

## Dispatches from Saudi Arabia: the case for cross-cultural collaboration

Thousands of Saudi students come to pursue higher education in the UK, but we do little to work in partnership and support university leaders there, says **Professor Pamela Gillies**



A Saudi student at King Fahd Medical City in Riyadh. Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University will educate the next generation of women leaders and professionals. Photograph: Hassan Ammar/AFP/Getty Images

Just as Saturday's sun was coming up, we arrived at King Khaled International Airport in Riyadh. As part of a small delegation travelling with the UK's minister for universities and science, David Willetts, I was well aware of the strict adherence to certain cultural mores that prevailed in Saudi Arabia following my visit to King Faisal Hospital in Jeddah the previous year.

Here I was, however, travelling to the very heart of the kingdom watching a French woman opposite me struggling into her voluminous black abayah as the plane entered its final descent. I knew the British Council had organised for an abayah to be waiting in the hotel but it was the first of many surprises on our 24-hour visit to hear from a fellow female traveller that while it was of course important to show respect for the local culture in Riyadh I would find a more relaxed attitude than I might expect.

Alighting from the plane the slightly crumpled accompanying delegation was whisked through airport formalities. Our group included Professor Eric Thomas, vice-chancellor of Bristol University and president of Universities UK, Dr Joanna Newman, director of UK Higher Education International Unit, and Martin Dole, chief

executive of the Association of Colleges, ably supported by Maddalaine Ansell of the Department of Business Innovation and Skills.

The very first thing that we all saw as we left the airport was the Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University, majestically rising from the desert. This, the largest university for women in the world, has the capacity to educate 40,000 female students on a purpose-built campus covering 14sq km with its own monorail system. A visit to it later in the day was the reason for my inclusion in the party as a female UK vice-chancellor. Although the university for women has had a long history producing generations of female teachers, this impressive campus development championed by the king will educate the next generation of women leaders and professionals for the nation across a wide range of disciplines: from health to education, business and social work.

It is an extraordinarily powerful symbol of Saudi Arabia's commitment to the higher education and future employment of its women in a nation full of contradictions. While more than 50% of Saudi undergraduates are female only 13.5% are employed, the lowest rate in the world, and 20% of women are illiterate compared to 13% of men. Women will be able to vote in local elections from 2015 and there is clearly a commitment to changing their position in society, although the pace of change will be measured. The female UK delegation, suitably attired in abayahs, arrived in the middle of the day for our much-anticipated visit to the university. We were ushered inside and, now in an all-female environment, the abayahs were quickly shrugged off. We were privileged to meet Dr Huda Mohammed Saleh Al-Ameel, the rector of the university, and her impressive top team of vice-rectors and administrators.

Dr Huda is a leader of intellect with an obvious passion for education and a desire to create the best university for the teaching of women in the world. Her team's energy, commitment and enthusiasm was infectious and they were frustrated that visits in recent years to the UK to seek partnerships to help them grow their curriculum, improve their quality assurance arrangements and upskill their staff with master's and PhD qualifications had largely fallen on stony ground. We in the west may not find it easy to accept the restrictions that limit the opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia, but my visit certainly taught me that change is in the air. Perhaps we should not be so reluctant to work in partnership with leaders like Dr Huda, to support her in her educational task within her country. Perhaps for too long we have stayed at home expecting Saudi students to come to us.

And they do come to us in very large numbers. We have more than 20,000 students from Saudi Arabia in the UK at the present time, 16,000 on a special King Abdullah Scholarship programme. During his short visit, the very first of a UK minister for universities to the kingdom, David Willetts worked graciously and tirelessly to promote our higher education sector, its diversity and the quality of our further education colleges. In return, the Saudi minister for higher education expressed his desire for a greater commitment to collaboration, for more research and knowledge transfer agreements between our universities and for assistance in promoting world-class teaching.

There is no doubting the affinity between our nations, unexpectedly captured in an emotional exchange I had over lunch with a woman from the ministry. She described

how, after entering the US after 9/11 with her three young children to resume her PhD studies at a university in Kansas, she had been treated with such aggression, hostility and distaste that she feared for her children's safety and returned to her own country to complete her studies. She added that she had always felt welcomed and safe in the UK, and we agreed that if our UK students were encouraged to study, even for short periods of time in Saudi Arabia, this could only further our understanding of each other, encourage tolerance and dispel fear.

Yes, a surprising visit and leaving on the Sunday morning as the sun rose once again I knew for certain I, with Joanna and Maddalaine, would do all we could to find ways in the months ahead to give practical support to the women we had met who are providing educational opportunities for the many willing hearts in their care.

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