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Source: *Higher Education*, 1986, Vol. 15, No. 1/2 (1986), pp. 17-23

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3446739>

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Development of higher education in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. This article seeks to trace the development of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from its origins to the present day. The study includes discussion of the historical roots of education as based on Islam, Islamic philosophy of education, the aims and objectives of higher education and modern university education. Empirical statistics are given to substantiate the Kingdom's rapid progress in higher education. Since 1957 when modern university education began with a single institution with twenty-one students and a staff of nine it has grown until twenty-five years later in 1982 higher education had grown to seven institutions with 63,563 students and a teaching staff of 6,906. The study examines these aspects of higher education; Saudi students studying abroad, foreign students studying in Saudi Arabia, female education, the role of the Ministry of Higher Education and the financing of higher education.

Development of higher education in Saudi Arabia

The history of higher education in Saudi Arabia is a study of educational progress almost unparalleled in history. University education as known today began in 1957 with a single institution an enrollment of twenty-one students and a staff of nine (King Saud University, 1982). By 1982 higher education had grown to include seven universities with 63,563 students and a teaching staff of 6,906. Saudi Arabian public expenditure for higher education per student is one of the highest in the world (Ministry of Education, 1980). Currently, in Riyadh the capital, the Kingdom is building one of the largest and most modern university complexes in the world today. Although higher education as known today is relatively new the roots of higher education reach far back into history.

Roots of Saudi higher education

If one accepts that education is a time-intensive process that takes place in formal and informal settings (Bashshur, 1973), then the history of higher education in Saudi Arabia may be traced back in history to the advent of Islam about fourteen hundred years ago. Since that time Mecca and Medina two of Islam's Holy cities have assumed importance as centers of knowledge and places from which knowledge disseminated to the world and particularly to the Islamic world.

For centuries each year millions of pilgrims would flock to Mecca and Medina and these two cities constantly experienced an infusion of knowledge from these visitors. There people from the world over would come together exchanging ideas and knowledge. Sometimes pilgrims stayed and became teachers spending their time writing books and learning from other scholars as well as teaching.

As more and more students began to flock to Mecca and Medina living quarters were given them by wealthy Muslims in the community. Schools developed in these two cities sponsored by the wealthy of the Muslim World. Those who built schools had to provide enough resources so that teacher and student only concerned themselves with education. After the Ottoman conquest of the Arabs in 1517 (Antonius, 1965) the Ottomans built some of the most famous schools there. Some of the early prestigious schools were the school of the Sultan Qayt Bay, Sultan of Egypt, that of the Sultan Gheyath el Din, and the Sultan of Benegal (Wahibi, 1978).

The Kutabs, ungraded Qur'anic schools that were attached to the Mosque or were in the Mosques themselves, played an important early role in education. They usually consisted of one teacher with an advanced student who acted as helper. Studies in the Kutab centered on the Holy Qur'an with writing and arithmetic also given. Both male and female students received instruction in the kutabs but separately (Wahibi, 1978). The Kutabs remained popular in Saudi Arabia until the twentieth century when modern schools were developed.

Philosophy of higher education

Underlying and permeating higher education is one's philosophy of education. Saudi Arabia follows an Islamic philosophy of education and the seed of its educational system are founded in Islam. The word 'Qur'an' itself is derived from the word 'reading' and the first verse of the Qur'an is a call to read and write. Islam dictates learning to be an obligation of every Muslim man or woman. Education therefore is valued, encouraged and supported by Islam.

Islam exalts the human mind and promotes free thought and inquiry when it commands the acquisition and propagation of learning. The Qur'an invites one to a profound and rational study of the universe by saying "Do they not contemplate the Kingdom of Heaven and the things which God has Created?" (Qur'an, VII:183). The Prophet Muhammad says, "The seeking of knowledge is a duty incumbent on every Muslim, man and woman" (Wafi, 1967) and "An hour's contemplation and study of God's creation is better than a year of adoration". He is reported to have said, "Seek knowledge though it be in China" (Pinkthall, 1961). Stress on spreading human knowledge among people is found in the Qur'an as a central theme in the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and forms the foundation of the Islamic philosophy of education.

Aims and objectives of higher education

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in its educational policy lays down the following general aims of education: “The purpose of education is to have the student understand Islam in a correct comprehensive manner, to plan and spread the Islamic creed, to furnish the student with values, teachings and ideals of Islam, to equip him with the various skills and knowledge, to develop his conduct in constructive directions, to develop the society economically, socially and culturally, and to prepare the individual to become a useful member in the building of his community” (Ministry of Education, 1980).

Since Saudi Arabia is rapidly growing, education for industrialization is stressed as the key to modernization, a high standard of living and full employment (Duguid, 1970). Higher education is to help provide for the manpower needs at present and in the future for qualified personnel. The Ministry of Education (1980) gives the following objectives for higher education in the Kingdom:

1. Developing loyalty to God and providing Islamic education which makes the student responsible before God and puts his capacities into fruitful and useful actions.
2. Preparing competent and qualified citizens to perform their duties in the service of their country for the progress of their nation in the light of sound Islamic principles and ideology.
3. Providing gifted students with the opportunity to continue higher education in all the fields of academic specialization.
4. Performing activities and publications to bring sciences into the service of the Islamic thought and enable the country to perform its leadership role in building human civilization on Islam’s genuine principles that steer mankind to righteousness and spare humanity material and atheistic deviations.
5. Translating science and useful arts of knowledge to the language of the Qur’an and enriching the Arabic language with new expressions to fill the need of Arabicization, and putting knowledge at the disposal of the largest number of citizens.
6. Offering training services and reorientation courses to enable graduates who are already working to keep pace with new developments.

Modern university education

The modern history of education in Saudi Arabia began in 1926 with the establishment of the country’s first Department of Education. From that time education has “become one of the brightest pages in the State’s progress” (Minis-

try of Information, 1971). In 1953 during the reign of King Saud the Department of Education became a Ministry with the present King of Saudi Arabia King Fahd appointed Minister of Education (Wahibi, 1978).

The advent of modern university education in Saudi Arabia began with the creation of Riyadh University now known as King Saud University. It began in November 1957 with 21 students (Ministry of Higher Ed. 1982) in a building meant to be a children’s nursery (Wahibi, 1978) and was the first university established in Saudi Arabia. King Fahd then Minister of Education became Head of the new university and during this time educational advancement in the Kingdom accelerated swiftly.

Universities have grown rapidly in the Kingdom and it now has seven universities. They are as follows:

- King Saud (Riyadh University) in Riyadh established 1957
- Islamic University in Medina established 1961
- University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran in 1963
- King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah began 1967 as a private institution and became a State institution in 1971
- Imam Muhammed Bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh established 1974
- King Faisal University in Damman established in 1975
- Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca established in 1981

Three of these universities specialize in religious sciences – Imam Muhammed Bin Saud Islamic University, the Islamic University and Umm Al-Qura (Ministry of Higher Ed. 1982). All of these universities since their conception have experienced rapid growth (see Table 1).

Table 1. Higher education, students and teaching staff, 1957 – 1982.

Saudi Arabian universities	1957 – 1958		1969 – 1970		1975 – 1976		1981 – 1982	
	Student	Staff	Student	Staff	Student	Staff	Student	Staff
King Saud University	21	9	2899	312	7807	645	17134	1785
Imam Muhammed Bin Saud Islamic University	-	-	2009	67	4614	204	7143	758
King Abdulaziz U.	-	-	993	105	9986	426	18028	1432
King Faisal University	-	-	-	-	170	28	1814	544
University Of Petroleum and Minerals	-	-	450	59	1716	287	2841	594
Islamic University	-	-	591	30	1055	42	3271	379
Umm-Al-Qura University	-	-	-	-	-	-	6278	785
Girls Colleges	-	-	-	-	1099	137	7054	769
Total	21	9	6942	573	26437	1741	63563	6906

University enrollment is determined by three main factors: the demand for higher education; the need for qualified manpower; and the capacity of the universities. Due to the rapid economic growth of the Kingdom the demand for manpower has and will continue to be great. According to the Ministry of Education (1980) "the qualified manpower needs of the Kingdom seem insatiable at least for the foreseeable future" and since "manpower is considered by the State as a springboard to the utilization of all its other resources" (Educational Policy of Saudi Arabia, 1970) demand for higher education is remarkable. Since the demand for higher education has been strong and the need for manpower great, the only limiting factor has been the capacity of the universities themselves. Therefore, according to the Ministry of Education (1980) "efforts have been in the direction of opening new universities and expanding existing ones".

Education at all levels including higher education is free of charge to all students and according to the Educational Policy of the Kingdom (1970) "education in all its forms and stages shall be free of charge and the State will not charge tuition fees". During 1981–1982 a large number of Saudi citizens, 47,833 (Ministry of Higher Ed. 1982) took advantage of this opportunity to attend institutions of higher education within Saudi Arabia.

Since 1957 when the Kingdom had one university, King Saud with 21 students, higher education has grown to 63,563 students with a projected enrollment of 69,000 for 1984–1985 (Ministry of Higher Ed. 1982). King Saud itself had almost 21,000 students enrolled for the 1983–1984 academic year (King Saud University Newsletter, 1984). For the decade 1970–1980 the average annual rate of increase in student enrollment was 21.3 per cent per annum (Ministry of Education, 1980).

Simultaneously with the tremendous growth in student enrollment has been the growth of the teaching staff which in 1982 numbered 6,906 for the Kingdom's universities (Ministry of Higher Ed. 1982). This indicates a teaching staff student ratio of 1:10, one that any nation can be proud of. The total teaching staff for the decade 1970–1980 increased at an annual rate of 23.6 per cent per annum (Ministry of Education, 1980).

The last few decades have seen a tremendous growth in the number of Saudi students studying abroad. The Kingdom initiated the first educational mission abroad in 1928 sending fourteen students to Egypt to pursue academic studies, in 1936 they sent a similar number and in 1943 a third group of fifteen students were sent to Egypt (Al-Shami, 1977). In 1982 the Kingdom had 11,921 scholarship students studying abroad. The Arab countries had a total of 2,056 with the greatest concentration in Egypt with 1,390 students. Non-Arab countries had 9,965 with the greatest concentration 8,681 studying in the United States (Ministry of Higher Ed. 1982). The projection is for 20,114 students to be studying abroad by 1985. In 1979–1980 about 20 per cent of the students at

the higher education level were studying abroad (Ministry of Education 1980). Perhaps due to the extremely rapid progress the Kingdom has and continues to make in higher education the number of Saudi students pursuing academic studies abroad will sharply decrease.

Foreign students themselves are seeking higher education in Saudi Arabia to partake of the wide offerings of higher education there. In 1970 foreign students accounted for 18.6 per cent of the total student enrollment, in 1975 the proportion of foreign students was 14.7 per cent and in 1980 they were 23.9 per cent of the total university enrollment (Ministry of Education, 1980). In 1982 the number of foreign students numbered 15,730 with 12,191 being male and 3,539 being female (Ministry of Higher Education, 1982). A sizeable number of these students were studying at Islamic universities in the study of Islam.

Probably no area of higher education has grown faster in the Kingdom in recent years than education for females. Since 1961 when King Saud admitted 4 females as external students the number of women in higher education has grown to 19,860 in 1982 (Ministry of Higher Education, 1982). In Saudi Arabia educational facilities, staff, teachers and students are separated along gender lines. The only instruction received by women is through close circuit television. This has necessitated the growth of women teaching staff which has grown from 4.4 of the total teaching staff in 1970 to 19.2 per cent in 1980. At the same time the women student population has increased from 5.5 per cent of the total population in 1970 to 28.4 per cent in 1980 (Ministry of Education, 1980). Since education along with nursing is an acceptable vocation for women in the Kingdom, a large number of female students pursue degrees in education.

The Ministry of Education supervised higher education until 1975 when the Ministry of Higher Education was established by Royal Decree. The Ministry of Higher Education enforces higher education policy and places emphasis in helping the Kingdom to fulfill its development plans. All universities in the Kingdom are formed by Royal Decree. The Girls Education Administration along with the Ministry of Higher Education is involved with overseeing women's education at the higher level.

The financing of higher education in Saudi Arabia is almost entirely by the government. Therefore, the resources available to the government determine the funding of higher education to a large extent. According to the Education Policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1970) the "educational budget is increased by the State in accordance with the growing needs of the country. This growth is proportionate with the growth of the general budget". The higher education budget has grown from 1984 million Saudi Riyals* in 1975–1976 to

* 5 Saudi Riyals equal 1 British pound and 3.52 Saudi Riyals equal 1 U.S. Dollar.

5539 million Saudi Riyals in 1979–1980 for an average annual rate of increase of 29.3 per cent (Ministry of Education, 1980). Along with the expansion of students and staff has occurred the expansion and improvement of existing facilities and the building of new campuses.

In the last few decades Saudi Arabia has made tremendous progress in education, probably unmatched during this period for any nation. Its roots and the high esteem for education can be traced back to its Islamic heritage. The rapid advancement in higher education can be substantiated by the phenomenal increase in student population, teaching staff, establishment of new universities, building of new campuses and the expansion of existing ones, and financial support made possible by the firm commitment of the leadership of the Kingdom. Education is playing a vital, valued and crucial role in the Kingdom's total development. With the continued commitment of the Kingdom to higher education it will be noteworthy to see what advancements higher education will make in the next few decades.

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