

Overview of Kuwait's Educational Landscape
Yazan Al-Saadi
January 2015

Kuwait, an oil-rich country, has been developing rapidly in the last few decades and higher education is seen as an important driving force in the economic growth of the country. The recent national policy of transforming Kuwait into a commercial and financial hub and a competitor in the global economy has also meant upgrading the country's educational infrastructure. Universities also play a role in the accelerated process of "Kuwaitization"—gradually replacing foreign workers, on whom the Kuwaiti economy now heavily depends, with Kuwaiti citizens. Through education, the government aims to encourage more Kuwaitis to work in the private sector rather than choosing more comfortable positions in the sprawling government apparatus. The country's Constitution stipulates all citizens' right to education and the government's mandate to provide free education for all Kuwaiti nationals. Consequently, public expenditure for education has been increasing. The government funds public universities in the country, provides scholarships and stipends to Kuwaiti students studying in private universities as well as to those who wish to study abroad, and rents land at subsidized prices for the construction of campuses for both public and private educational institutions.

With the passage of Law 29 in 1966, the first public institution of higher learning, Kuwait University (KU), was founded. Modelled after Egyptian universities, it offered general humanities and sciences programs. In 1981 another institution was established—the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET)—specializing in technical education. But as the country developed, these institutions could not keep up with the demand of a growing population and other options were needed. In 2000 Law 34 was passed, which allowed the establishment of private universities. With this step, the government also aimed to decrease the number of Kuwaiti students studying abroad by offering them educational alternatives at home. Law 34 also created the Private University Council (PUC), which has the power to give or revoke licenses, accredit degrees, and act as a liaison between the government and private institutions. The PUC's role could sometimes be quite intrusive, for example, in scrutinizing and criticizing the subject-matters taught in some university courses.

Kuwait currently has nearly twenty public and private universities that enrol approximately 45,000 students, the majority of whom are Kuwaitis as required by law. KU and PAAET are geared mainly to Kuwaiti citizens, therefore informally excluding the majority of the country's population—expatriates and the Bidoon.

To be accredited, private universities must be owned by Kuwaitis and must prove that they are financially viable. Some of them are affiliated with foreign universities in which case their partners have to rank among the top 200 universities worldwide and both must maintain joint research projects and other forms of collaboration and exchange. Because they are modelled after the Western system of education, private universities are often seen as more appealing to students. They offer liberal arts degrees that are not available in public institutions; however, graduates of such programs find that jobs in their fields of study are limited or simply unavailable in a society where the liberal arts are not entirely understood or valued. Another distinctive feature of private universities is the use of technology in the classroom, which has prompted the administrations of public universities to follow suit and upgrade their own technical infrastructures. Private institutions sometimes function as cultural centers offering events and activities that are not available elsewhere in Kuwaiti society.

The Kuwaiti postsecondary education system is highly centralized and the

government is heavily involved. The Ministry of Higher Education, created in 1988, oversees both public and private universities and has the mandate to accredit universities, establish admission quotas for some disciplines and promote others; it also approves and supervises the curriculum and types of degrees offered. Accreditation of public universities often involves inviting international teams (primarily American) to assess the quality of education and standards regarding curriculum, teaching methods, student achievements, and programs for alumni.

Efforts have been made to involve students, faculty, and the broader public in the development and governance of higher education. Student and faculty unions are allowed in public institutions. Major issues for faculty unions are inadequate pay increases and promotion, which is often based not so much on merit and effort, but on *wasta* (connections). At KU and PAAET, student elections take place every year; usually, four parties compete and in the past several years, the Islamic Coalition and Union group has received the most votes.

In private institutions representation of students and faculty is minimal. Being predominately foreign, faculty members there lack the social and legal power to address the problems they encounter in a substantial manner. Professors in private universities go through a rigorous recruitment process and are generally considered to hold better qualifications than their Kuwaiti counterparts. But turnover rates of faculty in private institutions are high as many are put off by the lack of tenure and career mobility, by the relatively low salaries, large workloads, and restrictions on academic rights and freedoms.

In Kuwait, scholars have some leeway in criticizing the government, the National Assembly, and overall state policy, but criticizing the ruling family, especially the Amir, is forbidden and is punished with fines and in some cases, imprisonment. Criticism of religion is also not allowed. In private universities any complaints against faculty presented to the PUC by students or others can lead to swift termination of contract and deportation. Censorship is also an issue. Most often it takes the form of scrutinizing the content of textbooks or curricula; if it is found to be controversial or inappropriate, the book can either be outright banned or can be used, but with heavy redactions. In matters requiring greater cultural sensibility, censorship is arbitrary because the law itself is quite vague.

A contentious issue in Kuwaiti universities is the gender segregation law voted in 1996 by a predominantly conservative National Assembly (Parliament). Although not strictly enforced beyond the classroom, the law has divided the country between those who feel that it implements an interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and those who think it is not effective in the modern age and goes against Kuwait's liberal orientation. Attempts to repeal the law in 2008 were unsuccessful and the issue continues to be debated. On the other hand, Kuwait has drastically improved women's access to higher education over the last twenty years and the number of female students is growing, especially in private institutions. Where gender does come into play is in the proportion of women studying abroad, which is lower than men's as many women are restricted from leaving by their families.

Demands for reforms in the education system have been ongoing, but change is slow to come, in part because of the unstable relationship between the National Assembly and the government that can create long periods of deadlock, stalling the implementation of new plans. Kuwait has been proactive in matters pertaining to its economic development goals. The country is trying to regain its regional leadership position in scientific and technological research, which it lost after the Gulf War. There are currently three major research centers in the country—the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, and KU's Research Centre—and a few full-time researchers most of whom are concentrated in the field of clinical medicine. As for private universities, they haven't yet established themselves as institutions influential to policy making. In 2008,

Kuwait implemented a five-year plan to increase the budget of the science and technology sector to 1% of the GDP by 2014. In addition, Kuwait adopted measures to reform this sector by establishing a governance monitoring mechanism, enhancing cooperation between scientific organizations, and improving the country's capacity for innovation.

The development of the country's higher education sector over the course of nearly a century has been remarkably dramatic. The strain on the system from a growing young population and the desperate desire to quickly provide them with quality and comprehensive education has led to progress as well as to an array of peculiar problems. Kuwait is still in the process of transformation and expansion, and the result hinges on many variables—from local and regional politics to the rise and fall of oil prices. While the future is unknown, the past and present provide a treasure trove of information, vastly unexplored by scholars and researchers.