

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN THE EDUCATIONAL REALM IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

Often the greatest symbol of national education is a university. While the first University in Saudi Arabia was King Saud University in Riyadh est. 1957, Saudi Aramco has served as a “defacto university” setting for thousands of Saudi’s from all over the Kingdom. While for years there were just a handful of government universities catering to a minority of high school graduates, the number of private universities is helping to take up the slack such as Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University in the Eastern Province which opened its doors in 2006 and was the first to enroll both male and female students in separate facilities. Those modern higher education institutions are being surrounded by a conservative Muslim society that holds many challenges one of which is the waste of the female potential for the societal development. With a reported unemployment rate for women of 21.7% and of men 7.6%, there is a large discrepancy in gender differentiated unemployment. It is often pointed to three conditions that must be met before women can be fully integrated into the wage labor force: need, opportunity and ability. While in the educational realm women are gaining grounds, Saudi Arabia remains a very traditional, conservative society where school to work transition remains a major challenge. However, in order to fully implement the concept of Saudization these traditional gender roles need to be renegotiated.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, university, female students, role of women

Introduction

The Saudi Arabia of 2012 is vastly different from the Saudi Arabia of a century ago that lay dormant with nomadic tribes criss-crossing the land. This country is like a sleeping giant that is just awakening and beginning to exert its influence in a rapidly changing political, economical, and social world. Its growing economic wealth is helping to transform all aspects of living and is particularly evident in the area of education. This transformation has been described in international reports “Saudi Arabia is experiencing an aggressive investment in the key pillar of the knowledge-based economy, namely, education and learning, innovation, and information technology” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

Often the greatest symbol of national education is a university, one where ideas and ideals intermingle and are debated, where students solve the worlds’ problems and at the same time investigate their own emerging world views. Think about it, in the U.S.; Harvard , Stanford and MIT, come to mind, in the UK; Cambridge, and Oxford, and in the EU; the Sorbonne in France, Bologna in Italy and Maastricht in the Netherlands, all of them carry a universal weight far greater than their collective national impact. Students from all over the world know these great institutions and which scholars and great scientists have emerged from their traditions.

While the first University in Saudi Arabia was King Saud University in Riyadh est. 1957, Saudi Aramco (previously known as ARAMCO) has served as a “defacto university” setting for thousands of Saudi’s from all over the Kingdom; from the southern heights of

Najran to the northern plains of Hail and all parts in between since 1963. This multinational entity has made itself a force to be reckoned with in the Kingdom for the last three generations. Together with the University of Medina, founded in 1961, the University of Riyadh, founded in 1957 and the 'Abd al-'Aziz University in Jiddah, founded in 1967 these institutions initiated the educational crusade. Under the leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Saud, education opportunities which for so many years was directed to the education of males is increasingly looking towards the untapped resources of educated women. Within the past few years the changes in opportunities for higher education have expanded in leaps and bounds. More than 12% of the fiscal budget has been allocated to education. The government has encouraged the expansion of private enterprise in the opening of new institutions of higher learning. Higher Education in Saudi Arabia is moving forward in leaps and bounds. In 1957 when the first university opened in Riyadh there were 22 students with 7 faculty. Today it is expected that over a quarter of a million students will be attending an ever increasing number of private and government funded universities in the Kingdom. The Ministry is convinced that educational reforms helped to transform “Saudi universities into ‘functional developmental institutes’ via a careful balance of international academic standards, national needs, local cultural identity, and careful management of knowledge production, management, dissemination, access, and control (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Without doubt: The giant has awakened and his movements are impacting all segments of society. This country has a bright future ahead as it stands on its own two feet and faces the challenges ahead with hope and determination.

“The implementation of the reform plans of Saudi Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) through launching several higher education initiatives in technical readiness and infrastructures, Saudi Arabia is starting to take a prominent place in the scientific and technical domains, both regionally and internationally” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). This statement reflects the Ministries’ interpretation of the actual educational reforms. However, in societies where thought and ideals are centrally mandated by either religion or government or both the entire concept of university takes on a new twist. What pictures come to your mind when you think about education in general in Saudi Arabia? Madrassas? High technology institutions? The separation of church and state as an outstanding feature of Western societies is not a valid concept for Islamic societies: In Saudi Arabia for instance education “remained under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002, [...]. This was to ensure that women’s education did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for ‘acceptable’ jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature” (Hamdan, 2005, p. 44). The umbrella of the Ministry of the Department of Religious Guidance both ensured that the interpretation of freedom would be in line with Wahaibi Islam, “a revivalist movement that has for two centuries dominated Najd, the home of the ruling dynasty, and has shaped government social policies in all the rest of the [Arabian] peninsula that came under Saudi rule in the twentieth century” (Doumato, 2000, p. 28). The religious or clerical police arm of the Ministry, referred to in general as the Muttawah, is used to implement these interpretations by providing regular on site supervision of curriculum, staff and administration.

What becomes clear from the above is that the shift towards a knowledge-based economy yet economically driven presents a challenge to this sleeping giant: The country faces a series of developments in the educational realm, in which the voice and the role of women can make the difference, while providing at the same time successful models for human development within an Islamic context in our global era. Has the new dawn in education broken on? Has the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stepped into the “modern” world by

taking its existing structures and overlaying them upon what those in the west consider institutions of free thought?

Socio-Economic Framework: A Fast-Forward Historic Perspective

For centuries the Saudi Arabia laid dormant with nomadic tribes criss-crossing the area. However, with the discovery of vast reserves of oil and the sudden increase in oil prices in the 70s, there has been a dramatic change taking place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is thought that the vast oil revenues helped in creating what Sharabi (1988) terms the postcolonial system of neopatriarchs in which the political control is exerted through existing tribal based networks in which loyalty is paramount. Key to this patriarchal system is a system of male domination in which the male is given legal power and prestige which is withheld from females. Because Saudi Arabia holds a central and leading role in the Gulf region, events occurring there have drawn secular and religious attention. Saudi culture in particular is male dominated based on the construct that males are superior to females (Becker, 1991). In the early 70ies there was a broadening of women's roles within the public sector in which there was a rise in women's organizations, TV broadcasting of unveiled females, and increased education of women. However, events outside of Saudi Arabia such as the Iranian revolution in 1979 became a turning point in which strict restrictions begun to be re-imposed on the dress and movement of women. The situation was exacerbated with the demonstrations against the Al Saud family and the violent takeover of the Grand Mosque by Islamic radicals. In an effort to make women less visible severe restrictions were imposed by the religious police resulting in a rapid decline of the liberalization of women in society (Willoughby, 2008).

With increasing financial resources available, the monarchies decided to invest in developing the infrastructure of their countries by concentrating on setting up the three pillars essential to the development of a modern state. The three pillars consisted of the establishment of: a) a socio-economic system forming the foundation of a public bureaucracy; b) the growth and development of the agricultural and industrial sectors; and lastly, c) the further development of social services covering health care and an establishment of a strong education system incorporating both Western and traditional, religious values (Bahgat, 1999). "The 2009 World Economic Forum recognized Saudi Arabia among the top 30 most competitive economies in its annual GCI Report putting it in 28 position out of 133 countries studies. In the innovation capacity section, Saudi Arabia has surpassed advanced economies such as Portugal, Spain, France and Russia as well as knowledge-intensive economies such as India and Brazil" (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

Keeping in mind the context in which all this occurred within a framework of thirty or forty years, there are bound to be aberrations in the manner in which this has occurred when compared with the progress of like institutions in developing countries where these were developed over centuries. As a result of all this, the mismatch between the vast wealth available and the progress made in relation to some areas is sometimes difficult for Westerners to grasp. Indigenous traditions and customs which have been in place for centuries have not had a chance to keep abreast with the rapid growth which would appear to be possible based on Western standards. Indeed, in Western societies these developments brought along a separation of church and state and a productive society built on the principles of secularism. However, this is not the case for Saudi Arabia, where religion and culture permeate every facet of life including economic, governmental and educational arenas.

Western influence on education has been and will continue to be a major force in driving the changes taking place. So many of the education leaders were themselves educated in the west. But one must never take for granted that western education or western culture will become the status quo. Because of the tremendous socio-religious pressures constantly

playing out, education in Saudi Arabia must be and will be distinctly Saudi, distinctly Arab. Why would one not expect it to be this way because when one looks back at the history of modern civilization, so much of what is studied today and practiced had its roots deeply entrenched in the Arab world with Saudi Arabia playing no small part.

Mushrooming Higher Ed Institutions

While for years there were just a handful of government universities catering to a minority of high school graduates, the number of private universities is helping to take up the slack such as Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University in the Eastern Province which opened its doors in 2006 and was the first to enroll both male and female students in separate facilities. Many of the smaller colleges that were attached to large universities are now breaking away to form new universities, all promoted and funded by the government.

Saudi Arabia under King Abdullah is determined to use its wealth in the development of a “Knowledge Society”. To this end institutions such as King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) have been developed as a state-of-the-art graduate research institution and located near Jeddah. In the same vein, Prince Naif Center for Health Science Research has been developed by King Saud University in Riyadh focusing on the education of its own people. Along with this development has been a strong impetus to the education of women. The newest university nearing completion on the northern outskirts of Riyadh covering more than 8 million square meters is Princess Noura University (PNU). It is estimated to cost more than \$11.5 billion and is planned to house 15 colleges and is expected to enroll up to 50,000 women thus becoming the largest women’s university in the world. It is hoped that this will boost the number of women researchers from the present 17% of Saudi researchers which is remarkable in itself. In addition, the Knowledge Economic City (KEC) scheduled to open in 2020 in Madinah will focus on linking education and knowledge-based industries and focus on training in the medical fields. It is anticipated that when complete KEC will provide jobs for more than 20,000 individuals (Reisberg, 2011). This is just a sampling of the tremendous changes now taking place in the promotion of education. These changes and the scientific outputs that come along with it don’t remain unobserved by the international scientific community: A study published in June 2010 by London-based royal society puts Saudi Arabia on the top of all Gulf countries and the second position in the Arab world with reference to scientific productivity, namely, publication of research in established journals.

The Ninth Five-Year Development Plan (2010 – 2014) claims that 50.6 percent of the budget go to human resource development including education and training. This was an important step to further realize the Kingdom’s goal of creating a knowledge-based society. According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2009) “a number of new facilities will be built, including 25 technology colleges, 28 technical institutes, and 50 industrial training institutes. The government will also expand and diversify the post-graduate programs offered within the Kingdom and seek to increase the amount of post-graduate students to 5 percent of all university students. The plan also encourages innovation in science and technology by providing US \$ 240 million in grants for research projects each year. Other initiatives include the establishment of 10 research centers, 15 university technological innovation centers in association with King Abdullah City for Science and Technology (KACST), and at least eight technology incubators at KACST and other universities. The government will also continue to promote university collaboration with international companies”. This is not to forget the investment in the thousands of students sent abroad and paid for by the government for graduate studies and for study in specialized areas that are needed for the growth and development of the resources of this country.

These efforts gained formal international appreciation as “Saudi Arabia was ranked 31 globally with reference to the efficiency of higher education system” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). This investment may end up being miniscule in comparison with the ultimate benefits of developing its latent industrial, commercial, business and economic resources. Government and private institutions alike have made an effort to join the international league table of the world’s top universities. As for June 2010 Webometrics of World Universities 3 Saudi universities ranked among the top 200 world universities, another 6 universities were included in the top 10 universities in the Arab Gulf states, Arab world and Islamic states. “In 2009, King Saud University was also admitted to the academic ranking of World universities, known as Shanghai ranking, within the top 500 international universities and the sole Arabic University” (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Although the weak points of international ranking systems are evident and in the case of the Gulf states often discussed in relation to their business relations with top universities in Europe and the US and the resulting exchange of faculty, Saudi Arabia’s ambitious efforts for higher education reform bear fruits.

However, the development towards a knowledge based society is a long term venture. The country has taken many of the right steps to invest in its innovative capacity. The Kingdom is investing a lot of money into the educational realm but this is not necessarily reflected in the quality of the education system. While pedagogically root learning is still the paramount it is not surprising that the weakest output pillar for Saudi Arabia is the dimension of “creative outputs”. Having thought at an educational institutions I have personally lived the challenges that are inherent in mushrooming modern educational institutions being forced to grow in line with religious restrictions and conservative mores. Those modern higher education institutions are being surrounded by a conservative Muslim society that holds many challenges one of which is the waste of the female potential for the societal development. Moreover, the questions need to be addressed: What happens when Princess Noura University’s 50,000 women begin to graduate and find themselves in a country where women do not have the independence necessary to pursue a professional career? Will all of the university’s graduates be content with limited opportunities (Reisberg, 2011)?

Females’ Roles

Let me try to answer the question whether the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has stepped into the “modern” world by taking its existing structures and overlaying them upon what those in the west consider institutions of free thought. King Abdullah and the ruling family of Al-Saud, has been seen to actively encourage women’s entrance into any and all fields that may interest them (Wall Street Journal, 2007); The Ministry states that 17 % of all Saudi researchers are female. This figure seems to be higher than that in Germany (12%), Japan (12%) and Korea (11%), and the same as in Luxembourg, according to a recent UNESCO report entitled “women in science: under-represented and under-measured”. Also Saudi women outnumber western women in worldwide university enrolments and graduation rates, according to 2009 Global Education Digest of UNESCO (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

However, the gap between what the Ministry officially has decreed and Shari’a courts uphold and the dynamics of local traditional power structures can be two different things. One example of oftentimes antagonistic debates lies within the educational realm. The King has made available large amounts of international study scholarships for women (Reisberg, 2011). However, due to: Mahram⁶ requirements, and the need for “a male relatives agreement

⁶Islamic requisite of Muslim women to travel accompanied by a male relative or sponsor as outlined in the Qur’an, where for a woman it is unacceptable to travel the walking distance of three days without Mahram (Al Hashimi, 1996)

before seeking work, education or travel” (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004, p. 266), those funds often go unused by the general public because families are unable to afford sending two members overseas with a requirement to provide funding for one of them. This reflects Shehada’s (2009, p. 24) proposition that “aspects concerning the wider sociopolitical context are crucial, notably the preeminence of the notion of family honor (sharaf), the mutually constitutive relation between the shari‘a court and the community, and the specificities of court cases. As an ideological construct, the law does not necessarily correspond to a social milieu full of inconsistencies, oppositions, contradictions, and tensions. However, in her work, primarily focused on Gaza, “the practice of law has always been characterized by pluralism, flexibility, and a degree of ambiguity, whereas the text remains characterized by rigidity, restriction, stability, and in some aspects, superficial clarity” (Shehada 2009, p. 24). Yet in Saudi, the period after nationalization has seen a concentration on Wahhabi Islam, “a gender ideology that was emphasized during the first half of the twentieth century along with [...] the conquest of Ibn Saud” (Doumato 2000, p. 42). The Al Saud family in conjunction with the Wahhabi clerics united the disparate regions of the upper Arabian Peninsula into what is now known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This unification engendered a huge expansion in the bureaucratic engines which support the country’s infrastructure and its implementation of both Royal and Shariac edicts.

The west has often considered the Al Saud family to be extremely open and liberal in its interpretation of Islam in a modern context; however, it’s important not to forget that the country as a whole is composed of many different factions that are primarily bound through the joint association and agreements maintained between the Al Saud’s and the Wahhabi clerics’. “[King Abdullah] does not have unlimited power. He has to take into account the sentiments of the sprawling ruling family as well as that of the powerful religious establishment. [...] On [February the 14th he] dismissed the chief of the religious police and a cleric who condoned killing the owners of TV networks that broadcast "immoral" content, signaling an effort to weaken the country's hard-line Sunni establishment. The shake-up—King Abdullah's first since coming to power in August 2005—including the appointment of a female deputy minister, the highest government position a Saudi woman has attained” (The Associated Press, 2009, para. 3-4). The changes made on Valentine’s Day limit the power of the religious police and that of the shari‘a courts and place a woman in an important position: Nura el Fajes is the first woman in the cabinet nominated as deputy Secretary of Education. This is the first time that a woman has been placed in a high position of responsibility within the Saudi government. This is a breakthrough for women in the Kingdom.

In 2005 a new labor law was implemented aimed at increasing employment of women, and locals in general; official figures claim that 49% (6.2m) of the labor force are non-Saudis and 14.7% are Saudi women with the remainder 36.3% being Saudi males. With a reported unemployment rate for women of 21.7% and of men 7.6%, there is a large discrepancy in gender differentiated unemployment (EIU Views Wire Middle East, 2005). Although these figures are inequitable, the question remains, does this data really represent the reality of the current economic situation. Internationally released data from the Kingdom has historically been closely monitored and internally collected thus there are few ways to confirm or disprove these numbers other than through first hand reports. Those indicate a much larger discrepancy between male and female employment due in part to available female sphere positions and in part to the lack of commercial opportunities and the ferocious competition among ambitious university graduates for the few administrative or professional track positions available. In her book “Women Power: the Arab Debate on Women at Work” Hijab 1998 lists three conditions that must be met before women can be fully integrated into the wage labor force: need, opportunity and ability; however, where, when and how are extremely varied in countries as closely aligned as Saudi Arabia and Oman. The new labor

law in Saudi proclaims that “women are entitled to work in all fields that are appropriate to their nature” (Middle East Monitor, 2005). The ambiguity this statement leaves behind is reflected in Pharaon’s (2004, p. 358) remarks: “the women’s role is the key to maintaining the family [...] it is the mother who transmits the cultural and religious traditions that reinforce solidarity and loyalty to the family [...] underlying all the argument is the very real fear that, if women allow their key role in the family to be overtaken by other roles, then the whole social system will fall apart”.

As Western style schooling historically was seen to facilitate the spreading of the doctrine of capitalism, centralized government, meritocratic society and the belief in progress (Leach, 1994) the rapid expansion of American/British/European affiliated universities with their heavily expatriate and Eurocentric faculty has challenged recent generations to find a way to balance the Western frameworks being imposed throughout their higher education and the traditional tribal frameworks within which the rest of their lives function. Unlike the contexts within which western Education currently produces high functioning professionals of both genders for any and all careers for which they are suited, not all academic subjects in the Kingdom are currently open for women. According to a report published in the Wall Street Journal (2007), in 2006 females were admitted to law school for the first time in the Kingdom; however, there is no assurance that they will be allowed to actually practice law within their own Kingdom, although they could do so in the neighbouring Kingdom of Bahrain.

The current state of educational settings and opportunities for women, while being based upon an American or European framework are being delivered in an idealized “women’s only setting”, which does not acclimate this generation to burgeoning work place realities that may include men.



Hallmark of gender segregation: ID control of those entering or exiting the premises-taking pictures of women is off-limits
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Moreover, the tools and oftentimes the career paths they will need to function effectively in a diversifying capitalist setting with a huge pool of potential employees, both male and female, are not part of their collegiate experience. “Consumers are controlled by capitalism with its objective of increasing profit” (Assad, 2006, p. 12) that has leached into the educational arena and has manifested in the rise of privatized Western brand educational corporations. With the rise of easily accessible technology in the Gulf States unscrupulous corporations using higher education as a bare front for cashing in on the higher education windfall were fleecing students by the thousands in the early 2000’s. However, in Saudi the Ministry of Higher Education has now made it known that it will accept only degrees from internally recognized and internationally accredited distance learning programs and online universities. Online bookstores like amazon.com and various torrent sites which specialize in educational textbooks are supporting the continued growth of such markets that help to make higher education accessible to home bound women (cf. Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004).

Educational Culture: The Clash of Divergent Concepts

As already described above, the harsh policy enforcing gender segregation based on a neopatriarchal society fostered by the tribal system is a key cultural component of Saudi society. Added to this is the national religion of Islam which permeates every aspect of life and at times cannot be separated from – what we would call – the secular aspects of life. Tied in with all this are the concepts of *wasta* and the importance of the *mutawwa'in*. The concept of *wasta* permeates all aspects of society and involves both the act and the person who mediates or intercedes towards finding middle ground. During the late 1970s and into the 80s because of social upheaval the *mutawwa'in* or religious police gained considerable power and authority which they still exert to different degrees right to the present. While Middle Eastern culture tends to have many common elements throughout the Middle East, Saudi Arabia presents a much stronger or “purer” interpretation of religious-cultural elements.

Education while having a global function also fulfills a national function which goes across nations. Western education by most Arabs is perceived as being liberal. Therefore, is regarded with suspicion by many Islamists. “[...] many Muslims are Islamist and almost no very pious Muslims are liberals, most Muslims remain conservative, traditional believers. This group includes the majority of clerics and ordinary people” (Rubin, 2006, p. 101). Religious or clerical police, referred to as *mutawwa'in*, is especially influential in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia where the conservative form of Wahhabi Islam is practiced. Religious affiliation within Islam is a determinant factor in securing jobs and for admission into educational institutions although officially not endorsed by any criteria applied. Examples of how this is influential in the educational arena are: hiring of personnel and student admissions with reference to their family names and tribal affiliations. On paper there is no discrimination based on Islamic religious affiliation; however, in practice this is a very important factor which is never openly discussed or admitted.

An example of the segregation of the sexes in educational institutions is handled differently according to national and religious legislation. First of all, educational institutions in Saudi Arabia are established primarily for males; however, there are a few institutions established primarily for females which offer traditional, “female-specific majors” such as Medicine, Interior Design. Places like KFUPM have separate colleges within the university established for women. In a private university such as PMU which was established as a co-educational institution functions very differently from what Westerners would expect. In an interview the Academic Dean told of an incident that happened on the very first day that PMU – a sample case that will be described in the following chapter – started classes in September 2006: “The male and female faculty and students were in the same building and though classes were set up on opposite sides of the building for male and female students, faculty and administrative personnel were allowed to intermingle in a central area. However, within hours of opening this was seen by the *Muttawa* who came to monitor what was happening on campus and a report was passed on to the Governor, saying that this was not permissible. I was in the Rector’s office when a phone call was received from the Governor’s office to desist this immediately and within 45 minutes all the women were cleared out of that section and within days a wall was set up to prevent intermingling. This was a turning point, it showed how influential the *Muttawas* are and the Rector was really scared. I still think he could have stood up to them and told them that this is a private institution and we apply Western standard. But the longer I stay here the more I think we have to start at the point where the people are at and feel comfortable within the bounds of their social and religious mores” (Richard, Hoogewerf[pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 12 May 2011).

The concept of *wasta* permeates all aspects of society and involves both the act and the person who mediates or intercedes towards finding middle ground. In the Western culture *wasta* is frond upon by university professors who feel that when giving grades students are

evaluated on the basis of the actual grades earned. This individualistic approach stands in opposition to the collectivistic make-up of the social groups that hold the power in the area. Expatriate teachers and university professors who impose this Western mindset in their treatment and evaluation of students are regarded as “inflexible, hard-headed, arrogant, and stupid” (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993, p. 127). Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993, p. 120) explicate the meaning of *wasta* in the educational realm. “After being admitted, students socialized in an environment heavily dependent on *wasta* sometimes assume that *wasta* will influence the university professor. They attend class irregularly, do not study for midterm tests, and then appear before the teacher asking to be passed [...]. Often the father or an important relative visits the professor. The probability of success in this *wasta* attempt depends on the fortitude of the teacher, the hump over which the student wishes to climb, and the strength of the particular *wasta* on the particular faculty member. Occasionally, this plea meets with success; more often, the student faces the rude shock of failure at the end of the semester. That failure is incomprehensible to students socialized to family loyalty as the primary value”. The author, who has taught as a visiting professor for several terms in the Gulf, also in Saudi Arabia, has living experience of the implementation of this concept.

“If *wasta* in the grading process is fought against by most faculty, the same is not true in the faculty selection process. Hiring faculty, like hiring employees for the government, involves *wasta*” (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993, p. 132). A senior Western administrator working in a private university in Saudi Arabia explains: “Once faculty with Arab background is hired they used all sorts of private conversation, did favors and so on to persuade me to hire their family member. Yousef paid several visits to my office and talked about his brother as well as Mohammed, who tried to show, first of all, how wonderful I was and then tried to get his brother hired. In both cases they tend to exaggerate the academic qualifications of their family members” (Richard, Hoogewerf[pseud.], interview by authors, Saudi Arabia, 12 May 2008).

A Sample Case: The Transnational Framework of PMU

The concept of Prince Mohammad University in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia (short PMU) was promoted by a banding together of fifty-two Saudi business men under the auspices of HRH Prince Mohammad Bin Fahad, governor of the Eastern Province who donated the land for this project. with a view to providing education for both male and female students. They not only wanted to meet the needs of a growing economy but also wanted to have an institution where their female students could reside at home and still receive a Western style education. This Western style education was designed by a group of 22 Texas universities comprising the Texas International Education Consortium (TIEC).



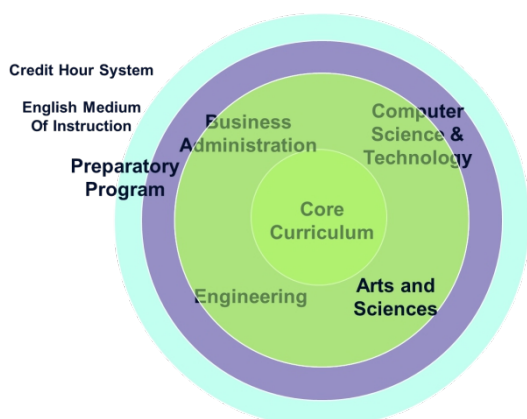
PMU-campus under construction, early 2007
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PMU inauguration-symbolizing its rise out of the sand
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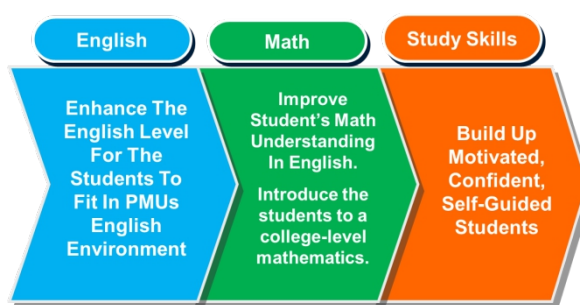
Prince Mohammad University was the first private institution in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia for both male and female students. However, the concept of co-education institutions in the West is quite different from that practiced in Saudi Arabia. Here the genders are kept segregated on separate campuses. With each college the dean is usually male and holds the top position and the female is always an associate who answers to the dean. Independent decisions by the associate dean are usually not accepted. For example, at the beginning of the 2nd year a new chair had to be selected; however, he had less experience than the current female associate chair (both Westerners). Under western circumstances the female would possibly have been made chair of the department with the male acting as associate chair. However, in Saudi Arabia this was not acceptable and the less experienced person had to be placed as chair on the basis of gender.

The diagram below shows the structure of the academic program at the university. The Preparatory Program is a bridge program between high school and college which emphasizes the instruction of English primarily along with Math and Study Skills. There are three colleges focusing on: Engineering; Business; Information Technology. The Engineering College is primarily for males and females are not catered for this area within this culture. To compensate for this under the umbrella of Engineering is the Department of Interior Design which is only for women. PMU has been going for six years and is on a steep growth curve in the employment of new personnel as well as in the intake of new students.



PMU - Academic Program

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PMU - Preparatory Program

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Accurate statistical information was difficult to get until the appropriate management programs were in place. For example, Banner, a management system for universities, was only just started during the latter half of the first year and is yet to be fully implemented. Therefore, accurate records of faculty, students, financial issues, etc. difficult to procure. Faculty for this new university have been recruited through a variety of means including TAEC, employment agencies, conferences, personal contacts and even incentives were given to current faculty for suggesting names of people and if they were hired the faculty member received 500 Saudi Rials equivalent to 130 US Dollars. The percentage of termination of faculty for the first two years of this start-up university indicates that the number of terminations could in fact be reduced if: a) proper screening were done prior to their arrival; and b) appropriate measures taken to assist with adjustment.

Many studies have proved that personality characteristics predict to a great degree whether expatriates will succeed in their educational assignment (e.g. Arthur & Bennett 1995; Ones & Viswesvaran 1997). Arthur and Bennett (1995) focused on the factors expatriates themselves perceive as being crucial for success. Five factors were highlighted: a) family situation; b) job Knowledge; c) relational skills; d) flexibility/adaptability; and e) extra-

cultural openness. Other researchers have gaged the success of international assignments on three other factors: a) adjustment; b) performance; and c) premature departure decisions. These factors, while theoretically well documented are treated in a superfluous manner in pre-employment screening in educational institutions in the Gulf. In an interview one Director of PMU stated: “Part of the screening process involves finding out from prospective employees as to the reasons why they would want to come in Saudi Arabia. Several reasons have been postulated as to why expats chose to work in any particular location: some come from money, others just want an overseas experience, some to be involved in the opening of a new university, others because they can’t get a teaching job back home, some to be exposed to a different culture and others to escape from ordinary life to a place with the aura of mystery” (Soliman, Watson [pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 18 June 2011). The director “Saudi always seemed to be the big mysterious thing. Everybody that I knew that had spent any time in the Middle East, had been to Saudi. It’s almost like you had to get your ticket punched to come to Saudi Arabia. I do know that this doesn’t sound right or good but I do mean this in the best sense” (Soliman, Watson [pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 18 June 2011). Another reason often cited is the desire to visit and explore new lands, financial packages (Feldman & Thomas, 1991).

In an interview the associate department chair who has worked at PMU from the very start, an American woman holding a Master’s degree, stated that the biggest adjustment that she has had to face along with the other women that she knew, was: “loss of identity”. She explains this by stating: “I have to wear an abaya, I am covered from head to foot whenever I want to go out. Then, I can’t drive of course. Decisions made at the university are made by men, it doesn’t matter what the women say. When the women need something done, they always have to go through a man, we can talk to the women at HR but this is useless because they themselves have to go through the men at HR. Women experience a loss of identity, a loss of power”(Maya, Watson [pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 21 October 2011). Becker (1991, p. 88) commented on this very point when she said: “At a time when equality for women is a major issue in American culture, women who support and who have enjoyed equal rights naturally react negatively to the subordinate role of women in the Saudi culture”. She also found that women in professional roles of authority were received with respect and were listened to in their jobs. However, while this was written almost two decades ago things have changed and women no longer occupy public positions of responsibility and especially in education the male voice is the one that is heard and respected. One of our teachers reported of complaints directed towards a decision that she had made. The students were very adamant that she acquiesce to their request. Because of her many years of experience working in the Gulf region and also having been at PMU from the very start she knew how to adjust to this situation by telling the students: “I cannot do anything about this but if you want it changed you will have to talk to the registrar” ”(Maya, Watson [pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 21 October 2011). At this point the students stopped their badgering. She had accepted the loss of power and adjusted her thinking and response accordingly pointed to the male authority.

Tétreault (2003) confirms my point when she claims that Islamic patriarchal politics has been increasing because of the feminization of higher education. According to our observation there is growing controversy over the role of women as practiced in the Islamic patriarchal system which clashes with the growing standing of women in higher education.

Another department chair stated: “A lot of our teachers have had considerable experience and authority in other locations. On coming to PMU they find themselves having to follow very explicit rules and regulations and do not have a chance to utilize the expertise that they have brought with them” ”(Anne, Gibson [pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 15 November 2011). This is contrary to findings by Feldman and Thomas (1991, p.

38) in which they stated “the reason most frequently given by our participants for accepting their assignments in Saudi Arabia was autonomy. They wanted to be in charge, to run their own operations with minimal interference from head-quarters”. The “loss of professional identity and power” is further explained by one of the directors: “I was one of six people who were told to start and lead out and my job was to get the academic program started. I thought that decision that I made would be carried out and would not be challenged or changed by my superiors. This happened for a while until a new layer of Saudi management was put in place; thus, taking away any power or authority previously held” ”(Paul, Gregson [pseud.], interview by author, Saudi Arabia, 02 May 2011).

It is hard for most of us to imagine the challenges that lie within educational institutions with virtually nobudgetary restrictions hampering their development. “King Abdullah is building a knowledge society—increasing access to a university education, exposing young Saudis to education and cultures abroad and aggressively recruiting international talent to come to the Kingdom to teach and conduct research” (Reisberg 2011, para. 5). However, we must address the question where all this leads in Saudi Arabia. Education cannot be separated from the larger sociopolitical context in which it takes place: The political and social problems of the whole system need to be taken into account.

Homemade Social Problems

The growing demands of globalization have resulted in a need for expanding the educational opportunities for the local population. In order for this rapid growth to have taken place has required tremendous efforts from both government and private enterprises. Because the training of the indigenous population required time, private enterprise was encouraged in this area and in fact took over as the primary source for the development and growth of these countries. In order to rapidly hire the adequate personnel an importation took place of large groups of white-collar and blue-collar workers commonly referred to as expatriates. In the late 1970s Saudi Arabia began recruiting large numbers of Filipinos for construction work. This was followed in the 80s with the recruitment of large groups of female Filipinos to staff their hospitals and other service sector jobs (Nagy, 2008). The term expatriate generally refers to individuals working for large international corporations being transferred to work in a subsidiary in the host country. PricewaterhouseCoopers (1999: iV) defines this as “employees assigned to live and work in a foreign country for a period of time (not permanently)”.

Currently the population of the GCC countries number around 35 million of whom 37% are expatriates (Bowman, 2007). The latter half of the 20th century saw a tremendous increase in population in the Arabian Peninsula with a corresponding increase in the expatriate population. The most notable change in demographics was seen in the United Arab Emirates where the expatriates made up 76 percent of the total population, in contrast to Oman where the expats comprised only 28 percent of the population (Leonard, 2005). There are estimated to be approximately 40% expatriates in Bahrain, 60% in Kuwait, 80% in Qatar and the UAE, in Saudi Arabia 33% and 25% in Oman (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The use of expatriates in the labor force tends to be dependent on the GDP of individual countries. Those with lower GDP tend to rely more on their indigenous work force whereas those states with a high GDP such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE tend to rely more heavily on expatriate labor (Willoughby, 2008).

In each of the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), non-citizens outnumber citizens in the workforce (Nagy, 2008). This shows the tremendous reliance of these countries on expatriates for their development in different sectors ranging from manufacturing, construction to executive positions. There is a bifurcation of the labor force into what Saunders (2002) calls the “global citizens” who are usually the higher paid expats

versus the “global foreigners” who tend to receive minimal wages. Another peculiarity in the rich Saudi Arabia is the discrepancy between public and private sector workers. The public sector wages are generally much higher than wages paid in the private sector.

This overdependence on expatriate labor is now being seen as becoming detrimental to the indigenous population as these people are being educated they are having greater difficulty in finding jobs which have already been taken over by expatriates. The public sector generally hires nationals and is generally overstaffed with problems of absenteeism (Saunders, 2002). The establishment of the “welfare state” in the 70s ensured that the government was the chief employer of its citizens. With the wealth available they were paid substantially better than those in the private sector (Bahgat, 1999, p. 132). “This system of make-work government jobs has ensured the loyalty of citizens to their governments, and helped introduce a sedentary working culture among what were once largely tribal populations” (Gogia, 2007, para. 3). This is a growing concern in terms of productivity and the expansion of services and industry. Moreover, unemployment is a growing problem due to the rapidly increasing population resulting from traditionally encouraged large families along with improved health and living conditions. For example, “the unemployment among Saudis currently stands at 11%, while in Bahrain it is just below 4% with around 20,000 of its citizens jobless”. In the UAE 32.6% of Emirati men and 47.7% of Emirati women were unemployed (Bowman, 2007). “A restive population of young Saudis for whom there is little work, little wealth and no political participation is pressing relentlessly for change” (Rubin, 2006, p. 76).

“Gulf citizens are now facing double-digit unemployment rates. Citizens therefore have to be encouraged to enter their countries’ private sectors” (Gogia, 2007, para. 3). Employers in Saudi Arabia will be faced with new challenges and problems when transitioning to the private sector: firstly, the wages may not be the same or in fact may be lower based on market demands; secondly, the level of health care may differ from public sector standards; thirdly, linguistic and technical demands may require skills that need to be developed; fourthly, working hours may be extended with fewer annual holidays (Gogia, 2007, para. 3). Moreover, governments must take into consideration that “a process of nationalization of the work force at too rapid a pace would most likely result in falling productivity, output, and national income” (Bahgat, 1999, p. 132). The employment of nationals in white-collar jobs is likely to increase whereas blue-collar jobs will still be predominantly filled by foreign nationals from South-East Asia (Willoughby, 2008).

Therefore, the governments are now initiating policies and seeking ways of restricting the numbers of the foreign workforce by “setting minimum quotas for hiring nationals, and raising the cost of employment of non-nationals” (Sassanpour, 1996, p. 27). This will allow for indigenous workers to participate more thoroughly in the labor market and eventually to take on positions of leadership. These processes are already successfully being applied in all GCC states and are referred to as: “Kuwaitization”, “Omanization”, “Saudization”, etc.

Saudiization is taking on greater prominence as pressure is building on the government to deal with the growing number of graduates from high school and the increase in unemployed Saudis. While a net has been thrown out to help these individuals financially, incentives are being given them to get training through government funded Work Force programs. In addition, institutions that hire more than the minimum percentage of Saudis are given more privileges as opposed to those institutions that rely too heavily on expatriate labor. This new classification of institutions and organizations will have a positive impact on the reduction of the unemployed but will cripple those bodies that rely heavily on expatriate labor. For example, already over a decade ago all businesses in the Kingdom were given notice that all senior positions were to be filled by Saudi nationals within a five year period. Less than 10% of the private sector work force are Saudi nationals while 14 job categories

were set aside for Saudi citizens. However, there are problems associated with the nationalization of the work force where nationals will expect the higher wages currently being supported by the government; however, this is not likely to occur; thus leading to a gradual melt down of the neopatriarchal system because of demands for support from the ruling class likely resulting in political destabilization (Willoughby, 2008).

Conclusion

In times of saving measures for educational institutions in Europe and the US, it is hard for most of us to imagine the possibilities that open up when there are virtually no budgetary restrictions hampering the development of higher education. The educational realm in Saudi Arabia has without doubt undergone huge reforms in the last decades, yet there lies a long road ahead. We need to ask ourselves where all this leads in Saudi Arabia. Granted Saudi Arabia is rapidly advancing as it plans for the future needs of its people and seeks its place in the international community. In a country deeply entrenched in religious-social culture, one must expect to come across opposing points of view in relation to these changes. There must always be give and take when at times one sees movement two steps forward and one step back or vice-versa. However, education cannot be separated from the larger sociopolitical context in which it takes place. Successful educational models encourage new ideas and new thinking. Saudi Arabia remains a very traditional, conservative society where new concepts are not easily implemented.

In the light of the research presented the following questions are yet to answered: “Can an institution designed to bring together top international scientists to collaborate on research thrive within a walled-off campus in the desert? How long will international scientists be willing to remain in a society that places unaccustomed limitations on their personal lives? How easily will foreign women forgo their right to drive a car or adapt to the gender segregation that defines the society beyond the KAUST campus? Is it possible to create the relaxed collegial camaraderie that often generates new ideas over a glass of apple juice? And what will the future be for the 120,000 scholarship students when they return from abroad? After being exposed to so many different cultures and ideas, will women easily re-integrate into a more conservative and restrictive society? Will young adults be content to relinquish the freedoms and opportunities that they enjoyed while abroad? What kind of future will a new generation of well-educated Saudis expect? What kinds of limitations will they accept?” (Reisberg, 2011).

One must have patience in attempting to answer those questions coupled with determination because change is inevitable and cannot be imposed on its people. The themes of self-definition and creative outputs are taking on ever more importance in the Southern Arabian region as globalization and its attending ideas slowly leach into this time bound land and its cultures. Cultural identity as a cognitive, moral, and emotional system is morphing in response to the mass global media and influx of westernized cultural models represented by the large numbers of expatriates now being engaged in the educational processes in the region. The role of Arabian Women as global leaders, as homemakers, and as community cornerstones, all these models are currently undergoing rapid change in response to educational and social development in the Arabian Gulf region. Domestic and geographic spaces help Arabian women assess class, value, and identity, when moving from one sphere into another whether that is from, unmarried tribal member into married status or university student into business professional. This is key for the establishment of a new phase of existence for Khaleegy women. The question is: how these women will step outside lives defined by their tribal Islamic heritage and move into ones that are in effect self-defined, and influenced by outside cultural systems. Moreover, how will Saudi Arabia benefit then from this important and well-prepared human capital?

The issues that they are addressing are issues that faced and in some ways continue to face global society: Who am I? Where do I belong? What is important to me? The impact of social development on tribal and urban life in these regions is one which can add depth and texture to the study of human responses to globalization worldwide. The question remains: Will modern education being separated from a modern culture bring about the same results? However, change must come from within and enlightened change comes from the development of a knowledge-based society holding on to the past with one hand and stretching out to the future with the other.

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