



Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia  
Information Office  
601 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037  
Tel. (202) 337-4134 Fax: (202) 944-5983  
[www.saudiembassy.net](http://www.saudiembassy.net)

# Education and Healthcare

S A U D I A R A B I A

## EDUCATION

Saudi Arabia's education system has gone through an astonishing transformation. When the modern Kingdom was established in 1932, education was available to very few people, mostly the children of wealthy families living in the major cities.

Today, Saudi Arabia's public education system includes 11 universities, with more planned; some 25,000 schools; and a large number of colleges and other institutions. The system is open to all citizens, and provides students with free education, books and health services.

The modern Saudi educational system provides quality instruction in diverse fields of arts and sciences as well as Islam. This diversity helps the Kingdom prepare its citizens for life and work in a global economy.

### *A Requirement for Every Muslim*

Education is a requirement for every Muslim, both male and female. The Holy Qur'an and the Hadith [teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad] repeatedly emphasize the importance of learning:

"Proclaim! [or Read!] In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created, Created man, out of a [mere] clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! and thy Lord is Most bountiful, He Who taught [the use of] the Pen" (Al-'Alaq 96:1-3).

In the centuries after the birth of Islam 632 AD, Muslim states established schools, universities and libraries that were unique in the world. At a time when Europe was mired in the Dark Ages, the Islamic world became a center for learning, making major contributions in the areas of astronomy, physics, art, philosophy, and medicine – a period known as the "Golden Age."

Methods pioneered by Muslim scholars and scientists during this period became the foundation of modern sciences, and were taught in European universities up to the 18th century.

In the Middle Ages, warfare, instability, and economic and social factors caused classical Islamic learning to decline.



*A boy walks to school near Dhahran in the 1950s*

The torch was passed to Europe, which was experiencing economic growth brought about partly by colonization of the Americas, Africa and regions of Asia.

The 20th century brought a resurgence of learning in many Islamic countries. In Saudi Arabia, the establishment of the modern Kingdom in 1932 brought political and social stability that set the stage for dramatic changes in education.

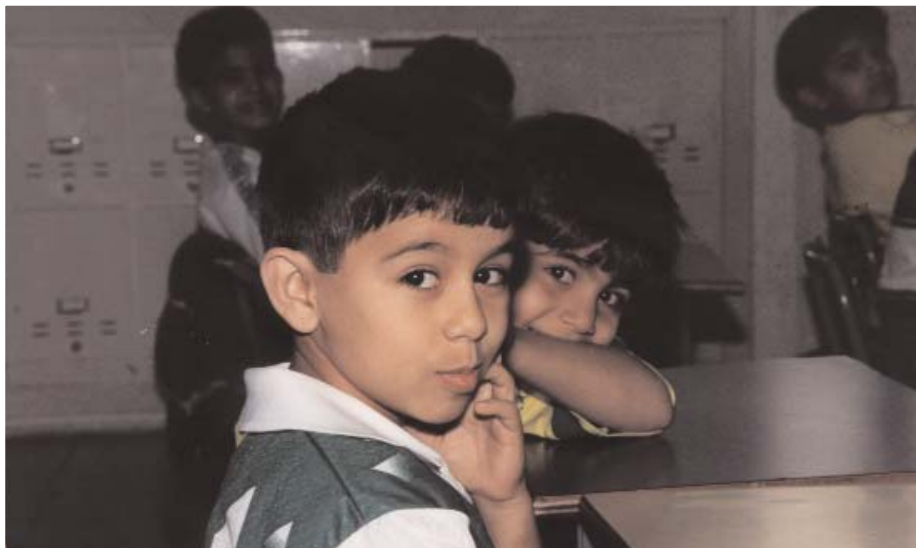
### ***General Education***

The Saudi educational system aims to ensure that students are prepared for life and work in the modern world, while meeting the country's religious, social and economic needs. Eliminating illiteracy among adults is another major goal.

General education in the Kingdom consists of kindergarten, six years of elementary school and three years each of intermediate and high school. The Ministry of Education sets overall standards and oversees special education for the disabled.

After elementary and intermediate school, students can choose whether to attend a high school with programs in the arts and sciences or a vocational school. In high school, students take comprehensive exams twice a year under the supervision of the Ministry of Education.

The government continues to improve educational standards by offering quality training programs for teachers, improving standards for student evaluation, and using educational technology. For example, in 2000 computer science was introduced at the sec-



*Elementary school students in a Riyadh classroom*

ondary level. The administration of the educational system has also been improved by giving provincial school boards greater decision-making authority.

Not only has the number of Saudi schools increased dramatically, but so has the quality of education. The Kingdom's student-to-teacher ratio of 12.5 to 1 is one of the lowest in the world.

### ***Education for Girls***

The first government school for girls was built in 1964, and by the end of the 1990s girls' schools had been established in every part of the Kingdom. Today, female students make up a little over half of the nearly 5 million students currently enrolled in Saudi schools and universities.

### ***Saudi Schools Overseas***

The Kingdom has established a number of educational institutions throughout the world for Saudi students living abroad. The three largest such institutions are located in the United States, Britain and Germany. These schools accommodate students from kindergarten through the 12th grade, and provide instruction in Islam, the Arabic language, the arts and sciences and the local curriculum. They are open to all interested applicants who are looking for an educational environment that is in accordance with the principles of Islam.

In an effort to maintain a consistent standard, directors of these overseas schools meet regularly to discuss curriculums and other shared issues.



*Students at the Islamic Saudi Academy in Virginia*



*The King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah*

### ***Higher Education***

Saudi Arabia began focusing on higher education when the country entered a new era of rapid development in the early 1970s. In 1975, a separate Ministry of Higher Education was established. The Ministry launched a long-term plan to make sure that the Saudi educational system provided the highly skilled manpower the Kingdom needed to run its increasingly sophisticated economy.

One of the plan's first objectives was to establish new institutions of higher education throughout the country and expand existing ones. By 2005, there were 11 major universities, a large number of vocational institutes, and a growing number of private colleges. Another objective was to establish undergraduate and postgraduate programs in most disciplines at these universities and colleges. As a result, Saudi students can now get degrees in almost any field in the Kingdom, and only pursue specialized study abroad if necessary.

### ***Universities***

The five major universities in the Kingdom are King Saud, King Abdulaziz, King Faisal, Imam Muhammad bin Saud and Umm Al-Qura. All are open to male and female students. Women attend all five major universities, as well as numerous all-female colleges and private women's universities.

Today, approximately 200,000 students are enrolled at Saudi universities and colleges, compared to 7,000 in 1970 – a dramatic improvement. Of the 200,000 students, more than half are female.

The oldest university in the country is King Saud University in Riyadh. When it first opened in 1957, just nine instructors taught 21 students. Today, 60,000 students pursue degrees at a variety of faculties. The university offers doctorate programs in many fields and is particularly known for its engineering and medical schools.

The King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah was founded privately in 1967 by a group of Saudi businessmen, and grew so rapidly that in 1971, its founders petitioned the government to take over its operation.

The Islamic University at Madinah, founded in 1961, is renowned as a center for Islamic studies, with graduates from 105 countries. Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh (founded in 1974) and Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah (1981) have highly regarded Islamic law, history and Arabic literature departments, in addition to programs in the arts and sciences.

Imam Muhammad bin Saud University offers programs in Islamic and Arabic studies at its branches in the United States, Japan, Indonesia, Mauritania, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates.

The Eastern Province's King Faisal University, founded in 1975, offers a range of programs, including medicine and architecture, at its campus in Dammam. The Hofuf campus is especially respected for its agricultural and veterinary sciences programs, its experimental farms, and advanced research in agriculture and animal husbandry.



*King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals is considered one of the best in its field*

Other universities in Saudi Arabia include the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, one of the oldest (1964) and considered on par with the best in the world in that field; and the King Khalid University in Abha, Asir Province (1998). Three new universities opened in 2004: Tayba University in Madinah, Qasim University, and the University of Taif. In March 2006, the foundation stone was laid for the Prince Muhammad University in Al-Khobar, Eastern Province, which will offer instruction in English.

There are also private universities in Saudi Arabia, including the Prince Sultan University and the Prince Sultan University College for Women in Riyadh. The Effat College and Dar Al-Hekma College for women are located in Jeddah. Scheduled to open in 2007 is Alfaisal University, a private, nonprofit university for science and technology that will offer an American curriculum.

Saudi students also have the opportunity to pursue specialized graduate and postgraduate degrees abroad. Supported by government scholarships, thousands of Saudi students enroll in universities outside the Kingdom.

### ***Special and Adult Education***

The Special Education Department of the Ministry of Education operates schools for the blind, deaf and the physically and mentally disabled. There are other institutes that



*Saudi students at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia*

care for elderly people with disabilities. These special schools are part of the Kingdom's effort to encourage every individual to reach his or her full potential. Adult education is another important part of Saudi Arabia's educational program. The Kingdom established a large number of adult education centers in order to make education available to everyone and to eliminate illiteracy. For people living in isolated rural areas, the government conducts intensive three-month adult education courses during the summer.

These efforts are clearly paying off: The Kingdom's literacy rate is over 90 percent for men, and just over 70 percent for women. The literacy rate for children under 15 is 89.2 percent for boys and 93.2 percent for girls.



*Students in an adult literacy class*

### ***Training***

Technical and administrative training is an essential part of education in the Kingdom. There are numerous public and private training institutions that produce thousands of graduates in the technical and mechanical sciences, health care, agriculture, teaching and other areas every year.

These institutions include the Royal Technical Institute in Riyadh, the Hofuf Technical Training School, and centers in Jeddah, Madinah, Abha, Taif, Unayzah, Dammam and other cities. They train thousands of young Saudis in a variety of fields, including machine tooling, metalworking, electromechanics, auto mechanics, electronics and maintenance of industrial machinery.

Another important institution is the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) in Riyadh. Established in 1961 as a semi-independent public agency, IPA offers courses in administration, law, accounting, computer science, maintenance, personnel management, secretarial skills and management planning. Today, IPA has branches in Dammam and Jeddah, as well as a special branch for women in Riyadh.

Most of the Kingdom's vocational training centers and higher institutes of technical education are operated by the General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training (GOTEVOT), along with the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

The Ministry of Education runs vocational secondary schools, and several other government agencies operate institutes or training centers in their particular specialties. There are also a number of private training centers meeting the needs of the marketplace.

### ***HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES***

The establishment of a modern health care and social services system has been one of Saudi Arabia's most stunning successes. The Saudi health care network provides free care to the general public and some of the most sophisticated specialized care available anywhere in the world.

The government also sponsors a wide range of social services programs aimed at ensuring that every citizen has a decent standard of living.

#### ***Establishing a Modern Medical Network***

Before the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932, health care was generally provided by local healers. One of King Abdulaziz's first initiatives for his new state was to establish free health care, not just for citizens, but for the pilgrims who come to the Kingdom to visit the Islamic holy sites.

As a result, medical facilities were set up throughout Saudi Arabia. Within a relatively short period of time, once-endemic diseases such as malaria and smallpox were virtually eradicated. Life expectancy rose sharply, from 53.9 years in 1970 to 72.3 in 2005.



*Saudi Arabia's modern health care system is one of its greatest successes*

The Kingdom's health care system also benefited tremendously from the government's five-year development plans, the first of which was launched in 1970. These ongoing plans promote development in areas such as agriculture, commerce, industry, transportation, communication, education and health care.

The first four development plans (1970-1989) brought dramatic changes to the Saudi health care system. In the beginning, the emphasis was more on establishing the necessary infrastructure of hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, laboratories and research facilities.

As these facilities were put into place, the focus shifted to improving the quality of medical care and services. The Kingdom encouraged more Saudis to pursue careers in health care, and took steps to attract qualified medical personnel from abroad. Technology was continually updated and the latest medical advances incorporated.



*General care is available even in remote areas*

Saudi facilities also established working relationships with leading specialized hospitals around the world.

The transformation of the Saudi health care system since 1970 has been astonishing. In 1970, there were 74 hospitals with 9,039 beds; by 2005, there were 350 hospitals with nearly 48,000 beds.

The Ministry of Health and other government agencies have established most of the health care facilities throughout the country. The government has also encouraged greater private sector involvement by offering long-term, interest-free loans for the establishment of hospitals, clinics and pharmacies.

### ***Quality Care, Accessible to All***

Today, Saudis have access to a national network of thousands of hospitals and clinics, and can obtain virtually any specialized medical treatment they might need in the Kingdom.

Sophisticated surgical procedures such as open heart surgery and organ transplants are routinely performed in Saudi hospitals by medical professionals. One area of particular note is the success in separating conjoined twins by medical teams at a number of National Guard hospitals.



*There are many specialized facilities, such as King Khalid Eye Specialist Hospital in Riyadh*

In addition, medications are readily available to patients at a low cost thanks to subsidies from the government. Saudi companies are also encouraged to manufacture pharmaceuticals.

### ***The Health Care Network***

Saudi Arabia's health service plan consists of two tiers that together meet all its citizens' needs from preventive care through advanced surgery.

The first tier consists of a network of primary health care centers and clinics throughout the country that provide preventive, prenatal, emergency and basic services. In addition, a fleet of mobile clinics provides remote rural areas with services such as vaccinations and basic medical care.

These centers and clinics have greatly improved health standards by making health care available to the general public. They were key in reducing the Kingdom's infant mortality rate from 68 per 1,000 live births



*Nearly all Saudi children are vaccinated*

in 1980, to 18 per 1,000 live births in 2003. Close to 100 percent of all Saudi children are vaccinated against common diseases.

The second tier of the Saudi health service plan consists of a network of advanced hospitals and specialized treatment facilities. Located in major urban areas, these facilities are accessible to all. Like the centers and clinics, the hospitals and specialized facilities have also experienced a rapid growth.

The Kingdom's health care program is primarily run by the Ministry of Health, which operates 62 percent of the hospitals and 53 percent of the clinics and centers. The rest are privately operated, but their functions and staff training are supervised and supported by the Ministry. Some government agencies, including the Ministries of Education and Defense, the National Guard and the Public Security Administration, have their own hospitals and clinics.

There are now about 34,000 physicians in both government and private health sectors. Twenty percent of those physicians are Saudi, with the rest from all over the world. The number of nurses has increased to around 70,000, both male and female.

In 1970 there were 74 hospitals with just over 9,000 beds in Saudi Arabia. By 2005, there were 350 hospitals with nearly 48,000 beds serving 22.7 million people. Saudi Arabia's ratio of one hospital bed for just under 500 people is among the lowest in the world.



*More than a quarter of the hospitals in the Kingdom are private*

### *A Leader in Specialized Medicine*

The Kingdom has a number of specialized hospitals that provide quality care in a variety of areas, including obstetrics and gynecology, respiratory ailments, psychiatric care, eye disorders and contagious diseases. There are also a number of convalescent facilities.

The King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh is a prime example of Saudi Arabia's modern hospital system. It has built a reputation as a leading medical and research center in the Middle East, and attracts patients from as far away as the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom. It has departments in many medical fields, and performs both general and specialized surgical procedures.

The King Khalid Eye Specialist Hospital in Riyadh is one of the largest eye hospitals in the world. Established in 1983, it has performed complex surgical operations including cornea transplants and laser procedures. The hospital also has a program to train ophthalmologists.

Organ transplant procedures are routinely performed in the Kingdom. For example, the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, which specializes in kidney and liver transplants, performs hundreds of operations annually, including bone marrow transplants.

Saudi hospitals have also been pioneers in other types of organ transplants. The first uterus transplant in the world was performed in 2001 at the Soliman Fakeeh Hospital, a private facility in Jeddah, by a surgical team led by Dr. Wafa Fageeh.



*King Fahd Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh*

Similarly sophisticated surgical procedures are performed at most Saudi hospitals. World-class cardiology centers in the Kingdom's top hospitals routinely perform open heart surgery, and many medical centers throughout the Kingdom offer specialized cardiac care.

The most famous of the hospitals specializing in cardiology is the King Fahd National Guard Hospital in Riyadh, which performs more than 750 cardiac procedures each year.

There are other cardiology hospitals in Jeddah, Makkah, Madinah and Dammam. Recently, two cardiology centers were opened in Riyadh and Jeddah exclusively for the treatment and research of heart diseases.



*Saudi centers conduct pioneering research*

The National Guard Health Affairs organization has gained an international reputation for the separation of conjoined twins. In March 2006, the King Abdulaziz Medical City in Riyadh successfully carried out its 11th such operation, the 14th in the Kingdom since 1990.

Another growing field in the Kingdom is dentistry. In addition to dental clinics and specialized hospitals, over 150 mobile dental clinics serve residents of remote villages throughout the country.

### ***At the Forefront of Medical Research***

Saudi health care facilities conduct advanced medical research with potential benefits for patients around the world. For example, the research center at King Saud University's School of Pharmacology has developed promising new drugs, including one for diabetes. At the King Abdulaziz University and the King Saud University College of Science, scientists are studying radioactive biotopes to determine the effect of antibiotics on bodily functions.

Scientists at King Khalid University Hospital are testing indigenous medical plants for potential benefits to cancer treatments. The National Guard's King Abdulaziz Medical City in Riyadh is conducting research on artificial hearts. And the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center – along with similar facilities in the Kingdom – has recently been conducting pioneering research in the area of stem cell transplants.



*The Saudi Red Crescent Society provides humanitarian assistance around the world*

### ***The Saudi Red Crescent Society***

Charitable societies also play an important role in Saudi Arabia's health care network. While there are many such societies, the most important is the Saudi Red Crescent Society. A member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, it provides first aid and emergency medical services to those in need.

The Saudi Red Crescent Society operates about 150 medical centers and branches throughout the country, as well as four mobile clinics and more than 500 ambulances and medical evacuation helicopters. It also has a special role in providing medical care for the millions of Muslim pilgrims during the annual pilgrimage known as the *Hajj*.

In addition to providing relief to Saudis, the society also responds to natural and man-made disasters abroad, including Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Chechnya, Palestine, Darfur, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania, Mali and Southeast Asia.

### ***Care for the disabled***

Saudi Arabia also offers facilities to treat and rehabilitate people with mental and physical disabilities. One type of facility offers services for medical, physical and mental treatment and rehabilitation of patients. There are currently 18 such centers, operated or supervised by the Ministry of Health.

A second type of facility focuses on the social rehabilitation of the disabled. These are run by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Centers throughout the country teach people with mental and physical disabilities social, educational and vocational skills so that they can enter society as independent, productive individuals. There are also special education institutes for the blind and the deaf throughout Saudi Arabia, and centers for disabled children.

Non-profit organizations also help people with special needs. One such organization is the Jeddah Institute for Speech and Hearing (JISH), established in 1993, which offers advanced services for those with speech and hearing deficiencies. The Help Center in Jeddah (*Markaz Al-Aoun*), established in 1986, offers programs for children with physical and mental disabilities.

## **SOCIAL SERVICES**

Saudi Arabia's social services system aims to ensure every citizen a decent standard of living. This commitment to the well-being of the community underlies the Kingdom's social stability and is in line with Islamic principles.

Saudi Arabia offers a wide range of social welfare programs. Administered by the General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI), key programs support workers or their families in cases of disability, retirement and death. A plan to cover employees who suffer occupational hazards was instituted in 1982 and has since helped millions



*The Help Center in Jeddah has programs for disabled children*

of workers. Another major program provides social security pensions, benefits and relief assistance to the disabled, elderly, orphans and widows without income.

The Kingdom continues to ensure that the assistance meets its recipients' needs by increasing the monthly stipends of social security recipients depending on individual status and need. These programs are also mindful of patients' comforts and sensibilities. Whenever possible, care is provided at home rather than in an institution.

### ***Housing Construction***

Another aspect of Saudi Arabia's social services network is providing housing for the country's fast-growing, young population. The government has been active in both financing and constructing housing for low-income Saudi citizens, public employees and students.

A particularly important policy has been to provide interest-free, easy-term loans for home construction to individuals and companies. The Real Estate Development Fund was established in 1975 for this purpose. Since then, it has financed tens of thousands of private homes, and provided millions of dollars to the private sector to build housing units, stores and office buildings.



*A residential complex in Jubail*