



Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
Ministry of Higher Education  
Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission  
Washington, DC



# EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN SAUDI ARABIA

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## Educational System in Saudi Arabia

Education has been one of the first and most prominent benefits accompanying the development of the modern State of Saudi Arabia. In 1925, the Directorate of Education was established. It was followed a year later by the Basic Instructions that laid the foundation for a centralized national system of government.

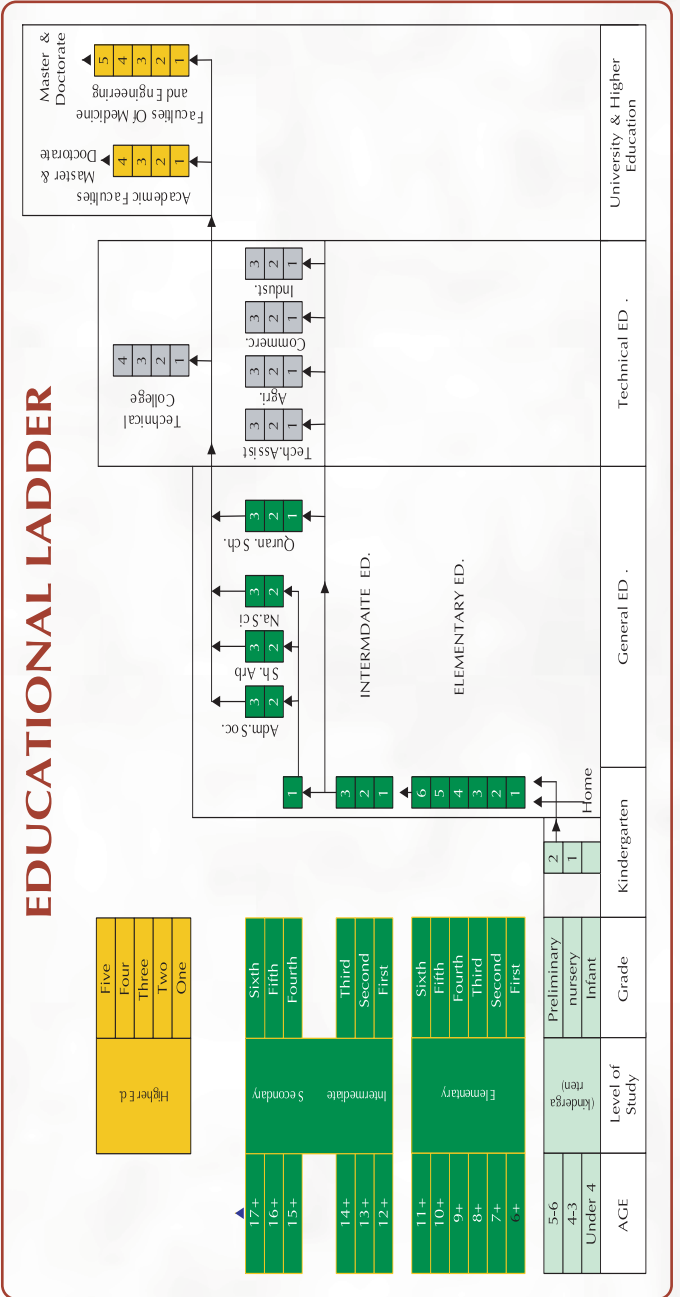
A new era in the development of modern education began in 1953 with the establishment of the Ministry of Education on December 24, 1953, as part of the Council of Ministers. The late King Fahd Ibn Abdulaziz, who was appointed the first Minister of Education, guided the Ministry's unprecedented expansion and modernization of educational resources. With its establishment, more schools were opened, and public education started to expand throughout the country. The expansion in education was so rapid that the Ministry of Education found it necessary to create "school districts" in different parts of the country to assist the Ministry by distributing some of its responsibilities.

In 1958, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia along with other members of the Arab League agreed upon a uniform educational system that provided for a 6-year elementary, a 3-year intermediate and a 3-year secondary cycle with a separate higher education program.

National development plans stressed a basic philosophy for the successful modernization of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This philosophy was based on two major principles: 1) developing needed human resources through education and training, and 2) building a comprehensive economic infrastructure. Due to their importance to the National Development Plans, human resources development along with infrastructure, economic resources and social resources, including education, were given high priority.



The following flow chart of the educational ladder in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia provides a quick reference of the organization of the education system.







# THE EDUCATIONAL LADDER

The educational system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia consists of the following levels:

## 1 – Pre-Elementary Level

The pre-elementary level prepares boys and girls for elementary education. The Children are taught at this level for the duration of two years. Children are enrolled at the age of four years old in the nursery school and at the age of five in the preliminary school.

## 2 – Elementary Level

Elementary level schooling is compulsory in Saudi Arabia and is also regarded as the foundation for the development of an overall educational program.

Children are enrolled at the age of six and spend a total of six years at the elementary level. The school year consists of two semesters, each with at least 15 weeks of classes and a two-week examination period. Grades 1-4 are exempted from these examinations and are instead regularly evaluated by their teachers. The daily elementary school schedule has six 45-minute classes. The standard curriculum is studied by boys and girls in separate schools.

## 3 – Intermediate Level

Upon finishing the elementary level, students between the ages of twelve and fourteen are encouraged to continue their education at the intermediate level (the equivalent of grades 7-9 in the U.S. education system).

The school year at this level consists of two 15-week semesters and a two-week examination period. There are thirty-three class periods per week, each of which is forty-five minutes in length.

At this level, English becomes a required subject and remains compulsory throughout secondary school. Passing a completion examination is necessary to receive the Intermediate School Certificate, which is a prerequisite for entering secondary school.



## 4 – Secondary Level

### 4-1 Regular Secondary Education

Secondary school education spans three years and generally serves students in the fifteen to nineteen year-old age group. All students in the regular secondary schools study a general curriculum for the first year and choose for the remaining two years one of the following majors:

- Administration & Social Science
- Natural Science
- Shariah & Arabic Studies

Students who maintain high grade-point averages in mathematics and physical science at the 10th grade level are encouraged to enroll in the natural science program.

The school year consists of two semesters, each of which is twenty weeks long, including a two-week examination period. Class periods are forty-five minutes long, and weekly schedules vary between a total of twenty-six and thirty-three periods, depending on grade and subject emphasis. To earn a Secondary School Certificate students must complete the required credits and pass their individual subject examinations with a grade of no less than fifty percent of the maximum score.

### 4-2 Vocational and Technical Secondary Education

National development policy makes a compelling case for the importance of technical education and vocational training in Saudi Arabia. The technical and vocational skills of the Saudi work force is a critical factor in increasing productivity and staying apace with the rapid technological developments sweeping the international business world. The programs in industrial, commercial, agricultural and vocational training described here play an essential role in preparing more highly skilled Saudi workers.

Technical education is divided into three types:



- Industrial.
- Commercial.
- Agricultural.

These institutes have three year programs for intermediate school graduates.



King Saud University

## 5- Higher Education Level

The post secondary system of education in Saudi Arabia is, to a certain degree, similar to the educational system of the United States. The patterns and procedures of these educational systems have been adopted in accordance with Islamic systems, traditions and customs.

In 1975 a segment of the Ministry of Education became a separate entity, and was renamed the Ministry of Higher Education, with the purpose of dealing exclusively with higher education. Among its responsibilities were:

- Proposing the establishment of higher educational institutions and authorizing them to offer special programs in accordance with the country's needs.
- Creating and administering universities and colleges in the Kingdom.



- Raising the level of communication and coordination between institutions of higher learning and coordinating with other governmental ministries and agencies in terms of their interests and needs in higher education.
- Representing the government abroad in all educational and cultural affairs, through various cultural and educational offices distributed over 32 countries.

The Higher Education Council is the supreme authority for post-secondary education affairs with the specific task of supervising and coordinating its institutions, with the sole exception of military education. Some of the Council's responsibilities are: directing university education in accordance with policy, supervising the development of university education in all sectors, coordinating among universities especially in the field of scientific departments and degrees, encouraging research, formulating rules and regulations for compliance by all institutions of higher learning.

Higher education in Saudi Arabia has undergone a tremendous growth over the last five decades. The higher education system, which is based on diversification has expanded to include:

- 11 major universities (109 colleges & 9 institutes)
- 18 primary teacher's colleges for men
- 102 primary teacher's colleges for women
- 40 colleges and institutes for health
- 24 technical colleges
- 9 private universities and colleges

The universities and colleges offer graduate studies programs which grant master's and doctoral degrees in some fields. Like other elements of the educational system in the Kingdom, higher education is designed and evaluated in relation to the overall national development plan, and is considered essential for fulfilling the potential of the Kingdom's greatest resource- its people.





## SPECIAL EDUCATION

In 1960 the Ministry of Education started a special education program and opened the first governmentally supported training institute for blind male students, the Al-Noor Institute in Riyadh. In 1964, the first school for blind girls was founded. In the same year the first school for the hearing impaired, the Amal Institute in Riyadh, was opened to provide education, training and care for deaf children. By that time, resources for blind students had expanded to five institutes. The first specialized institute for children with mental disabilities, Al-Tarbiyah Al Fikriyah Institute for boys and girls in Riyadh, was opened in 1971.

There has been a steady expansion of resources for disabled students as new institutions are founded in different geographic locations according to the needs of each province. Schools for the handicapped have increased from one school in 1960 to 27 schools in 1987, and most recently to 54. Presently there are 10 schools for the blind, 28 schools for the deaf and 16 schools for the mentally challenged.



King Abdulaziz University Exhibition Hall



## ADULT AND EVENING EDUCATION

The Ministry of Education and the educational authorities give considerable attention to **adult education**. An ambitious plan was launched to eradicate illiteracy in twenty years through four stages:

**1. The Initial Stage:**

The goal was to eradicate 20% of the illiterate population in the first five years.

**2. The Expansion Stage:**

The goal was to eradicate an additional 25% of the illiterate population, in the second five years and another 30% in the third five years.

**3. The Third Stage:**

The goal was to eradicate 24% more of the illiterate population in the following three years.

**4. The Final Stage:**

The goal is to eradicate illiteracy among the remaining 1% of the illiterate population in the last year.

Adult educational programs were established throughout the Kingdom to help combat illiteracy. These programs were developed and are supervised by the General Secretariat for Adult Education. **Over 90% of adult education classes are coordinated by the Ministry of Education**, and utilize public school facilities and teachers. National education policy requires all private schools to offer their share of adult education classes in order to qualify for government assistance.

The **basic program teaches reading, writing and arithmetic up to the fourth grade**. Students who complete the requirements of this program receive a **Literacy Certificate**. There is a standardized curriculum that is used in all adult education classes, and the textbooks for this introductory level have been specially designed for adult students.



Adult education does not end with combating illiteracy. Adult education also provides for the continuing education at higher levels. Evening schools are made available throughout the country to enable male adults, and those who work during the day, to pursue their education and sit for the general examinations held by the Ministry of Education. These students may continue their university study or use the certificates they obtain to improve their standard of living.

## GIRLS' EDUCATION

The Kingdom has been at the forefront of many countries in providing equal education at all levels to both males and females. As a result of these efforts, the Kingdom has provided a distinguished level of education for women that guaranteed the continuation of their education. Recent statistics (which are presented in the following table) indicate close equality in the number of students according to gender enrolled in the three stages of education.

**Number of Students in all levels of Education  
2004**

Level	Male	Female	Total	% of female
Elementary Education	1,242,959	1,084,293	2,327,252	46.6
Intermediate Education	614,211	548,483	1,162,694	47.2
Secondary Education	453,038	463,526	916,564	50.6
Higher Education	236,996	334,817	571,813	58.55
Total	2547204	2,431,119	4,978,323	48.8



According to these official statistics, one can see how the education of girls in the Kingdom has outdistanced, in many aspects, the education of boys.. The recent decision to place the education of girls under the Ministry of Education has increased the importance of the educational system in the Kingdom, and has led to the unification of policies, procedures and regulations, without changing the special nature of girls' education.

Institutions of higher education can be found throughout the Kingdom, especially in large cities and governorates. Female graduates, of course, are also served by these institutions.

As a matter of fact, the number of female students in higher education has exceeded 58%. Although most of these female students specialize in education and human sciences, many are enrolled in medicine, pharmacy, medical sciences, economics, accounting, administrative sciences and computers. Additionally, female students specialize in agriculture and the basic sciences.

The announcement of the establishment of a women's university in Riyadh was the first step towards opening other women's universities in different parts of the country.



King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals





## TEACHER TRAINING

Teacher training programs have developed as an integral part of the educational system in Saudi Arabia. Over the last five decades the standards for teacher training have been rising steadily, paralleling the general development of the educational system in the Kingdom. The new minimum requirement for teaching in all education levels is a 4-year bachelor's degree.

The schools of education at Saudi universities and colleges provide a broad curriculum in education theory and methods, and also have separate departments for mathematics, physics, biology, English and Arabic language and Islamic studies. Every student is required to major in all specialty within one of these departments and must combine courses in education with courses providing in-depth knowledge of a particular subject.

## CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

The curricula used throughout the educational system in Saudi Arabia undergo a constant process of change and improvement in response to social and economic developments in the Kingdom as well as international developments in technology. National committees established by the Ministry of Education are devoted to curriculum development and review and advise the Educational Development Department of the Ministry. These committees study the subjects being taught in schools at different levels and special issues such as adult education, measurement and testing, special education, audio-visual aids, and student guidance and counseling.

There have been many innovations in curriculum development in the last several years such as the development of new texts for primary and secondary education. Schools have been equipped with variety of audio-visual media, including television monitors, computers, slide and overhead projectors, and school



broadcasting facilities that have been integrated into the teaching of mathematics, science and geography. Language laboratories have been built for the study of English and other foreign languages. School libraries have been converted into comprehensive educational resource centers stocked with books, reference works, newspapers, maps, posters and films.

Textbooks are updated periodically to reflect developments in different subjects. Textbook materials in fields such as mathematics, science and social studies, however, are reevaluated even more regularly.

Similar textbooks are used by male and female students who also follow the same academic curricula. It is compulsory that private schools use the same textbooks and curricula employed in the public school. The government provides textbooks to private schools free of charge. Supplementary textbooks are sometimes used by private schools for the extra subjects that are not available in the public schools such as English or French as a foreign language.

Over the last three decades, Saudi National Development Plans have provided for a massive program to improve the physical facilities of the educational system. This has included the construction and furnishing of new schools and the upgrading of existing schools. Most schools in Saudi Arabia are now furnished with science laboratories and appropriate equipment and supplies. Audio-visual media are fully integrated into the curriculum and schools are provided with a full complement of equipment. Schools, from the elementary level through the secondary level, can produce their own media materials, such as educational videos that can be broadcast through an in-house closed-circuit television system. Some schools also have photographic equipment and photo processing laboratories.

The government provides all schools with computers. They are introduced to students beginning at the elementary level. Software in Arabic is abundant and specific programs are used in the teaching of Islamic studies, reading, mathematics, Arabic language and social studies.





**Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the U.S.A**

2600 Virginia Ave., N.W., Suite 800  
Washington, D.C. 20037

Tel: (202) 337-9450 • Fax: (202) 337-2978

Website: [www.sacm.org](http://www.sacm.org)