

# Higher education in Saudi Arabia: Story of progress

Every new year in Saudi Arabia ushers in a new era of change and progress in the field of education with ever-increasing demand for highly skilled and educated workers. To keep pace with the dynamic situation, the Kingdom has developed what has become one of the best systems of higher education in the Middle East. 30 years ago, no formal universities existed in Saudi Arabia. At present there are seven universities providing higher education to 90,000 young men and women, equipping them with the necessary knowledge to meet the challenges of the 1980s and even beyond.

Education has deep and ancient roots in the Arabian peninsula. Since the birth of Islam, the pursuit of knowledge has been a sacred duty for all Muslims. As such, schools and other centers of higher learning were common throughout the Islamic world. Medieval Arab scientists are credited with having made critical breakthrough in medicine, chemistry and mathematics.

Universities in their contemporary form, however, first appeared in the Kingdom in the mid-1950s with the founding of King Saud University in Riyadh. Prior to that, religious education and training were the primary form of higher learning. Religious institutes in Makkah and Madinah had been in existence for many years: today they still exist as parts of larger universities which have incorporated other facilities as well.

During the past 30 years, higher education in the Kingdom has made a big leap forward. When King Saud University was founded in 1957, it had a total enrollment of only 21 students and a teaching staff of nine. According to the recently released annual report of the Ministry of Higher Education, enrollment at the Saudi Universities in 1985 academic year has topped 90,000, with a teaching staff of approximately 9,000. Between 1970 and 1985, university enrollment has grown at an average annual rate of 18.5 percent. The progress and change embodied in these figures provides an indication of the extent of higher education development in Saudi Arabia.

#### FOURTH PLAN PRIORITY

Higher education will continue to get top priority in Saudi Arabia as it implements the Fourth Five-Year Development Plan (1985-1990). According to the Ministry of Planning, an estimated SR 40.3 billion (\$11.04 billion) has been allocated for higher education to be spent between 1985 and 1990. Another indication of the long range importance of higher education was the establishment, ten years ago, of the Ministry of Higher Education.

The developments that led to the formation of the Ministry of Higher Education can be credited largely to be the

rapid and comprehensive improvement in all levels of education fostered by the Ministry of Education. The first minister of education was no less a person than today's King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz who was keenly aware of the country's need for modern education for all citizens. In June 1982, in his first official address to the nation as its leader, King Fahd made a solemn pledge: "One of our objectives" he said, "is to see that the fast moving wheel of education will maintain its momentum, and that the level of education will be improved both qualitatively and quantitatively".

While the 1970s were marked by the establishment of new universities and a expansion of existing university facilities, the mid-1980s have witnessed a stronger emphasis on the quality of education. The Kingdom's higher educational system, like the large industrial developmental projects initiated during the 'boom years' of the last decade, is now being tuned, with a stress on efficiency, higher quality and compatibility with Saudi Arabia's particular economic and social priorities. The Kingdom's planners anticipate that university enrollment will reach 110,000 by 1990. In addition, many students who would have otherwise enrolled in a university are now being encouraged to enter vocational and technical schools and institutes for practical training programmes.

#### SCIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

Education, whether at the elementary or the university level, represents an investment in the future and ensures the well being of generations to come. Furthermore, through higher education, the Kingdom hopes to enhance its position regionally and internationally by becoming technologically self-sufficient. The Saudi attitude toward higher education was best summed up by H.M. King Fahd when opening the King Saud University's new campus in December 1984. He said "With science we know the path towards truth with knowledge we preserve our honour among nations."

H.M. King Fahd, himself



one of the guiding forces behind the drive to better education, has told Saudi students that the country needs more young men to go into engineering, agriculture and petroleum engineering.

#### UNIVERSITIES

There are seven universities in Saudi Arabia, the oldest being the King Saud University in Riyadh. Founded in 1957, it is the largest university in the Kingdom with an enrollment of 23,315 students. Being symbolic of the Kingdom's commitment to development of higher education the university's budget has increased 370-fold over the last 26 years. Its budget for 1985-86 has been fixed at SR 2 billion (548 million dollars). With branches in Abha and Al-Qassim, the university offers 123 undergraduate majors, as well as 21 advanced degrees including agriculture, education and pharmacology. The university's new camp at Diriyah, inaugurated by H.M. King Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz in December 1984, was built at a cost of SR 5.7 billion (1.56 billion dollars). The campus is 620,000 square meters and features housing facilities for 45,000 students.

The Islamic University in Madinah has 3,400 students, 85 per cent of whom come from various Islamic and other countries of the world. The Islamic University was founded in 1961 as a traditional Islamic institution. It was recognized in 1975 to meet the development need of Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries. Students at the Islamic University can study for degrees in such fields as linguistics, Islamic law, Quranic studies and Islamic literature.

The University of Petroleum and Minerals was founded by late King Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz at Dhahran in 1963. This university is widely acknowledged to be the leading institution for the study of energy sciences in the Middle East. As a leading centre for scientific research and innovation, the University of Petroleum and Minerals plays a pioneering role in the Kingdom's development efforts. The scientists of the research institute of this university played a great role in preparing Prince

Sultan Bin Salman in his historic June 1985 space journey in shuttle 'Discovery'.

King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah is the Kingdom's second largest university. Founded by the local businessmen in 1967, King Abdul Aziz University became a state-run institution in 1971. The university's main focus has been on sciences, medicine, economics, and the humanities. In addition it has a faculty of navigational sciences, reflecting Jeddah's traditional link with the sea. The university's faculty of meteorology and environmental sciences has of late gained renown for its work in monitoring environmental pollution. At present the university has 15,000 students. The university has a branch in Madinah specialising in teachers training. Since its establishment 11,000 students have received undergraduate degrees.

Imam Muhammad Bin Saud University, founded in 1974 is a consolidation of a number of science and Islamic institutes located in Riyadh and other cities within the Kingdom. In fact, the Institute of Science in Riyadh, established by late King Abdul Aziz in 1950, forms the core of what is now known as Imam Muhammad Bin Saud University. The university specialises in Islamic studies, teacher education, Arabic language & literature. It has branches in Madinah, Abha, Buraidh and Al-Hasa. It has branches in foreign countries like Mauritania, Djibouti and United Arab Emirates. Moreover, the university runs two Arabic language institutes in Japan and Indonesia.

Established in 1975, King Faisal University at Al-Hasa offers degrees in agriculture, education, veterinary science and medicine. It had a total enrollment of 3,209 students in the academic year 1984-85, with ten per cent of the students coming from abroad. During the past ten years the university has graduated 680 students, 36 per cent of whom specialised in engineering and 28 per cent in agricultural sciences. In addition to the above mentioned specializations, the university's 12 faculties also include foreign languages, chemistry, mathematics, the social sciences and education.

Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah is in fact composed of some of the Kingdom's oldest institutes of higher education. In 1981 a Royal decree turned the College of Sharia and Education as an independent university giving it the name 'Umm Al-Qura.' About 12,000 students are at present studying in the University's seven academic departments and its Arabic language institute. Although the focus of the university is on religion, 38 per cent of the students are studying in Islamic studies, teacher's education and science.