Vision 2030 and the Transformation of Education in Saudi Arabia

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August 2016

Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 (the “Vision”) and the National Transformation Program (“NTP”) which flows from it set out an ambitious road-map for education reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The success of the Vision depends in large measure on reforms in the education system generating a better basis for employment of young Saudis.

This article looks at how those high-level goals cascade down through the recently published National Transformation Program and what opportunities and challenges there will be for foreign participants in an education sector which is by some margin the most significant in the GCC.

The Vision

The Vision is about transitioning the Saudi economy away from an over-reliance on oil revenues to a more balanced, investment based model. It states:

Our goal is to attract and retain the finest Saudi and foreign minds, and provide them with all they need. Their presence in the Kingdom will contribute to economic development and attract additional foreign investment.

To this end, we will prepare a modern curriculum focused on rigorous standards in literacy, numeracy, skills and character development. We will track progress and publish a sophisticated range of education outcomes, showing year-on-year improvements. We will work closely with the private sector to ensure higher education outcomes are in line with the requirements of the job market [...].

We will continue to improve and reform our regulations, paving the way for investors and the private sector to acquire and deliver services – such as…education – that are currently provided by the public sector. We will seek to shift the government’s role from providing services to one that focuses on regulating and monitoring them and we will build the capability to monitor this transition.

This outward looking perspective sets the tone for much of the Vision. It is reflected in the strategic objectives of the NTP which include:

- Improving recruitment, training and development of teachers
- Improving the learning environment to stimulate creativity and innovation
- Improving curricula and teaching methods
- Improving students’ values and core skills
- Development of financing methods and improvements in financial efficiency
- Educating students to address national development requirements and labour market demands
- Increasing Private Sector Participation in the Education Sector.

The last two points are perhaps the key strategic objectives, but what form this private sector participation may take and how it may be targeted to achieve national development goals remains
to be seen, especially in the context of the recently updated Companies Law promulgated by the
Ministry of Commerce and Investment which has broadened the potential for foreign ownership in
Saudi corporates but does not address the education sector. That said, there are current Saudi
Arabian General Investment Authority policies which:

- based on a decision by the Council of Ministers, have suspended foreign investment (for the time
  being) in the construction, management and operation of elementary, intermediate and secondary
  schools; and
- permit foreign investment (with prior approval from the relevant Ministries) in the construction,
  management and operation of institutes, colleges or universities for education and granting
  graduation degrees.

In the short term the NTP sets out thirty-six specific initiatives with projected costs on a five year
basis which are intended to be launched in 2016. Interestingly, the costs stated are expressed not
to include the contribution of the private sector in a particular initiative – which is certainly
consistent with the strategic objective relating to finance indicated above. It also indicates that
some form of PPP structure is contemplated in a number of cases. Unlike some other GCC states,
there is no specific PPP law in the Kingdom (although ministries can and do promulgate their own
regulatory systems in this regard and similar projects of various types have been undertaken).

**Accountability**

It is also clear that there is a high premium being placed on accountability within the Ministry of
Education in terms of securing delivery of the plan. Education is a fundamental building block of the
Vision as a whole and its progress is likely to be scrutinized carefully. Highlights include:

- A comprehensive framework for the professional development of teachers and educational
  leaders
- Developing a national strategy to upgrade the teaching profession by raising the professional
  level of teachers, improving the profession’s ecosystem and raising the quality of services
  provided to teachers
- Development KPIs at Ministry level
- Establishment of a Transformation Office and an office of strategy management at Ministry level
  to implement the relevant sections of the NTP
- Shifting to digital education to support teacher and student progress
- Encouraging the private sector to invest in public education including at kindergarten level
- Attracting private investments to finance school’s construction
- Develop the Independent Schools model to reach 2000 public schools run by small
  establishments
- Establishment of the King Salman University for Technical and Vocational education
- Establish a practical framework to align university graduates with labour market needs
- Life-long Learning (Sustainability).

Taken together these measures represent a sea-change in the education sector in the Kingdom,
and one which must be delivered at a critical period economically.

**Conclusion**

The scope of private sector involvement in the financing and construction of education
infrastructure is clear; whether the same access will be given to the actual delivery of educational
services is less so. However, the potential for joint ventures around items such as technical
curriculum development and teacher training is significant. The franchise model, adjusted as
necessary to accommodate the specific traditions of the Kingdom, also has potential to play a role.
The precise mix of measures adopted by the Ministry of Education remains to be seen, however we anticipate that the last quarter of 2016 should see a flurry of activity in the sector as initiatives are launched.