SAUDI ARABIAN EDUCATIONAL REFORMS: A ROAD FROM TRADITIONALISM TO MODERNIZATION

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ABSTRACT: *People are the true wealth of any nation. Adequately prepared and well educated, they can push a country towards development and prosperity. With this in mind, the Saudi Arabian government has always believed that developing the nation's citizens is not only an investment but a sacred duty too. Yet, it has faced social resistance in implementing change for fear of losing national identity to globalization, which is felt through the current debates in the media and official arenas. But the country is working hard to reach a platform of modernized ideas and beliefs that the majority can agree on. Then Saudi Arabia will be able to rise to the level of the developed countries without losing its culture nor identity. In this Study, the author utilized a descriptive method in order to provide a brief description of the country's demographic characteristics, trends in education before and after 1953, and indicated the Saudi philosophy of education upon which everything else in the educational system is built through presenting the structure of the educational system including policies. Issues related to general education, special education and post-school education are presented. Major developments in the Saudi educational system after 1953 in general, and 1990 in specific will be discussed. Finally, government efforts to overcome current educational issues will be delineated to demonstrate how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be able to move forward towards modernization without jeopardizing its religion, language, culture, or identity.*

KEYWORDS: Saudi Arabia, Educational Reforms, Traditionalism, Modernization

INTRODUCTION

People are the true wealth of any nation. Adequately prepared and well educated, they can push a country towards development and prosperity. With this in mind, the Saudi Arabian government has always believed that developing the nation's citizens is not only an investment but a sacred duty too. Therefore, since its establishment, it has embarked on a huge mission to nourish and preserve the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual, and physical development of its citizens. The government has, since 1932, established free education, training, and health institutions all over the country. The major goal of this development was to preserve the traditional ways of thought and belief. Any attempt to modernize the people's knowledge and behavior was considered by the traditionalist as an attach on the religion. The community usually ostracized those few who tried in the past to introduce modernization as heretics. Saudi Arabia developed technologically but in core remained a country that cherished traditionalism. Today, after seventy-two years, the government is facing a huge challenge embodied in the spread of globalization. Custudio (2003, 2) postulates that "[t]he challenge in this era of globalization both for countries and individuals is to find a healthy balance between preserving a sense of identity, home and community and doing what it takes to survive within the globalization system". Through the

current debates in the media and official arenas, the country is trying to reach a platform of modernized ideas and beliefs that the majority can agree on. Then the country will be able to rise to the level of the developed countries without losing its culture nor identity.

This chapter provides a brief description of the country's demographic characteristics, history, and clarifies the Saudi philosophy of education upon which everything else in the educational system is built. Major developments in the Saudi educational system after 1953 in general, and 1990 in specific will be discussed. Finally, current educational issues and government efforts to overcome them will be delineated.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia is situated in the southwest corner of Asia. The country is a monarchy that totally relies on the Holy Quran for matters of state. The official religion is Islam with a majority of Sunni while the minority, which is about 33 percent of the population, is *Shi'ite* (Szayna, 2000, 278). Since 1975, the country has undergone a population growth. Nevertheless, the government faces two major issues. The first is that young people constitute more than 55 percent of the total population. The second issue is the ongoing migration to the cities. That creates tremendous pressure on the government to provide services such as housing, health, education and to create job markets. (Obaid, 2004, 25) The Saudi population is homogeneous. Citizens share the same religion, same culture and speak the same language with different dialects. In terms of social structure there are three categories nomads, rural dwellers and urban dwellers. (Al-Duwaihi *et al*., 2003; Al-Farsi, 1990)

Since its discovery in the 1930s, oil has been the major contributor to the country's economy. Its large revenues helped the country to implement its plans for modernization and development. However, because of the inconsistency of oil prices the government decided to lesson its dependency on oil and open new areas for economic growth such as supporting the private sector and privatizing some public service institutions. It started the 'Saudization' of the jobs in the government agencies and the private sector to increase employment opportunities for the growing numbers of unemployed Saudis.

Besides being a member to several important affiliations such as the United Nations and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Saudi Arabia is currently working on joining the World Trade Organization, the epitome of globalization. Therefore, the country confronts the challenge of upgrading its educational and training system to be able to produce a highly skilled and qualified work force that can compete in the global market.

Though the formal education system was established in 1926, the real boom in the number of educational institutions occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Educational institutions are under the administration of three main authorities: the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Higher Education; and the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training. In addition, some other government ministries such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Civil Service Bureau, and national defense agencies have some control over their

educational institutions. Gender segregation exists in all types of educational institutions except at pre-primary level. All types of education are free for citizens. Moreover, students of certain educational institutions receive monthly payments as an incentive to pay for educational materials. Public and private schools get free textbooks and the educational aids that are connected with them. The government finances the expenses through the state budget. Although attendance is not compulsory, females accounted for 47.65 percent and males for 52.34 percent of the total 4,850,656 students in the general educational institutions in 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2003). In 2000 about 38,893 students enrolled in technical institutions, 11896 in vocational institutions, about 4,000 enrolled abroad. (Ministry of Planning, 2001). As for literacy, it is estimated at 50.1 percent of those over age fifteen in 2000, 17 percent for males, and 33.1 percent for females (World Bank Group, 2002).

Trends in Education Before 1953
The earliest education was in urban areas and was provided for boys in religious schools called *Kuttaab*, by the learned *Ulema*. The Qur'an, Islamic studies and sometime the three R's were taught to the students who were awarded a certificate to teach the subject they had mastered. Schools in Makkah were three types: Ottoman's established in 1905, Hashimite's established in 1913, and private schools which were established much earlier. *Alsulatiyah* School was the first private school established in 1872. The curriculum was influenced by the one used in India because the teachers came from there. Graduates taught in *Halaquat* (groups) at the Holly Mosque in Makkah. In 1912, the school developed into an institution that contained four stages of studies: four years of pre-elementary, four years in elementary, four years in secondary, and two years in the high school stage.

The first formal education system was established in 1924 and supervised by an educational administration called *Modeeriat Al-Maarif Al-Ammah*, in 1924. The first high school was opened in 1936 to prepare students who were going abroad to get higher education. Moreover, in the year 1944, a school for preparing judges opened in Taif. Studies consisted of six years three intermediate, and three secondary. Then, in 1945, the first school for the nomads was established. As for higher studies, a college for Islamic studies, *Shari'ah*, was established in 1949 to prepare judges and Islamic studies teachers for the secondary schools. In 1952, the College of Teachers opened to prepare secondary level teachers in the other subjects. The following year *Kuliyat Al- Shari'ah*, college of Islamic law, was established in Riyadh. (Al-Duwaihi et al., 2003; Al Sonbul et al., 1998; Baghdadi, 1985)

As for girls, they continued to receive their education in the *Kuttab*. Except for some elites and the educated, girls' education was not deemed important in general. Some families employed private tutors for their daughters' education, while others send them abroad to study. The majority believed that girls should stay at home and educating them was preceived a corruption rather than a development. (Al-Duwaihi et al., 2003; Al Sonbul et al., 1998; Baghdadi, 1985)

Education since 1953
The Ministry of Education was established in 1953. However, the Saudi Education Policy Document was not issued until 1970 by the Saudi Higher Council of

Education. It delineated the main bases from which the modern Saudi educational system was regulated and directed. Al Salloom (1996) postulates that Wizaret *Al-Maaref*, a ministry while before it was an administration, directed the general education system, special education, adult education, and the institutes and colleges for teacher preparation. The supervision, including policy-making, planning, staff hiring and training was done through a centralized system based in the capital Riyadh. In addition, it developed and distributed textbooks and teacher manuals, and provided the required educational aids to all the schools. It carried the responsibility of evaluating and developing the national curriculum and teaching methods. The General Presidency of Education for girls conducted the same duties. However, in 2003 a royal decree joined the two into one under the new name of the Ministry of Education.

STRUCTURE OF EDUCATION SYSTEM

The National Policy for Education

The Saudi education system is derived from the country's national policy. Not only does it impel the official philosophy of education, but it also serves as the principal guide for planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the country's educational institutions. It is based upon the nation's philosophy of education that stresses the integration of Islamic beliefs, values, and heritage with all types of knowledge and sciences. Furthermore, it responds to the needs of the society and implements the nation's objectives. The document consists of 236 articles arranged in nine chapters covering the various fields and stages of education, curriculum plans, educational aids, administrative systems, and the responsible authorities that direct and operate them. (Eyssah, 1979)

Issues relating to the Education Policy Document

The document has been criticized for not having been updated or modified since it was published especially the articles that deal with teacher institutes that no longer exist (Al-Duwaihi et al., 2003, 238). Besides rewriting, special attention should be paid to the articles regarding:

- reinforcing of the connection between general education and higher education;
- involving teachers, school principles, supervisors in the evaluation process of the educational system and its needs;
- uniting the numerous agencies that handle educational institutions;
- making the education policy document available for all who are concerned; activating some of the articles that have been neglected such as article 202 which deals with establishing adequate school libraries;
- and raising the level of execution for some of the articles (Al-Saloom 1996, 29-34).

For example, the document did recognise "women's right to obtain suitable education on equal footing with men in light of Islamic laws" (Al-Haqeel, 2003, 66). However, in practice, educational options for girls in general education as well as in higher education are not identical to those for boys.

General Education

General education schools are public or private. The levels range from nursery up to secondary. A school year is eight months, four for each term. Students from fourth grade and up take final examinations at the end of each term. Students who pass the examinations are promoted from one grade level to the next. Homeroom teachers evaluate grade 1 to 3 students on a continuous base. The intermediate and secondary stages are also offered through evening courses or distance learning. Private schools are general, religious, or international.   Parents of Saudi students wishing their children to enter international schools must obtain a special permission from the Ministry of Education.

The government encourages private schools by supplying limited and conditional governmental funding and administrative support. Yet these schools are not allowed to grant graduation certificates at any stage of education. Some of these schools offer more subjects than public schools such as higher level of English as Foreign Language (EFL), computer, physical education (for girls), and sometimes French. Usually the classrooms are smaller and the school buildings are better in structure and design. The different levels of the educational structure are:

- Nursery schools are for children between the ages of one and three. The General Presidency for Girls' Education, (official government agency that runs girls' education) opened these schools in 1975 with the aid of a team of social workers and a UNICEF specialist.
- Kindergarten schools take children three years prior to primary school. Private schools were the first to provide kindergarten education. In 1987, with the help of UNESCO and the General Presidency, a group of specialists developed a new curriculum for the Kindergarten stage. Later, the Presidency established four training institutions in four regions of the country to prepare workers in the field of Kindergarten education.
- Primary schools take students from the ages six through twelve and consist of two levels: lower primary, first through third grades, and upper primary, fourth through sixth grades. Graduates leave with a General Elementary School Certificate.
- At the intermediate stage students enter at the age of twelve and leave at the age of fifteen with a certificate called *Shahadat Al-Kafa'at Al-Mutawassita*. There are three types of intermediate schools (graduates leave with an Intermediate School Certificate); Religious Intermediate School (*MutawassitaThafiz Quran* and these schools concentrate on Islamic studies, for they make up 51 percent of the curriculum); and Intermediate Education Institute (*Al-Maahed Al-Elmiya Al-Mutawassita* that Imam Mohamad Ben Saud Islamic University established for male students inside and outside the kingdom). Girls attend only general and religious schools while boys attend all types.

At the secondary stage, students usually enter at the age of fifteen and leave at the age of seventeen. There are several types of secondary schools such as general, religious, technical and vocational training, commercial, and agricultural schools. Girls attend

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all types except commercial and agricultural schools while boys attend all types. At the end of the third year, the Ministry of Education distributes unified exams written by the specialists for all the schools in the kingdom. These examinations are a major event in students' lives for the results determine their future course. Students' answer booklets are corrected at the Ministry. Later, names of successful students appear in local newspapers.

Even though the market is in great need of such graduates, the number of students in these schools is very low. One reason is that graduates are looked down upon by the society for they become blue collar workers, jobs that are done by foreigners not Saudis. Furthermore, not all graduates get jobs because their training is not up to the latest technical developments of today's markets.

Issues Relating To General Education
General education in the kingdom has gone through many minor changes, usually adding or deleting a subject, changing the name of a subject, increasing or decreasing the number of hours per week for the different subjects, or changing the grading system. Nothing major has been done to the large number of subjects the students have to take each year, which means carrying daily a heavy load of books back and forth from home to school. Furthermore, instruction is concentrated on the transmission of information more than on the practical participation of the students. Nothing major has been done to update the curriculum at all stages. Furthermore, the grading system drives teachers to lecture and concentrate their teaching on examinations preparation. Students are encouraged to memorize rather than learn and acquire information by hands-on experience and participation

The low level of teachers' preparations is a problem. Until recently, elementary teachers were graduates of the secondary stage, with two years of college education. Even though in 1986 those colleges changed into four year colleges, the level of graduates is still not up to international standards.

Another problem is the weak connection between the schools and the parents. Schools try very hard to have parents share the educational process of their children. Yet, those who do care, generally the mothers, find it difficult to consult with their sons' teachers. This is because some teachers refuse to talk to females, some father do not allow their wives to talk to male teachers, or male students feel embarrassed if their mothers contact the school.

Generally, the school buildings, do not represent a healthy atmosphere for children and youth to learn and develop. A large number of students in every class and the short school day that does not allow for extra curricular work of any kind, compound the issue.
As for computers and computer education, a subject called "computers" is given starting at the 10th grade for both girls and boys. The problem is that not all schools have computer labs, especially public schools. Moreover, the internet service is not provided for schools. As a result, schools are not connected to the Ministry, or other schools nationally or internationally. Some private schools provide such services but they are very few and very expensive. All students are not allowed to carry a mobile

phone in schools for ethical reasons. Even if they did, it is very expensive to hook to the internet via mobiles.

The above problems are mentioned just to name a few, and the Ministry is working hard to solve them. This is evident in the recent training and development workshops for teachers and supervisors; and conferences and conventions at both national and international levels. Furthermore, some teachers are able to continue their education at the local colleges or universities if they so wish. The Ministry has also established a section for the care of talented and gifted students. Centers have been opened to develop programs and train teachers to identify these children and how to challenge them. It has also developed training programs for teachers to be able to identify children with learning difficulties, and for them to learn methods and strategies of how to teach those children. (Al-Duwaihi et al., 2003; General Presidency for Girls, 1998; Al Sonbul et al, 1998)

Special Education
Private institutions started providing special education in 1952. The government opened special education institutions in 1959. Several ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Work and Civil Services, and the Ministry of Health supervise special education. There are several types of such institutions such as the following e,g, schools for the blind, the deaf and the dumb and institutes for cognitive education.

Issues Relating to Special Education
The main problem of special education is social awareness towards physical disabilities and mental retardation. People do not know how to react or deal with them. Parents and families feel embarrassed and try to hide such children from the rest of the society. That is why the government finds it difficult when planning and budgeting for these institutions. It is hard to project the needed help if the correct statistics are not available. The second problem is the lack of trained professionals even though the government does conduct training programs inside and outside the country. Last, but not least the mass media neglect educating and raising the awareness of the public towards special education problems, needs, and acceptance of these people.

Post-School Education
There are several types of postsecondary education: universities, girls' and boys' education colleges, and community colleges. The education colleges provide bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees. The Ministry of Higher Education runs the universities, public or private, and the private colleges, for boys or girls. Postsecondary education is also offered at higher technical institutes, technical colleges, and institutes of public administration. These programs range from two to three years.

In addition to opening universities, the government has established a research centre called King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology to help researchers in various fields, including education. Moreover, the majority of the Saudi students who are enrolled in universities outside the country are supported by government scholarships.

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Yet women who want to study abroad are not encouraged to do so especially if they want to travel alone. Not all women can get a close male relative to drop everything and accompany them for two to four years while they pursue their degree. Many must stay and enter local universities. Yet not all universities admit female students, and the ones, that do, offer limited fields of education. For example, women cannot study engineering, law (to become judges), agriculture, archaeology, media, or marine science. Today, the Saudi universities are offering a larger variety of masters and doctoral programs. Furthermore, private colleges and universities, which are affiliated with well known international universities, have been issued licenses and their numbers are growing yearly.

Issues Relating to Post-School Education
Today higher education is facing a big dilemma because of the growing demand for enrolment. A Saudi student prefers an office job to a blue collar one. Because the government pays a monthly salary for students, some students fail on purpose to prolong their stay so as not to lose the extra income, which to many, is a much-needed relief to the rising costs of living. This is a huge burden on higher institutions and limits their ability to develop programs and expand facilities and services. The government is trying to solve this problem by linking the salary to grade point average (GPA), and enforcing entrance examinations on all high school graduates. Furthermore, the accepted entrance GPA was raised from 60 percent to 80 percent in arts and science departments, and to 90 percent in medicine, engineering, and natural sciences departments. Some departments even require passing an interview. The ones who are not accepted can become long distance students for a partial fee, or enter the regular programme for a complete fee. Others with low GPA can enter community service programs such as tourism and office management.

The situation is different at the teacher colleges. Even though Dr. Rasheed (2003,7), the current Minister of Education, stresses the importance of choosing appropriate people for the teaching profession, students with a GPA of 60 percent can enter, sometimes after failing the interview. He says that special care should be given to training, guiding, and encouraging teachers. Nevertheless, professors are teaching large classes, some teach 300 students per class. In addition, students take ten subjects per term that does not give them time to research and practice applying their newly acquired knowledge in teaching. The school-based training period is 15 days during the third year, and another 15 during the fourth year. Not all public schools can accommodate them and there not enough specialized supervisors to oversee the students training.

General Issues Relating To Education
Saudi Arabia has entered the 21st century with the latest technology, in equipment, but with the human training and competences of the early 20th century, with a poor level of in-service teacher education. The poor quality of general education graduates was acknowledged by the Minister of Education, Dr. Rasheed (2003a, 123). University professors complain about the poor level of students they receive from the general education. That is why the job market is not getting the required work force and so businesses employ foreigners rather than taking nationals.

Eastin (1999, 18) postulates that a country cannot afford to keep on borrowing talent and experience from outside, it needs to cultivate its own talent and experienced work force. He lists several examples of predictions of changes that the work force is going to face such as: the increasing complexity of jobs; the long hours of work at several places; the importance of knowing about other cultures, languages, and business practices; and the importance of computer literacy for survival in the job market. The requirement of new skills is echoed by Lirberman and Miller (2000, 48) when writing speaking about the pressure enforced on schools by community businesses to produce students who are able "to frame and solve problems, to think critically, to develop a multicultural awareness, and to demonstrate mastery of basic skills." Dolence and Norris (1995, 23) describe the 21st century as the information age. They add that all educational fields are

> "… bending under the weight of more and more information. It is becoming increasingly difficult within our traditional course and degree structures to produce graduates who are competent thinkers, know enough about selected specialties, and have the capacity to continue to learn and navigate to obtain information germane to their need."

The education of young people should be the collaboration of the community and the education system. They should work to enrich and develop the country's most valuable treasure and, as statistics show, they are the majority. It is a major and vital project that the country has to embark on if it wants to compete among highly developed communities, and thus ensure a safe and prosperous life for its people. That can only be done if the people are prepared and trained to acquire and retain jobs. Otherwise, the poverty level will escalate, discontent, despair will surface, and troublemakers who preach extremist schools of thought will gather our angry and confused youth and push them into destructive paths. Today, a rise in unemployment among the youth is causing anger and frustration. In 1982, Al-Sebai, a writer and social activist, warned that if the higher institutions do not start providing a variety of specialisms, and stop producing graduates for jobs that are almost full, there'd come a time when graduates will not find jobs. This would push them to hurt themselves and their country through corruption, evil, and crime (Al-Sebai, 1982, 21). However, young men are not the only ones having problems finding jobs, it is also women. Ben Marwi (2004, 8) asserts that besides not being able to continue their higher education, fifty thousand Saudi women are facing unemployment after high school graduation.

The local market and global market demand certain type of skills in the future workforce. Thornburg (2002, 33-34) postulates that the market is changing so fast that soon there will be numerous new types of jobs but not enough skilled workers to fill them up. He mentions the list of basic work skills needed in such jobs drawn up by Robert Reich's (the United States Secretary for Labour): abstraction, system thinking, experimentation, and collaboration. Thornburg describes the future worker as someone who is "A contractor (not a long-term employee), Comfortable with ambiguity, a life long learner, highly mobile, and highly entrepreneurial and creative." (ibid., 34) To provide for such a market, the Saudi educational system has to address the following problems:

- The concentration on quantity not quality;

- Teachers' education, training, and development;
- Lack of internet connections and training for staff and students in schools and colleges.
- School buildings that do not meet accepted global specifications;
- Lack of public libraries, especially for women and children, and the few that do exist do not allow women to enter. Metair (2004, 9), quotes Dr. Aref who says that women are not allowed in public libraries for organizational and security reasons and for the lack of female staff;
- Libraries in public schools are used by and large for storage or meetings;
- The growing numbers of students is causing overcrowding in classes and schools;
- The large number of rented building for schools. According to the deputy director of education for buildings and school equipments there are 9842 public schools for boys of which 4,670 are rented (Malki, 2004, 8);
- Some people still believe that women have less physical and cognitive abilities as compared to men. Therefore, it is considered an injustice for girls to get the same type of education and opportunities as the boys (Al-Baghdadi, 1985, 423)
- Labor markets are opening for women but programs to educate them are still limited;
- The media should work on raising the social awareness towards women, women's work, technical and vocational jobs, special and adult education;
- The present curriculum is overcrowded with old and obsolete information. Ziyadah (2003, 156), a prominent Arab historian, says that we teach about Islamic scholars but not their work. As educators, we have to think of civilization on the bases of the future and not on the way we were because that is exactly the ethical or political conspiracy that we play on ourselves. That means the Muslim world should take the work of Muslim scientists, inventors, and thinkers and study it and not study about it. Make the past a bridge to the future and not a prison;
- Science has no gender. We cannot say that any scientific information is suitable for boys and not girls. Thus, it is not logical to have any and not just science curriculum for boys and another one for girls;
- Human rights do exist in the curriculum but students do not practice these rights nor are trained on how to apply them in life. Furthermore, the education system which is supposed to protect graduates' rights from unemployment or underpaid jobs, is the largest producer of unemployed and underpaid workers, because of its current poor performance (Al-Quaifely,2004; 46);
- The assessment and evaluation systems need revising. Students should be prepared not only for examinations but for life.

Initiatives by the Government

Recent changes in the educational, governmental, economical, and social structure of the country do project hope for a nation that went through many changes in such a short time. The changes in the educational and job related fields are the most notable ones. They have come as a response to the new policies introduced by the reform movement (*Al-Eslah*) launched by Prince Abdullah Ben Abdulaziz, the Crown Prince. To name a few:

- Women are entering new fields of work;
- Women are formally participating in many conferences and conventions inside and outside the country. They are registering their views and opinions. Soon they will join policymaking committees to share in planning the development and administration of the country;
- Leading positions that deal with women's affairs are being transferred to women and women are expected to fill up all such positions;
- The establishment of the first female Saudi public university is underway;
- On June 21st 2004, a Royal Decree moved the boys' and girls' education colleges to under the authority of the Ministry of Higher education;
- Private universities and colleges are opening all over the country. That means more opportunities and choices for the students;
- The first fully electronic school opened in Riyadh in 2004;
- Two private schools, one in Riyadh and one in Jeddah, were chosen in 2002 to experiment with a critical thinking program (Jaheen, 2004, 92);
- The universities and colleges are working on establishing e-learning programs to accommodate the continuous increase in student numbers.
- The Ministry of Education has started the process of decentralization of educational administration;
- Numerous committees have been formed for educational development, studies and research, curriculum development, evaluation and assessment, and training and development;
- The Ministry of Education has assigned a large budget for establishing computer labs in public schools all over the country.
- Training programs for male and female teachers, supervisors, administrators, laboratory technicians, have sprung up all over the country like mushrooms;
- The Ministry of Education is working with other countries to upgrade the educational system for example the collaboration with the U.S.A through the Globe Program to raise environmental awareness and raise the academic level in mathematics and science (Al-Marefah, 2002; 156).

Yet the most important solution for the current general education problems is the ten-year plan, 2004-2014, produced by the Ministry of Education under the guidance of its minister. Dr. Rasheed (2003a, 85) postulates that the fast changes in the world have placed new demands on education specialists who must seek new objectives and teaching methods to deal with these changes. The ten-year plan (Ministry of Education, 2003a, 10-46), if applied properly, gives the Ministry ample time to work

on raising public awareness and to develop and modernise its educational system. It concentrates mainly on the following:

- Establishing a separate and independent nursery stage;
- Obligatory general education;
- Developing the high school certificate examination process;
- National conference on developing the general curriculum;
- Concentrate on the skills of critical thinking and communication;
- Provide the hardware for computer education to all students;
- Participation in international examinations;
- Incentives for exemplary teachers;
- Administer competency tests on teachers;
- National examinations to check the quality of education;
- Apply appropriate criteria for school accreditation;
- Three hours a week in schools for non-curricular activities.

The plan delineates major goals each with several strategic objectives and programs that will help achieve them. Such major projects need the collaboration of every one in the Saudi society by supporting the Ministry. Although these reforms are substantial, the country has to be extra careful in the speed of implementation. It has to first work on preparing the public especially when it comes to issues that deal with women and changes in the curriculum. The Ministry with the help of the media should first launch a campaign for raising the public awareness towards women's role and work to pave the way for the required reform, otherwise there will be a backlash. Some people will seize the opportunity to steer the public towards more conservatism if given the chance. Thus, women will lose all that they have gained in the process. It was experienced also, in the 70's and 80's. Al-Hazzaa (1993, 2) wrote:

> "The preservation of the traditional family system is also used as a defense against the continued growth of Western cultural, economic, and political influences which accompanied the capitalist mode of the development process that has been taking place in the country in the past two decades. The defense of Islam against continued Western influence made the private controls of women within the family defensible and acceptable to both men and women in the name of protecting the Islamic culture".

As for the curriculum, some elements in Saudi society consider any change towards modernizing it as an attack on religious teachings and values. As a result, the Ministry is facing a serious resistance from those who are campaigning against changes. Some of the resistance is coming from some teachers. Therefore, the Ministry must work on a counter-strategy by first educating the public to ensure that changes and development are not perceived as an attack on or a threat to Islamic teachings or values. Making use of the same arenas, the opposition is utilizing such organizations as the media, mosques, national and local events, to do this. Their message should be that Islam is for the future and not the past. But it is imperative that the Ministry should weed out the traditionalists among its teachers otherwise all efforts will be to no avail. They are either scared, do not understand, feel threatened, or simply do not want the change. Omar ben Al-Khattab (the second caliph) in one of his speeches asked the people to provide heir children with an education different from the one they got because they are raising their children for a different time. As

Davis (Parsell, 2002, 2) puts it "…to move to truly multicultural world where the spread of technology-beneficial technology, whether it's medical technology or the Internet-need not imply the elimination of ethnicity." Thus, Saudi Arabia can move forward towards modernization without jeopardizing its religion, language, culture, or identity.

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