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Education in Saudi Arabia
Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia prioritises education spending and investment as part of its development agenda. The government spends more on education than any other public service, with 35% of Saudi Arabia's population enrolled in the country's general and higher education institutes (MoE, 2019). However, Saudi students are criticised for performing poorly both in and out of school. They under-perform in international standardised tests, performing in the bottom third in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), while graduates fail to meet skills demands in the labour market (Oxford Business Group, 2020). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, underpinned by its Realisation Programs, outlines strategic objectives to achieve three key themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. Although educational goals are linked to these themes and programs, they are often intertwined with economic and skills goals, blurring the lines of reform application and accountability. With skills shortages and high rates of youth unemployment, the education system tends to be a scapegoat for lack of development and economic under-performance. Education certainly plays an important role in providing young people with the skills needed in the labour market, but it is not in itself responsible for labour demand or job growth. By measuring the success of education through meeting the demands of the labour market alone, the role of education becomes blurred, and the focus of reform shifts away from the core responsibilities of an education system.

Education Structure

The Saudi Ministry of Education (MoE) develops and administers policies for both general and higher education. The stages of schooling in the contemporary general education system are pre-primary (ages 3-5), primary (ages 6-11), intermediary (ages 12-14) and secondary school (ages 15-18), and span across twelve comprehensive school years. Vocational training and tertiary education typically comprises students aged 18-22 (MoE, 2019). The governance of education and schools is centralised at the MoE and administered through 42 regional and provincial education bodies (UNESCO, 2007b), while technical and vocational training is governed by the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) (TVTC, 2019).

The Saudi education system is highly standardised. Textbooks, budgets, training, and examinations are more or less uniform and centrally managed at the MoE with limited autonomy at the regional levels (UNESCO,2007b)[1]. The textbooks are centrally developed at the Ministry, and tend to reflect and disseminate the interests of the state (Kattan, 2017). In more recent years Saudis have been able to attend international schools and private schools have begun to provide international curricula. However the majority of Saudi students use Saudi textbooks exclusively as only around 10% of the high school population is enrolled in private education (Clark & Mihael, 2012; UNESCO, 2007a).

Education and Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia's national development strategy Vision 2030 has set goals to lower unemployment, achieve higher economic diversification, expand the private sector and increase the percentage of nationals working in the economy (Council of Economic and Development Affairs, 2016). These goals are linked to the education system through key performance indicators and programmes related to strengthening links between education and work. The main 'Vision Realisation Program' that addresses education is called the "Human Capital Program" (Vision 2030, 2020). Referring to education in this way ties educational excellence to economic performance, framing teaching as a functional investment for generating economic growth for both the individual and the economy (Becker, 1964). This approach marginalises

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[1] Variations exist depending on population density, rural and urban differences, staff and regional governors, and access to facilities and local industrial support. In 2017, 21% of Saudi students lived more than five kilometres away from a school (p.40).

the importance of educational processes within schools, focusing only on outcomes and treating the education journey as a black box.

The process of education should develop competencies and knowledge, but it cannot create job demand. Demand for labour and economic growth is related to structures of production, industry growth and labour policies (Buchanan et al., 2020). While no government entity can function alone, education targets within Vision 2030 should aim to strengthen the education process as a distinct domain first – underpinned by a strong curriculum, trained teachers and clear governance structure - and as a catalyst for strengthening the labour market second. Strong educational foundations and goals can and will result in competent and knowledgeable citizens who can contribute to the economy in diverse ways.

Governance

Simplifying the complex education governance system would allow for more targeted decision-making mechanisms that are tailored to the diverse range of needs in different schools. The large numbers of schools, students and staff in Saudi Arabia present challenges to smooth, timely and uniform education governance. As of 2018, there were 32,027 government run primary and secondary schools across the Kingdom, staffed by 434,593 teachers (Oxford Business Group, 2020). Education quality is monitored by the MoE as well as the newly established Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC, formerly the National Center for Assessment) (ETEC, 2020). Furthermore, to overcome bureaucratic barriers to change and circumvent the traditional bureaucratic governance, Tatweer Education Holding Company was established in 2012 to implement education reforms. Even before the launch of Vision 2030, Tatweer has managed teacher training reforms and curriculum development in an effort to support the MoE in 'elevating' the education system and reaching the country's development goals as outlined by the Ministry of Economy and Planning (Tatweer Education Holding, 2015). Implementation of reforms happens gradually, meaning that the schools in which reforms are implemented first will have an advantage over those who are lower down the list, assuming that the reform is effective.

The inconsistent application of reforms and variations in curriculum means that some schools will have access to more technology, careers guidance, and teacher training and upskilling, while others do not, depending on the policies being tested. This trend continues with programmes launched under Vision 2030. For instance, until the announcement that English would be universally taught from the first grade of primary school beginning in 2021, English language instruction began with varying year groups and at a different standard (Arab News, 2020) . This has put young people who do not study English at a disadvantage as it is often the primary communication language in universities and the private sector (UNESCO, 2007a). The same disadvantages result from uneven and short-lived application of different technologies and different teaching strategies such as experiential, collaborative or project based learning (See for instance the MoE Maher Initiative (MoE, 1440). Such programs tend to be piloted in some schools to enhance the quality of student learning but are often met with resistance from teachers and students. Because the implementation of these practices is ad hoc in its nature, without more localised decision-making, many pilots are short-lived despite their potential (Al Nesyan, 2012; Al Yami, 2014).

Curriculum Design and Structure

Strong curriculum standards are necessary to transition toward a new way of teaching and learning that encourages more critical inquisitive and motivated students. While efforts to reform curricula have been underway for several years, the outcome has been focused on editing textbook content rather than developing learning objectives for both students and teachers. While textbooks provide the information to build knowledge, a curriculum dictates what is taught, as well as how this is delivered, measured and assessed (OECD, 2020). These have been slowly introduced in efforts to incorporate higher level thinking, there is yet to be a core set of standards used in schools. Formally engaging private schools that have been leaders in this space would be one way to identify strategies that have worked to better manage change.

In January 2020, the MOE announced the introduction of new subjects. Students would be taught philosophy to foster critical thinking and decision making, skills deemed necessary for the '21st Century job market'. However, without a set of core curriculum standards it is unclear how these subjects will be taught, and if they can achieve their desired outcome. Furthermore, the growing interest in automation and artificial intelligence tend to shift the focus away from some of the more pertinent debates related to teacher qualifications and training and uneven access to effective classroom pedagogy. Skills for a more technological future are important, but it is also necessary that these are not taught narrowly so that they become obsolete with new technological advancements.

To overcome the uneven playing field, ETEC worked with the UNESCO to introduce a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to deliver a standardised approach (ETEC, 2018). This has yet to be approved by the MoE and the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) (OECD, 2020), further highlighting the importance of more streamlined governance. Furthermore, the NQF will present a new set of challenges, as they tend to assume weaker boundaries between future occupations and sectors, promising portability and progression. While this is essentially a desirable outcome, it can lead to a shift in who takes responsibility for individual learning, and place more burden on the learners rather than the institutions responsible for designing curriculum and the specialists guiding students and teaching them (Young, 2011).

Transition Pathways

The way education is governed and how its content is organised must respond to the question: 'what is education for?' While reforms are centred around a mandate to create specific skills, redefining the purpose of education may be a more productive approach. The education system cannot create jobs, but it can provide students with opportunities to develop their aspirations and pursue education routes they are passionate about. Recent reforms promise more flexibility in traditionally rigid secondary transition pathways in order to enable youth to pursue a variety of different education models and specialisations. In August of 2020, the Ministry announced that a "pathways system" would be piloted in schools in 2021 (Al Shammari, 2020). This new system would expand secondary pathways from humanities and sciences to six pathways that include computer and engineering sciences, health and life sciences and Shariah, responding to the changing nature of work. Traditional transition pathways in the Saudi education system have not allowed young people to easily transfer between different academic and career paths. The new pathways model is a step in the right direction, but its success hinges on a more cohesive governance structure, a clear set of curriculum standards and access to strong and informed career guidance (Thompson & Yamada, 2019).

Embedding flexibility into the system elevates the importance of individual choice and enthusiasm. However, without anchoring opportunities in a system that acknowledges the value of modularity and flexibility, it will only exacerbate the frustration of those who made a choice that is less valued by employers, in terms of the skills, knowledge or qualifications they have gained. In the current system, certain universities are seen as more prestigious and thus more valuable than others, as do academic compared to vocational qualifications (Almoaibed, 2020).

Unlike certain practices in humanities and Quranic education in the past, all education streams must ensure that students are taught basic numeracy, literacy and information technology skills. Without these, many students find their qualifications irrelevant across all sectors of the labour market. Beyond these basic skills, students' qualifications should include specialised knowledge that is relevant to multiple industries. Recent research has highlighted the benefits of organising expertise through 'vocational streams' (Buchanan et al., 2020). Within vocational streams, students learn advanced skills that are transferable Between groups of similar industries. By re-imagining occupations through clusters of skills and higher order thinking qualifications are protected against becoming obsolete.

Conclusion

The educational advancements in the short history of formal education in the contemporary Saudi state are profound: basic education is nearly universal and Saudi Arabia has developed a solid infrastructure that allowed all students access to educational resources in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. To keep up with the demands of the labour market and the future of work, the education system must continue to adapt policies and practices. As relevant government bodies

focus on economic growth and develop equitable labour policies, the education system can play a role in providing students with relational and collaborative educational experiences. Research concerning the role of education stresses that the attributes needed for success in the workplace such as creativity, grit, empathy and teamwork must be acquired through developing knowledge and competence in different subjects. To be better at work, the Saudi education system must nurture students' learning dispositions through innovative pedagogy linked to strong standards and monitored through clear mechanisms.

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