



## **TRANSFORMATION OF SAUDI ARABIAN EDUCATION IN THE FRAMEWORK OF VISION 2030**

**Rizka Husnu Maulana<sup>1</sup>, Badrudin <sup>2</sup>, Mohamad Erihadiana <sup>3</sup>**

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, West Java, Indonesia

Email: rizkahusnu@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract:**

This research discusses the transformation of education in Saudi Arabia as part of Vision 2030, a strategic initiative to reduce the country's dependence on oil, diversify the economy, and develop the social sector, including education. This transformation includes curriculum reforms, education system modernization, teacher quality improvement, and technology adoption to support learning. The research uses a qualitative approach with relevant literature and policy analysis to understand the steps taken by the Saudi government in creating an inclusive and market-oriented education system. The research findings indicate that educational reforms are key to building competitive human resources, promoting innovation, and strengthening national identity by moderate Islamic principles. However, challenges such as cultural resistance, gender disparities, and the need for adequate infrastructure continue to be obstacles to achieving the goals of Vision 2030. This study concludes that the success of educational transformation requires collaboration between the government, private sector, and society to ensure the sustainability and relevance of reforms in supporting Saudi Arabia's long-term development.

**Keywords:** education, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, education reform.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Saudi Arabia as we know it used to be a Muslim country on the Arabian Peninsula which adhered to conservative, rigid Wahhabism, closed to modernism and the development of science (Wahyudi, 2018). However, in recent years, the country has embarked on significant reforms under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as Vision 2030. These reforms aim to diversify the Saudi economy, reduce dependence on oil, and introduce various social changes that bring the country closer together. close to the principles of modernity. Saudi Arabia has now experienced a significant transformation in economic, social, political and human resource development, especially in the last five years. As one of the 20 largest economies in the world, Saudi Arabia hopes to play a key role in the new knowledge-based economy (Samarin & Asfour: 2023).

Vision 2030 was launched as an ambitious national development blueprint with the aim of diversifying its economy, reducing dependence on oil, and advancing strategic sectors, including education. As an important part of this

vision, education reform is the main focus to create a generation that is ready to face global challenges, innovate and support sustainable economic development. Education reform in Saudi Arabia includes various significant steps such as modernizing the curriculum, improving educational infrastructure, and training teaching staff that is more oriented towards 21st century skills. Special attention is paid to improving the quality of primary, secondary and higher education, with an emphasis on technology, science and entrepreneurial skills. In addition, women's participation in education and the workforce is also prioritized to increase their contribution to the country's economic development. Vision 2030 not only changes the direction of education policy in Saudi Arabia, but also brings the country onto a more competitive global stage, where education is the key to empowering society and creating a more prosperous future. As an integral part of this vision, educational reform plays a central role in enhancing Saudi Arabia's global competitiveness and preparing human resources to face the economic challenges of the 21st century (Alharbi & Yusoff, 2021).

Overall, education reforms under Vision 2030 focus not only on modernizing the education sector, but also on creating a more productive and innovative society, which will ultimately contribute to the successful economic and social transformation of the country. It is hoped that the implementation of these reforms can create a society that is more inclusive, competitive and ready to face global challenges. The aim of curriculum reform in Saudi Arabia is to form a patriotic, tolerant generation that respects diversity and views the world with a humanist and moderate approach (Quamar, 2020).

Education is the main tool in achieving sustainable development, innovation and job creation, so the Saudi Arabian government is focusing on overhauling the education system to create a more inclusive and highly competitive learning ecosystem. This educational reform includes improving the curriculum that is more science and technology oriented, strengthening English language teaching, and emphasizing project-based learning that focuses on creativity and critical thinking skills. These steps aim to prepare Saudi youth to be able to compete in the international job market and support the country's ambition to become an economic and technological hub in the Middle East. This change is also driven by the need to increase the role of women in the workforce, expand access to quality education, and increase the capabilities of teaching staff through comprehensive training programs (Alharbi & Yusoff, 2021).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The research is qualitative research with library research, namely research and study of books, literature, notes and reports related to the topic you want to solve (Sugiyono, 2022). The research uses documentation data collection techniques, namely collecting data sourced from documents or notes in the form of books, journals, articles, images or electronically available information to obtain information related to the research object. Data were analyzed using a descriptive analytical approach. The stages begin with reducing data from library sources, then organizing and presenting the data, the verification process then ends with summarizing the data to answer the problem you want to research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Understanding Transformation**

Transformation is a change that is structural, gradual, total, and cannot be returned to its original form (irreversible). Transformation is a change from an old form to a new form. Transformation in the world of education refers to a process of fundamental change that aims to improve the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the education system. This transformation not only includes changes in the curriculum, teaching methods, and evaluation, but also includes aspects such as educational governance, use of technology, and the formation of a more inclusive and adaptive learning culture. Transformation in the world of education refers to a process of fundamental change that aims to improve the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the education system. This transformation not only includes changes in curriculum, teaching methods, and evaluation, but also includes aspects such as educational governance, use of technology, and the formation of a more inclusive and adaptive learning culture (Tuhumury, 2018).

### **Saudi Arabian Education in the Past**

Formal primary education in Saudi Arabia began in the 1930s, and by 1951 Saudi Arabia had 226 schools managed by the Directorate of Science, with approximately 29,000 male students. The school only accommodates male students because of society's belief that female education is contrary to traditional and religious values that prohibit women from leaving the home except in emergencies. Initially, schools provided for male and female students were first held during the reign of King Faisal and his wife Ratu Effat in 1946 in Taif City (Madani, 2017). This school was quite unique because it was a boarding school that had female students in it, but was soon closed due to protests from conservatives. Fifteen years later, in 1961, the education system was expanded to include non-compulsory primary education for girls and the state ran only 15 girls' schools in the entire country. In 1981, gender equality was achieved in the school education system (Malik, 1998).

The education system in Saudi Arabia is largely a rote learning method and is very lacking in modern scientific approaches, technology and critical thinking methodologies, because it is weakened by radicalism, tribalism and Wahhabism. To improve the education system, some experts require a critical thinking approach, teacher training and accommodating input from teachers in reforming education (Elder, 2005). Education in Saudi Arabia includes arts and science subjects, such as mathematics, history and English, but the government insists that the curriculum must prioritize religious studies. This causes the educational focus in Saudi Arabia to place more emphasis on religious studies as stated in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's education policy document issued by the Council of Ministers in 1969 that "religious sciences will occupy a primary place at every level of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (Lacroix, 2011). The political policies of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were also influenced by political events that occurred in the Middle East, especially the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Juhayman extremists in 1979 and the Iranian revolution in the same year. This event coincided with many foreign teachers entering Saudi Arabia, some of whom were Muslim Brotherhood refugees from Egypt and Syria. They influenced Saudi Arabian education not only on a practical level, but also on a philosophical level that reconfigured the Saudi Arabian education system and curriculum. They even politicized the religious curriculum

and turned Wahhabi peace into political activity (Doumato et al, 2007).

Saudi scholars estimate that in 2006 Islamic studies in Saudi Arabian schools accounted for one-third of weekly learning hours at the primary and secondary school levels. Until 2011, religious studies were divided into 6 subjects, namely, the Koran, monotheism, tajwid, tafsir, hadith and fiqh (Elyas, 2008). Several studies state that there is weak knowledge and application of critical thinking skills among lecturers and student teachers in teacher education programs at universities in Saudi Arabia. This is not too surprising, because Saudi Arabia's policies are heavily dependent on oil revenues and in the field of education there are no policies that advocate reform and promote critical thinking in the entire Saudi Arabian education system (Elyas & Picard, 2013).

### **Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030**

Before the launch of Vision 2030, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had implemented various approaches to develop its education system. King Faisal and King Abdullah were the leaders who initiated reforms to the education system in Saudi Arabia. King Faisal was the first king to seriously reform the education system, by introducing general education for female students, despite strong challenges and protests from conservatives. King Faisal also really understands the importance of skills training in modern work fields for Saudi citizens. He built many vocational schools, some of which are still running today, under the Technical and Vocational Training Institute which has successfully graduated students who are competent in the fields of mechanical and electrical technology, food production techniques, clothing design and sewing skills. Faisal also provides scholarships abroad, although the numbers are still small. In 1974 there were around 800 Saudi Arabian students studying at United States universities (Alkahtani, 2020).

King Abdullah also played a role in modernizing the education system in Saudi Arabia. He implemented two approaches, namely first, rebuilding the existing education system and building a new one. Second, the KSA government provides its citizens with the skills needed in the world of work, especially in the private sector by providing scholarships to study abroad. KSA set national standards for teachers through the National Center for Education and Professional Development (QIYAS) in 2008. QIYAS carries out testing to evaluate teacher competency. In 2016, 70 percent of teachers failed the exam. As a result, this program can filter out candidates who do not meet the requirements, so that they can be included in special training organized by the Ministry of Education (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

Although King's previous steps to develop education added elements of progress to the overall education system, these steps were not always united by a strategic vision. This was caused by conflicting opinions and interests emanating from various government decision-making bodies, including differing views from various monarchs who took their own small steps towards reform. These developments, in short, were the coincidental result of real events and personal attitudes toward reform, not of a sustained program. As a result, the consequences are more gradual than the conclusion of a decades-long reform program, which ultimately stalled and failed to create a greater impact despite large budgets allocated to support the program (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

However, the current education reform in Saudi Arabia based on Vision 2030 shows a dual approach. The first approach involves changing the content of religious textbooks and curricula to place less emphasis on religious topics and more emphasis on technical, creative, and critical thinking skills, as well as tightening supervision of teachers. The second approach is to experiment with more market-oriented forms of education and educational policy, with the aim of implementing economic reforms that seek economic diversification and employment opportunities for Saudi citizens. Thus, the education system has been directed towards national economic growth and changes in society, which will ultimately allow the development of moderate religious discourse (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

The approach implemented by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) is different from that of King Abdullah, in the sense that the latter's approach to education reform focuses entirely on the educational apparatus. MBS's focus has shown that he is ready to bring order to institutions outside the educational apparatus, which may hinder some reforms, such as disbanding the mutawwa'in religious police and cracking down on radical fundamentalists. By addressing the broader issue of religious extremism and the role it plays in hindering Saudi youth, MBS's approach may be more successful than ever (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

So far, the Vision 2030 plan to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil revenues has made the greatest effort to modernize the education system. The Kingdom has introduced hundreds of training programs aimed at improving the competence of teachers. Additionally, they are also incorporating new learning technologies and new teaching methods into the classroom, including plans to replace print textbooks with interactive tablets and digital curricula. This allows material to be reviewed and any material deemed radical to be easily edited. In 2018, the Ministry of Education launched the Khibrat program, which sent 1,000 public school teachers of various levels for pedagogical training in the United States and Europe to improve their competencies (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

New modules on "Critical Thinking" and "Philosophy" have been taught in secondary schools since 2021 to address deficiencies in these areas. After decades of using a memorization-based curriculum. In a change from the past, the Ministry of Education has moved away from the standard curriculum and now allows students to choose new elective subjects, including research classes and information resources as well as exact sciences. Additionally, high schools and colleges in Saudi Arabia have implemented Mandarin language training to prepare students for work in the global economy and also strengthen economic ties between Riyadh and Beijing.

In recent years, the KSA government has significantly expanded the Overseas Scholarship Program, which provides a means for all Saudi students to obtain undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from foreign universities. In Vision 2030, this involves the first-ever cultural scholarship program in the arts, including the study of music, theatre, film, and architecture, which were previously prohibited. Minister of Culture Prince Bader bin Abdullah explained that this step was taken to meet labor market needs, especially in the

entertainment and tourism industry, a key component of Vision 2030's efforts to diversify the economy. The Minister's statement indicates that Riyadh is seeking to incorporate modern subjects into its education system under the pretext of economic reforms and Vision 2030, which explicitly proposes a modern education system adapted to the job market. The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia allows foreign universities to open branch campuses so that Saudi citizens can obtain quality education without having to leave their hometowns. And in a historic move to increase regulation, King Salman approved a new system to privatize higher education. (84) The implementation of this new law will begin in stages at three universities, namely King Saud University Riyadh, King Abdulaziz University Jeddah and Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University Dammam. (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

The KSA government has also worked to include the arts and integrate them into the curriculum of schools and universities, both public and private. Initial plans for the initiative to teach music and theater in school and university curricula involved the creation of a Department of Arts and Culture at King Saud University in Riyadh as well as a Bachelor of Cinematic Arts program at Effat University, a university for female students in Jeddah. These curricula are expected to help Saudi Arabia improve its entertainment and tourism sectors, generate billions for the country's economy, and directly create jobs for Saudi citizens. Vision 2030 has the goal of reducing unemployment to 7 percent by 2030. This means the education and training sector must be enhanced with appropriate knowledge and practical skills.

The focus of Educational Transformation includes reforming the curriculum and teaching methods by integrating STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). In addition, there is an emphasis on project-based learning and the development of 21st century skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication skills. Apart from that, increasing access to education for women has also been expanded. These reforms include increasing the number of women in higher education and vocational training, so that they can participate more actively in the labor market as needed (Fullan, 2016). Educational digitalization programs with programs such as Saudi Arabia's "Tatweer," utilize technology to improve access and quality of education. Schools and universities have adopted online learning and technology-based learning management systems, which are especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic and have adopted inclusive education as an effort to ensure education is accessible to all levels of society, including children with special needs. Inclusive education programs continue to be developed to meet their needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Saudi Arabia's educational transformation in vision 2030, confirms that KSA is committed to improving the quality of human resources in economic and social development. This is done through reforms, especially in the curriculum, integration of technology in learning, increasing the professional abilities and skills of teachers, as well as increasing the role of women in educational aspects. This effort is intended to create a young generation that is competitive at the global level, innovative, and supports the goals of Vision 2030 in economic diversification.

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