

Foreword

by Shaikha Dana Nasser Al-Sabah

The privatization of post-secondary education in Kuwait is now in its 16th year. Since 2001, Kuwait has granted licenses to 16 universities and colleges, of which nine are currently operating. Among them is the American University of Kuwait (AUK), which was established in 2003, and opened its doors in 2004 as Kuwait's first and only liberal arts university. Over the years, it has been tremendously gratifying to watch our graduates thrive as productive individuals and citizens of both the region and broader world; it has also been gratifying to see the impact they have made in creating and promoting social and economic progress. At AUK, the focus has always been on graduating life-long learners rather than professional drones. That's because we see education as inherently valuable, regardless of the fact that it is critical for developing human capital and creating knowledge-based economies.

Whether public or private, education should not be simply judged within the context of how well it disseminates knowledge and teaches specific skillsets that are aligned to the market. Instead, we as a society must begin to think about education within a broader holistic context, seriously taking into consideration our national approach to education. This will require thinking beyond metrics such as the number of schools, universities, majors and degrees available. It will also require a consideration of the following: what is our national approach to education?; is it identifiable and definable?; to what extent are our educational institutes aligning themselves in support of the national agenda?; how do we measure all of this? and do we have a mechanism in place to improve education?

At the moment, the demand for a globally-nuanced citizenry that is well-informed, has transferable skills, is flexible to adapt to ever-evolving market needs, can think critically and can work with local, regional and international communities is at an all-time high. While we are focusing on developing Kuwait's academic and pedagogical infrastructure for higher education, a key concern raised by university administrators and instructors is adequately preparing students for post-secondary education.

As the public begins to grasp the substantial benefits of higher education, the imperative now is to look more closely at the state of public and private K-12 education and how it can be improved. The lack of academic readiness of students who enroll in post-secondary institutions is of great concern (it is a problem that is not unique to Kuwait nor the Gulf region in general, and is worldwide in nature). Issues like quantitative illiteracy should not only be addressed early on in primary school, but also in the years immediately leading up to higher education.

As for the labor market, skills-based education is abundant in Kuwait but insufficient for where we are as a society and where we need to be. Although our job market openly demands skills-based education, the real challenge is about work values and ethics and how to instill them in our youth. This is the only way toward social advancement.

What a liberal education can do—at least in the post-secondary sector—is provide the framework for much-needed change. This type of education is tried-and-tested in Europe and the United States; it is not alien to the Gulf. Furthermore, there is a clear value-add to providing opportunities for young people to

become “well-rounded.” Not only will it expand their pool of knowledge—through a general education curriculum that informs all majors and degrees—but it can foster a culture of curiosity and knowledge-seeking. The act of raising and researching questions does not just provide us with answers, but opens up new avenues of inquiry and further research. Indeed, these are the intellectual principles that define progress, may it be social or otherwise.

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