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Introduction Double Issue Part II

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Introduction to Section Two

David Lee Carlson & Ruhi Khan

A 2019 *Business Insider* poll indicates that only about 22% of Americans believe that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is an ally of the United States. These numbers are perhaps not surprising consider recent political events and some unknown aspects of Saudi Arabian culture. In fact, we know that often the lives of people who live in Middle Eastern countries are far more complex and similar to our own than what gets represented in the media and exceed beyond the actions of their respective governments. Although most recent U.S. administrations maintain solid relations with KSA, the relationship between the two countries has been strained. Perceptions about the people of KSA may be skewed based on the actions of its government. What people may not know is that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia understands that dependence on oil and gas could lead to social collapse when those resources run dry. In fact, the country is planning to reimagine governance and social civil life as these valuable resources run low. The government of KSA published *Vision2030* in 2016 as a blueprint for how to prepare for social and economic changes as it disconnects from a dependence on oil and gas.

Saudi 2030 is a policy initiative designed to modernize the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It has been drafted by the Council of Economic and Development Affairs in order to develop an economy without subsidies. This means that KSA will need to alter its social and economic approach in order to lead to greater involvement in its region and the larger international community. The purpose of this initiative is to move the country from an economy based primarily on oil and gas production

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and lead its citizens to be less dependent on the federal government for necessities. As KSA moves to transform its economy, culture, and relationship with regional and international partners, it requires that traditional socio-cultural beliefs change. To meet the demands of a new culture and economy, KSA has centered its policy on education. Of course, the Kingdom is committed to its Islamic faith including but not limited to constructing a large museum dedicated to the Islamic faith and increasing the number of cultural and entertainment events. Education, however, is the main cornerstone to this particular transition period for KSA and devising new ways to teach and prepare the younger generation for life after oil is no easy task. To their credit, KSA has developed partnerships with international universities to help devise new ways of teaching and learning that will help prepare students for the next generation, or for Saudi 2030.

On July 15, 2019, sixty educators from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia committed to partnering with the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University (ASU), thus embarking upon a year-long leadership journey. By attending English language classes specially designed for educators, professional development workshops, and school immersion experiences, the teachers and principals from KSA collaborated with faculty, staff, and local school districts to conduct research aimed at examining their own educational problems and issues in their home country. The foundation of this leadership journey initiative was based on Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision to transform teaching and learning and drive the education system to meet the needs of an economy that aims to sustain itself without relying on profits from petroleum production.

Central to this transformation is the expansion of human capital, which can develop the economy by expanding the knowledge and skills of its people, ultimately resulting in an increase in productivity. The goal is to evolve from an economy that depends on oil to one that focuses on the "ingenuity and creativity of its people" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 2). By investing in educational professionals in partnership with successful higher education institutions abroad, KSA aspires to strengthen the capacity of its educational leadership to function as agents of change.

This experience was intended to support educators from KSA to leverage the leadership skills learned from participating in the program not only to change their own practices but also to work towards system level change that is learner centered (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, 2018). The notion of establishing a learner-centered education system is based on the underlying principle that graduates will contribute to the economy by making the country more competitive and encourage economic expansion. By capitalizing on the potential of educators to sustain changes in teaching and learning and impact future generations, the Ministry of Education in KSA strives to provide educators with an opportunity to examine education outside of their own context. While abroad KSA educators observed and analyzed practices in the host schools. Through this

experience, they extended their theoretical and practical understanding of educational literature and research to motivate change.

In collaboration with the university, the educators from Saudi Arabia created an action research plan that supported educational reform. In order to achieve this, Saudi educators were assigned a district mentor at the host school aligned in each case to his or her content area or administrative assignment. The district mentor helped facilitate access to school expertise, networked with peers and created the job-embedded learning opportunities to immerse the visiting educators in educational practices. ASU faculty with international expertise functioned as mentors for the international educators by supporting the understanding of the American education system, following up on the every-day school immersion experience, and by coaching during the design and development of the action research project. Action research provided the educators with the opportunity to develop knowledge and engage in reflection. This model of research helped educators to find solutions to problems they faced in classrooms and schools. This was heightened by the school immersion experience to explore and study the topic of their action research and to receive feedback from both school district leaders and university faculty. This partnership provided an opportunity for the visiting educators to identify solutions to teacher and principal needs.

Nine KSA students were selected to compose articles about their experiences in the U.S. and more specifically about how it may or may not change their approach to teaching and learning in schools in KSA. Originally, the course was designed to be in-person for a two-week intensive writing workshop, however due to the emergences of Covid-19, the writing workshop was completed online and in consultation with English language instructors at Global Launch at ASU. Students wrote each section according to a series of prompts, which were developed by the professor, David Lee Carlson. Students composed each section and received feedback. Participants were encouraged to write about their experiences and their time in the U.S. as well as about what educators in the U.S. could learn about KSA. The topics in this special issue of *Taboo* range from Maker Spaces, implementing a growth mindset, to special education, to testing, and to issues related to technology. As editors, we want readers of this special issue to consider the articles here as an invitation to think with educators in KSA about how to re-imagine teaching and learning from a global perspective as well as to think about the relationship between the changing resource management in various areas of the world and how education can be potential generative for socio-economic-cultural changes. We want to initiate further cultural exchanges with educators in KSA that may spark better understanding and relationship among educators and citizens in general. Finally, we want to thank the students for their patience during the Covid-19 pandemic and their diligence at getting their work done in a timely manner—and we want to thank the commentators of this special issue. What a true joy it has been to work on this project with all of you.

Reference

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education. (2018). *Request for proposal: Building leadership for change through school immersion*. Author.