

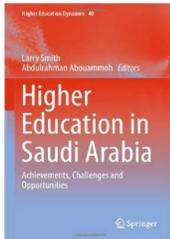
Book Review

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Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

Smith, L. and Abouammoh, A. (Eds.) (2013). *Higher education in Saudi Arabia: Achievements, challenges and opportunities*. New York: Springer, 190 pp. \$106.23, Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-9400763203

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Institutions in the United States have been popular among Saudi students seeking post-secondary degrees. In fact, Saudi Arabia is one of the highest represented home countries of international students in the US. 44,566 Saudi students enrolled in US colleges and universities for the 2012-2013 academic year, and enrollment numbers for Saudi students have been increasing tremendously over the years (IIE, 2013). *Higher education in Saudi Arabia: Achievements, challenges and opportunities* (2013), edited by Larry Smith and Abdulrahman Abouammoh, provides insight into this growth. This book suggests that Saudi Arabia wants to improve its higher education system, the goal being to “...achieve ‘world-class’ standards” (p. 5). To accomplish this, Saudi Arabia has invested 160 billion US dollars into its budget for education.

This book is relevant for the higher education community because it introduces the higher education system of Saudi Arabia. Institutions with recruitment goals for Saudi Arabia can benefit from this book, which consists of 17 chapters, because it informs readers about the history, governance, quality assurance, accreditation, teaching approaches, faculty research and other relevant topics. In addition to the objectives, changes, and challenges of the Saudi Higher education system, the authors address various initiatives and projects carried out by Saudi Arabia toward its mission to attain “...world-class standards” (p. 5).

The foundations of the higher education system in Saudi Arabia are: “a focus on the teaching of Islam, a centralized system of control and educational support, state funding (thus education is free at all levels in Saudi Arabia) and a general policy of gender segregation” (p. 2). Educational policies are administered by the Ministry of Education, the General Presidency of Girls’ Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training. Gender segregation is heavily enforced by the Saudi Arabian education system.

Saudi Arabia has 24 public and nine private institutions (p. 3). Because of free education, Saudi students are not confined to their home country, allowing them to study abroad in countries including the USA, the United Kingdom, Canada, Egypt, and Jordan. In early 2011, 107, 706 students were reported attending foreign institutions and 85% were fully funded by the King Abdullah Scholarship program (p. 3).

One of the most expensive initiatives to revamp the system was the King Abdullah Project, started in early 2007. Worth 3.1 billion US dollars, the project focuses on “...teacher training and professional development, curriculum and textbook review, the provision of

contemporary information technology for both teaching and learning (including internet services for teachers and students) and programmes for developing innovative practice” (p. 4). “...Deepening Islamic values, morals and allegiance to family, society and nation, and appreciating and preserving national achievements” (p. 4) are equally important to Saudi Arabia; hence, money is bestowed for these purposes as well.

AFAQ or Horizon planned Saudi Arabia’s goals for a quality higher education system. Although this is laudable, the authors suggest that their plan is far from being perfect, due to its lack of proper foundation and evaluation criteria. They believe “...that while Saudi Arabia is demonstrating remarkable energy and enthusiasm for effecting improvements to its higher education system, both at the system and institutional levels, it is at considerable risk of trying to do too much too quickly” (p. 4).

Nonetheless, like many countries, Saudi Arabian universities want “world-class” reputations. According to Mazi and Altbach, “...a world-class university is a research university” (p. 13). This view is shared by various systems, which rank institutions around the globe. Even though ranking is only fixated on research and does not take into account the importance of “...teaching, service, social engagement, and others,” (p.13) it is widely valued among institutions looking for recognition, and “...a world-class system cannot be measured by the existing rankings, nor does such a system lend itself to easy definition or assessment. Our own definition of world class in this context emphasizes each institution in the system doing the best possible job in the context of the established mission” (p. 15).

Overall, the authors suggest that Saudi Arabia should address “...the tension between academic vision and cultural norms, the lack of an appropriate governance model for Saudi universities, developing and sustaining international credibility, maximizing opportunities and achievements for women in higher education, and the tension between traditional Saudi approaches to teaching, learning, and student assessment and the needs of global economy” (p. 181).

In conclusion, this book raises some important questions as institutions in Saudi Arabia are on their way to “achieve world class” status through quality education and innovative programs and initiatives (p. 5). From this perspective, what will happen to US institutions that are dependent on Saudi student enrollment and scholarship when these students no longer have the need to attend American institutions? In institutions with large numbers of Saudi students, what additional support services will be made available to retain these populations? What type of recruiting strategies will be used to make students choose US institutions over other institutions in their home countries?

REFERENCE

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REVIEWER

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