

Universities, Branding and Saudi Arabia

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Global Research, May 30, 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The modern university is a tertiary colonising institution. Like the old mercantilist bodies – the Dutch East India Company and its equivalents – the educational world is there to be acquired by bureaucrats, teachers and, it is hoped, suitable recruits.

To that end, a good degree of amorality is required. Scruples are best left to others, and most certainly not university managers, who prefer counting the sums rather than pondering deontological principles. Such a point seems very much at the forefront of an arrangement between the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The MGSE, which seems, in acronym, similar to a salt brand, struck gold in [its arrangement](#) to reform the Kingdom's school curriculum – some 36,000 schools in all comprising 500,000 teachers.

“This project,” stated the Minister for Education Ahmed Bin Mohammed Al-Issa, “will have a significant impact on the development of the new educational process in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” It will require “patience”, and the contributions of “international experts”.

Irons were already being laid in the fire the previous year, with thirty teachers from Saudi Arabia engaging a six month program “designed,” according to the [MGSE dispatch](#), “to transform their teaching knowledge, skills and attitudes.”

The search for such experts is part of a broader Saudi mission, the [“Vision 2030”](#) ostensibly designed to produce a new generation of “critical” thinkers.

“A system of transmitting existing knowledge,” opined Al-Issa to a gathering of education and business figures at the [Yidan Prize Summit](#) in Hong Kong last year, “is no longer adequate. We need to rethink education from preschool through graduate schools and we need to do this urgently.”

Al-Issa has spread matters broadly, with his ministry signing an agreement with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in November 2017 “to explore opportunities to further deepen cooperation on the design and implementation of education reform in Saudi Arabia.”

The Melbourne University newsroom was beaming with remarks sweetened by success. MGSE's Dean Jim Watterston [kept it vague](#) and professional. “We look forward to working with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to deliver evidence-based research methods into classrooms.” The impression given by Watterston is a system of education that enlightens rather than indoctrinates, something distinct from what passes for Saudi teaching fare.

Which brings us to the sticking, and even fatal point behind the whole ghastly business. As the chief Sunni state wages remorseless war on Yemen, in the process robbing cradles and breaching human rights in the name of geopolitical goals, business is still to be done. Australian education envoys, sent by overly managed universities, are the ideally blinkered. Given that it remains the country's third largest earner of gross domestic product, principles would be a needless encumbrance.

What gives this whole matter of pedagogical enterprise between the MGSE and Saudi Arabia a good lashing of irony is that the Kingdom is at war with what it deems extremism. Only its own Wahhabi brand, the same sort that inspired those who flew the murderous missions on September 11, 2001 against US targets, is tolerated.

Saudi Arabia, for one, boasts an education program that lends itself to the standardised, hardened teachings of Wahhabism. [Nina Shea](#), director of the Centre for Religious Freedom of the Hudson Institute, told the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade in July 2017 how "violent and belligerent teachings" abounded in the curriculum like dandruff.

Two years after the 9/11 hijackers reaped sorrow, the National Dialogue in Saudi Arabia sported the findings of a scholarly panel commissioned by King Abdullah. The [religious studies curriculum](#), in particular, "encourages violence towards others, misguides the pupils into believing that in order to safeguard their own religion, they must violently repress and even physically eliminate each other."

According to Shea, not much had changed. The textbooks authorised by the Ministry of Education still taught "an ideology of hatred and violence against Jews, Christians, Muslims, such as Shiites, Sufis, Ahmadis, Hindus, Bahais, Yizidis, animists, sorcerers, and 'infidels' of all stripes, as well as other groups with different beliefs." If you hate, hate well, thoroughly and diligently.

Behind the current agenda of the Ministry of Education is an effort to root out rival Islamic doctrines, a program that is only critical in its evisceration and selective censorship. In March this year, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told CBS television that the dreaded Muslim Brotherhood had found its way into the Saudi school system, a carcinogenic force that needed a good dose of administrative chemo.

The Kingdom, [he promised](#), will "fight extremist ideologies by reviewing school curricula and books to ensure they are free of the banned Muslim Brotherhood's agenda". This act of pedagogical cleansing was promised to be harsh, seeking to "ban books attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood from all schools and universities and remove all those who sympathise with the group."

Short shrift, in other words, is being given to the functions of actual critical thinking, the very stuff Watterston boasts about somewhat uncritically. But that will not bother him, or those who have put their signatures in this particular form of international engagement. The perks are bound to be endless. Like the selling of arms, education is a business designed to line pockets, feed the parasites of management, and enhance an empty brand. Forget the students – they are the last in the dismal food chain. Even more importantly, ignore the politics of it all.

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