

Saudi Arabia Report



Visit to Saudi Arabia, February 2006

"I get five Japanese a day banging on my door – no Brits." (Mr Abdallah S Jum'ah, President and CEO, Saudi Aramco, in meeting on 20 February 2006)

Programme

The programme was largely composed of formal meetings, held in football-pitch sized rooms with full AV facilities, in ministry buildings or universities. This has a direct bearing on the suggestions for future action in this report.

The programme in outline was as follows.

Saturday 18 February

Arrive Kuwait on overnight flight, fly on to Riyadh
Briefings at the Embassy in Riyadh
Buffet supper for the delegation

Sunday 19 February

Meeting with Dr Al-Obaid, Minister of Education
Meeting with Dr Al-Ghafis of GOTEVOT (the Government organisation for vocational training) and Dr Al-Ghosaibi, Minister of Labour
Meeting with Dr Al-Anqari, Minister of Higher Education
Meeting then lunch with the President and Deans of the King Saud University
Meeting with the Rector and Deans of Prince Sultan University
Round-up so far with delegation
Mini Education Fair at the Embassy then buffet dinner with guests for informal discussion and networking

Monday 20 February

Meeting with the President and Deans of Al Yamamah College
Flight from Riyadh Royal Terminal by royal jet to Dammam
Meeting then lunch with the President and Deans of King Fahd University of
Petroleum and Minerals
Meeting with President & CEO and entire senior management team of Saudi Aramco
Meeting with Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry, then mini
education fair (20 minutes!)
Round-up with delegation
Buffet dinner with Eastern Province academic and business leaders
Drive to Bahrain for 02.00 flight arriving Heathrow 06.00 21 February.

Rather than reporting blow-by-blow accounts of formal meetings, this report will try to distil the salient points.

Purpose of visit and background

The motive for the visit was a discussion between the Prime Minister and the Saudi Government in summer 2005, when co-operation in education was raised and the PM agreed to send an education delegation led by a Minister to explore how and in what areas of education the UK and Saudi might extend existing collaboration.

The visit was led by Bill Rammell MP, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, and facilitated by the Embassy in Riyadh (Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the Ambassador, and Karen Bell, First Secretary) with the help of the local British Council office (Alan Smart, Director, shortly to move to a posting in Burma). It was extremely well planned and organised, well received as attested by the levels of access achieved, and ably led by the Minister. It has however mainly opened doors: there needs to be planned and intensive follow-up if business benefits are to result.

Saudi Arabia – brief facts

Of the 24million population, only 18million are Saudis: the rest are immigrant workers. These 6million foreign workers account for an amazing 89% of private sector jobs.

Demographics: under-17s are about 44% of the population (compare 20% in the UK), and projections indicate a doubling of the population by 2030.

Economy: growth of around 6% a year, 'ideal conditions' according to Embassy analysis. Underpinned by huge trade surpluses deriving from oil and gas exports, which will increase further with oil production planned to increase from 11million to 15million barrels a day to meet world demand. Saudi Aramco has 260billion barrels of proven recoverable oil reserves (compare BP, 18billion barrels, and Shell, 19billion).

Vast state investment in education being planned at all levels: over 5,000 new schools, 22 higher education colleges, 61 training colleges and 4 university hospitals. Private investment in higher education and training also being encouraged, by both rich individuals and corporations. Foreign assistance needed with content and delivery of courses.

General observations

The focus on and investment in education is intended to address a complex of problems facing the Saudi state.

Saudi young people have not just to be made employable, they have to see employment as the natural state of things. The policy of Saudisation, reducing dependency on immigrant workers, will create job vacancies. However the general standard of education reached at the end of secondary education is very poor in terms of international comparisons, mainly because (though the Saudis cannot say this) a huge amount of time is spent on Koranic studies, basically learning the holy book by heart. Even at elite higher education institutions some 20% of the time is spent on study of the Koran. When Saudi Aramco takes on staff it puts them through a 5-6 year on and off the job training process which is to some extent remedial education and to some extent familiarisation with work practices, and only when they have attained both training and employment objectives are they confirmed as permanent employees.

At the same time Saudis have to be persuaded to work, and there is some resistance to this, based partly on the cultural-historical feeling that work is neither dignified nor actually necessary. But clearly the government feels that having a substantial proportion of the under-30 male population relatively uneducated and unemployed is to invite economic and social problems which could prove a fertile recruiting context for extremists.

However education (particularly learning a language such as English) and work are both perceived by the religious leaders as a threat to Islamic values by introducing knowledge of the world and western secularism. The government, which is largely composed of liberal western-educated intellectuals allied closely to the royal family, has to tread very carefully. To guard against accusations of moving away from Islam, a certain amount of repositioning is going on: instead of 'king', for example, the preferred title is 'guardian of the two holy mosques'. The split is evident geographically, with cities on the west coast such as Jeddah and on the eastern Gulf coast being relatively liberal (in the sense that women are seen driving and some do have jobs outside the home), and the interior being extremely orthodox.

Given the demographics, the government realises that it has to act quickly to improve education and employment for the young. Saudi itself does not have the personnel and the education professionals to deliver this improvement in the timescale required, which creates a major opportunity for outside input.

For obvious geo-political reasons, the Saudis wish at the same time to reduce their links to the USA. Though every member of the Saudi Aramco senior management team has a degree from a US university, and usually a US Harvard-style advanced management program as well, the company is de-Americanising. Similarly though at least one of the private colleges we visited has bought in its ELT from an American outfit, there was an explicit acknowledgement that they wish to diversify their links and reduce overt American dependence. UK competitors such as Australia have already grasped this and are beginning to market their offer aggressively.

The UK is however well positioned in terms of its reputation for education quality and links with senior Saudis. Many Saudis regard London as their second home and spend much of July and August here. Overall the welcome for the group was cordial

and the sense was that there is serious business to be done, but it will not come easily and careful preparation will be needed.

Visas

Saudis applying for visas to visit the UK are security screened by the Saudis. Consequently 98% of applicants receive a UK visa and most are granted in a day.

Embassy advice

The British Embassy in Riyadh offers help with translation of brief documents (course brochures) into Arabic, and generally seems to have a positive attitude towards its role in trade development.

Their advice stresses that building relations with the Saudis is required before any detailed business discussions can happen. They suggest that once contacts are made, it can often be easier to meet key Saudi people in London in the summer than to meet in Saudi. Exchanging mobile numbers is vital: Saudis prefer to call than to write.

Their assessment of the security situation is that the threat to westerners has reduced and is reducing, and that the Saudis have made significant intelligence-led breakthroughs against terrorist networks. Caution and local advice is still needed for westerners planning independent travel.

Future action

With Embassy help and British Council support (and possibly some UKTI funding to offset part of the costs) it may be possible to take a small group of members to Saudi for meetings with key organisations and a mini-fair. This would effect a second level of business introductions which members could then pursue independently with discussions with Saudi contacts in London this summer. If your organisation would be interested in this in principle, please let Tony Millns at English UK know. Expressions of interest will not at this stage be taken as commitments, but simply as an indicator of whether there is enough interest in the proposal for us to turn it into a proper plan.

Contacts made

Dr Ahmed Yamani	Rector, Prince Sultan University	yamani@psu.edu.sa
Roderick Wathen	Director, English Deptt, PSU	rod_wathen@yahoo.com

(PSU needs a consultant to help them revise their teaching materials.)

Saleem Omar	Executive Vice-President	saleem@bassamgroup.com
Tarek Al-Tantawy	Institute Manager, Dammam	tarek@bassamgroup.com

(The Al-Bassam Group is a group of private colleges which is interested in links with a UK university which might validate their English language courses and qualifications. They are also interested in the possibility of operating their ELT side as a franchise of a British college or group with a strong brand.)



Juan Caballero Head, Learning & Performance j.caballero@alahli.com
National Commercial Bank
(Interested in English language courses for the financial services sector.)

Dr Graham Stott Training Programme Manager gstott@alfransi.com
Banque Saudi Fransi
(Interested in English language courses for the financial services sector.)

Abdul A R Al-Hammad Director, Al-Hammad Projects
hammadschool@hotmail.com
(Travel and education projects: Al-Hammad private colleges send 1,000 students a year to universities in SA and abroad; also acts as education travel agent.)

Dr Ahmed Al-Eisa President, Al Yamamah College
amaleisa@alyamamah.edu.sa
Ibrahim Al-Malik Director of Marketing
ialmalik@alyamamah.edu.sa
(New very impressive private college aiming for university status in 3-5 years. English language operation a franchise of US Interlink. May be interested in international student exchanges.)

Prof O S Tayeb President, King Abdulaziz University almodyr@kaau.edu.sa
Dr K S Al-Sultan Rector, King Fahd University alsultan@kfupm.edu.sa
Dr H H Redwi Chairman, KFU Science Park hhamid@kfupm.edu.sa

Saudi Aramco: Senior Management Team plus various personnel from Human Resources and Training