

The New Saudi Educational Renaissance: In between the “Capacity to Aspire” and the “Capacity to Remember”

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Abstract

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia investments in higher education have increased exponentially in recent years, and the New Saudi Educational Renaissance is attracting the attention of international academia. The purpose of this study is to draw on Saudi sources, with the aim of allowing Saudi voices to introduce their strategies for the design of a Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society, which will be a product of the “capacity to aspire” and the “capacity to remember” (UNESCO, 2002) of the Saudi nation.

Keywords: King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, King Abdullah scholarship program, Saudi Arabian knowledge society, Saudi educational renaissance

1. Introduction

“Arm yourselves with knowledge”

(King Faisal bin Abd Al- Aziz)

In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed exponential increases in expenditure on education — and higher education in particular — indicative of the notion that a New Saudi Educational Renaissance is in the making. This remarkable commitment of Saudi rulers to education is attracting the attention of international academia. However, Western-dominated literature often shows a tendency to analyze the Saudi educational enterprise according to Western-inspired parameters, paradigms and modes of understanding: an approach that risks failing to appreciate the complexity and richness of the Saudi educational and cultural landscape. By way of response, this study intends rather to present a selection of documents, among many others available to the public, where prominent Saudi voices address the educational changes in the kingdom, explaining views, plans and ambitions for the future of what can be seen as the Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society (Pavan, 2013).

To begin with, it may be helpful to recall the rationale of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program: “Knowledge is the foundation of the renaissance of the nations; for this reason, the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has given special attention to this sector” (Ministry of Higher Education website).

2. Literature Review

Hitherto, Western-dominated literature on Saudi Arabia has consistently offered unsolicited opinions, critiques and advice on a range of issues concerning the country. This trend becomes particularly evident in the case of literature on Saudi higher education policies. On the one hand, such literature may perhaps indicate new interest on the part of international academia in a Saudi knowledge society now unquestionably emerging. On the other, however, this Western-oriented literature on Saudi (higher) education policies presents five problems.

First problem. Such literature is usually built around Western hegemonic paradigms and theories of knowledge, which inevitably in most instances will demonstrate only a limited grasp on the complexity and the importance of the Saudi cultural, religious and socio-political environment. As Onsman (2011) informs his readers, “To consider how the Kingdom is strategising its ambitions, a critical management framework, based loosely on Singer’s (2010) notion on metatheory will be used”. Elyas and Picard (2013), with the aim of “critiquing higher education policy in Saudi Arabia”, espouse McCarthy (2009) and Davies and Bansel’s (2007) theses on neoliberalism, suggesting new neoliberalism as a conceptual framework for the purpose of interpreting Saudi Arabian education. Patrick (2014) explores the challenges for Saudi Arabia in its transition to a knowledge

economy and a knowledge society with the help of Knorr Cetina's work (2007) on knowledge cultures and David and Foray's work (2002) on knowledge communities. Hilal (2013) reports on interpretations of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, also known as KASP, by Knickmeyer (2012), Ottaway (2012) and Coleman (2012). Obviously this is a very limited selection made from numerous authors writing about Saudi policies on education.

Second problem. Contrary to the general picture given by Western-dominated literature, this study maintains that it is arguable whether or not the beginnings of a Saudi (higher) education tradition can be dated to the 1950s. For example, Elyas and Picard write that "Westernized notions of education have increasingly impacted the Saudi Arabian education system from the 1950s when increasing oil discovery and oil revenues resulted in the education of locals to take up oil jobs, and as part of the responsibilities of the welfare state to provide free education" (p. 32). Onsmann sustains that "Saudi Higher Education has a history of little more than 50 years" (p. 521). However, on careful examination of what is reported by Saudi scholars themselves (Al Abdulkareem, Al Mousa, Abouammoh, among others), and by the most authoritative international agency for education, UNESCO (Pavan, 2013, p. 27), there is evidence of a long-established education-oriented, and particularly scholarship-oriented attitude taken by the Saudi rulers as well as by the Saudi population, comfortably predating the official establishment of King Saud university in 1957, the first university in the kingdom and in the whole Arabian Peninsula.

Third problem. Furthermore, focusing on the specific aspect of vocational education and training, Patrick (p. 233) recalls that "Saudi administrations have invested heavily in human capital development via education and training since the 1970s...Investment in education has produced a culture shift in terms of the extent to which formal education is valued culturally and socially: education has become valued for its own sake (see Roy, 1992). This has meant that Saudi governments until recently tended to provide education as an end in itself, rather than giving as much consideration to the ways in which education might enable individual employability and national economic growth (Roy, 1992, p. 484)". Even forgetting for a moment that education is first of all an end in itself and that universities have been founded upon this principle for centuries, all around the world, it is not clear whether or not Patrick sees Saudi Arabia as having developed effective technical and vocational training, and whether or not, in her opinion, the nation's economic needs are best served by its higher education policies. At all events, it may be interesting in the very near future for international academia to hear more about the Colleges of Excellence set up by the Saudi Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) with the financial support of the Saudi Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF), and the claim that "what Saudi Arabia is doing in terms of investment in vocational and applied education is truly historic today across the world" (Arab News, April 15, 2014). A good insight into new Saudi perspectives on vocational and technical training is provided by Al Othali and Burdon in Smith and Abouammoh, 2013 (pp. 159-166: International Collaboration).

Fourth problem. Analyses focusing on developments in Saudi higher education tend to stress the urgency of combating weaknesses, improving quality and correcting mistakes, but often without taking into consideration the fact that the Saudi higher education system has become a presence in the international scenario only very recently. In particular, Patrick writes: "Indeed, Saudi Arabia represents an example of a country which has invested heavily in education and training, with comparatively little impact in terms of increased or diversified economic productivity" (p. 239). And referring to the Ninth Development Plan published by the Ministry of Economy and Planning in Saudi Arabia, she adds: "It is also unclear the extent to which Westernized knowledge paradigms can be indigenized and with what effect and overall outcome" (p. 242). Quality issues are a major concern: "If the government's aim is to enable the education system to produce graduates who can contribute to the development of a knowledge economy, then high-quality university teaching in the sciences and technology will be important. However, this may be challenging to develop in the light of *the lack of context and tradition of research and knowledge production in Saudi universities*" (p. 245, emphasis added). The following statement from the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education may assist in providing a reply: "Academic research is one of the essential functions of universities. It is the canonized and systematized basis for discovering and generating various types of scientific knowledge. Research also contributes to alleviating human suffering, and to playing a human role if research deals with vital issues. This makes it not only a social responsibility but also a human message" (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013, p. 84). In other words, despite the absence of a long-established research tradition, the Ministry is apparently familiar with the aims of fundamental as well as applied research. On the other hand, Smith and Abouammoh (2013) warn that the Saudi university system "is still very young and inexperienced", but they suggest: "*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). Saudis are fully aware of their limited research experience, but willing nonetheless to engage in self-criticism and set up a variety of tools that will enable them to pursue excellence in education.

Onsman observes: “The Kingdom is more prepared to send its students in a discriminating manner out in to the world than to invite the world to within its borders – at least as far as institutions of Higher Education are concerned” (p. 528). But Al Ohali and Burdon, in Smith and Abouammoh (2013), explain: “Saudi Arabia is embarking on a 10-year plan for expanding and improving the quality of its higher education system. The plan involves:...Investigating the possibility of allowing a number of overseas universities to set up centres for learning and research within Saudi Arabia and perhaps even Saudi itself setting up programmes and centres overseas” (p. 162). Given that “Saudi Arabia aspires to be a regional hub of excellence” (p. 162), “it must find effective ways of addressing and capitalising on three separate spheres of influence for international collaboration: firstly, the Middle East...; secondly, a wider Muslim country collaboration...; and thirdly, and perhaps the most challenging, *global collaboration*” (p. 166, emphasis added). And they conclude: “Globalisation and international collaboration will need to find its place among Saudi Arabia’s vision and goals for the future and its strategies and plans for improvement” (p. 166). It seems that Saudi higher education policy-makers have chosen the wise path: the country is moving forward at its own pace, step by step, in building its capability to become a worldwide and authoritative economic and educational competitor. International academia, take note.

Fifth problem. Finally, there is what might be perceived by Saudis — and probably not only by Saudis — as a judgemental attitude of outsiders who comment on educational issues in the kingdom. For example, Onsman stresses that “Many of the deans of the newer universities are overseas trained and inexperienced as leaders... In contrast many of the overseas staff are highly experienced and qualified” (p. 521). Then he adds that “Currently the King Saud University (KSU) is the Kingdom’s highest ranked university, and its advertising rethoric indicated its (and the Kingdom’s) ambitions. The KSU website (30/07/2010) trumpets.” (p. 522). And again: “A closer look at the individual categories used in the ranking process reveals that KSU has no Nobel Prize or Fields Medals winners among its current and past staff and it performs relatively poorly in the HiCi (17), N&S (1.5), ISC/ISSC (18.8) and PCP (11.7) categories” (p. 523). It must be said that unfortunately Onsman is in good company.

This study on the other hand suggests that—even ignoring the fact that the European Renaissance would have probably never existed without the Greek legacy handed down through translations and studies, not to mention the achievements, of Arab science, and this is the reason why even the contemporary lingua franca contains many words of Arabic origin, and that Western philosophy is forever indebted to Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina) — international academia should, at least temporarily, abandon pseudo-international ranking criteria entirely when it comes to discussing Saudi educational policies and indeed Arab educational policies generally. And, in the name of historical truth, international academia should assume a more constructive attitude, in keeping with the globalized knowledge societies of contemporary humankind, toward the rich and unique tradition of the Arab region, which extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf, and “was once the cradle of a vibrant civilization... It led the world in knowledge production. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, Arabic was undisputedly the language of science, if not the language of all fields of knowledge production. At that time, the Arab Empire stretched from Andalusia to the Western borders of China, encompassing a huge population and a wealth of religions, races and local cultures” (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2014, p. 28). The traditional Bedouin values of “honour, simplicity, generosity, and bravery” (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington D.C. website: The History of Saudi Arabia), originating in the Arabian desert, have made an invaluable contribution toward shaping Arab culture, and subsequently Western civilization in the modern era. The explanation offered by Onsman with reference to the “worryingly low” general level of ability to communicate in English among Saudi academics: “Such may of course be expected in the heartland of Arabic culture and history” (p. 522) suggests that Saudis are reluctant to learn the contemporary lingua franca *because of* their cultural heritage. Maybe the problem is more subtle: in reality, Saudis do study English, invest heavily in educational reforms and open up to the globalized world *thanks to* their cultural heritage, which enables them to understand and appreciate the value of education as an irreplaceable means of development. For this reason, the Saudi experiment, “the attempt to reconcile changes with respect for traditions, culture and beliefs” (Pavan, 2013, p. 31), is of considerable interest, provided that it is correctly and, above all, respectfully interpreted.

3. Some Saudi Figures on Education

Whilst the value and the help provided by the literature mentioned above in advancing research on Saudi educational policies is not in question, this study intends by contrast to draw on Saudi sources, with the aim of making Saudi voices heard in international academia and allowing them to introduce their strategies for the design of a Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society.

According to Al Abdulkareem, when the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established on 23 September 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Saud, the majority of the population was nomadic and the illiteracy rate around 90%. In 1965 estimates, the Saudi population was made up of 66% nomadic, 12% settled cultivators and 22% urban dwellers (p. 3).

In January 1966, V.P. VIJ, who was in charge of the UNESCO-led project for the establishment of the library of the Saudi Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and the survey of conditions existing in government libraries, writes in his report: "In a country such as Saudi Arabia where rapid developments in agriculture, industry, commerce and communications are taking place, it is absolutely necessary that the library services be developed: (a) To support and reinforce programmes of adult and fundamental education; (b) To provide effective services for children and young people, including requisite services for schools; (c) To promote and stimulate reading for pleasure and recreation; and (d) To make widely available information on technical, scientific, commercial and practical subjects to assist in the economic development of the community and to assist in improving the standard of living. Saudi Arabia has also a unique position, as it is the birthplace of Islam and the custodian of a very big culture. Moreover, it has all the resources and its economic position is very sound. Its library service, therefore, should assist the people of Saudi Arabia to understand more fully their own culture and carry out more adequately the role which is their geographic and cultural position" (Appendix, p. 1)".

Some fifty years on, Saudi Arabia, the Arab world's largest economy, has made remarkable progress. According to the Saudi Central Department of Statistics and Information (2013), the illiteracy rate in the kingdom stands at 5.6%. A sustained and sustainable political commitment to invest in education (Pavan, 2013, p. 32) was also confirmed by the Ministry of Finance at the end of December 2013, when a record \$228 billion budget for 2014 was announced. Total expenditure on the education sector amounts to around \$56 billion, representing 25% of total appropriations for the year 2014, and an increase of 3% over the previous year. "The budget includes new projects for 465 new school buildings amounting to around \$0.8 billion in addition to 1,544 school buildings currently under construction and more than 494 schools that have been completed in 2013. In addition, the budget includes appropriations to increase the number of classrooms and rehabilitation of around 1500 existing school buildings" (Ministry of Finance, Press Release, December 23, 2013, p. 2). In May 2014, as reported by the Saudi Press Agency, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah approved a five-year plan worth more than \$21.33 billion, in addition to the resources already allocated to the Education Ministry for the year 2014. The plan includes building 1,500 nurseries, providing training for about 25,000 teachers and establishing educational centres and other related projects (ArabianBusiness website accessed July 5, 2014). According to Dr Al Anqari, Minister of Higher Education, in his opening speech at the Fifth International Exhibition and Conference on Higher Education in Riyadh on April 15, 2014, higher education accounts for 10% of the entire 2014 budget.

In 1970 there existed only 3 public universities, namely King Saud University (1957), King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (1963) and King Abdulaziz University (1967). When King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ascended the throne on August 1, 2005, there were 7 public universities. At the beginning of April 2014 he ordered the establishment of 3 universities in Jeddah, Bisha and Hafr Al-Baten, bringing the total number of public universities to 28 (Arab News, April 2, 2014). There are also 9 private universities, and the construction of campuses across the country is relentless (IFCL Media, July 23, 2013, and Saudi Gazette, December 3, 2013, among others). In addition, at least 10 universities are expected to be opened within the next five years in an attempt to meet the educational needs of the rapidly growing Saudi population (Arab News, April 3, 2014).

Under the umbrella of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), between 110,000 and 125,000 Saudi students are studying at the top universities around the world; this however is probably a conservative estimate, given for example that the IECHE (International Exhibition and Conference on Higher Education) Magazine published by the Ministry of Higher Education, puts the figure at 146,000 (Issue 1, p. 8). According to the Ministry of Finance, the total number of Saudi students currently studying abroad, including dependants or chaperones who accompany them with government funding, is 185,000 (Press Release, December 23, 2013, p. 2). KASP is considered the largest government scholarship program in the world (Al Mousa, 2010, p. 719) and Saudis represent the fifth highest number of students pursuing their education abroad, after China, India, Korea

and Germany, making up 4% of the world's international students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013, p. 69). In order to meet the needs of Saudi students on scholarships and Hajj pilgrims residing in Canada and the United States, Saudi Arabian Airlines inaugurated two new flight destinations, Toronto and Los Angeles (Arab News, September 22, 2013 and January 29, 2014).

To convey some idea as to the size of Saudi investments in education, it may be helpful to compare them with European Union allocations to education and development. At present the European Union boasts two newly launched programmes, Horizon 2020 and Erasmus Plus. Horizon 2020 is the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. Its main priorities are excellence in science, competitiveness of European industries and societal challenges; the Horizon 2020 budget for the next seven years (2014-2020) is €80 billion (European Commission, 2013a). Erasmus Plus is the EU programme aimed at boosting skills and employability, and modernising education and training. Its budget for the same period (2014-2020) is €14.7 billion (European Commission, 2013b). So the European Union has allocated a total amount of around \$131 billion in order to support the development of the European knowledge society over the next seven years, the equivalent of \$18.7 billion per year. Self-evidently, the EU allocations for the next seven years bear no comparison with the Saudi allocations for education in 2014 (Pavan & Alfahadi, 2014).

4. The New Saudi Educational Renaissance Seen from the Saudi Perspective

But Saudi figures on education do not tell the whole story. There are various official documents and declarations delivered by prominent Saudi voices on the subject of educational development in the kingdom and other related issues providing clear evidence that a *new* Saudi Educational Renaissance — to borrow an expression that has been circulating in the kingdom for decades, but gained new impetus in recent years (Ministry of Education 2004, p. 4)— is indeed in progress and that the remarkable figures mentioned above stem from vision, wisdom and a deep-rooted commitment to the human development of the Saudi nation in the context of the global knowledge society.

As reported on the KAICIID (King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue) website, the Madrid Declaration, issued at the World Conference on Dialogue convened by King Abdullah and organized by the Muslim World League in Madrid in July 2008, states that “Cultural diversity...is the cause for the progress and the prosperity of humankind”. It also emphasises that “Peace, commitment and the keeping of promises, as well as the respect of people’s uniqueness, their entitlement to peace and liberty and their right to make their own decisions in their affairs are the essence of relationships among people”. It also attaches great importance to the media for the dissemination of a culture of dialogue: “(The Conference recommends) disseminating the culture of tolerance through dialogue so that it can turn into the framework for international relations. All this is to be achieved through the convening of conferences and symposia, and through the development of cultural, educational and media programmes conducive to this concept”. This recommendation, in particular, echoes another one included in the “Means and procedures of dialogue” contained in the Makkah Declaration, issued at the World Islamic Conference on Dialogue called for by King Abdullah and organized by the Muslim World League in Makkah in June 2008: “Openness to all contemporary influential trends, in the domains of politics, research, academics, media, among others, and not limiting this openness to religious leadership alone” (KAICIID website).

Although these affirmations—apparently underpinned by the conviction that education can pave the way for peace and human development—are in line with various international documents related to education, this study has chosen to borrow the voice of UNESCO, which included Saudi Arabia among its co-founders in 1945.

Firstly, the Preamble of the UNESCO Constitution, which states: “Since wars begin in the minds of men [human beings], it is in the minds of men [human beings] that defences of peace must be constructed” and “The wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man [human beings] and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern”. Secondly, the Delors Report published by UNESCO in 1996: “Learning: the Treasure Within”, which introduces the four pillars of education for the 21st century (namely: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to be). In his Introduction to the Report, Jacques Delors focuses both on the importance and on the difficulty of implementing the third pillar: “Learning to live together, by developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions and spiritual values and, on this basis, creating a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence...would induce people to implement common projects or to manage the inevitable conflicts in an intelligent and peaceful way. Utopia, some might think, but it is a necessary utopia” (p. 22). Utopia, however, does not seem to figure prominently in King Abdullah’s realistic thoughts on learning to live together: “Men [human beings] are equal on this planet and by

consent are condemned to live together in peace and harmony or to finish in the fire of misunderstanding and hatred” (from the King’s statement at the opening of the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Dialogue of Religions, Cultures and Civilizations, 12-13 November 2008, New York, as reported by ISESCO, 2012, p. 19). This writer discerns a message of peace in the words of the Saudi King, which can be a positive and beneficial influence in moving toward a global vision of education in the 21st century.

The Ministry of Economy and Planning, in its 2009 Report on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in Saudi Arabia, states that: “Education is a main pillar of economic and social development and the most important factor of its sustainability. If the ultimate goal of development in a developed society is improving human welfare, then this cannot be attained without educated, productive citizens and individual commitment to human values and ideals” (p. 25). On the occasion of the Global Knowledge Society Forum in December 2013 in Dhahran at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, Khalid Al Falih, President and CEO of Saudi Aramco, after declaring that “The currency of the new realm is knowledge”, goes on to say: “Our desire is to move to societies of well-educated citizens, using the products of their minds to make the world a better place and build a sustainable higher standard of living for themselves and their families”. The Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society undeniably reflects an interpenetrative relationship between education and society that is part of the history of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Pavan, 2013, p. 28).

The content of the opening address delivered by dr Mohammad Al Ohali, Deputy Minister for Educational Affairs in the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, at the Gulf Research Centre Cambridge meeting in July 2010 provides a particularly effective insight into the potentially very important Saudi contribution to the development of a global knowledge society. In his own words, “While many believe that globalization endangers cultural diversity, I think it could provide a unique opportunity for dialogue among cultures and civilizations on the basis of shared human values, mutual understanding and respect” (p. 24). He highlights the fact that the kingdom is committed to raising investments in higher education, because “we strongly believe that higher education must significantly contribute to the country transformation socially and economically” (p. 25). Consequently, “One of the first major adopted initiatives is to provide wider access opportunities at university level” (p. 25). It is pointed out that the strategy followed by the Saudi government for the preparation of its human capital “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). Illustrating the rationale behind KASP, dr Alohal explains: “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). For the kingdom, it is not just a matter of implementing the ‘education for all’ goal, however vital this may be. Working on the knowledge triangle of education-research-and-innovation, Saudi higher education policies can show the country the way to gain the status of a developed nation. And it is expected that the foresight of Saudi rulers will contribute greatly to the pursuit of this goal, as it has so far.

Shortly after his appointment as Minister of Education in December 2013, Prince Khaled bin Faisal Al Saud declared: “We are all responsible for education and every official in this country should contribute to education reform”, adding that “Education should be our shared project to help raise a generation able to compete in the production of knowledge in all disciplines” (Arab News, January 2, 2014). The wisdom and the strong sense of responsibility underlying Prince Khaled’s words inspire confidence in the capacity of Saudi Arabia to engage successfully in the sphere of worldwide cognitive competition (Pavan, 2008, p. 98). Furthermore, Prince Khaled openly addresses 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, December 30, 2013, emphasis added). This study ventures to hope that the nascent Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society will be a source of inspiration for all those countries, especially outside the Arab world, which—like Saudi Arabia—seriously believe in education as the driving force for human development.

5. “Capacity to Aspire” and “Capacity to Remember”

UNESCO, a tireless champion of cultural diversity, affirms that there exists the “capacity to aspire” in the broader framework of the “cultures of aspiration”: “UNESCO underlines those dimensions of human energy, creativity and solidarity (rooted in history, language and tradition to be sure), which help ordinary human beings to be full participants in designing their cultural futures”; “We must recognize that the capacity to aspire cannot be built without paying attention to the future of cultural diversity... Ideas about dignity, hope, planning and futurity do not appear in generic and universal forms. Different groups and populations articulate them in terms

of highly specific idioms of value, meaning and belief” (2002, p. 10). In addition, there is the “capacity to remember:” “If we recognize that development requires participation, that participation requires aspiration, and that aspiration is meaningful only as culturally articulated... We must also recognize that the relationship between past and future is not a zero-sum relationship, and that the cultural past and the cultural future are mutually linked resources. The capacity to aspire and the capacity to remember must be nurtured as linked capacities” (p. 11).

Saudi Arabian policies on education are a product of the “capacity to aspire” (thanks to their foresight, openness and ambitions) and the “capacity to remember” (reflected in their wish to implement a human perspective for development based on strong traditions, values and beliefs). They place special emphasis on the cultivation of fiduciary abilities, i.e. the adherence to cultural codes (UNESCO, 2005, p. 61). They are part of the inheritance of a great past: “During the most splendid period of the Spanish-Mohammedan empire, ignorance was accounted so disgraceful that men who had not enjoyed opportunities of education in early life concealed the fact as far as possible, just as they would have hidden the commission of a crime” (S.P. Scott, *History of the Moorish Empire in Europe*, cited in *Pathfinders: The Golden Age of Arabic Science*, by J. Al Khalili). For all of these reasons, much is to be expected from the New Saudi Educational Renaissance.

6. Conclusion

Firstly, this study recommends a shift from Western-led literature and interpretation of the recent developments in Saudi higher education policies to a more Saudi and Arab-led literature and interpretation. Secondly, it embraces and promotes the idea that a New Saudi Educational Renaissance is under way: an idea consistent with the notion that a Saudi Arabian way to knowledge society is unquestionably in the making, progressing at its own pace, as explained in a previous study. Thirdly, it suggests that King Abdullah’s firm visionary realism deserves full and widespread recognition. Finally, it invites international academia to follow the Saudi experiment as attentively and as free of prejudices and preconceptions as possible, remembering that Saudi Arabia is a country striving to balance its “capacity to aspire” and its “capacity to remember”.

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