

Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims to prepare future generations to be productive citizens who can meet the aspirations of the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 initiative. One part of the initiative is the Human Capital Development Program, which aims to:

“Improve the outputs of the education and training system at all stages from early education to continuous education and provide training to reach the international levels through education, rehabilitation and training programs that keep abreast of modern times and requirements and are in line with the needs of development and the local and global labor market in partnership with all relevant parties locally and internationally. The program also contributes to the development of all components of the education and training system, including teachers, trainers, faculty members, governance, evaluation systems, quality, curricula, educational and vocational paths, and training environment for all stages of education and training to cope with modern and innovative trends in the fields of education and training. The program will be based on the Islamic, educational, social and professional foundations. It will introduce new educational and training policies and systems that will enhance the efficiency of human capital in line with the Kingdom Vision 2030 to achieve comprehensiveness, quality, flexibility and serve all segments of the society to promote the Kingdom’s regional leadership and international competitiveness.”¹

Since the founding of the nation in 1932, the education system in Saudi Arabia has marked many accomplishments, especially in recent decades. Although the literacy rate was very low at one time, in 2017, it reached 99.3 percent for people ages 15 to 24 and 95.3 percent for people ages 15 years and older. The education system is divided into six years of primary education, three years of intermediate education, and three years of secondary education. Preprimary education is still not compulsory; however, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been working very hard to achieve its goal of reaching a 40 percent enrollment rate in preprimary education by 2025.

In 2021, the Ministry established several initiatives to improve the education system, including the introduction of many new subjects into the curriculum (e.g., critical thinking, digital skills, life skills, English as a second language beginning in first grade). One of the most promising initiatives is offering multiple learning pathways for students in upper secondary grades to choose from. Also

starting in 2021, the two-semester school system will be converted into a three-semester system with short vacations to keep pace with international best practices.

Saudi Arabia is experiencing very rapid changes in all sectors, including education, due to its Vision 2030 initiatives. In 2021, the Saudi government launched the Human Capability Development Program, which is part of Vision 2030's realization programs, aiming to achieve the following goals:

- Instill a sense of national belonging and values of global citizenship
- Build a strong foundation of 21st-century skills
- Nurture the mindset of self and community development
- Make high-quality education accessible to all
- Provide different pathways for secondary education

To achieve these goals, the program inspires teachers to deliver innovative learning experiences through teaching strategies and the effective use of technology (e.g., blended learning and online learning). To acquire the intended skills and develop values, students are given a variety of extracurricular and community-based opportunities. Teachers are provided with more diverse career paths and professional development programs to gain relevant experience and improve their competency. Benefiting from research, including international test results, the Ministry has been working on improving the education system with special focus on improving learning outcomes and closing regional gaps.

Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia and the main medium of instruction. English is the second-most commonly spoken language used and spoken in international schools, where other languages of instruction may be used.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Saudi Arabia's participation in PIRLS will allow for the collection of data from students, teachers, and principals. The results will also provide information related to learning policies and facilitate the development of the education system. Through participation in PIRLS, Saudi Arabia hopes to build a distinctive education system with reading and writing as a central component by concentrating on four major processes of comprehension:

- Identifying specific ideas and ways of restating them
- Drawing conclusions and explaining information and ideas in texts
- Expounding on and merging information
- Studying and assessing content, language, and elements of a given text

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Arabic language is a large part of Saudi students' identity. It is the language of the Holy Qur'an, which is mandatory for all Muslims to read and understand, as well as the medium used to spread Saudi Arabian heritage and culture. As a result, the Ministry puts a great emphasis on Arabic language teaching and learning. Three main goals of Saudi education policy focus on the Arabic language:

- Developing reading skills and reading habits to enhance knowledge
- Acquiring the ability to express oneself fluently through communication, speech, and writing using proper language and organized thinking
- Developing linguistic ability in ways that enrich and recognize the beauty of the Arabic language

In Saudi Arabia, the Arabic language curriculum is built on teaching the language in an integrated manner where the “artificial” barriers between the methods of learning language (listening, speaking, reading, reading comprehension, writing) are eliminated to help students acquire all language skills (grammar, spelling, punctuation, handwriting, and rhetoric) through a reading passage. Each unit of the fourth grade language curriculum uses texts on specific topics (e.g., art or science) to address all language skills (e.g., grammar, dictation, writing, reading comprehension). Arabic language goals for Grades 1 to 9 are as follows:

- Acquire comprehension of eloquent Arabic words and structures that help students understand what they read or listen to
- Acquire linguistic abilities that allow students to express themselves and respond fluently and accurately
- Acquire speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills
- Use the language successfully as a thinking and communication tool

Arabic Language Competencies

Arabic language scope and sequence focuses on competencies that are spread across Grades 1 to 12 and that reflect the four main skills of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). One important competency is reading comprehension. For fourth grade, reading comprehension includes the following:

- Extracting main ideas and subideas
- Suggesting an appropriate passage title
- Determining a passage's main goal
- Distinguishing between fact and opinion
- Analyzing simple text
- Drawing a mind map of a story

- Explaining an opinion on values included in the passage
- Determining main characters' attributes
- Comparing between synonyms
- Determining sentences that indicate specific ideas
- Determining a passage's main idea

Following the constructivism theory, Arabic language in fourth grade is taught using a learner-centered approach. This is reflected in the strategies that are suggested for teachers to use that focus on active learning (e.g., collaborative learning, experiential learning, project-based learning). Each unit includes a small project that allows students to better understand the topic as they improve comprehension in addition to using the language in a practical way, which helps students improve their language skills. Students are asked to summarize the main ideas of the topic using mind mapping to encourage even deeper comprehension. With current advancements in technology, Saudi Arabia greatly emphasizes technology integration in curriculum implementation. The Saudi Minister of Education insisted that “technology in education is a strategic choice.” Textbooks are offered in printed and electronic (PDF) versions, both of which include links (QR codes) that take students to additional resources related to the topic to enrich their knowledge. These resources are varied (audio, video, pictures) to engage students and meet their different learning styles. Through formative and summative assessments, students are assessed with various tools including projects, presentations, verbal and written communications, quizzes, and tests.

Teachers and Teacher Education

MOE has launched “the educational job list,” which signifies an important shift in the process of developing education in Saudi Arabia through transforming the teacher’s job into a profession, as the teacher is one of the pillars of the development of the education sector in the Kingdom.²

MOE aims to develop teacher performance levels, secure teaching positions for those with contract renewals, and equally and fairly assign and transfer teachers. Moreover, in cooperation with the Education & Training Evaluation Commission, MOE has implemented a new system for teacher licensure to clarify the status of teacher positions and to ensure improvements in teacher performance.

In the current teacher recruitment process, university graduates from every discipline are screened. Regardless of the level they intend to teach, prospective teachers are required to meet the following requirements:

- Hold a bachelor’s degree in a teaching major
- Pass a proficiency test in their major and a test of general education proficiency
- Pass a medical examination
- Pass a background interview that assesses the candidate’s personality and character

MOE also cooperates with institutions of higher education to develop additional standards for new teachers. Some of these efforts include the following:

- Preparing standards for general teacher education levels in cooperation with colleges of education and teachers' colleges, guided by the international standards applied to every subject for all levels of the general curriculum
- Preparing professional development programs for teachers based on education and professional standards
- Reviewing the courses of study of colleges of education and teachers' colleges to ensure they meet the requirements of the new curricula

What MOE plans to accomplish from this cooperation includes the following:

- Ensuring that colleges of education and teachers' colleges are able to fulfill the Kingdom's future needs for teachers in all fields
- Coordinating with international committees to develop a set of recommendations for educational colleges nationally and internationally, and urging universities to fulfill academic recommendations
- Developing colleges of education and teachers' colleges by using best standards and practices and through cooperation with distinguished international colleges and universities

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Ministry of Education sends some teachers and administrators to national universities or abroad to obtain master's or doctoral degrees. The Ministry further seeks to train qualified teachers with extensive professional development courses and programs throughout the year to enhance teacher performance according to the needs of curricular projects, some of which are developed in cooperation with specialized private sector corporations.

Teachers receive professional development and supervision throughout their career in a variety of ways. For example, computerized supervision allows for rapid idea exchange and information access that helps to develop teachers' knowledge, teaching environments, and quality teaching outputs. The Ministry also is preparing a project for teacher assessment to improve practical and educational outputs to build knowledge. Another program aims to implement changes to educational programs based on analyses of teacher evaluations and trends in education.

Currently, one of the projects in progress is the Professional Development of Teachers,³ which aims to improve teachers' performance according to professional standards through improving education products, offering diversified specialized programs according to the needs of continual professional development programs, and raising the standard of scientific and professional qualification of education post occupants. All of this would be made possible through investing in MOE's distance learning and modern technical applications.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Saudi Arabia has never known an experience like the education crisis caused by COVID-19. One of the most severe challenges during the pandemic was that no one could predict what would happen in terms of health and safety or education. The matter required that MOE in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia close all schools, universities, and education centers in all parts of the country without exception, as in most countries throughout the world. The necessary measures to manage education at that stage were carried out in cooperation among the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Human Resources. The most important measures that the country has taken to maintain the safety of students and combat infection while providing high-quality education are described below.

Saudi Arabia is taking the reopening of schools very seriously, with an emphasis on school safety and school staff preparedness. Primary and preschool education continues remotely as of the end of 2021. In schools that have reopened, students, teachers, and administrative staff wear masks, sterilize hands, and do not shake hands, limiting the activities and events that could lead to a COVID-19 resurgence. These instructions were communicated to students, families, teachers, principals, and student counselors. Students, teachers, and education employees comprise one of the largest segments of society in whom awareness and education can limit the spread of COVID-19. The Ministry of Education encouraged families, teachers, and students to use electronic platforms and other online resources to continue learning and teaching processes without missing any school days.

Due to financial challenges, many private schools were forced to close. However, it is expected that investment will return to help schools recover after the pandemic so students can return to schools in person. Many subsidies were given to private schools from the government.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia has been delivered through a combination of modes:

- Educational TV channels (Ain)
- Existing online instructional resources
- Online instruction delivered by teachers
- Online instruction provided by private tutors

Policy and Practice Changes

Since the start of the pandemic, flexible laws and legislation have been developed and can be amended to adapt to the progression of the pandemic until its end. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a range of challenges not just to public health, but to many other areas of public life, including education. MOE designed an integrated system for distance learning through which appropriate systems and laws were developed for the use of technology and applications. An

electronic platform was designed as an alternative to the classroom, through which students and their families can communicate with the school and teachers in virtual classes and teachers can communicate with their colleagues about the learning and teaching processes.

During the pandemic, the Ministry of Education realized the importance of diverse partnerships in overcoming the crisis. MOE's first partner was the Ministry of Health, which cooperated to provide health information and health directives. Families are also one of the most important partners in the education process, and the Ministry greatly relied on them to provide the required equipment to continue student learning, such as computers connected to the internet. MOE also cooperated with companies that provide internet service and called on companies to be socially responsible by donating computers to students who needed them.

Evaluation is an area in which the most work has been done. In the first year of the pandemic, student evaluation was suspended, all large-scale examinations were stopped, and students were promoted to the following grade level without evaluation. In the second year of the pandemic, different assessment tasks were identified from what occurred before the pandemic and grades resulting from those tasks were adjusted. Schools were notified with explanatory evidence of what had been modified, and work was done on designing platforms and applications to test students remotely.

The tasks, roles, and ways of learning and teaching varied during the pandemic, and this required the implementation of many training programs targeting education leadership in male and female teachers, student counselors, and others from the school community. The training topics varied and included how to run the school and monitor the quality of its performance from a distance, as well as how to manage distance learning and education processes, conduct remote evaluation, and increase students' motivation toward distance learning.

Training programs were implemented in the Ministry of Education, as well as in education departments in the regions and governorates, in cooperation with the private sector. The programs were implemented through remote training platforms, and training packages and professional development tools were provided to those who wished to obtain them. The Education Development Holding Company is a government company owned by the Public Investment Fund. The Education Development Holding Company works to activate the strategic role of the Tatweer group of companies to support the education sector by helping to implement education development programs and develop the knowledge economy, in line with the Ministry's objectives and the national strategy for transformation into a knowledge-based society.

According to the Kingdom's Vision 2030, the National Education Portal (Ain) offers a range of electronic solutions and services for teachers and their students to support them in the teaching and learning process, for example, by providing lessons via YouTube and the Ministry of Education's TV channels.

Suggested Readings

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