KSA operator of ICDL programme believes that the allegations are baseless and an attempt to seize the license of the program

Taqniyat Al Maarifa keen to play vital role in Kingdom's transformation into knowledge-based society

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The management of Taqniyat Al Maarifa li Al Taaleem Al Mutatawer, the exclusive operator of the International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL) programme in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, outlined plans to enhance the role of digital literacy in national development during a special press conference held today at Al Faisaliah Hotel, Riyadh. Taqniyat Al Maarifa also took the opportunity to thank its partners in the government and private sectors for their continued support of ICDL's highly successful Saudi initiatives.

Taqniyat Al Maarifa is the local governing body and certification authority of the global ICDL network overseen directly by the ECDL Foundation which has delivered computer literacy programmes to over 10 million people in 46 languages. Considered one of the most productive ICDL operators worldwide, the organization received a special award during the 2009 ECDL Foundation Annual Global Forum for persuading major Saudi universities to integrate ICDL certification into their academic programs. Since 2003, over 99,438 ICDL certificates have been awarded in Saudi Arabia, making it one of the fastest-growing and most successful ICDL programs in the world. Additionally, in 2009, Saudi Arabia registered more candidates in the ICDL program than the United Kingdom.

"We are proud to say that our efforts have helped enhance the economic and social development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and have been instrumental in encouraging more women, youths and students to improve their technological competencies. Taqniyat Al Maarifa has worked hard to advance the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's transformation into a knowledge-

based society, and through the support and trust of our partners and citizens we shall continue to move forward with this mission," said Dr. Jamal Al Hefdhi, General Manager, Taqniyat Al Maarifa.

"We were thus totally surprised to learn of the allegations hurled against us by the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) through the media. One of the questions raised by the corporation is our legitimacy as the sole body handling the ICDL programme in the Kingdom. We would like to note that this is a common practice among several ICDL-adopting countries, and that we have been adhering to the same implementation standards followed by members of the international network," added Dr. Al Hefdhi.

Taqniyat Al Maarifa had recently responded to allegations made in the press by TVTC, following the attempt by the latter to suspend the ICDL certification. Taqniyat Al Maarifa clarified that the conflict with the TVTC is strictly financial and about take over, and had nothing to do with quality issues of the ICDL program offered. It emphasized that ICDL is an international certification with services offered in the KSA in the same manner and quality standards as those offered around the world, and that it is properly licensed in the Kingdom and runs a completely legitimate business.

Explaining the relationship between Taqniyat Al Maarifa and ICDL Saudi Arabia, David Carpenter, Advisory Board Member - ICDL Saudi Arabia, said, "In late 2002, Taqniyat Al Maarifa was engaged by TVTC to provide computer competency training and testing for all TVTC students. Based on independent research as to the unique needs of the TVTC student population, Taqniyat Al Maarifa introduced and recommended the ICDL certification program to TVTC, who was unaware of the existence of the ICDL program at the time, as being the most appropriate international certification program to meet the needs of the Kingdom."

"Taqniyat Al Maarifa then contacted the ECDL-Foundation, to seek its assistance to accredit the TVTC centres to provide ICDL certification testing. As a result of this dialogue Taqniyat Al Maarifa arranged for a meeting between myself as CEO of the Foundation and Dr. Sulaiman Al-Dhalan, the then TVTC Director General of International Cooperation, in London in March 2003 to discuss potential licensing arrangements for the program in Saudi. The result of this meeting and subsequent discussions was that a licence agreement for the ICDL program in the Kingdom was signed between ECDL-Foundation and Taqniyat Al Maarifa in May 2003. In October 2003, Taqniyat Al Maarifa, now operating as ICDL Saudi, signed a five year agreement with TVTC, which stated that ICDL Saudi is licensed by ECDL-F to be the only authorized company to operate the ICDL program in the Kingdom and required ICDL Saudi to accredit only those

private training centres for the ICDL program already licensed by TVTC provided they met the accreditation and quality standards of the ICDL program," added Carpenter.

Taqniyat Al Maarifa further pointed out that the ICDL program is commonly supported by a single testing company in various host countries to maintain high levels of operational quality. Most successful operators of the ICDL program around the world rely on single test provider or an exclusive contractual relationship with one provider for offering testing services. This approach is followed in many developing countries such as the UK, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Germany, and various African countries. Taqniyat Al Maarifa also noted that it was the only ICDL licensee in the world to adopt and enforce 100 per cent test supervision as one of its Quality Assurance standards.

For more than seven years, Taqniyat Al Maarifa has been facilitating ICDL certification within the Kingdom and has been introducing the program to policy makers and decision-makers, and in the process has invested significant resources including human and financial resources. Hence, the allegations being directed towards Taqniyat Al Maarifa by TVTC does not only affect its business, but also discourage investments by any company with a new innovative business idea interested in operating in the Kingdom.

Over 78,000 candidates - of which 36 per cent or over 28,000 are female - were in the process of completing the ICDL certification and now are left stranded due to the fact that testing is suspended. This is the number of candidates used to calculate part of the contingent liability. Further, TVTC has threatened to remove the Civil Services accreditation, so should testing resume, candidates will want assurances that their certification will be recognized by the Ministry of Civil Service.

Additionally, there were 165 centres of which 72 are female centres operating under TVTC's jurisdiction offer the ICDL program in Saudi Arabia. These centers have legitimate trade licenses with existing accreditations to operate ICDL Training and Test Centres and are holding ICDL inventory; and the 78,000 plus candidates are in effect their customers.

The repercussions of TVTC's move on the employees of Taqniyat Al Maarifa were also brought to light during the press conference. Taqniyat Al Maarifa pointed out that it employs 115 people on a full and part-time basis across the Kingdom, including in remote areas. Over 66 per cent of its employees are Saudi nationals, of which 36 per cent are female. Further, more than 72 per cent of its employees fulfill the test invigilator or Quality Assurance role, and 76 per cent of these roles are filled by Saudis. Given this scenario, since there is no testing and over 80 per cent of Taqniyat Al

Maarifa's customer activity has been halted by TVTC, it is inevitable that lay-offs will occur if operations are not to resume shortly.

Another important fact that Taqniyat Al Maarifa pointed out is that its centers that are not under TVTC's jurisdiction continue to offer the ICDL program, such as King Saud University, Princess Noorah University, Taibah Univerity, Tabook University, Prince Sultan University, Um Alquorah University, King AbdulAziz University, Girls Community College in Al Ahsa, King Abdullah Air Defense Academy, among others. This shows that TVTC has stopped the same digital literacy certification program which has been endorsed by some of the best institutes of higher education in the Kingdom, many that have even made the ICDL program mandatory for their first year students.

Taqniyat Al Maarifa also highlighted that it has been applying the same pricing set by UNESCO since it started operations in 2003, despite ECDL increasing its royalty fees, fluctuations in the Euro exchange rate, and the volatile inflation witnessed in recent years. It noted that its recent decision to increase its prices was a commercial decision and does not conflict with any agreements it has with a third party.

There are presently over 10 million candidates for certification around the world and 1.5 million in the Arabic speaking countries. The ICDL certificate is backed by the approval and participation of the region's various educational ministries, universities, and government authorities. The achievement of requirements for obtaining the internationally-acclaimed accreditation in any of the approved centers within the GCC or in any other place in the world poses a major challenge. For its part, Taqniyat Al Maarifa is prepared to take the necessary steps to cover unpaid test fees to maintain the program's quality and reward the immense trust given to ICDL by GCC countries.