

Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

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The current paper offers an overview of higher education in Saudi Arabia. The paper also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the higher educational system in Saudi Arabia. Implications for faculty in general are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932. It was poor country, and there was a small educational program comprising 12 schools with 700 students. This situation changed dramatically after 1938, when oil was discovered in huge amounts in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, by 1950 there were 365 schools educating 42,000 students (Simmons & Simmons, 1994). In 1954, the Ministry of Education was established. It includes all educational levels in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, the education was offered to males only, and there were not schools offering education for female. In 1957, there was a need to open a university to educate Saudi students instead of sending them abroad for education, therefore, King Saud University was established and inaugurated in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. In 1959, King Saud discussed the issue of educating women in Saudi Arabia, and he sought support from religion's scholars to start education for girls. In 1960, the first school for girls started in Riyadh (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). Thus, there were schools which separated boys and girls on all educational level until now.

Elementary through secondary education in Saudi Arabia is free to all Saudis and non-Saudi students. On the other hand, higher education was exclusively for Saudi citizens, and the students were paid stipends for joining higher education. Even though students were paid to join schools and institute, the literacy level was low in Saudi Arabia, especially in the case of women. The estimated level of literacy in 2003 was 78.8%, were 84.7% males and 70.8 females (CIA, 2011).

After King Saud University was established in 1957, there were other six universities which were established in Saudi Arabia over the period of 20 years:

- Islamic University was established in 1961
- King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals was established in 1963
- King Abdul-Aziz University was established in 1967
- Um Al-Qura University was established in 1967
- Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University was established in 1974
- King Faisal University was established in 1975 (universities websites)

As the number of the universities increased to seven universities, it was necessary to establish the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. Higher education was under the Ministry of education. The purposes of this establishment were dealing exclusively with higher education and among the ministry's responsibilities were:

- Proposing the establishment of higher educational institutions and authorizing them to offer special programs in accordance with the country's needs.
- Creating and administering universities and colleges in the Kingdom.
- Raising the level of communication and coordination between institutions of higher learning and coordinating with other governmental ministries and agencies in terms of their interests and needs in higher education.
- Representing the government abroad in all educational and cultural affairs, through various cultural and educational offices distributed over 32 countries (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to Washington DC, 2011).

The Ministry of Higher Education is a centralized authority responsible for directing university education in accordance with the adopted policy, supervising the development of university education in all sectors, coordinating among universities especially in the field of scientific departments and degrees, encouraging research, and formulating rules and regulations for compliance by all institutions of higher learning (SACM, 2011).

Higher education in Saudi Arabia has undergone a tremendous growth over the past decade. The higher education system, which is based on diversification has expanded to include:

- 23 Government Universities
- 18 Primary Teacher's Colleges for men
- 80 Primary Teacher's Colleges for women
- 37 Colleges and Institutes for health
- 12 Technical Colleges
- 33 Private Universities and Colleges

(<http://www.mohe.gov.sa/en/studyinside/aboutKSA/Pages/default.aspx>)

Despite the fact that private institutions started in the last decade, there is a good number of private institutions which provide higher education, and their number is increasing consistently.

STRENGTHS

Saudi Arabia is a member in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and has the largest underground oil reservoir in the world. Hence, economic recession was not a problem for Saudi Arabia economy. In fact, the budget of the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia has increased significantly as the price of the oil increased in the last couple of years.

In 2005, Ministry of Higher Education established a program called “King Abdullah Scholarship Program” The program aims at fulfilling the shortage of Saudi faculty members, and requirements of work markets in Saudi Arabia. At this time, there are about 70,000 Saudi students over the world studying at baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral level in different disciplines. The majority of the sponsored students are in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (www.mohe.gov.sa). According to a report published at the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education website, Saudi Arabia is ranked by UNISCO as the fourth country on the movement of the students around the world; Saudi Arabia ranked behind China (421,000 students), India (153,300 students), and South Korea (105,300 students), Saudi Arabia is, thus, ahead of Japan and the United states in student movement around the world. Furthermore, scholarships are now granted regardless of the gender of the student. However, Saudi female students in this case must be accompanied by a “Mahrram”, immediate family member, which is a benefit as the living expenses for the family member covered and they could be sponsored to study as well. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is also ranked by UNISCO the first in the world for the number of students studying abroad in proportion of the population, a total of 0.03% (Ministry of Higher Education website: <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/ar/news/Pages/an74.aspx>).

In 2010, the Ministry of Higher Education started to sponsor Saudi students at private universities in Saudi Arabia, which gave the chance for those who cannot afford the tuitions and fees of the local universities. It is clear there will be tremendous change in level of higher education in Saudi Arabia in the near future.

The huge numbers of graduate students in different fields from different parts in the world and the current political situations in the Middle East will lay extra stress to officials on giving more freedom in higher education in Saudi Arabia, open the doors to “changes” which could overcome the obstacles and enhance the higher education system in Saudi Arabia

WEAKNESSES

Even though most of Saudi deans of schools have been educated internationally, bureaucracy is a major obstacle in higher education in Saudi Arabia. For instance, the system is centralized in the Ministry of Higher Education, and there is no clear venue for changes that move a milestone toward development (personal communication with faculty members at King Saud University).

Furthermore, there is high percentage of expatriate faculty and there is no motivational system for them, in fact, there is discrimination in salaries and incentives. For instance, Saudi Arabian faculty members receive salaries higher than non-Saudi faculty. Saudi faculties receive incentives which are mostly not provided to their colleagues such as incentives for publications. Moreover, Non-Saudi faculties receive less incentive than their Saudi colleagues do and they encounter obstacles when they apply for promotions (personal communication with faculty members at King Saud University).

Not all degrees are offered in Saudi Arabia, which increases the burden on the students who are willing to pursue a higher degree in their field. There are several specialties offered to men only which may interfere with social justice. However, this topic is beyond the purpose of this paper. On the other hand, there are some specialties offered to women only, for instance, until recently bachelor of the nursing was offered for women only.

Moreover, higher education in Saudi Arabia is missing important elements, which depend on either hygiene or motivation factors in motivating the students through the learning process to achieve the objectives of the programs offered in Saudi Arabia. For instance, online education is not supported and it is included minimally in some universities. Lack of research funds is a major obstacle which prevents scholars from conducting research in Saudi Arabia. Hence, scientific conferences and scientific journals are limited or absent in most departments. Finally yet importantly, academic freedom is limited due to cultural and political reasons.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY IN GENERAL

The scholars in Saudi Arabia should invest the positive attributes of higher education in Saudi Arabia to develop a system which would help them to contribute the art and science of different disciplines. For instance, there is job security in Saudi Arabia that allows scholars to strive for their rights and developments of higher education system.

The Saudi higher education system cannot develop without a schema which focuses on research and provides funds of researchers to conduct their research. Therefore, research funds, scientific conferences, research days, journals, and professional organizations should be prioritized in the agenda of the scholars in Saudi Arabia.

Faculty members should shift the education pedagogy from “faculty center” to “student center” to engage the students in the learning process. Moreover, it is important to use different teaching strategies that motive students and ensure achievement of the objectives.

Disappointingly, there is inconsistency in the curriculum in some departments, for instance, if the dean graduated from Australia, he/she will insist to follow Australian system, but if the dean graduated from United Kingdom, he/she will insist to follow United Kingdom system, etc. Indeed, this problem waste time and resources in certain departments, and it affects the level and terminal objectives of the programs (personal communication with faculty members at King Saud University).

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING EDUCATION

Within the large numbers of Saudi students over the world, there is low percentage of nursing students; nurses need to address this issue and increase the percentage of nursing students locally and internationally, otherwise they will leave behind.

Recently, the admission level of the nursing profession has been changed to baccalaureate, but the majority of nurses in Saudi Arabia hold associate or diploma in nursing. However, there are few programs which provide bridging programs or RN-BSN with a limited number of seats. It is crucial at this point for Saudi educators to increase the number of the programs that offers bridging programs and the number of the students they admit. Furthermore, there are two programs which allow nurses to pursue a master degree in nursing (King Saud University, and King Abdulaziz University), and there is no masters programs for men in Saudi Arabia. I think it is the time to focus on nursing graduate education level to increase nursing professionalism and provide educators for the new generations of nursing students. Doctoral programs in Saudi Arabia are still the dreams of enthusiastic nurses, but I am positive nurses will be there in future.

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