)	0	0	0	1.26
Self-sufficiency skills	17 (56)	11 (35)	1 (3)	2 (6)	0	1.52
Key or core skills	20 (68)	7 (23)	3 (10)	1 (3)	0	1.61
Intellectual skills	22 (71)	5 (16)	4 (13)	0	0	1.74
Personal attributes	11 (35)	16 (53)	2 (6)	2 (6)	0	1.84
Academic knowledge	11 (35)	12 (42)	5 (17)	1 (3)	0	2.06
Awareness of religious beliefs and values	13 (43)	9 (28)	5 (17)	2 (6)	2 (6)	2.06
Awareness of national and international issues	7 (23)	10 (32)	8 (26)	2 (6)	4 (13)	2.55

The questionnaire response of academic managers were confirmed by the interview study. The reason this group gave the highest degree of importance to career management skills was found to be explicable, for example, since Saudi managers traditionally tend to consider management as a factor beforehand in any field of development (Al-Tawail, 1995). The remarks of one interviewee included the following statement:

“Without developing good career management skills among undergraduates, we would fail to enhance both their personal and academic abilities to express themselves to assessors and employers. I believe this is the reality facing our university students today, irrespective of the nature of the occupation each one of them is or will be seeking.”

In the view of a number of academic manager interviewees, career management skills constitute a multidisciplinary competency that is acquired in the milieu of university and applied in a variety of national developmental enterprises. According to some of them, these skills are also important for Saudi students in another very special way and that is their influence on the national common interest and concern. One of them expressed his perception of this idea as follows:

“The development of skills, labelled as career management, may facilitate the task of changing the Saudi system into a more open one. For example, they are effective tools for testing the impact on the culture (religion and tradition) and hence on Saudi economic and political organisations of modern information resources, including computers and the internet. This development, in turn, is bound to enhance the relationship of Saudi organisations with each other and with the society as a whole, as well as with the outside world.”

This group of Saudi stakeholders accepts the idea that there is a strong correlation between the development of career management skills, as competent employability factors, and other aspects of students' development, for example, the acquisition of other types of transferable skills as well as an understanding of subject matter. The central theme of this account confirms what academic managers in the West have been advocating, especially during the last decade; that is, the very great need for today's universities to take up the challenge of developing a list of management skills required by students (Dale, 1993; Assiter, 1995; Williams, 1996; Harvey and Bowes, 1998; Harvey, 2003; Little, 2003). Consequently, this task is



seemingly worthy of attention, for example, by virtue of the fact that managerial skills are subject to systematic acquisition and application.

The interviewees argued against the idea that career management skills should be looked upon as if they are types of unique personality capabilities that can be inherited like genetic traits. Thus, in the opinion of one of them:

“I am in favour of considering the managerial skills as highly relevant to quality and employability in the context of higher education. That is, they are knowledge, understanding and tactics that can be developed by students through the usual channels of teaching, training and experience.”

The above finding confirms the opinions of several researchers, such as Gill and Johnson (1997), Schneider and Barsoux (1997), Ghobadian (1999), and Newby (1999), who provide a rich range of examples of the origin of managerial skills. The following quote from Dickinson (2000) supports the above argument, in addition to representing a facet of the situation in Western countries at the present time:

“It could be feasibly inferred that employers are essentially looking for graduates who have ‘managerial skills’, thus putting a new emphasis on the importance of schemes such as Schools Without Walls at the University of Surrey that explicitly give students the opportunity to develop managerial skills” (p. 161).

Indeed, many pieces of information similar to the above have recently been disclosed, which collectively may underline the fact that there is a great renewal of interest in graduates’ demand for a package of well-developed management skills. Clearly, a wide range of undergraduate curricula could significantly benefit from embedding extra-curricula skills of this type into their subject-specific knowledge.

A number of interviewees referred to the existence of a particular connection between the development of managerial skills and Saudi culture. What one of them perceived was:

“Development of cross-cultural management is an effective means of identifying of similarities and differences in the quality of thoughts, attitudes and performances of different groups of employees.”

It is interesting to note that a number of foreign and Saudi researchers also argued in favour of management across cultures (Hofstede, 1993; Yasin and Zimmerer, 1995; Shore and Venkatachalam, 1996; Yavas, 1997). The advantages of such management were seen in terms of developing a new generation of skills portfolios which are suitable to be adopted by various countries of the world.

However, while the above group of researchers tend to recommend that Saudi Arabia should strive for experimentation in the context of Western management theories, for the sake of embracing what is suitable in its cultural milieu, other researchers are not so optimistic in this respect. For example, in the opinion of some, such as Niblock (1982), Ali and Al-Shakhis (1991), Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993), and Hunt and At-Twajri (1996), the Saudis have a very strong orthodox Islamic orientation. In other words, there is still a major cultural difference between this Arab sub-population and any of the Western nations. The crux of such difference is attributed to the unique Saudi religious beliefs and teaching, deep Arab and tribal traditions, a high propensity towards collectivism and tight social relations within organisations, and a dislike for disputations which lead to conflict. In consequence, Western-developed managerial styles (Paine, 1994; Watson, 1994; Schneider and

Barsoux, 1997), might face serious difficulties when applied in Saudi educational and economic settings, not to mention in political or religious ones.

## 8.6 Conclusion

The recent economic uncertainty which has swept the global labour market, plus the enormous expansion of higher education in many developed and developing countries, have exerted the greatest impact ever witnessed by the latter's systems. Perhaps the first insight which has already emerged from these events is a demand for the highest degree of coordination between the different efforts relevant to the development of the international workforce (Trowler, 1998; Finlay *et al*, 1998; Gumport, 2000). It is fair to say that some countries have already taken up the challenge of initiating a dramatic reformation of their job training schemes (Harvey *et al*, 1997a and b; Yorke, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Gill *et al*, 2000). The quality of university disciplinary curricula has to be improved significantly, and the same applies to the process of acquisition of key or general skills. In this way the quality of such a heterogeneous undergraduate programme as a whole may be indicated by the quality of students' employability development.

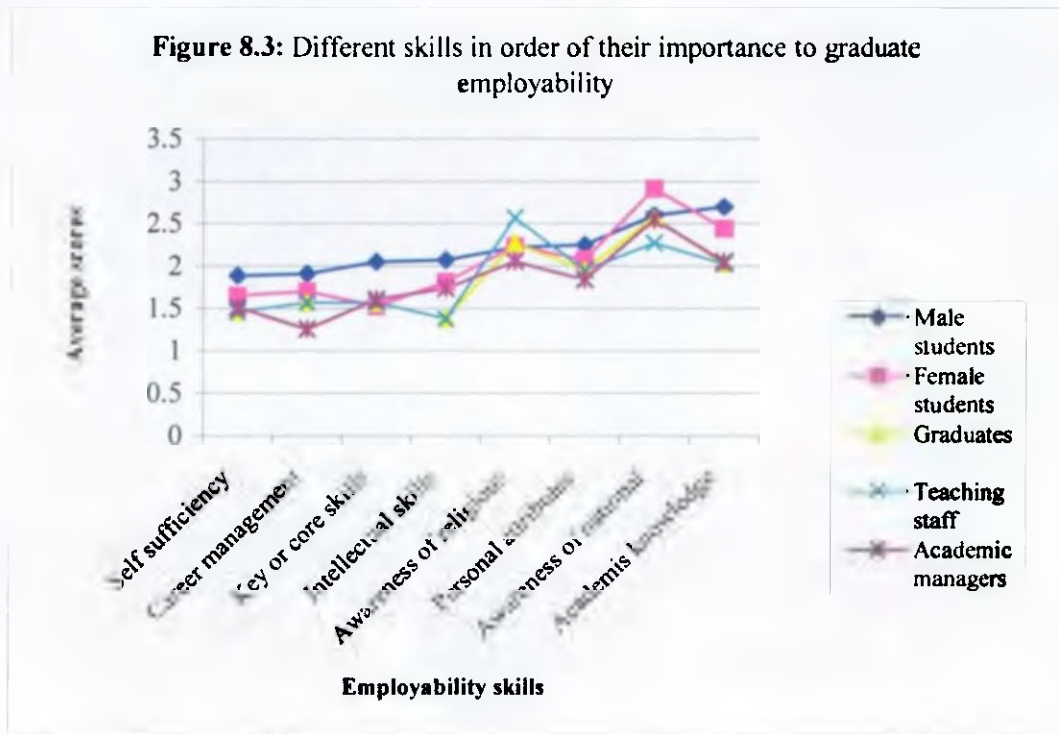
The main aim of the researcher in this chapter was to display, discuss and reflect upon the various aspects of the argument after carefully studying the responses of participants and other sources of information. The firsthand data obtained give a general impression that the study respondents, apart from the female students (perhaps because of certain factors associated with the circumstances of their education and work), believe in the existence of a substantial degree of correlation between curriculum quality and graduates' employability. In fact, the issue of the employability

development was discerned by not less than two-thirds of all the respondents, including female students, as an indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality in the study departments. However, many of the interviewees amongst the student and graduate groups, as well as some academic managers, expressed views that the reverse is inevitably a credible measure. In other words, both of these concepts are apparently attractive and good theoretically, but which one of them will work better practically is difficult to say unless they are systematically tried and their results are analysed and compared. On the other hand, a high percentage of teaching staff and academic manager interviewees seem to support the idea of considering employability development as an indicator of curriculum quality.

The majority of the respondents tended to see the importance of a portfolio of employability skills provided to undergraduates together with the disciplinary subject matter. However, the mature age groups (teaching staff and academic managers) were also more aware of the importance of these general competencies in better preparing graduates as a quality labour force than the relatively junior groups (students and graduates). As a matter of fact, the former groups believe that they are active participants in this dynamic developmental endeavour, for example, through their efforts in improving curricula programmes and teaching. Employability skills were valued by stakeholders in the following order (highest to lowest): teaching staff, academic managers, graduates, male students and female students.

Respondents ranked their top preference employability-promoting skills and the subsequent ones within the list provided to them by the researcher. For teaching staff and graduates the most important single factor was intellectual skills; for academic managers it was career management skills; for male students it was self-sufficiency

skills, and for female students it was key or core skills (Figure 8.3). This pattern in the desirability of employability skills to respondents may reflect the extent of variation presently prevalent amongst Saudi stakeholders. Of course, the most important question in this respect is pertinent to the best way of preparing Saudi university students and presenting them to assessors before entering the work market. The reasons behind each case of desirability to respondents of the package of employability skills provided was carefully identified, analysed and discussed in the light of possible changes to the Saudi higher education system.



It is interesting to note that none of the respondent groups, by majority ranked either the “personal” or “academic” skills as a top factor of importance to graduates’ employability. Furthermore, respondents were indifferent regarding the relatively insignificant ranking of the factor “awareness of national and international knowledge”

in the issue under consideration. However, how far those issues related to the orientation of the country as a whole, and affected the respondents' choices in this respect, is difficult to fully realise. What is quite clear though in this respect is that Saudi official bodies (KSA, 1990-2000), private enterpriscs (Al-Shethri, 1998; KSU, 2000) and many academic researchers (Al-Zoabái and Bakr, 1995; Saegh *et al*, 1995; Addawood, 1996; Al-Hamidi *et al*, 1999; Abdulla, 2002) are all highly attentive to this issue.

The discussion in this chapter adds significantly to the idea that in Saudi Arabia the university disciplinary curricula must be kept under review. Amongst all the potential factors which may contribute to the process of curricula strengthening, a portfolio of employability skills embedded in the mainstream subject matter gives better meaning to Saudi stakeholders. Once this challenge is accepted and its implementation is worked out, it can be systematically adopted. When this happens, the concept of employability will become a credible measure of quality in the programmes of Saudi higher education institutions.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

## 9.1 Introduction

The specific purpose of this chapter is to present a brief review of the thesis. The way to do this is to bring together its various parts and concurrently underline its new findings so as to facilitate the task of proposing a change aiming to enhance the quality of educational provision in the Saudi higher education system.

The researcher intends, first, to highlight the outcome of his literature survey and disclose a shortage in the data pertinent to this study. Next, he will emphasise the significance of a mixed methodological procedure that was employed in the fieldwork study in order to generate and gather the desired information. Then, he will summarise the analysis of the results obtained regarding undergraduate curriculum quality and development of graduates' employability, as well as the significance of the correlation between them in the assessment process. The importance of undergraduates' development of a well-selected package of general skills including key skills according to study discipline will also be focused upon. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made on the problems facing Saudi female students during their university life and the way to overcome them.

In the remaining sections of this chapter the researcher will focus on the possible contribution of the new findings to current knowledge. This will be done through advancing some insightful conclusions drawn from the data in order to precisely define the present situation of the Saudi higher education system, making recommendations and highlighting the need for further studies in this field.



## **9.2 Summarised Review of the Research**

### **9.2.1 Literature Survey**

The literature survey uncovered a shortage of reported Saudi data in relation to various concepts and issues which are prevalent in the context of higher education in the West. These include the usefulness of following a triangulation body of quantitative and qualitative methods and rules in socio-cultural and educational studies, the significance of the contribution of various groups of relevant stakeholders in planning and assessment of undergraduate curricula, inclusion of compact packages (portfolios) of general skills along with subject matter within undergraduate programmes provided for students. The aims of the above are to strengthen graduates' employment prospects, student identity, and the impact of traditional culture on teaching and learning at university level. Even more serious gaps exist in data reflecting the opinions of Saudi stakeholders on issues of development of curriculum quality and employability of graduates. No attempt has been made in the literature to connect the above two issues and hence there is not even a mention of assessing quality in terms of the latter.

### **9.2.2 Methodological Procedure**

Data obtained during the course of this study demonstrate the value of triangulation methodology for the purpose of generating fieldwork data and the collection of necessary results to answer the research questions. The researcher employed a suitable version of such a strategy in the course of this study. He selected the questionnaire (a quantitative method) as the main procedure and interviews and study of documents (qualitative methods) as complementary sources of data.

In view of the above approach, and the religious constitution and traditional culture of Saudi Arabia, the researcher intended to make the fieldwork part of his study as comprehensive as possible. This required him to approach some of the most relevant groups of Saudi stakeholders (teaching staff, male and female students, academic managers and graduates) for the purpose of gathering information and creating the desired data. The researcher also collected a good sample of documents for examination and paid attention to other relevant issues, such as the selection of the most appropriate setting amongst the Saudi institutions, representativeness, and information management and analysis.

### **9.2.3 Quality in Saudi Higher Education**

The meaning of the term “quality” was found to be almost the same to Arabs as it is to people in the West (see 6.2 and 6.7). The majority of participants (students, graduates, teaching staff and academic managers) thought that quality in the context of the Saudi higher education system is subject to evaluation and that the best way to do this is to consider it as equivalent to the “level of qualification achieved”. Only female students considered “students’ effectiveness in the learning environment” as the most important factor in quality in higher education. However, female students, like male students and graduates, believed that “graduate performance at work” is the best indicator of the benefit to students of their programmes of study. In contrast, the best quality indicator in the opinion of teaching staff and academic managers was “examination results”. Modularisation in Western terms was generally envisaged by the respondents as an important factor in enhancing the educational quality, if it is to be adopted by the Saudi system. Furthermore, there was not unanimous agreement amongst the respondents as to how quality can be measured in respect of teaching practice. Teaching staff and a

high percentage of students considered the “lecture-based teaching method” best, while academic managers preferred a combination of methods, and graduates favoured the “debate-based method”. Overall, the teaching staff and academic managers perceived the quality of their departments to be excellent or at least very good, while the graduates and students regarded it as just above average, average, or even poor. The most important factors which may influence quality were perceived to be “limited student access” and “managerial influence”. There was a general belief that quality is primarily an institutional responsibility and hence an external factor like “employer’s influence” was not expected to have a substantial impact upon it.

#### **9.2.4 The Role of Undergraduate Curricula**

The vast majority of respondents felt that curricula have a significant role in improving quality in the context of higher education and that the pervasion of the latter with employability development ideas is helpful. However, while teaching staff and academic managers seem to be actively engaged in the process of quality development, in the judgement of students and graduates, they have little chance to do so.

Many of the respondents agreed that undergraduate curricular programmes in Saudi Arabia are constantly monitored by experts. Such activity is regarded by them to be for the purpose of improving quality and additionally improving other processes related to teaching and learning, such as the acquisition of job-related skills. They felt that assessment by national committees was happening more than twice as often as by international committees of specialists

A significantly greater number of respondents saw the religious sector, rather than employers working in business organisations, as an important factor in affecting

the process of curriculum development in the Saudi higher education system. The responsibilities of these two groups were seen by the researcher to be different. While employers wish graduates to be prepared to operate effectively in the productive workforce, religious leaders aim to prepare them to be good adherents, not only to the aspirations of Saudi society, but to the Moslem community at large. The latter is unequivocally pronounced in oral revelations made to Prophet Mohammad by Allah and included among Qur'ānic verses.

### **9.2.5 Graduates' Employability and the Significance of General Skills**

Participants among the senior groups (teaching staff and academic managers) were obviously divided regarding the importance of graduates' employability development. To be precise, slightly more teaching staff and academic managers considered this issue to be an indicator of curriculum quality than those who did not. On the other hand, this issue was seen by over two-thirds of all the study respondents as a significant factor in the process of development of curricular programmes and hence that "graduates' employability" is fundamentally a curricular issue. In the researcher's opinion, this approach is bound to have an impact on innovative thinking and planning in Saudi Arabia and therefore should be encouraged.

The idea of including general skills, attributes and knowledge in conjunction with the subject matter is both new and genuine. It was viewed by many respondents as a positive factor which may improve quality and employability and hence increases the graduate's potential to learn the job more quickly (Strivens and Grant, 2000; Allison *et al*, 2002; Lees, 2002). However, the respondents' opinions were divided about the importance of single items of skills. For example, male students considered "self-sufficiency skills" as most important as far as the graduate employability issue is

concerned. Teaching staff and graduates ranked “intellectual skills” as the most important factor for employability, while the academic managers and female students ranked “key skills” as the most important factor in this respect. The majority of respondents regarded an awareness of national and international factors as imperative to the issue of development of graduate employability in the Saudi academic milieu. It was possible to conclude from observations, such as those above, that the actual experience of the members of each group of stakeholders within Saudi society is reflected in their opinions.

No doubt, a general agreement of opinion among the stakeholders would be most helpful in the selection of a portfolio of general skills to be embedded in a particular curricular programme. However, there seems to be both calculated and anticipated difficulties in the way of achieving such an objective at the present time (Harvey, 2003; Little, 2003; Yorke and Knight, 2003). Thus, in view of the contention revealed by the findings of the present study, the notion of basing such a policy on what will gain widest support seems more practical.

#### **9.2.6 The Problem of Female Education in Saudi Arabia**

Throughout the fieldwork study, the responses of female students to the research questions were often seen to be different from those of other groups. The claim made in some published reports (Majed, 1992, 1998; Al-Baker, 2002; Al-Naeem, 2002), that female higher education in Saudi Arabia is given less attention than male higher education was verified through the participants’ responses. This, for example, was done in terms of the provision of necessary requirements, such as high quality teaching, academic facilities, managerial services, funding and other aspects of their university

life, to prepare them to contribute effectively to the national workforce. The main reason behind this distinction seems to be the Islamic tradition or culture. However, in the researcher's view, Islam calls for equality between the two sexes, and the issue of education is no exception (The Holy Qur'ān; Al-Bukhari). The same should apply to graduate-level jobs to be held by male and female graduates, as well as salary, promotion and other relevant issues. If such equality were applied, the higher education stakeholder would represent an ideal example for the Saudi community as a whole.

### **9.3 The *Status Quo* of the Saudi Higher Education System**

The present findings reveal a very important issue regarding the process of education in Saudi Arabian Universities and that is that this process seems to focus mainly on the general intellectual pursuits, for example, the development of general knowledge of subject matter as well as the general powers of mind. Such an approach was familiar in European and American Universities about four decades ago (Robbins, 1963) and often described as the "broad concept of curriculum cognition" (Eisner, 1982, 1991). It is clear that this approach to undergraduate education has not yet accepted the place of general skills within disciplinary curricular programmes, for example, in the way it is discerned in the Western system to develop an ability based curriculum and thereby the capable practitioner graduate (Yorke, 1999; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Strivens and Grant, 2000; Wright and Knight, 2000; OBU, 2002). As a direct consequence of this educational deficit, there is a significantly wider competence gap between the output of Saudi higher education institutions and the requirements of the work market (Niblock and Wilson, 1999), compared to the situation in developed countries. This situation must change if the objectives of Saudi national development are to be put into effect as planned by the government.

The priority of the Saudi higher education system seems to be directed towards the reinforcement of spiritualistic education, that is, strengthening the process of development of true Islamic faith and personality. Thus, as far as academic curricular programmes are concerned they are still not sufficient, especially where issues of quality and graduates' employability are concerned. The Saudi system is apparently, as yet, not fully aware that the mere idea of university is rapidly evolving (Watson and Taylor, 1998; Tosey, 2002; Yorke, 2003) and, indeed, is already much more elusive than it was a few decades ago (Green, 1994a; Dearing, 1997; Barnett, 2000; Harris, 2001). It is this fact that triggered a large number of higher education institutions in developed countries to accept the challenge and undergo dramatic changes (Mestenhauser and Ellingboe, 1998; Bartell, 2003), and those in developing countries should follow suit to improve quality, employability and skills-agendas in their system.

#### **9.4 Recommendations and the Need for Further Studies**

The researcher would like to make a number of recommendations and suggestions which, if appropriately adopted, may help in planning a series of forthcoming investigations in relation to the main themes of this study.

- A. The issue of "graduates' employability" or "graduatness" in its wider sense should be reviewed as an indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality within the higher education process. This may be done by researching those departments of the Saudi universities and colleges which are suspected to lie at the two extremities of the employment rate, for example, to see whether the significance of such an indicator will vary with change in the employability rate of new graduates. This effort is expected to promote both "good citizenship" and "community involvement", as

well as enhancing “international competitiveness” amongst Saudi stakeholders and also bolster commitment to “gender equality”. Furthermore, the researcher believes that additional studies in this area would contribute to investigation of the issue of whether employability means the same thing in Saudi Arabia as it does in the West and, if so, whether that is in general or in particular sense.

- B. A study of the variations in the standpoints of relevant groups of stakeholders regarding the important issues in each department could yield important information, for example, on whether the issue of graduates’ employability is the best indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality or not, and whether it is better to assess it in terms of the developmental process or output alone. In the researcher’s view the former approach would be better since it provides more opportunity to understand various relevant actions and operations within the course of teaching and learning conduct and may even anticipate what a particular higher education system would achieve in terms of total quality and standards.
- C. There is a need for more research on some external groups, particularly religious sector and employers, with the aim of generating an agreement of opinions among as many relevant groups of Saudi stakeholders as possible. Undoubtedly, a national consensus will narrow the gap between the higher education and its environment and thereby help in adopting better policies to improve this system.
- D. It is clear that the issue of gender educational distinction is of special importance in Saudi Arabia, as it is in other Arab and Islamic countries. Therefore, it is expected that it will arise in many future studies. This means there is a demand for immediate



attention to this socio-cultural problem with dedicated researcher on ways of overcoming it. The researcher envisages that this issue would be better investigated in the light of responses obtained for the same types of subjects provided for male and female students.

- E. Previous studies on student population of Saudi universities were more often carried out by the same gender; that is, male students were studied by male researchers, and female students were studied by female researchers. However, the researcher believes that this attitude should change in favour of teams of mixed-sex researchers investigating both groups of students. In any event, this issue needs to be addressed to achieve an effective balance in as many aspects as possible, and sooner rather than later.
- F. Direct attention should be paid to choosing the elements of both the subject matter and general or key skills involved in every undergraduate programme in Saudi Arabia to ensure the formulation of more positive teaching and learning units within the various syllabuses. Assessment of the value of such units by students, as well as other groups of stakeholders, is a crucial factor in the educational process, especially if it is carried out in terms of curriculum quality, with its primary indicator being graduates' employability development, as suggested in this thesis.
- G. More systematic information is also required on the effectiveness of undergraduate curricula provided by Saudi universities in preparing their graduates for employment as well as on graduates' transfer into work marker.

H. The new findings of this thesis should be looked upon as an optimistic set of ideas. They are invariably open to be re-investigated independently, including being adopted, modified and employed by other researchers. In fact, it is anticipated that following this route will accomplish a remodelling of these ideas and thereby enhance the process of putting them into effect within the context of higher education syllabuses. It is the researcher's belief that there is a substantial degree of homogeneity among the Saudi universities, with King Saud University representing a prototype for all of them. This suggests that if the above named university accepts the findings of this study, the conclusions drawn from them and the recommendations based thereon, then other Saudi universities would most likely follow suit.

While other studies have looked at the Saudi higher education system, this is the first to look specifically at its undergraduate curriculum in terms of quality and employability. It identified some key issues, such as the significance of a portfolio of general transferable skills as a body of knowledge capable of strengthening the disciplinary curriculum, the role of curriculum in describing the level of quality in higher education, and the graduates' employability development as an indicator of educational quality. But it is only a starting point on the journey to structure the Saudi universities so that they can develop intellectual capital of citizens and their effectiveness in the workforce.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1: The main questionnaire inquiry

This questionnaire constitutes an important part of a Ph.D. fieldwork research at the Saudi higher education system. Its aim is to collect essential information about quality in higher education, the undergraduate curriculum, and the development of employability skills by Saudi students. Please clearly mark your opinion regarding the following statements:

### A. THE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. How would you rank these ideas about what the quality in higher education means, from the most important (rank = 1) to the least important (rank = 6)?

- a. Quality is about the level of qualification achieved
- b. Quality is about the standard of student grade achieve
- c. Quality is about student effectiveness in the learning environment
- d. Quality is about the efficiency of education system
- e. Quality is about performance of teaching staff
- f. Quality is about the employability of the graduates

2. Please rank the following factors in terms of their influence on the quality of higher education in your department?

	Not very important	Quite important	Neutral	Important	Very important
a. Political influence					
b. Financial constraints					
c. Academic tradition					
d. Limited student access					
e. Managerial influence					
f. Employer's influence					

3. What you think about the quality of higher education provision in your department?  
Please tick one box.

- a. Excellent
- b. Very good
- c. Average
- d. Poor

4. Please rank your preference for the following teaching methods in respect to their impact on the quality in higher education at your department, from most preferred (=1) to least preferred (=5):

- a. Lecturing-based
- b. Debate-based
- c. Text-based
- d. Project-based
- e. A mixture of all the above

5. In your view, how can we best determined that students benefit from the undergraduate courses offered to them by your department? Please rank the following from most informative (=1) to least informative (=6):

- a. Examination results
- b. Questionnaire
- c. Employment rate of graduates
- d. Graduate performance at work
- e. Graduate further studies

## **B. THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM**

6. What is the extent of contribution of the stakeholder group you belong to in the development of the undergraduate curriculum in your department?
- a. To a large extent
  - b. To a moderate extent
  - c. To a limited extent
  - d. No relation whatsoever
  - e. I do not know
7. Do you know if employers are making any contribution to the development of undergraduate curriculum in your department? Yes [ ], No [ ]. If yes, what role:
- a. A major role
  - b. A moderate role
  - c. A limited role
  - d. No role at all
  - e. I do not know
8. Do you know if religious sector is making any contribution to the development of undergraduate curriculum at your department? Yes [ ], No [ ]. If yes, what role:
- a. A major role
  - b. A moderate role
  - c. A limited role
  - d. No role at all
  - e. I do not know

9. Do you know of any other group of stakeholders that participates in the development of undergraduate curricula in Saudi universities? If yes, please name it.

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10. When was the undergraduate curriculum in your department last evaluated by the following? Please put a tick in each column.

	Professional committees	Governmental committees	International committees
a. 1-2 years ago			
b. 3-5 years ago			
c. 5-7 years ago			
d. More than 7 years			
e. I do not know			

### **C. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS**

11. Do you think that the graduates' employability should be considered as an indicator of undergraduate curriculum quality in the context of higher education? Yes [ ], No [ ].

12. In your view how significant is the issue of graduates' employability in the development of undergraduate curriculum?

- a. Highly significant
- b. Significant
- c. Moderately significant
- d. Of little significance
- e. Of no significance

13. Would you (male student, female student, graduate) value the development of employability skills in the undergraduate curriculum? Yes [ ], No [ ].
13. As a member of teaching staff, do yourself develop employability skills in your teaching? Yes [ ], No [ ].
13. As an academic manager, do you contribute to the development of employability skills? Yes [ ], No [ ].
14. Have you (male student, female student) ever been asked about the desirability of employability skills? Yes [ ], No [ ].
14. In your experience as a graduate, do you feel that the skills of the employability were developed in the undergraduate programme you undertook? Yes [ ], No [ ].
14. In your experience as a member of teaching staff, do you feel that the skills of the employability are developed in the undergraduate programme you teach? Yes [ ], No [ ].
14. In your experience as an academic manager, do you feel that the skills of the employability have been developed in the undergraduate programme of your department? Yes [ ], No [ ].
15. Please rank the following skills in terms of their importance to the employability of Saudi graduates: 1= extremely important, 2= very important, 3= neither important nor unimportant, 4= not very important, and 5= not at all important.
- a. Key or core skills, for example, application of numbers and information and communication technology (ICT).
  - b. Intellectual skills, for example, evaluation, analysis and synthesis.
  - c. Career management skills (CMS), for example, oral and written communication, networking and decision-making skills.
  - d. Self-sufficiency skills, for example, self-confidence, negotiation and coping with uncertainty.
  - e. Personal attributes, for example, creativity, adaptability and responsiveness.
  - f. Academic knowledge.
  - g. Awareness of national and international issues.
  - h. Awareness of religious beliefs and values.



**Student (male, female):**

Finally, I should like to express my sincere thanks to you for answering the above questions and, if possible, for providing the following information as well:

A. College:
B. Department:
C. Year:
D. Date of answering the questionnaire:
E. Your name:

**Graduate:**

Finally, I should like to express my sincere thanks to you for answering the above questions and, if possible, for providing the following information as well:

A. College:
B. Department graduated from:
C. Your present position:
D. Year of service after graduation:
E. Date answering the questionnaire:
F. Your name:

**Academic manager:**

Finally, I should like to express my sincere thanks to you for answering the above questions and, if possible, for providing the following information as well:

A. College:
B. Department:
C. Your academic qualification(s):
D. Your academic position:
E. Your main duty:
F. Years of service: At this university: At other university: At other offices:
G. Date of answering the questionnaire:
H. Your name:

**Teaching staff:**

Finally, I should like to express my sincere thanks to you for answering the above questions and, if possible, for providing the following information as well:

A. College:
B. Department:
C. Your academic qualification(s): <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- B.Sc.</li><li>- M.Sc.</li><li>- Ph.D.</li><li>- Other (please identify)</li></ul>
D. Your academic position: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Teacher</li><li>- Lecturer</li><li>- Assistant professor</li><li>- Associate professor</li><li>- Professor</li><li>- Other (please identify)</li></ul>
E. Year of your service: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- At this university</li><li>- At other universities</li><li>- At other offices</li></ul>
F. Your additional duties, you can tick more than one: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Scientific research</li><li>- Administration</li><li>- Consultation</li><li>- Departmental committees</li><li>- Other (please identify)</li></ul>
G. Date of answering the questionnaire:
H. Your name:

## Appendix 2: Chi-square test between the stakeholders and indicator of quality

### Test procedure:

$H_0$ : (Null hypothesis) There is no association between the stakeholder and employability as an indicator.

$H_1$ : (Alternate hypothesis) There is an association between the stakeholder and employability as an indicator.

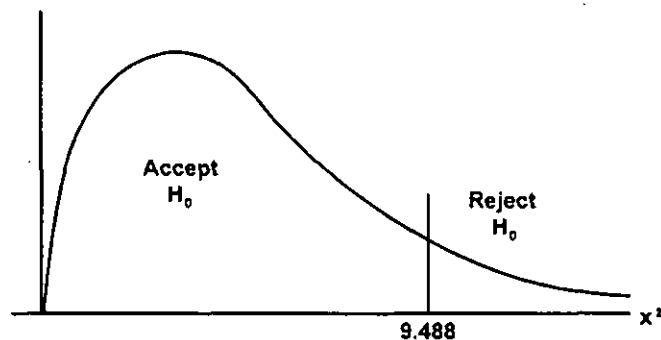
$\alpha$ : (Level of significance) 0.05

Test statistic:  $\chi^2$

Degrees of freedom:  $(r-1)(c-1) = (2-1)(4-1) = 3$ .

$r$  = number of rows and  $c$  = number of columns.

Decision rule: If calculated  $\chi^2$  is greater than the critical value 7.815, then reject  $H_0$ ; otherwise accept  $H_0$ .



Expected counts are printed below observed counts

Indicator of quality		Stakeholder				Total
		Graduates	Teaching staff	Academic managers	Students	
Yes	Observed	20	19	17	108	164
	Expected	18.22	14.98	12.55	118.24	
No	Observed	25	18	14	184	241
	Expected	26.78	22.02	18.45	173.76	
Total		45	37	31	292	405

$$\text{Chi-Sq} = 0.173 + 1.077 + 1.575 + 0.887 + 0.118 + 0.733 + 1.072 + 0.604 = 6.240$$

$$\text{DF} = 3, \text{ P-Value} = 0.101$$

The calculated value of chi-square is less than the critical value and lies in the acceptance region. Therefore, the null hypothesis 'there is no association between the stakeholder and employability as an indicator' is accepted.

### Appendix 3: Chi-square test between the stakeholders and employability as an indicator of quality

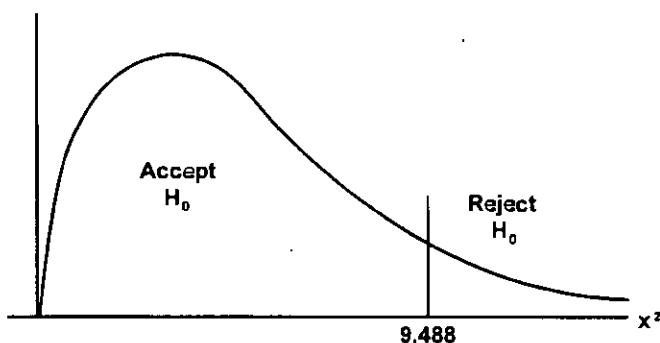
$H_0$ : (Null hypothesis) There is no association between the stakeholder and employability as an indicator.

$H_1$ : (Alternate hypothesis) There is an association between the stakeholder and employability as an indicator.

$\alpha$ : 0.05

Test statistic:  $\chi^2$  with 4 degrees of freedom.

Decision rule: If calculated  $\chi^2$  is greater than the critical value 9.488, then reject  $H_0$ ; otherwise accept  $H_0$ .



Expected counts are printed below observed counts

		Stakeholder					Total
		Male Students	Female students	Graduates	Teaching staff	Academic managers	
Indicator of Quality	Yes	101 102.85	7 15.39	20 18.22	19 14.98	17 12.55	164
	No	153 151.15	31 22.61	25 26.78	18 22.02	14 18.45	241
Total		254	38	45	37	31	405

$$\text{Chi-Sq} = 0.033 + 4.572 + 0.173 + 1.077 + 1.575 + 0.023 + 3.111 + 0.118 + 0.733 + 1.072 = 12.488$$

$$\text{DF} = 4, \text{ P-Value} = 0.014$$

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