Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Rooted in Heritage and Values, Aspiring to Progress

Annalisa Pavan[1]

[1] Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Italy

Correspondence: Professor Annalisa Pavan, Dipartimento FISPPA, Università degli Studi di Padova, via B. Pellegrino 28, 35137 Padova, Italy. Tel: 39-49-827-1709.

Abstract

This paper attempts to answer three questions about the challenges posed within Saudi Arabian society by recent developments in the Kingdom's higher education policies, namely: Is the promotion of higher education in accordance with religious values and heritage in Saudi Arabia? How can the Saudi Arabian vision of higher education reconcile globalization with respect for traditions, culture and beliefs? How does the current rapid development of higher education in Saudi Arabia affect social change in the country? This paper makes the point that, although education per se is not seen as a threat to religious values and heritage, the advance of globalization is sparking a debate inside and outside Saudi Arabia on how to reconcile tradition and globalization within the framework of the Kingdom's vision and plans for its higher education system.

Keywords: Saudi higher education, Saudi Arabia, Saudi culture, Saudi Knowledge Society, KAUST

1. Introduction: The Context

"They accused us of being reactionaries. But what do they mean by this word? If protecting our freedom and independence, spreading education and enlightenment, providing health services and developing this country are reactionary measures, then we are proud of being reactionaries" (King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, 1963, cited in De Gaury, 2007, p.156).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, home to the first university in the Arabian Peninsula (King Saud University, 1957), has been increasing expenditure on education at a spectacular rate in recent years, and on higher education in particular.

When King Abdullah ascended the throne in 2005, there were 7 public universities. Ten years later, there are 28 public and 9 private universities. In addition, at least 10 more universities are expected to open within the next five years (Arab News, 3 April 2014). In a press statement released on the occasion of the national budget announcement, the then Ministry of Higher Education pointed out that there had been an 86% growth in the number of universities during the last decade, which now accommodate over 1.5 million students throughout the Kingdom (Ministry of Education, 2015a).

Despite the sharp decline in oil prices, a record $229.3 billion budget was announced on 25 December 2014, with total expenditure on the education sector amounting to around $57.9 billion, equivalent to 25% of total allocations for the year 2015. In the case of higher education, the new budget includes allocations of around $3.28 billion for the completion and refurbishment of college campuses in several universities and for 3 new universities (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, 2014).

The total number of Saudi students currently studying abroad under government sponsorship is over 207,000, including dependents who accompany them and are also supported by the government (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, 2014).

It is in this context that this paper seeks to address the following questions:

Q1-Is the promotion of higher education in accordance with religious values and heritage in Saudi Arabia?

Q2-How can the Saudi Arabian vision of higher education reconcile globalization with respect for traditions, culture and beliefs?

Q3-How does the current rapid development of higher education in Saudi Arabia affect social change in the country?

Addressing these questions, this paper will draw on Saudi sources whenever possible, embodying them in the main text. This is done in the belief that Saudi authors are best placed to provide an insight into the unique, complex, rich and yet largely unknown culture of the Arab world's largest economy.

Q1. Is the promotion of higher education in accordance with religious values and heritage in Saudi Arabia?

Islam attributes a pivotal role to education. That priority and its impact are ever evident, powerful and effective in the cradle of Islam.

A first response to this question is contained in the National Report on Education Development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, submitted in 2008 by the Saudi Ministry of Education to the 48th Session of the International Conference on Education in Geneva. This summarizes the guidelines of the official document entitled: *Education Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, which sets out the principles of the current Saudi educational system. In particular, the National Report lists a number of goals for education in the Kingdom. The foremost of these is "Development of Islamic religion fidelity", linked to "Articulate comprehensive harmony between science and religion under Islam". The Report declares the Kingdom's aim to "Encourage and develop scientific research and, through it, enhance observation, contemplation and enlighten capability in the universities to read Allah's marks, and to enable individuals to participate effectively in social life and also seek to direct it soundly" (pp.11-12). Within this framework, other explicit pillars of Saudi education are "Comprehend the environment, widen the students horizons via introducing the world various countries" and "Provide students with other live language to supplement sciences, arts, benefit inventions and to seek transferring knowledge and sciences to the other communities to participate in spreading Islam and serve humanity" (p.12), among others.

These commitments are no new development. In his seminal book *History of the Arab Peoples*, Hourani recalls how education had been a powerful tool for the diffusion of religion since the early stages of Islam: "From the beginning of Islamic history too, men moved in search of learning, in order to spread the tradition of what the Prophet had done and said from those who received it by line of transmission from his Companions" (Hourani, 1991).

Saudi scholars in their writings on Saudi education often mention the profound link between Islam and education in Saudi Arabia. For example, Saleh (1986) points out that "Saudi Arabia follows an Islamic philosophy of education and the seeds of its educational system are founded in Islam", adding that "The first verse of the Quran is a call to read and write. Islam dictates learning to be an obligation of every Muslim… Education therefore is valued, encouraged and supported by Islam" (p.18). AlAbdulkareem mentions halqahs (study circles), kuttabs (Islamic elementary schools) and mosques as centres for religious education as well as for the learning of basic reading, writing and arithmetic, prior to the establishment of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 (pp.5-6). Hamdan (2005) also notes that, besides the kuttabs, "the teaching of girls also took place in private tutorials, which occurred in the homes of professional male or female Quran readers" (p.47).

Consequently, it is therefore of the utmost importance to note and acknowledge that scholarship-oriented policies have been part of the Al Sauds' education strategy since the 1920s (Pavan, 2013). According to Al Mousa (2010), soon after the first General Directorate for Education was established in 1925, King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud responded to the request of "a group" who had submitted a written proposal for the development of education. After examining the proposal with the assistance of three authoritative advisors, in 1927 the King "approved the scholarship project… He ordered that the Saudi mission be sent to Egypt immediately, along with the three submitters of the proposal and six other students". It is noteworthy that "The decree made provision for the expenses of the mission related to the allowances of the individuals and the supervisor of the mission. In addition, it also stated as a condition that the scholarship student must work after graduation in the field assigned to her/him (sic) by the government". Al Mousa also explains that: "The first educational mission eligible to attend universities outside the Kingdom was sent to the universities of Egypt and elsewhere to study different sciences and disciplines. A second mission, consisting of ten students, was then sent to Egypt to study Sharia sciences, the Arabic language and the Principles of Education and Pedagogy" (p.718). Thereafter, several missions were sent to different countries, including European countries and, later on, to the United States. Interestingly, Al Mousa specifies that at the time of the second mission "a regulating system for overseas scholarship affairs was created. This included the cost of living, medical treatment and supervision of conduct through a special management board established for this purpose"; and that "in 1936, the King ordered the establishment of a preparatory school for the missions. This was the first high school in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to be based on the modern system that facilitates the enrollment of students in university colleges" (p.718). Thus, King Abdul Aziz not only encouraged Saudi students to pursue their education abroad, but also conceived scholarship policies as the starting point for the future development of the Saudi higher education

system. Over the years, the Saudi rulers' staunch support of education as the catalyst for generating change and development has become the landmark of the Saudi social and economical landscape.

Nowadays, the Kingdom also welcomes and encourages overseas students. A report published in January 2015 by the Saudi Ministry of Education contained updated figures: the number of non-Saudi male and female students receiving scholarships to study at universities in the Kingdom is currently about 32,000. These come from more than 155 countries. Most of the beneficiaries of these scholarships are citizens of Arab and Muslim countries including Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Pakistan and Indonesia. Certain specializations — medical and health in particular — accept Saudi students only, and consequently are not accessible to their scholarship-funded peers (Ministry of Education, 2015b).

When reviewing the development of higher education in Saudi Arabia, the contribution of the late King Abdullah deserves a special mention. Continuing King Abdul Aziz's personal commitment to scholarships, King Abdullah launched the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, also known as KASP, under Royal Order Number 5387/mb of 25 May 2005, which is the most impressive Saudi educational initiative of recent years. Two extensions and ten years later, KASP is established as the largest fully endowed government scholarship scheme ever supported by a nation state (Bukhari & Denman, in Smith & Abouammoh, 2013, p.151).

After China, India, Korea and Germany, Saudi Arabia is the nation with the fifth highest number of students pursuing their education abroad. They account for 4% of the international student population (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013a, p.69). The most popular disciplines chosen by these Saudi students abroad in 2013 were 'Social Sciences, Business and Law', followed by 'Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction', 'Health and Welfare' and 'Science' (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014, p.166). As stated in Abouammoh et al. (2014, p.45), approximately 85% of Saudi students abroad are sponsored by government funding, primarily through KASP, with USA, UK, Canada, Australia, Egypt and Jordan being the most popular destinations. Under the umbrella of KASP, students can choose where to study from among 23 countries (Ministry of Education, 2015c). The Institute of International Education (2014) has reported that, in the 2013/14 academic year, 53,919 students from Saudi Arabia were studying in the United States, which was 21% more than in the previous year. Saudi Arabia thus sends more students to the U.S. (6.1% of the total international students) than any other Middle Eastern country. While the number of international students in the US has grown by 72% since 1999-2000, students from China and Saudi Arabia together account for 73% of that growth (O'Malley, 2014).

The reasons behind the establishment and continuation of KASP have been variously interpreted by a growing number of non-Saudi scholars, often quoted by Saudi scholars. These commentators tend to emphasize King Abdullah's political foresight, but regrettably fail to characterize this foresight within the wider context of Saudi rulers' historical commitment to education. Accordingly, a Saudi writer gave a straightforward explanation of the rationale behind KASP: "Graduates from international universities can contribute to ideological, intellectual, human and cultural *renewal* and development in the country by studying abroad and transferring various international expertise to the Kingdom" (Al Khaazim in Saudi Gazette, 7 April 2015, emphasis added).

Despite rumours circulating in Saudi Arabia to the effect that further extensions of the KASP might be in doubt, King Salman has reiterated the government's intention of enabling young Saudis to study at reputable universities inside and outside the kingdom, describing students as "an investment for the nation's future" (Arab News, 11 March 2015).

It is significant that these developments have been regarded in Saudi Arabia as renaissance. In 1963 King Faisal said: "We are badly in need of *an extensive renaissance.* This country, thank God, is not short of money nor is it short of men and numbers… The only thing the country is short of is sufficient human capacity to meet the requirements of this noble land in keeping its position with respect to its Islamic and Arabic destiny" (cited in De Gaury, 2007, p.164, emphasis added). Nowadays, this same pursuit of a renaissance is also reflected in the Introduction to the KASP on the Ministry of Education website : "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" (Ministry of Education, 2015d). KASP, "one of the main mechanisms to achieve the required quantum leap toward a knowledge society", as declared by the Ministry (Arab News, 15 December 2014), is certainly a major tool for the implementation of the "new Saudi educational *renaissance*" (Pavan, 2014).

In conclusion, the Islamic vision of education, the history of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saudi scholarly works, Saudi official documents and Saudi figures on higher education, far from expressing fear of education and higher education as a threat to religious values and heritage, all reflect a sustained and sustainable commitment to

invest in higher education as an essential tool for shaping the progress, the economic growth and, more recently, the global identity of the Kingdom.

The combination of religious beliefs, of learning needs within the Saudi population, and of the consistent determination of the Saudi rulers to support the educational development of the country, have generated an interpenetrative relationship between education, especially at university level, and society as a whole (Pavan, 2013, p.28).

Q2. How can the Saudi Arabian vision of higher education reconcile globalization with respect for traditions, culture and beliefs?

The four defining characteristics of education in Saudi Arabia are: a focus on the teaching of Islam; a centralized system of control and educational support; state funding at all levels; a gender segregation policy (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013, p.2).

Saudi academics usually highlight the uniqueness and complexity of Saudi culture. Among many others, Hamdan (2005) draws attention to the "complex religious and ideological terrain of Saudi Arabian culture" (p.125). Alfawaz et al. (2014) observe that "Saudi Arabia has a unique society appearance in its adherence to its inherited values. Hence, it is challenging for the government of Saudi Arabia to offer solutions without changing parts of the culture" (p.24). Al Alhareth et al. (2015) maintain: "Saudi Arabia is a socially and religiously conservative country. It has a high cultural homogeneity based on tribal and Islamic affiliations and therefore has a unique and complex culture… The government faces great challenges if it is to achieve its goal of development, and fundamental changes in the way society is conducted are needed" (p.121).

Consequently, whenever Saudi authors unveil reasonable ambitions for the Saudi education system, they also express deep concern at the external pressure for change imposed by the irresistible influence of globalization. Academic and social debates in the Kingdom reveal that Saudis are acutely aware of the challenges posed by globalization (Pavan & Alfahadi, 2014), and the rapidity of inevitable changes and their impact on Saudi culture, traditions and beliefs are issues of major concern. For example, Al Ohali and Burdon, in Smith and Abouammoh (2013), declare that "Saudi Arabia aspires to be a regional hub of excellence" (p.162), but at the same time warn: "Innovation and entrepreneurship within a global context are not natural components of traditional Saudi society, and so if Saudi Arabia is to achieve its economic objectives, a strategy for overcoming the cultural barriers needs to be put in place. 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). In December 2013, the former Minister of Education Prince Khalid bin Faisal Al Saud openly addressed the international educational community: "We have a formidable task ahead of us. We have been entrusted with the huge responsibility of building good citizens. Determination and management is a must. They are the most basic of our principles and values. Through Islam the Kingdom can prove to the world how it is capable of developing and progressing better than other states and *without imitating* the models of such states. We should all work hard and make sure the ministry becomes the best in the Arab world" (Saudi Gazette, 30 December 2013, emphasis added). And a very similar "no-imitation" stance is taken by Smith and Abouammoh (2013): "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… 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, emphasis added). They go on to recommend a strategic plan for the Saudi higher education system — a system with "enormous" potential (p.12). Such a plan should include: "A clear and widely communicated vision of how the system and the universities within the system will be positioned at various critical times in the future (ideally 10 and 20 years hence), a set of well-defined objectives that must be achieved in order to attain the vision; a set of processes and tactics for achieving each of the objectives; a detailed plan for adequately resourcing the implementation plan, not only in terms of finances but also in terms of appropriately qualified and experienced staff as well as appropriate equipment and infrastructure; rigorous mechanisms for providing regular and constructive feedback regarding progress towards goals"(p.11).

A different kind of concern emerges from certain non-Saudi academic quarters, tending to highlight difficulties and weaknesses in the Saudi higher education system and to suggest that the country is struggling with a conflict between Western and Saudi style education, exacerbated by the process of globalization. Krieger (2007), commenting on

plans to establish what later would become the KAUST, affirms: "Supporters and skeptics are at odds over whether Saudi Arabia can successfully import Western-style education into a decidedly non-Western culture" (p.5). It remains to be seen who these supporters and skeptics are, whether Saudi Arabia actually intends to import Western-style education, and finally, what effectively are the significant differences in the context of education between a Western and a non-Western culture. Koch (2014), while addressing "Saudi Arabia's education revolution" (p.17), warns that "Whereas other Gulf countries have long embraced the neoliberal rhetoric of an internationally-oriented development strategy, Saudi development policies have – rhetorically, at least – been somewhat more inward-looking". And she concludes: "By developing Saudi Arabia as a knowledge-based economy, King Abdullah's reforms have sought to get citizens invested in the idea of a self-reliant national homeland, which has not hitherto prevailed. This idea of national sovereignty… *as everywhere in the world*, is deeply connected to the regime's own political calculus" (pp. 20-21).

The topic of national sovereignty had already been raised in 2003 by Prokop, who observed: "Confronted with public international criticism and American demands for religious education syllabuses and teaching practices to be changed, even more liberally minded Saudis have come out to defend 'their' education system, saying that education is an issue of national sovereignty and Saudis 'will not let any country interfere'" (p.89). This perhaps indicates that Saudis do not reject criticism altogether, but rather assert the right to manage their education system without external interference. It has apparently not occurred to some critical non-Saudi academics that Saudi Arabia is not alone in claiming national sovereignty over education policy. For instance, education and vocational training in the European Union are a matter of national interest and, as such, governed exclusively by national laws, as stated in articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). Article 165 reads: "The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity"; the same principle is embodied in article 166, with reference to vocational training. Given that the supremacy of national sovereignty over educational policy has hitherto been undisputed in the European Union, it is at least arguable whether Saudi Arabia should be criticised for treating the governance of its education system as a matter exclusively of national interest.

During his opening address at the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge Meeting in July 2010, Dr Al Ohali, Deputy Minister for Educational Affairs in the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, introduced the 20-year Saudi strategy for higher education, built around "a short-term track", in his own words, "focusing on admission capacity and employability of graduates"; and "a long-term track", "continuing the previous two key issues and in addition dealing with quality assurance, funding scientific research, scholarship program and international cooperation and partnership" (p.25). Illustrating the rationale behind KASP, he explained: "We believe this exposure will equip our students with different experiences and more understanding of cultural diversities, looking forward to building more and stronger bridges with other cultures and countries" (p.26).

Nevertheless, concern on the part of Saudi critics of KASP that globalization and exposure to different cultures might endanger Saudi culture, traditions and beliefs, is reported for example in the Saudi Gazette ("Needless clamour against scholarship program", 5 January 2015). There are also numerous Saudi scholarly works that report and discuss the changes and challenges faced by Saudi students both when living abroad and on their return to the Kingdom (Alhazmi, 2010; Abouammoh, 2012; Alandejani, 2013; Alsaif, 2014, among others).

At present, the Saudi vision of higher education is experiencing a struggle, rather than witnessing a reconciliation, between globalization and tradition. The issue is not simply a matter of importing or not importing Western-style higher education into the Kingdom. From a broader perspective, Saudi Arabia is confronted with a major challenge: to become a worldwide and authoritative economic and educational competitor, while retaining its freedom to decide what is the right and the best path to human development for its people. And here, forward educational educational plans can play a pivotal role. The outcomes of the Saudi experiment (Pavan, 2013, p.31), as this struggle to balance traditions and globalization could be defined, will impact not only on the country itself, but also on the Gulf region, the Arab world and possibly the world at large.

Q3. How does the current rapid development of higher education in Saudi Arabia affect social change in the country?

Looking back on the history of education in the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, indeed education — and more specifically higher education — has certainly always been regarded as the driving force behind social change.

The huge efforts deployed by Saudi rulers to eradicate illiteracy are described in UNESCO-IBE reports of the 1950s and 1960s (Pavan, 2013). Educational developments during the first decades of the modern Kingdom have also been

well documented by Assah (1969). He recalls that, while the Directorate of Education was instituted in 1926 "for the purpose of establishing schools and of encouraging and promoting learning" (p.294), "University education began in Saudi Arabia in 1957, four years after the institution of the Ministry of Education. This may be regarded as a unique event in the whole world, showing the young Kingdom's earnest desire to spread knowledge among its citizens as fast as humanly possible". In fact, in Saudi Arabia "it is realised that illiteracy is synonymous with ignorance, and that ignorance constitutes one of the sides of the triangle of backwardness" (p.307). And he adds: "Those who enthusiastically advocated the establishment of the university at this relatively early stage were aware that university education would have to face many difficulties, particularly the problem of finding competent foreign professors and lecturers, but they argued thus: No matter how long we delay the establishment of university education we still have to face difficulties at the outset. It is therefore advisable to start now and squarely face the difficulties however great they may be, as long as they are inevitable, thus taking a shortcut to stable, fruitful university education" (p.308).

The race against time, the quest for excellence in education (Pavan, 2015) and the force of enthusiasm have seemingly characterized the development of Saudi higher education right up to the present day. However, rapid development brings serious attendant risks. In the view of Smith and Abouammoh (2013): "While Saudi Arabia is demonstrating energy and enthusiasm for effecting improvements to its system, both at the system and institutional levels, it is at considerable risk of trying to do too much too quickly" (p.4). And they caution: "*Hasten slowly*. 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 it towards international benchmarks will require disciplined and rigorous processes, and above all, it will take time. Letting enthusiasm overpower reality could easily undermine the very things they are so committed to achieving" (p.189, emphasis added).

As Dr Al Ohali explained in 2010, "Higher education in Saudi Arabia has adopted a strategy for the next 20 years, with a clear vision and practical and dynamic initiatives. We strongly believe that higher education must significantly contribute to the country's transformation socially and economically. The strategy focuses on the preparation of human capital as a fundamental prerequisite to make the Saudi economy truly a knowledge-based economy. It aims to make the Saudi society achieve higher standards in intellectual productivity, knowledge creation and dissemination, as well as its utilization in various activities and services" (p.25).

Dr Al Ohali's words are supported by the concise yet accurate definition of knowledge economy and knowledge society given by the European Commission (2003): "The knowledge economy and society stem from the combination of four interdependent elements: the production of knowledge, mainly through scientific research; its transmission through education and training; its dissemination through the information and communication technologies; its use in technological innovation". The Commission also emphasizes the role and potential of universities as key actors for achieving a Europe of knowledge: "Given that they are situated at the crossroads of research, education and innovation, universities in many respects hold the key to the knowledge economy and society" (pp.4-5).

Saudi decision-makers undoubtedly recognize the importance of higher education and research in enhancing Saudi Arabia's competitiveness, growth and employment. The commitment to boost investment in human resources is a fundamental prerequisite for progress in the country at all levels. This is essentially so in regard to the younger generations, those aged under 30 and representing some 67% of the Saudi population, according to the Saudi Gazette, 6 November 2014, quoting the latest figures released by the National Information Center at the Ministry of Interior.

The 24-point five-year Development Plan for the period 2015-2020, released by the Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning and subsequently approved by the Saudi government in September 2014 (Arab News, 16 September 2014) lists a number of goals for the higher education system which, it is hoped, will be attainable. Among the most important, are "Enhancing communication of scholarship students with the Government agencies and encouraging them to conduct research and studies which address the developmental challenges in the Kingdom and support them to transform the research findings into applied projects and products"; "Updating educational curricula to stimulate research and innovation"; "Continuing the scholarship program, to the renowned international universities, in specializations demanded by the development plans and the labor market", "Expanding graduate studies programs and establishing specialized universities of science; "Enhancing the research role of universities in line with the future needs of the society" (Tenth Development Plan, points 11.10, 11.13, 11.14, 11.17 and 11.18, pp.13-14).

In this light, the idea of Saudi universities as having an explicit social responsibility, which was 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 is the importance attached by Saudi policy-makers to the role of universities as proactive facilitators of social change and human development.

Gallarotti and Al Filali (2013) make the point, "As is being realized by Saudi scholars and educators alike, education is the catalyst to generating the change that will provide a fertile ground for an economic transition to higher stages of development in the Kingdom" (p.19). This echoes Bremmer (2004): "The long-term success of reforms in the Kingdom depends on the emergence of a citizenry capable of playing an informed and active role in their society" (p.29).

Through scholarships, cooperation agreements and joint research projects, all of these being facilitated by instant online communication, higher education policies are particularly well placed to help expose Saudis to other cultures, ways of thinking and lifestyles. However, decision makers are determined that globalization must not mean loss of identity. They seek to ensure that social change, which is both expected and feared in Saudi Arabia, but nonetheless inevitable, should not be tailored to suit the vested interests of cultures that are in many ways alien and dominant. For this reason, they intend that final decisions primarily on the timing, but also regarding the content, methods, vision and mission of higher education policies, should remain in Saudi hands.

2. Concluding Remarks and a Recommendation: A *Glocal Model* for Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

This paper attempts to answer three questions about the challenges posed within Saudi society by recent developments in the Kingdom's higher education policies.

Firstly, it seeks to demonstrate that education — and higher education in particular — have been at the core of the development strategy adopted by Saudi rulers in accordance with religious values and heritage since the beginnings of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Today the Kingdom is making a truly immense effort to improve the professionalism of young Saudis and their capacity to engage internationally, showing that the nation can and must do more in terms of economic and human development.

Secondly, it makes the point that, although education per se is not seen as a threat to religious values and heritage, the advance of globalization is sparking a debate inside and outside Saudi Arabia on how to reconcile tradition and globalization within the framework of the Kingdom's vision and plans for its higher education system. The wisest approach for outsiders — non-Saudi scholars and international stakeholders alike — would be perhaps to merely monitor the Saudi experiment attentively and with respect, certainly highlighting weaknesses, inconsistencies and backward steps, but also applauding strengths, positive efforts and global ambitions, which may all be regarded as the product of the nation's "capacity to aspire" together with its "capacity to remember" (Pavan, 2014).

Thirdly, it appears that the biggest worry for Saudi scholars and decision-makers is that of precipitous changes affecting their higher education system. Whilst the importance and potential of the universities are widely acknowledged, ambition and the appetite for innovation tend to conflict with prudence and caution. This is a modern dilemma facing an Old World country - a country however, with the proven ability to build an education system from nothing in a relatively short space of time.

In the era of the nascent global knowledge society, Assah's wise words (1969) could still show the way: "In the early days of modern education in Saudi Arabia, what the country needed was the curriculum that would open the minds of its sons and daughters to modern knowledge. What it needs today and for the future is an educational programme and a curriculum that will open the vents of the Kingdom to the learning of the age and at the same time to the heritage, spirit, teachings and values of Islam, because nothing can imperil the Kingdom and hamper its progress as much as forgetting its natural role as a country which was the cradle of Islam and the bearer of its message and which should remain so forever" (p.317).

The opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Thuwal in September 2009, as reported in 2009 by Times Higher Education ("Oasis in the desert"), and again in 2015 by Nature ("Science oasis under pressure"), created tensions among those members of Saudi society who worry most about preserving cultural norms and beliefs. KAUST is an international research university for post-graduate studies. It is overseen by the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and is, to date, the only coeducational university in the country. The internationally most acclaimed outcome of King Abdullah's generosity and firm visionary realism (Pavan, 2014, p.43), KAUST was envisaged by the King as the new Bait Al Hikma, House of Wisdom, which "shall serve the people of the Kingdom and benefit all the peoples of the world in keeping with the teachings of the Holy Quran, which explains that God created mankind in order for us to come to know each other" (KAUST, 2015a). Of 840

students from 69 nations currently enrolled at KAUST, 246 are Saudis (KAUST, 2015b). Raw statistics aside, it will be useful in due course to have more detailed information on the number of Saudi PhD graduates, Saudi research and teaching staff, and Saudi nationals who are already employed in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere by virtue of their post-graduate studies at KAUST, also on publications in English and Arabic in refereed journals directly related to research conducted by Saudis at KAUST. These figures could help enormously — primarily within the country, but also across the wider educational academic community — in appraising how KAUST is "serving the people of the Kingdom" and could therefore represent a model for higher education systems inside and outside the Arab region.

Similarly, looking at the challenging experiment of KAUST in the context of the larger Saudi experiment, this paper suggests that Saudi decision-makers should embrace and put in place a *glocal* model of higher education, combining Saudi *global aspiration* with Saudi *local determination* to retain traditional culture and beliefs. Always bearing in mind that "the Kingdom is still a work in progress" (Turki AlFaisal, 2015, p.10), such a model could preserve the important cultural, religious and traditional heritage of the country and at the same time help its society open up to the globalized world. Further research and proposals are needed, ideally from Saudi scholars first and foremost, on how to develop and implement such a model in all its various aspects.

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