



## Reviving the Heritage of Lifelong Learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

*The land of Arabia has a long tradition of the pursuit of teaching and learning throughout life that dates back at least to the birth of Islam and probably well before that. There are many passages in the Noble Quran that exhort Man to keep learning and teaching as well as the many sayings from the Prophet (PBUH). The early scholars certainly follow lifelong learning and teaching very closely: thus, we have the collectors of the sayings of the prophet who spend their whole life seeking and verifying and teaching from the sayings. In present Saudi Arabia there are no organised and coherent efforts towards reviving lifelong teaching and learning to the masses although this is very important, especially since Saudi Arabia is moving more and more towards becoming a knowledge economy. Given the geography and the culture of Saudi Arabia, elearning technologies will play a major role in the delivery and access to teaching and learning. This paper discusses the present state of lifelong learning in Saudi Arabia and will propose some initiatives involving elearning technologies that have the potential to revive the heritage of lifelong learning.*

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### Introduction

There are many definitions of Lifelong learning and all are quite similar. For the purpose of the present discussion the description used by the working committee in the European Commission Report (2005), will be adopted. The committee described lifelong learning as “encompassing all purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence”

Thus, lifelong learning is any learning activity which reaches out to a wide range of learners throughout their lives providing access to learning opportunities for enhancing knowledge, skills, intellectual and personal growth. These learning opportunities directly benefit the individual and society and as a consequence can also improve performance in the workplace. Systematic implementation of lifelong learning has the potential to enhance the human capital of a country and is regarded as one of the most important initiatives for economic development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Countries are facing major challenges in human capital development because of the rapidly changing employment landscape brought about by globalisation and technology. To cope with the challenges, governments and the industries must provide channels of learning that can meet national aspirations and the unique demands of each industry. Learning on demand, which is learning as and when required, and “top-up” or “re-skilling” to bring the work force to the levels expected by the job market and to meet new needs may have to be carried out on an ongoing basis. This is especially important for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as it must gradually move away from reliance on oil and gas towards a more balanced, knowledge-based economy. It also need to reassess the provision of education within the Kingdom because the present formal education provided by schools and universities has created an ever-widening gap in meeting the needs of the marketplace leading to serious concerns about the possible rise in unemployment. Lifelong learning is seen as a having great potential to bridge the gap.

With the good ICT infrastructure that is available throughout most of the Kingdom, Internet-based lifelong learning can be systematically implemented throughout the community across all relevant age groups. It is a flexible and cost effective approach to address many of the challenges faced by the current training provision.



### The Lifelong Learning Legacy

In the early days of Islam, knowledge was passed on orally. In fact our present knowledge of Islam is based on orally transmitted information. The people used to observe the actions or listened to the teachings of the Prophet, peace be upon him (pbuh), and they will then teach their immediate family members and so on until most of the community become aware of the new knowledge. Each member of the community is always aware of their responsibility to seek knowledge on Islam directly from the Prophet (pbuh) or from his companions and to pass on the knowledge that they gained to others. Seeking and spreading knowledge has been an integral part of the Islamic tradition. Learning starts at a very young age. The early scholars, for example al-Shafi, memorised the Quran at about 7 years old. He travelled widely during his adult years until old age learning and collecting and teaching the sayings and the practices of the Prophet (pbuh). The scholars never stop seeking and imparting knowledge. They travel throughout the land learning and teaching. It is the duty of all Muslims to continue learning and teaching throughout their lives. The lifelong learning culture is deeply embedded in the way of life of the Muslims, especially the Arabs.

Islam place great emphasis on seeking knowledge and spreading it through teaching or other means. It is the duty of every able Muslim (*fard kifayah*) to seek knowledge in areas that are critical to the well-being of the society. Thus, for example, since it is essential to treat the sick, there must be at least some member of a community who will take it upon themselves to study and qualify as medical practitioners. If this duty is not discharged at the individual level then the whole the community bear the blame for not fulfilling this essential need of the community.

In fact, the Quran contains numerous verses on the importance of seeking knowledge, such as:

- "Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for those of understanding." [3:190]
- "Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?'" [39:9]
- "Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge by degrees." [58:11]

The Prophet (pbuh), also place great emphasis on seeking and disseminating knowledge as can be seen in his many *hadiths* (sayings), such as the following:

- "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim." - *Al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 74
- "Knowledge from which no benefit is derived is like a treasure out of which nothing is spent in the cause of Allah." - *Al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 108
- "Allah, His angels and all those in Heavens and on Earth, even ants in their hills and fish in the water, call down blessings on those who instruct others in beneficial knowledge." - *Al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 422
- "Acquire knowledge and impart it to the people." - *Al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith 107

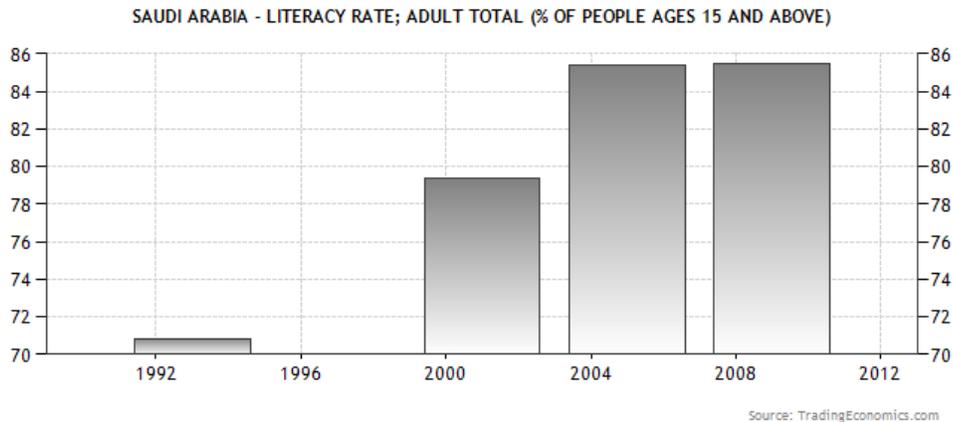
In the early days of Islam people gathered in mosques to discuss and learn. The mosques become a centre for formal and informal teaching and learning in a community. With time, dedicated places for sharing of knowledge called *madrasahs* were set up. Even now, in many countries, the *madrasah* still provide teaching and learning to all ages, but confined mostly to religious areas. In the larger *madrasahs* the whole spectrum of Islamic knowledge may be taught. Thus, one may find lessons on the basic practices of Islam (for the very young or new learners) as well as specialised subject matter such as Islamic law, finance and astronomy. In many Islamic countries the *madrasahs* still continue to be centres for religious studies. Central to traditional Islamic learning is the master-disciple relationship characterized by deference to the master. This relationship is sustained through face-to-face oral instruction that transmits not only learning but also spiritual guidance as well as moral authority.

### Current State of Lifelong Learning in Saudi Arabia

Adult literacy is recognised as an important factor in the economic development of a country and was included in the UNESCO (2000) Education for All (EFA) Development Index (EDI). This index is used to provide a measure of the achievements of countries in the provision of EFA. The measure is based on four



quantifiable EFA goals: universal primary education, adult literacy, gender parity and equality, and education quality. Before the year 2000, the literacy rate for Saudi Arabia has been quite low. But as can be seen in the trend in adult literacy in Saudi Arabia is shown in Figure 1 (from TradingEconomics.com), great progress has been achieved in this area because the Saudi Government has put in place many initiatives to improve the situation. The figures for 2009 as reported in the 2011 UNESCO GMR, were 86.1% of adults and 97.6% of youth are literate. This means that adult literacy is no longer an obstacle to lifelong learning in Saudi Arabia.



**Figure 1** Literacy rate trend for adults in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Government has entrusted the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) with the responsibility for promoting and developing Lifelong Learning throughout Saudi Arabia, through its Lifelong Learning and Community Service Centres. These centres contain facilities such as workshops and labs that can be used to support lifelong learning in technical areas as well as classrooms and other facilities. As the core responsibility of TVTC is the promotion of technical and vocational training for school leavers it has not yet embarked on any major lifelong learning initiatives. It has, however, formulated several objectives related to continuing education and lifelong learning, namely:

- research and further studies, consultancy and continuing education to serve society and develop the relationship with TVTC
- work to provide opportunities for members of society to continue their education and training, and to benefit from the advancement of technology by providing programmes that cater for the different sectors of society.
- Publicize throughout the community the importance of working in technical and vocational fields and offering suitable training environment for lifelong learning.

Most universities have their own extension, outreach or extra-mural divisions providing different types of adult education, ranging from liberal studies to high-level professional training. Many universities have lifelong learning incorporated into their mission or strategic objectives, such as Effat University, based in central Jeddah and King Abdul Aziz University. King Fahd University for Petroleum and Mining (KFUPM) through its community colleges in Dammam and Hafr al-Batin offer associate degrees to students with lower qualifications than the minimum required for university entrance. The associate degree enables graduates to work and gain experience and later on attend university to complete their studies for a full degree.

Looking at the university offerings and their interpretation of lifelong learning it is apparent that most so-called lifelong learning initiatives at the universities are actually academic programmes but for a different group of learners with lower entrance qualifications or who are at work and cannot attend the full-time conventional programmes. None of the universities cater to the non-academic needs of the community such as short courses in communication skills, entrepreneurship, agriculture, handicraft etc.



### The Need to Revive Lifelong Learning in Saudi Arabia

The geography of Saudi Arabia is varied with wide areas mostly uninhabited since much of the nation's landmass is desert and semi-arid regions. The population centers are mainly located along the eastern and western coasts and interior oases such as Hofuf and Buraydah. There are many areas outside of the main population centres that are sparsely populated and in some areas, such as the Rub' al-Khali and the Arabian Desert, there is no population whatsoever. The population in the remote areas are usually of lower economic standing compared to the average population and many are not gainfully employed.

Saudi Arabia practices gender segregation. This has significant implications in determining easy access to good education and job availability for women. Before 2010, many universities set up branch colleges for female students. Teaching at these colleges are by female instructors or via voice only conferencing if by male instructors. Because of the scarcity of good female instructors, the teaching at these colleges can be of varying quality. All the female colleges are now under the administration of the Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University, a huge university that started operations in 2010. With its all female, local and international, teaching staff it is hoped that the female half of the population will now have better access to higher quality education.

The present population of Saudi Arabia consists of a minority of very highly educated (many educated overseas with Masters and PhDs) segment, a large youth population with high school and university education and some youths and adults who have not been to school. Unemployment is a major problem. According to IndexMundi (2011), an estimated 10.8% of Saudi males are unemployed in 2010. The Labour Ministry has been working hard to address the unemployment problem and to raise the capabilities of the human capital in the Kingdom. It realises that there is an urgent need for fresh graduates of post-compulsory education who will be joining the workforce to be trained in new skills and competencies that are required by the knowledge economy. The "youth bulge" (15–24 years old), the large number and rapidly increasing early school-leaving and out-of-school youth population in Saudi Arabia present a more serious problem.

High schools in Saudi Arabia are producing more graduates that qualify for university education than the available places in universities. And the discrepancy between eligible high school graduates to available places in the universities continues to increase (Altowjry, 2005). Some of these "excess" students are enrolled into several universities as distance learners. But because of problems encountered by students in a totally self-managed learning mode, with none or very little support, distance learning has never proven popular resulting in very high attrition rates.

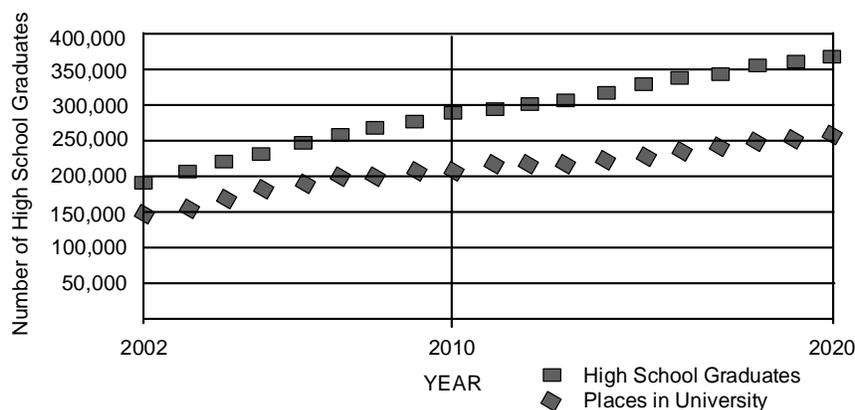


Figure 2 Predicted gap between number of high school graduates and available places in universities

The graph in Figure 2 is the predicted gap between the number of high school graduates to the available places in the universities based on a ten year trend up to 2003, from a proposal paper presented by Dr. Khaled Al-Sultan, the then undersecretary for educational affairs at the Ministry of Higher Education (Al-Sultan, 2002). The Saudi government has been taking steps to address the situation and indeed, in 2010 the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Al-Angary mentioned in a speech that the government has increased



the number of public universities from seven to 24 in 12 years, in addition to the 29 private universities and colleges opened in recent years (Al-Angary 2010). In 2007, 91% of high school graduates were admitted to universities. However, due to the increasing number of high school graduates in 2008, only 86% could be offered places (Alebaikan 2010). In its 2007 annual report on global education, the World Bank (2007) noted that the global population will be facing many new challenges in adult education that governments must consider seriously. These include the threat of globalisation to the local economy, the social and economic impact of the revolution in communication technologies and the increasing importance of knowledge in a country's development process.

In the present context of Saudi Arabia, lifelong learning can contribute in many important ways to the Kingdom's human capital development, including:

- Providing supplemental training to fresh graduates (high school or universities) to better prepare them for the job market.
- Providing in-service training to improve knowledge and skills to be able to cope with changes in the work environment.
- Providing training in entrepreneurship, especially in the Internet economy, to identified target group.
- Providing education and training to the less mobile population, such as the disabled and home workers, to enable them to improve their economic situation or for awareness.
- Providing access to education and training in leisure such as cooking, baking, handicraft, basic legal education etc.

Most lifelong learning efforts to reach the masses, especially in the outlying areas, have not succeeded because of lack of qualified and motivated trainers. Many authorities in adult education, at least for the developing countries, agree that the biggest challenge to providing effective adult education and lifelong learning is getting good and committed trainers. The administrative and technical support personnel are, in general, professionally trained, but the same cannot be said for the trainers. These are usually part-timers, with varied training experience (Yousif, 2009). There is a general agreement that in most cases part-time trainers are neither well trained nor well rewarded, and many of them are not sufficiently motivated to make a significant difference to national lifelong learning efforts.

### **Strategy for Reviving Lifelong Learning in Saudi Arabia**

The older members of the communities in Saudi Arabia probably still practice or at least remember the practice of pursuing knowledge throughout life, at least in religious matters. This tradition is largely forgotten now perhaps because the modern, formal education system has largely displaced the traditional system. In the modern system, schooling "ends" after graduation and a new phase begins – working. To most people there is a clear separation between the learning phase and the working phase. Somehow, in the working phase learning slows down drastically. People must be reminded all the time of the strong emphasis on lifelong learning in Islam. They must be reminded that learning must never stop.

Even though the community-based lifelong learning as traditionally practiced may not be suitable to the meet the modern requirements of human capital development in Saudi Arabia, the tradition of lifelong learning can be revived to serve modern needs. Community centres, mosques and *madrassahs* can be equipped to serve as centres for lifelong learning. Saudi Arabia has very good ICT infrastructure with good broadband penetration that can be leveraged to provide education to all levels of society everywhere. The lack of good trainers in certain areas can be overcome by organising web-based training videos or other suitable material prepared by experts.

The National Centre for e-Learning and Distance Learning (NCeL) is well-positioned to implement, manage and support lifelong learning over the Internet because it has experience in all aspects of online learning. NCeL has been involved in promoting e-learning since 2007 as well as supporting the e-learning implementations of many universities in Saudi Arabia (AlMegren et al, 2007). It is also working with the Labour Ministry to provide training for unemployed youths in various skills using e-learning.

Internet-based lifelong learning enabled learners to access training and information at anytime and from anywhere. This flexible mode of delivery allows the training to fit it with the learner's lifestyle. Learners



access training whenever they are able to after discharging all their other commitments. It is a more friendly approach than the conventional face-to-face training that requires trainees to attend training at a fixed location according to a fixed schedule. The reach of the Internet means that members of the community that thus far face difficulties in accessing lifelong learning, such as the disabled, those in very remote areas and home-workers, can now easily gain access. It is certainly an approach that can win learners over to lifelong learning.

The successful implementation of lifelong learning is a national effort that involves all departments, ministries and the business communities. It is not something that can be successful overnight because it requires long and sustained efforts by all. However, as a start, based on our researches on international best practices in the implementation of lifelong learning, NCeL proposes the following initiatives:

- Create a lifelong learning master plan - The relevant government ministries must formulate a national lifelong learning master plan that defines the objectives and charts the paths for achieving the desired objectives.
- Foster ICT training and the establishment of “net communities” for those with special needs and interests - ICT literacy is essential for online learning. NCeL can provide training and support by extending the scope of its existing “Saneed” HelpDesk. Its JUSUR LMS can be expanded to include support for the “net communities”.
- Embed lifelong learning education and philosophy in all major government policies - All major government policies must be formulated with Lifelong learning in mind. Policies must be lifelong learning friendly and must not adversely affect any aspects of lifelong learning implementation.
- Forge partnerships between government, business, and education and training providers - It is essential that the entire community be involved in lifelong learning. It is not just the government responsibility alone. In this regard NCeL can play the role of intermediary, connecting all members of the partnerships into an interactive “net community”
- Formulate policies to encourage the use of schools, community colleges, mosques, civic halls and other public and private buildings for lifelong learning programmes - Local facilities are necessary for face-to-face talks and training as well as to provide facilities for community usage – such as ICT systems and libraries – essential requirements for lifelong learning.
- Promote research and development in the areas of adult education and lifelong learning by strengthening existing research and development centres of lifelong learning - At present not much is known about the requirements of and for lifelong learning in the Kingdom. Most of the ideas and opinions are based on lessons from other countries. It is important to gain a better understanding of the lifelong learning in the context of Saudi Arabia. This is a fertile area for research.
- Launch a National Lifelong Learning Helpline Dedicated Centre located at the Ministry of Human Resources or the Ministry of Labour as a one-stop centre for all information and services on lifelong learning.

The above proposal is meant to be a starting point for discussions and further deliberations by all parties. It is important that the dialogue takes place and initiatives started so that there concerted efforts being made towards developing lifelong learning within the Kingdom.

### **Conclusion**

Saudi Arabia is facing several challenges in human capacity development to meet its aspiration to be a knowledge economy and more immediately to reduce unemployment by providing training to graduates so that they have the capability that matches the requirements of the marketplace. Saudi Arabia can leverage on its long tradition of lifelong learning to provide continuous training but because of its unique social practices and the distribution of its population, Internet-based provision of lifelong learning is the best approach. It can provide the flexibility to suit the requirements of the individual learner as well as the reach enable access to the remote areas.

Implementing Internet-based lifelong learning programmes require concerted efforts from all parties. It is not the task of any one particular department or ministry, however, the National Centre for eLearning and Distance Learning have the necessary experience and expertise to spearhead this initiative.



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