

A New Perspective on the Quest for Education: The Saudi Arabian Way to Knowledge Society

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, thanks to the foresight and generosity of the Al Saud ruling family, has always devoted great efforts to the development of education. Investments in higher education, in particular, have increased exponentially in recent years. The purpose of this paper is to introduce some facts and figures about the new developments of the Saudi higher education system and to explain how past, present and future policies on education in Saudi Arabia embody the idea of education as a matter of public concern and interest. The paper suggests that a Saudi Arabian knowledge society is in the making, at its own pace, and the country is preparing to play a very important role in the international competition for excellence in education.

Keywords: King Abdullah Scholarship Program, Saudi Arabian knowledge society, Saudi higher education system, cognitive competition

1. Introduction

Ever since its beginnings, thanks to the foresight of the Al Saud ruling family, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has given special attention to educational matters. But now, there are recent qualitative and quantitative developments in the Saudi higher education system that deserve also to be highlighted and brought to the notice of the international academic audience. Outstanding achievements delivered latterly by Saudi policies on higher education have placed the Kingdom in a unique and challenging position in the worldwide scenario of competition for excellence in education.

Assuming that investment in education means investment in the future, my first aim is to provide a short description of the main facts and figures relating to the present higher education system in the Kingdom. My second aim is to comment and reflect on selected issues raised by the book published in 2013 by Springer: "Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities", which is the first book on Saudi higher education to be published in English. It is expected to pave the way for further bibliography in addition to the miscellaneous materials (official Saudi documents, papers and statistics, international documents, newspaper articles) that have hitherto provided the main source for those wishing to conduct research on Saudi higher education developments. This book has turned out to be very inspiring and has helped to reinforce my view, namely, that a Saudi knowledge society is definitely in the making. My third and last aim is to invite international academics and experts to follow very closely what may reasonably be called the Saudi Arabia case study, where tradition and future come together in the name of education.

2. Some Facts and Figures

Established as a kingdom on 23 September 1932, when Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud was proclaimed King of Saudi Arabia, the biggest oil producer in the world has a very young population, according to recent official statistics. In particular, 79% of the Saudi population is under the age of 40, and 36% of the population is younger than 15 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010a, p. 1). 1.2 million students are enrolled in higher education, and 4% of these attend private institutions. Females represent over 60% of the student population (ICEF Monitor, 2012).

Investments in higher education and the establishment of new universities and colleges have increased exponentially across the country in recent years (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2013).

The facts and figures are impressive. Just to mention a few, in August 2009 four new universities were opened in Dammam, AlKharj, Shaqra and Majmaa. In September 2009, thanks to a US\$ 10 billion initial endowment from

the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was opened in Thuwal, a city located 80 kilometres north of Jeddah on the Red Sea coast (Sawahel, 2009). KAUST is an international research university for post-graduate studies, and the only coeducational university in the country. The Riyadh University for Women, founded in 1970, was renamed by King Abdullah in 2008: now the 'Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University for Women', it is at present the largest female-only university in the world. The first President, Princess Jawhara bint Fahd Al Saud, stepped down prematurely, and the current President is Dr. Huda Al Ameel. The new campus, inaugurated in 2011, can accommodate 40,000 students and 12,000 staff, and has a 700-bed teaching hospital.

The number of public universities has grown from 3 in 1970 to 24 by the end of 2009, with the maximum rate of growth, 212.5%, registering between 1999 and 2009 (Mazi & Abouammoh, 2009, p. 3). To date, there are 25 public universities (of which 16 were opened in the last decade, including the Saudi Electronic University, SEU, an online university established by royal decree on 8 October 2011) and 9 private universities in the Kingdom, distributed throughout all 77 towns and governorates. At present, it is estimated that over 80% of faculty members have been educated overseas, mainly in the United Kingdom and in the United States (Sawahel, 2013). According to Mazi and Abouammoh, the policy of the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, established in 1975, is to prioritize support for older universities in the pursuit of excellence in education and research, whereas new universities are encouraged to seek help from the more mature universities with training of their teaching staff and the development of up-to-date infrastructure (Mazi & Abouammoh, 2009, p. 5).

In August 2013 King Abdullah approved the establishment of 11 new research centres at universities throughout the Kingdom (Arab News, August 2, 2013). Some of these new centres, especially from a Western perspective, seem to be particularly promising and enlightened: a scientific publication and translation center at Hail University, a volunteer work studies centre at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, a students' inventions and ideas centre at Majma, among others.

King Saud University, founded in 1957, is the Kingdom's largest university (more than 8300 faculty members and more than 70,000 students), as well as the oldest in the Kingdom and throughout the Arabian Peninsula. In 2013 it was granted nearly US\$ 2.6 billion, the largest sum ever budgeted to any Saudi university. 25% of the 2013 national budget, US\$ 54.75 billion, the largest ever passed in the Kingdom's history (US\$ 219 billion), has been allocated to education, a 4% increase over the previous year. 12 % of the overall budget is devoted to Higher Education (King Saud University website, accessed March 11, 2013).

A growing number of young Saudi male and female students choose to study abroad. It is estimated that approximately between 85% and 95% of Saudi students abroad are sponsored by government funding, and most of them KASP-sponsored. It is worthy of mention that Saudi students studying abroad fall into two categories: (1) students who are selected from among the top performers majoring mostly in medical and scientific disciplines. These are eligible for the KASP; (2) students who, regardless of their majors, choose to study abroad at their own expenses for the first eight months or so, and then apply for a government scholarship (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011, p. 7). The students of this second group are therefore classifiable as less excellent, and less filtered or screened than the KASP-sponsored students, but still eligible for a government scholarship. At all events, the Kingdom strongly supports students who decide to pursue their education overseas.

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), one of the most impressive Saudi educational initiatives introduced in recent years, is considered the largest government scholarship program in the world (Al Mousa, 2010, p. 719). The KASP was launched under Royal Order Number 5387/mb issued on 26 May 2005 and extended subsequently by King Abdullah in February 2010 to last until November 2015. US\$ 3.2 billion were allocated by the government to finance the extension (IECHE, 2012, p. 2). In February 2013 King Abdullah approved a further extension until 2017 (Arab News, February 12, 2013). It is estimated that there are currently between 110,000 and 125,000 Saudi male and female students studying in 23 different countries, the highest percentage of students studying under government grants in the world, and the third highest number of students studying abroad, after China and India (Arab News, February 12, 2013).

According to the Ministry of Higher Education website in its Introduction of KASP, "Knowledge is the foundation of the renaissance of nations; for this reason, the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has given special attention to this sector". The Vision ("Prepare distinguished generations for a knowledge society built upon a knowledge-based economy") and Goals are ambitious and challenging:

"Sponsor qualified Saudis for study in the best universities around the world.

Work to bring about a high level of academic and professional standards through the foreign scholarship program.

Exchange scientific, educational and cultural experience with countries worldwide.

Build up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment.

Raise and develop the level of professionalism among Saudis”.

It is generally agreed that the establishment of KASP represents a turning point in Saudi higher education policy-making, heralding the development of a new generation of Saudi-global citizens.

In reality, scholarship-oriented policies have been part of the Al Sauds' education strategy since the 1920s. As Al Mousa recalls, “a group” submitted a written proposal for the development of education to King Abdul Aziz, who eventually approved the scholarship project assisted by an ad-hoc Committee composed of three authoritative advisors to the King. In 1927, according to Al Mousa, the King ordered that the Saudi mission be sent to Egypt along with the three originators of the proposal and six other students (some sources maintain there were not six, but four). A royal decree covered all expenses on condition that the students would go back and work in the field assigned by the government. Thereafter, there were other missions to different countries. For example, in 1935 ten students were sent to study aviation in Italy, in 1936 two students were sent to study law and political science in Switzerland, and in the years that followed, the number of students, destinations and research fields grew in quantity and quality (Al Mousa, 2010, p. 718).

The Ministry of Education was created by royal decree in 1953, replacing the Directorate of Education established in 1925 under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior. The first Minister of Education was Prince Fahd (later King Fahd).

According to the 1957 issue of the International Yearbook of Education published by the International Bureau of Education and UNESCO, in Saudi Arabia “The plan followed by the Ministry of Education in its educational policy is to develop the spiritual, cultural, social, health and literary standards of the people. It aims at rendering education common to everybody, by opening schools in the urban and rural areas” (p. 336). In particular, “To solve the space problem for school, His Majesty the King [Saud bin Abdul Aziz] gave many of his palaces in several towns for schools. Quite recently His Majesty gave two royal palaces in the capital to the Ministry of Education and ordered the building of fifty primary schools on his private account”. As far as quantitative development is concerned, it is reported that “Until recently the education movement was slow. Today it is normal to see villagers and Bedouins flooding the offices of the Ministry of Education, demanding the opening of schools in their villages. Illiteracy is disappearing gradually ... In addition, educational progress was not the privilege of children alone. People of advanced age have started attending evening schools, which the Ministry is establishing in increasing numbers. Often, father and son could be seen sitting side by side for the final primary school examination” (p. 337).

A decade later, the 1966 issue of the International Yearbook of Education highlights that “The Ministry of Education also continues to send scientific missions to study or specialize in foreign universities. Only holders of a certificate of secondary studies with an average of 70% marks are sent abroad. The number of students abroad in 1965-1966 was 1,798, distributed as follows: 355 in the United Arab Republic, 65 in Syria and Lebanon, 588 in the United States of America, 375 in Germany, 89 in France, 69 in the United Kingdom, 180 in Italy, 35 in Pakistan, 12 in Austria, 9 in Belgium, 21 in Switzerland”. Furthermore, the 1967 issue of the International Yearbook of Education reports that “It is not necessary to make education compulsory by law because the people's desire for education is sufficiently strong in itself, but the Ministry is working toward the ideal of making education available to everyone who wants it” (p. 359). It seems therefore that Saudi people had always expressed a strong interest in education, and their learning needs were met by the foresight of the ruling family.

The role played by the Al Saud rulers in support of education has been remarkably consistent through the years. It was enhanced in the Basic Law of Governance issued by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd on March 1 1992. Article 29 states that “The State shall patronize sciences, letters and culture. It shall encourage scientific research, protect the Islamic and Arab heritage, and contribute towards Arab, Islamic and human civilization”. Article 30 reads: “The State shall provide public education and commit itself to the eradication of illiteracy”.

The Saudi rulers' active support of education and the eradication of illiteracy could also be seen as responding to two international documents, among others. More exactly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a party to two pivotal international declarations, the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam and the Arab Charter on Human Rights. In particular, the Cairo Declaration affirms: “The seeking of knowledge is an obligation and provision of education is the duty of the society and the State” (article 9). The Arab Charter on Human Rights states: “The eradication of illiteracy is a binding obligation and every citizen has a right to education” (article 41); “Every

person shall have the right to take part in cultural life ... and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and their applications” (article 42). According to these articles, every citizen is entitled to education as of right; the State has a primary responsibility to provide education for all citizens; education has a social dimension as it is seen as a means to improve both individual life and collective life. This social and collective dimension suggests the definition of education as a “community business” (Pavan, 2003, p. 14), where “community” stands for the ancient *polis* (city-state) in Greece, and “business” for the Latin *res publica*, or common good/interest. It seems reasonable to see past, present and future policies on education in Saudi Arabia as embodying this idea of education as a matter of public concern and interest—in short, a praiseworthy way of dealing with the educational issues of a nation.

In this light, the idea of universities as having a social responsibility, introduced by the Riyadh Conference Statement on “The Social Responsibility of Universities” (2013), comes as no surprise: “Universities have three key functions—teaching, research and service. Often, the service responsibility of universities is undervalued. Yet, service to society and to the academic community is of central importance, and a key element of service is social responsibility. A university’s social responsibility can be defined as the obligation to represent and practice a set of principles and values through its core functions of teaching, research, community engagement, and institutional management. Fundamental to this social role is a commitment to fairness, truth, and excellence; promotion of social equity and sustainable development; recognition of an individual’s dignity and liberty; appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism; and promotion of human rights and civic responsibility”. Discernible here, once again, is the interpenetrative relationship between education (universities) and society as a whole, which seems to be part of the history of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

It is also important to remember that the Kingdom is a UNESCO co-founder, a member of the organization since November 4, 1946. In October 2012, the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, and H. E. Mr. Ziad Aldrees, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to UNESCO, signed an agreement formalizing the US\$ 20 million donation from King Abdullah to the UNESCO Emergency Fund announced earlier in July 2012. On that occasion, Ambassador Aldrees reaffirmed the intention of the Kingdom to strongly support the Organization and “its important role in its fields of competence to advance mutual understanding and in the building of peace” (UNESCO website, accessed November 13, 2012).

To strengthen its political commitment to education, two plans have been established in the Kingdom during recent years, which deserve special mention within the sphere of international academia. In 2007, under the US\$ 3.1 billion King Abdullah Project for the development of public education, the Saudi Cabinet inaugurated a 5-year plan involving a major review of the Saudi education system as a whole (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013, p. 4). Later on, in 2009, within the framework of the KAP, Saudi Arabia launched Aafaq (Arabic for ‘Horizon’), “The Future Plans for Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”. This is a 25-year plan defining the vision for Saudi Higher Education, its mission, needs, types, output quality and funding methods (Al Ohali & Al Aqili, 2010, p. 756). In times when economic, social, moral and political uncertainty effectively impose short term vision, such a long-term plan, despite its sometimes complicated details (then again, how is it humanly possible to be completely clear about such a long-term undertaking in a globalized world?), appears quite impressive (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010b, p. 24).

When it comes to educational plans, it is not only a question of funding. Education is in essence a project aimed at the improvement of people and nations, and projecting the future requires courage. Moreover, as UNESCO never fails to remember, having the resources to implement the right to education does not necessarily mean having the political will to make education accessible to all. Evidence shows that Saudi Arabia is providing plans, courage, finance and strong political commitment.

3. A New Contribution on Saudi Higher Education Developments

In 2013 Springer published the book “Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. Achievement, Challenges and Opportunities”, a most welcome and needed contribution for those interested in the ongoing evolution of the Saudi higher education system. It is a unique work, as it introduces some prominent Saudi voices discussing the changes of the Saudi higher education system, comprehensively and independently—and in English, for the first time—, as the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Khalid M. Al Ankary, explains in the Foreword. Each chapter is co-authored by Saudi and non-Saudi academics and experts, and tackles fundamental issues and challenges. However, the views expressed in the book reflect the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Ministry of Higher Education.

What follows is a selection of issues raised by different chapters, which highlight certain topics of debate on the development of Saudi higher education systems. These topics enable reflection on the impact that the

development of education has on a society, bearing in mind the globalized scenario in which we live and move. At the same time, one can also attempt to contextualize Saudi higher education policies within the global knowledge society.

In Chapter 6, *Assessment of Student Learning* (Darandari & Murphy), the authors maintain: “There is little evidence to suggest that Saudi Arabian universities have as yet sought to utilise the RPL [recognition of prior learning] process, or to embrace the legitimacy of knowledge and skills outside of the formal education systems” (p. 70). Assessment of Prior Learning has long been on the educational agenda, particularly following the worldwide protests and riots of 1968, which called not least for deep reforms of schools and universities, mainly in the developed countries. The Faure Report “Learning to be”, in an attempt to analyse and understand the protests, likewise drew attention to the RPL issue, among many others. It said: “Education should be dispensed and acquired through a multiplicity of means. The important thing is not the path an individual has followed, but what he has learned or acquired ... From now on, all these paths, whether formal or informal, institutionalised or not, will be acknowledged—on principle—as equally valid” (Faure et al., 1972, p. 186). Admittedly, as far as most European universities are concerned, it is seemingly difficult to agree on common criteria for recognition of prior learning outcomes. So apparently it is not an issue only with Saudi universities, but rather a more general problem typical of university culture and attitudes everywhere. It is a question of pushing the boundaries between formal and non-formal education to a point where what actually matters is what a person knows and is willing to learn. In the end, the key-competence is learning to learn in an ever-changing world. In this regard, universities can and must play a pivotal role.

In Chapter 7, *The Role of Information Technology in Supporting Quality Teaching and Learning* (Colbran & Al Ghreimil), the authors remark that Saudi universities are struggling to catch up with certain aspects of university education worldwide: “Pure distance education is a small component of the current system in the Kingdom. One question to consider is: What role will Saudi Arabia play in developing distance education in the Arab world and beyond? It is suggested that this role can be extensive, enhancing the importance and influence of the Kingdom in world education. The focus should be both international and external” (p. 82). This is an excellent point. One might ask what the Kingdom is doing to make the recent developments in its HE system known to the world. It seems that much more information should be made available on this topic, in English, first and foremost via the Internet. Saudi websites are not always satisfactorily translated into English and updated. Researchers may lose their motivation when confronted with a limitation of this kind. In addition, it cannot be taken for granted that everyone researching in fields pertinent to the Arab world will have learned the Arabic language. And even assuming familiarity with the language—which the author of this paper has acquired—a good deal of learning is required before websites in Arabic can be fully read and understood. Secondly, Saudi academics and HE leaders should do their best to promote Saudi policies on HE through conferences and seminars abroad, and especially outside the Arab world. Certainly, important initiatives are already in place, for example the annual International Exhibition and Conference on Higher Education in Riyadh (known as IECHE; the fifth edition is expected to take place in April 2014), under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education, and papers as well as reports are made available to an international audience. However, much more needs to be done.

Talking about education and moreover, investing in education, means talking about the future and investing in the future. Mature western societies have played a hugely important role in developing the idea of *culture*, but now have great difficulty in shaping the idea of *future*, whether they acknowledge it or not. So, hearing from a country so seriously investing in its future would be very beneficial. Thirdly, it is in fact difficult to find English language Saudi journals/reviews commenting on HE issues and readily accessible to foreign academics. One might suppose that a Saudi-only Editorial Board, with clearly stated aims, scope and policies, would guarantee a proper selection of contributors, and at the same time help disseminate Saudi good practices in international academia. Fourthly, field visits from foreign scholars might be encouraged with the specific aim of making Saudi Arabia’s unique advances known to the rest of the world. The world needs to know that the biggest oil producer and cradle of Islam is devoting remarkable efforts to the development of its HE education system. At present, a researcher could in effect find it difficult to keep up with the rapid pace of change in the HE Saudi system. Saudi Arabia will not be a learner of best practices originated elsewhere for a long time yet, but could conceivably make its voice heard even sooner than Saudis themselves might reasonably expect.

Chapter 9, *Knowledge-Based Innovation and Research Productivity in Saudi Arabia* (Al Ohali & Shin), returns to the issue of Saudi publications: “Social science publications represented less than 1% of all Saudi international publications in 2010” (p. 99). The authors, recalling the final chapter of the book by Smith and Abouammoh, list “the major reasons for the relatively low publication rate by Saudi academics”: “A lack of knowledge and understanding about what is required to report research output in an international publication”,

albeit this is by no means a Saudi problem only. Universities would rather focus on the need to establish so-called “teaching and learning centres” (for example, we learn that King Saud University has established a Deanship of Skills Development, seeking to improve the teaching skills of faculty members) which might be beneficial also in terms of advancing research techniques. Incidentally, the existence of such “centres” is not yet the norm in all international universities. “Difficulties in expressing ideas in English, the major language for international publications”: again, it is definitely not only a Saudi problem, given that all non-native English speakers experience this same difficulty, so one supposes it cannot seriously be asserted that Saudi academics are lagging behind due to their inferior command of the English language. And there is also the fact that peer review and evaluation criteria used in international journals are becoming a heated topic of discussion at many universities, especially in non-English speaking countries. “The relatively new emergence in Saudi Arabia of many disciplines in the social sciences as areas of academic strength (internationally, this area accounts for a massive number of publications)”: here I would like to borrow an excellent expression from the Conclusions by Smith and Abouammoh: hasten slowly! (p. 189). From a western point of view, the Kingdom is already doing wonders in terms of creating university and research centre opportunities. Research skills need time and practice to develop. But it is out of the question to think that the establishment of Saudi journals and reviews on education would do much to help disseminate and exchange knowledge. “Inadequate mentoring of Saudi academics by established international academic authors, particularly in the social sciences, including education” and finally, “A lack of confidence to expose their academic arguments and findings to international critique”: these last two items of the list sound truly challenging. I need here to turn to two internationally accredited authorities in the field of education, UNESCO and Al Azhar University.

First UNESCO. In its Report “Towards Knowledge Societies”, the Organization maintains that “The increasing importance of cultural and linguistic diversity underscores the extent to which problems of access to knowledge are bound up with the production of knowledge. Fostering diversity also means nurturing the creativity of emerging knowledge societies. Such a prospect fulfils not only an abstract ethical imperative, it above all aims to raise in each society an awareness of the wealth of the forms of knowledge and capacities it possesses, in order to increase their value and take advantage of what they have to offer. That done, each society will probably be better armed to cope with the ever increasing pace of change that characterizes today’s world” (UNESCO, 2005, p. 18). In other words, UNESCO encourages the independent and creative development of different cultures, each one with its unique wealth of traditions, values and beliefs. Emergent differences can add value to globalization, this new human adventure we have embarked upon.

In a Declaration issued by Al Azhar University on the legal ordinances of fundamental freedoms, dated January 2012, it is stated that “The time has come for the Arab-Islamic umma to return to be competitive entering into the era of knowledge ... It is time that the Egyptians, Arabs and Muslims also entered this scientific and cultural competition. They in fact have the spiritual, physical and human energy needed for progress, in a world that has no respect for the weak and for those who get left behind” (Third point: freedom of scientific research).

Mentoring from international scholars can be greatly beneficial to Saudi academics, but Saudis nonetheless have the right to engage in worldwide cognitive competition (Pavan, 2008, p. 98), as equal players, at the same level as their international colleagues. I can only hope they are aware of their right.

It is important to remember here that the expression “knowledge society” refers to a society which generates, processes, shares and makes available to all its members knowledge that may be used to improve the human condition (Castelfranchi, 2007). According to Stehr, in a knowledge society the source of economic growth and value-adding activities increasingly relies on knowledge. The significance of knowledge grows in all spheres of life and in all social institutions of contemporary society (Stehr, 1994). UNESCO purposely refers to “knowledge societies” (plural), as there exists not only one vision of knowledge society, namely the Western model, but as many visions and ways to implement them as there are different cultures and traditions—all of equal value, all worthy of respect and appreciation. In particular, Al Azhar intellectuals recall the extraordinary legacy left to the world by past Arab scientific communities, and encourage a new Arab contribution to the development of knowledge. Therefore, we can expect a great deal from a country such as Saudi Arabia, given its relentless and extraordinary investment in education.

In 2012 Khalid A. Al Falih, President and CEO of Saudi Aramco, affirmed: “Our young people are without doubt our most valuable renewable energy” (Al Falih, 2012, p. 3). The Rector of King Saud University Dr. Badran Al Omar, commenting on the massive funding of higher education in 2013, said: “Now world economies have evolved from industrial production to knowledge production. Investment now focuses on minds not on machines. It is the worthiest investment in the present era” (King Saud University website, accessed March 11, 2013). To judge from facts, figures, data, official statements and plans, I think that there is unquestionably *a Saudi*

knowledge society in the making, moving at its own pace.

With special reference to KASP, in Chapter 14, *Student Scholarships in Saudi Arabia: Implications and Opportunities for Overseas Engagement* (Bukhari & Denman), it is insinuated that: “Religious, political, and social pressures have been instrumental in shaping the nature of the scholarship programme, and thus, it is not unexpected that many academics outside the Kingdom believe a major purpose of the programme is to promote the word of Islam internationally. The main or at least the stated aim of KASP is essentially economic: to develop an effective and internationally competitive workforce” (p. 158). I think that the international community should accept the vision and goals as stated in the MoHE website in good faith. Investment in education is always a wise choice and a brave bet on the future of a country. Moreover, “Current evidence across a range of indicators suggests that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has been successful both in achieving its stated aims and in improving the capacity of the students involved to engage internationally” (ibid.). Leaving aside insinuations that do nothing to help describe the Saudi engagement in favour of education, it is more interesting, rather, to note that the book places considerable emphasis on the *international* arena. This definitely suggests an open attitude of Saudi policies on education, both toward the outside world, and toward the future at large.

Clearly, all the authors are well aware of the difficulties and challenges Saudi Arabia is facing in its struggle to balance its traditions with the globalized world. So for example in Chapter 15, *International Collaboration* (Al Ohali & Burdon), it is maintained that “Such a strategy will not be easy to develop and implement, because the need to retain Saudi culture and the need to collaborate on a global scale on entrepreneurial and innovative endeavours are both important, but somewhat antithetical, objectives” (p. 165). The authors warn that “Internationalisation is a choice, not a necessity. It carries risks as well as rewards” (p. 166). This opinion might be seen as an example of different moods, attitudes and worries we have nowadays in Saudi society as it faces inevitable changes. A similar warning is expressed in Chapter 16, *Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: An Exploratory Focus Group* (Smith & Abouammoh): “Saudi Arabia has a strong commitment to its traditional culture and religious beliefs and practices. There is considerable concern at all levels of Saudi society that too much exposure to the other cultures and ways of thinking may begin to erode those tightly held traditions. At the same time, almost all Saudis seem acutely aware of the need to engage closely and productively with the international community if the Kingdom is to prosper in an increasingly global economy. Resolving the tension between these two imperatives is a major challenge for Saudi Arabia” (p. 171). But antithesis and tension could also be seen in a positive light: educational policies are impacting on Saudis, who sense the change. Saudi society is alive, stands up for its values and traditions, while also being aware of and receptive to changes now in progress.

Nevertheless, “Saudi Arabia recognises the advantages of having high-quality academics from outside the Kingdom working in mentoring arrangements with Saudi universities and academics. Such arrangements would not only leverage improvements in the quality of research and teaching but also foster joint authorship of *international* papers, develop strong *international* networks and facilitate *international* benchmarking” (emphasis added, p. 175). What is most interesting is that Saudi academics are aware of the risks carried by the benchmarking activities undertaken by many universities in the Kingdom: “A key element of this challenge is the need for Saudi Arabia to learn from the university sectors in other countries, but not to copy them” (p. 171). In fact, “Establishing such a programme, however, will require considerable planning to identify the ‘right’ international academics to target, and it must be underpinned by appropriate and attractive incentive packages” (p. 175). This position is commendable, because it indicates the willingness to cooperate from a Saudi vantage point: reforms, initiatives and practices are the “right” ones if they can be implemented in the Saudi system of higher education after undergoing reasonable adaptation. This will require time and concerted efforts, but the chances are that this attempt to reconcile changes with respect for traditions, culture and beliefs will eventually succeed, and it will be of considerable interest to see the outcomes of what I would call the Saudi experiment.

And finally, in Chapter 17, *Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Conclusions* (Smith & Abouammoh), a cautionary note: “If ... Saudi Arabia wants to be an active and effective participant in the global knowledge economy, then it will need large numbers of university graduates who are flexible and creative thinkers, who can recognise and take advantage of opportunities and who are highly effective communicators across a wide range of issues and forums” (p. 186). We would all agree that all countries need such graduates. But maybe sometimes we tend to forget that the word “competition” comes from the Latin verb “cum-petere”, where “cum” means with, and “petere” means to move on/ahead. Therefore, etymologically speaking, competition does not mean fighting for supremacy, but proceeding together toward agreed and shared goals (Pavan, 2008, p. 137). Embracing competition in the original sense of the word, accordingly, we can assume that to be part of the international

competition within the global knowledge economy does not entail giving up values, traditions and the culture to which each person belongs. Globalization must not mean loss of identity. It is more than likely that compromise and adjustment will ultimately come about in Saudi Arabia, thanks to the development of education.

The process perhaps needs to be harnessed, as changes are happening very quickly. In fact it is hoped that “The current situation whereby a nebulous vision of ‘world class’ is supported by a plethora of individually worthwhile but strategically uncoordinated projects, and ‘good ideas’ would be replaced by a rigorous and disciplined process in which projects and stakeholders would all be working together to progress the system towards a common and mutually understood goal” (Smith & Abouammoh, p. 189). But I feel it would be important to decide eventually what the final goals will be, on an independent basis. This should be a major challenge for the Kingdom: To become a worldwide and authoritative economic and educational competitor retaining its freedom to decide what is the right and best path to human development for its people. And in this challenge, education will again play a major role.

In conclusion, “The Saudis are full of enthusiasm and ambition for their system, and this should not be lost. They do need to realize, however, that making the major changes to their system necessary to move towards international benchmarks will require disciplined and rigorous processes, and above all, it will take time”(ibid.). We all know that enthusiasm and ambition lead to success more often than not. So let the Saudis be ambitious in their expectations, bold in their plans, brave in their investments, wise in preserving their culture, and open to the future, and we shall all witness unexpected outcomes probably sooner than the Saudis themselves can envisage at this point in time.

4. Conclusion

This paper has introduced some facts, figures and comments on past and current developments in the Saudi higher education system. Drawing also from the recently published book “Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities”, it has highlighted how changes are subject within Saudi academia and society to an open and sometimes heated debate. Strong commitment to the development of education is part of the history of the modern Kingdom. Nowadays, efforts are focused on the building of what can be called the *Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society*, a process characterized by sustained and sustainable political commitment to invest in education, the preparation of several detailed plans for future developments, international scholarships for younger generations, attention to the international debate on higher education, research into best practices in education, and finally, a strong determination to retain traditional culture, but at the same time awareness of the need to open up to the globalized world.

Taking into consideration all of these elements, it seems that the Kingdom is preparing, at its own pace, to play an important role in the international educational community. The time has come for international academia to give serious attention to higher education developments in Saudi Arabia, a country where education is a matter of serious belief. By choice.

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