

A HUNDRED YEARS OF ADULT EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT: The focus of this article is to highlight adult education in Saudi Arabia. It also investigates the roles of early official and volunteering initiatives that established the adult education and literacy system in Saudi Arabia. In addition, a brief overview of the development of adult agencies such as Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers, Summer Campaign Program, and Social Development Centers in Saudi Arabia is discussed. This article focuses on the system of adult education and illiteracy in Saudi Arabia and how it developed through the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. It also discusses the most important official plans to develop adult education and literacy such as the 20-year Plan. A brief history of adult education and literacy introduces how different adult education agencies have been created in Saudi Arabia. Each agency's vision, mission, and goals are covered as well as comparisons between them. The paper also reviews the innovative plans and strategies being used to enhance the awareness of the importance of adult education as well as some of the outcome of these innovations. Finally, it presents a brief overview of the role of higher education in supporting adult education in Saudi Arabia, and it discusses the recent university programs that provide graduate academic degrees in adult education.

Keywords: literacy, summer camps, night schools, social development centers

Adult Education in Saudi Arabia

The definition of literacy and adult education has changed several times in Saudi Arabia due to factors such as the continuous development of the educational system and ongoing criticism of the overlap between literacy and adult education, policies, and common definitions of both literacy and adult education in Saudi Arabia (AL Rasheed, 2000).

According to Hindam et al. (1978) and Alsonbol et al. (2016), adult education is a broad concept and has differing methods, programs, and activities in developing countries. In the Arabian countries, adult education is especially synonymous with literacy, because illiteracy is the main challenge facing these countries. According to Fairaq (1981), as a response to the various factors impacting the educational system, the definition of literacy has changed from an individual who has basic skills and is able to read, write, and do math, to an individual's career-level needs as a new dimension to the previous definition. This education allows illiterate individuals to achieve an educational level that allows them to use new skills to their benefit on a daily base. According to Al Rasheed (2000), one of the main goals of literacy and adult education was to correlate literacy and career to improve illiterate individuals' lifestyles. It focuses on functional literacy that correlates economic status of illiterate individuals and their learning interests to their career level in many fields related to the individual's interests and needs to help them be productive individuals in society (Faraq, 1981).

Thereafter this definition was extended to include public culture as a new dimension to foster citizenship by acquiring knowledge and skills to increase people's awareness of

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social roles and to allow them to participate effectively in society. According to Alsonbol et al. (2016), adult education in Saudi Arabia is defined as affordable opportunities and chances for adult students, who complete a two-year educational program *basic-level* or *illiteracy-level*, to achieve their educational and cultural needs to allow them to develop their skills and experiences to help them increase their social and economic status, which will enable them to participate in their communities effectively. This is the latest adult education definition in Saudi Arabia. The latest definition of an adult learner, according to Alfahad (2015), is an individual who is older than elementary school age and has reached a higher educational level in reading, writing, and math, and who has the ability to pursue a higher level of education and skills to increase their educational, social, and economical status.

Early Initiatives

All efforts to eliminate illiteracy and support adult education in Saudi Arabia moved through several phases and processes. According to Abdulhakim (2012), there have been two main phases to reduce illiteracy and to spread awareness about adult education in Saudi Arabia. The first phase was approximately 33 years between 1917 and 1949, which were individual efforts mainly conducted and financed by teachers and wealthy locals. Pioneers of this phase offered study circles, *Kataeeb*, to teach reading and writing to children and adults at Mosques and their homes. These study circles expanded and developed to become the seed for the Night Schools Program system, especially in the west coast of Saudi Arabia (Alsarhani, 2003). Late in this phase, the Saudi government took a few initiatives to partially support these schools. This stage was considered an overlap period between the first and second phases. In 1950, the second phase started, and the Saudi government took full responsibility to combat illiteracy and support adult education (Alsonbol, 1997). These efforts were interpreted as official governmental development plans.

Volunteering Efforts Between 1917 and 1949

The volunteering phase was considered a major component and played a vital role in the success of several social programs. Adult education is one of the social programs especially in its initial implementation, even though there were challenges such as unclear understanding of the importance of adult education and insufficient funding and resources (Alsonbol et al., 1998). These volunteering efforts represented all the individual efforts to establish the *Kataeeb*, which is known as small study circles to teach small groups of people, in small villages and cities in Saudi Arabia (Alsonbol et al., 1998). Study circles, which were the seed for private schools (Abdulhakim, 2012), included lessons in Islamic studies, Arabic, social science, history, and math, which usually took place in Mosques or teachers' homes to teach children and adults alike (Alsonbol et al., 1998). At this early stage, all study circles were funded by wealthy people's charities (Alaasaf, 2018). In addition, these initiatives were the beginnings of the Night Schools Program in Saudi Arabia in efforts to make learning available for people who could not attend *Kataeeb* during the daylight hours. The *Success Elementary* night school was the first evening school built in Makkah in 1930 (Alsarhani, 2003). *Kataeeb*, which is known

recently as *Halaqat*, continues until today; however, its role has diminished to include only memorizing the Holy Quran and learning Islamic studies.

Another example of an early school system was Alqarawi schools, which helped society to provide education (Alaasaf, 2018). Alqarawi schools were small schools prevalent in the southwest of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Abdullah Alqarawi was the founder of these schools. In 1939, he started his first school in his grocery store in Jazan, Saudi Arabia. The curricula focused on religious studies, memorizing the holy Quran, reading, and writing (Alsonbol et al., 2016). By 1957, the total number of schools was 2,800 with 3000 teachers teaching 50,000 boys and 15,000 girls. However, by 1979, this number decreased and merged into the new formal education in Saudi Arabia (Alaasaf, 2018). These initiatives were the first step to establish the new governmental system of adult education and literacy program in Saudi Arabia.

Governmental Efforts After 1960: The 20-year Plan

All individual and voluntary efforts played a vital role increasing awareness about literacy and adult education among people in Saudi Arabia. This passion of people for knowledge guided the government to start the Night School Program in 1949 to fulfill the educational needs of adult learners (Alsonbol et al., 2016). This program continued until 1953 when the Ministry of Education established the *Social Cultural Department* under the elementary school system (Alsarhani, 2003). Rapid growth of public literacy and adult education programs led to the establishment of a new system to cover the massive amount of its complicated responsibilities. As a result, in 1958 for the first-time, the Social Cultural Department became independent and separated from the elementary school system. In 1959, it became the Department of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL). In 1976, the Ministry of Education created the National Center of Adult Education and Literacy for preparing adult teachers (Alsarhani, 2003). Then in 1984, the Ministry of Education changed the name of DAEL to the General Authority of Adult Education and Literacy (GAAEL), whose mission was to improve the literacy of 250,000 people as well as to review literacy rates and adult education policies, practices, and principles (Alsarhani, 2003).

In 1970, the Ministry of Education developed a 20-year plan to educate 500,000 illiterate Saudi citizens. Royal Decree number M/22 on July 1972 was issued to approve this plan and clarify its goals, admission, and allocation of incentives for students and teachers (Moghrabi, 2009). It also defined the framework for the Ministry of Education with other governmental and private organizations regarding literacy and adult education (Alsarhani, 2003). It was the most successful developmental plan improving and organizing the adult education and literacy system in Saudi Arabia. The 20 came from the implementation period, which included four phases between 1972 and 1995. The 20-year Plan was a general national development project that covered almost every corner of the Saudi governmental and private sectors. Under public education goals in this plan, there were several sub-goals to improve adult education and literacy. For example, improving illiteracy was intended to improve the social and economic status of individuals. Also, its goal was to educate people to the fourth-grade level and support individuals who wanted

to continue to finish elementary school (Alsonbol et al., 2016). Regarding adult education, the 20-year Plan encouraged fourth grade graduates to continue their education, as well as supporting working adults to continue their education (Alsarhani, 2003).

Four Phases to Apply the 20-yeat Plan 1972-1995.

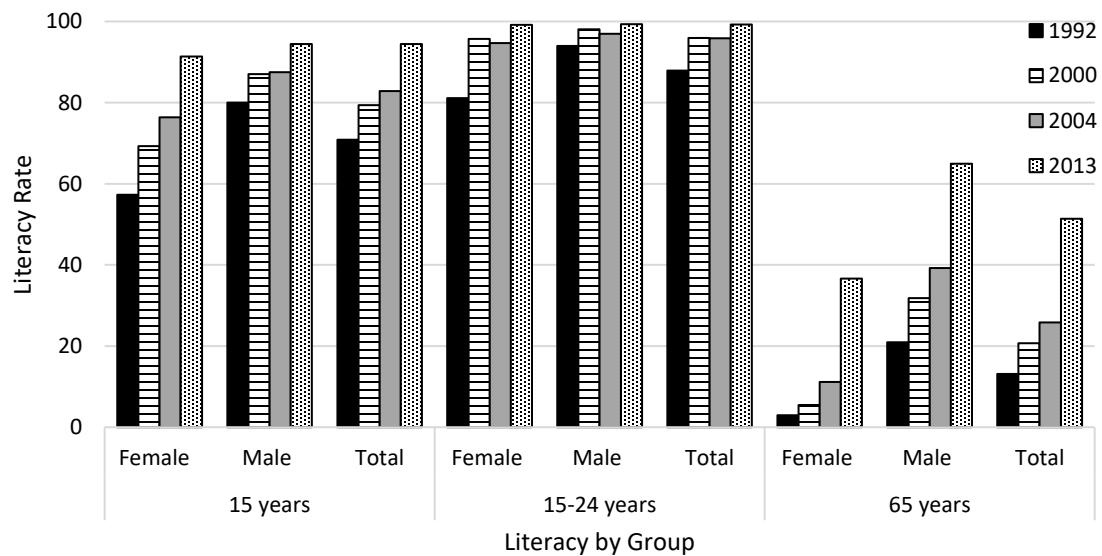
This plan consisted of four phases: *preparation*, *starting*, *expansion*, and *finalizing*. First, the preparation phase, which was one of the most significant developmental plans, included adult education and literacy in its agenda. This phase lasted between 1972 and 1976. It focused on general preparation for implementation of this plan (e.g., establishing curricula, preparing school buildings, and providing adult teachers training). The second phase was the starting stage. It was initially established to eliminate 4% of the illiteracy rate annually and 20% collectively (Alsonbol et al., 2016). This stage extended for five years from 1976 to 1980. The third phase was the expansion phase, which was the longest and extended from 1980 to 1992. This phase had three main goals. The first goal was a five-year plan to eliminate 5% of literacy per year. Five years to eliminate 6% of literacy per year was the second goal. Finally, the third three-year plan was to eliminate 8% of literacy per year in Saudi Arabia. The final phase was a two-year plan, which mainly focused on closing the gaps of previous stages. For example, one gap was to educate the rest of illiterate adults who were not educated. In addition, it targeted the elimination of another 1% of the remaining illiteracy rate (Alsonbol et al., 2016). See Figure 1, which illustrates the literacy rate in Saudi Arabia for selected years between 1992 and 2013 by gender and age group. The supervision of this plan was assigned to a high authority consulting panel, which was a group of experts from the Ministry of Education including the Minister of Education. This consulting panel was responsible for planning, mentoring, hiring teachers, establishing curricula, and allocating resources (Al Rasheed, 2000).

During the implementation of the 20-year Plan, the Ministry of Education was assigned the creation of educational policies for adult education and literacy agencies. The Ministry formed a joint committee to determine its function and identify the main issues and agenda (e.g., defining literacy and adult education, clarifying job responsibilities and a hiring system, applying requirements, studying and testing policies, and creating an incentives system for employees and students) (Alsonbol et al., 2016). The Ministry of Education made a major effort to organize the work and responsibilities across other ministries and organizations, which contributed to fulfilling the 20-year Plan goals regarding adult education and literacy. For example, the Ministry of Education led collaboration with other government offices and departments such as the National Guard, Ministry of Labor and Work, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense and Aviation, and other organizations from the private sector. This collaboration included three illiteracy and adult education programs: illiteracy centers, summer camps, and social development centers (Alsonbol et al., 2016). These programs had an important impact on adult education and literacy in Saudi Arabia.

Several factors had controlled efforts to eliminate illiteracy and to encourage adult education in Saudi Arabia (Alsonbol et al., 2016). One of these issues was the scattered population of separated small villages and cities. As a result, it required special technical and financing efforts to address these issues. Saudi Arabia is considered one of the first countries in the Arab world to appraise literacy's effects on people and make it a national priority (Alsarhani, 2003). Several social, educational, and economic comprehensive developmental plans were established by the government and private organizations to include literacy as one of its goals (Abdulhakeem, 2012). In 1962, the Saudi government created strategies supporting adult education and spreading literacy among the Saudi populace. Three main programs were supported and considered as strategic solutions to support literacy and encourage adult education (Alsarhani, 2003). These programs included Night School, Summer Campaigns, and Social Development Centers. These three programs are differentiated by methods, styles, and applications regarding targets and goals such as community needs, social needs, and economic status of the community (Alsarhani, 2003).

Figure 1

Literacy Rate by Gender and Age Group in Saudi Arabia Between 1992 And 2013



Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers (NLSAEC)

In 1946, the Ministry of Education established Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers in almost all cities in Saudi Arabia. Students who graduated from NLSAEC could achieve a literacy program certificate, which was equivalent to the elementary level. Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers included all programs initiated for elementary school-level learning. Also, it consisted of two stages: *Fighting Illiteracy* and *Follow-Up*. NLSAEC started as a four-year program and later was changed to a three-year program (Abdulhakeem, 2012). According to Alsonbol et al. (2016), between 1949 and 1962, all official efforts instituted by the Ministry of Education

were not intended for adults. These efforts were considered as educational experiments. However, in 1962, the Ministry of Education published its first curriculum targeting adult learners and their learning preferences, motives to learn, and social and psychological attitudes. This curriculum was updated in 1967 to correspond to the environmental, society, and adult learner needs. In 1972, the Ministry of Education established a new curriculum for literacy to align with the comprehensive vision of an adult learner curriculum and to improve studying experiences to help adult learners achieve their social goals (Alsrhani, 2003).

In 1977, within the efforts of developing and increasing the quality of services provided to adult learners to fight illiteracy, the Ministry of Education cooperated with the World Bank and conducted two field experiments in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The first experiment was establishing an *accelerated program*, which was a three-year program to fight illiteracy to replace the old four-year program for illiteracy. The second experiment was a technical program to develop the literacy curriculum to fit the nature of adult learners' lifestyles, jobs, and the context of their life whether they were farmers, ranchers, or industrial workers. In addition, the second experiment aimed to replace the old curriculum, which was not suitable for adult learners. After gaining successful results gathered from these experiments, these programs were generalized to cover all Saudi cities (Alsonbol et al., 2016).

Alsonbol et al. (2016) defined the Fighting Illiteracy stage as a specific program initiated to help people to learn to read and write. The duration of this stage was two years and the daily schedule consisted of 15 classes per week. Students who passed this stage achieved a certificate equivalent to fourth grade and could continue to the Continuing Learning stage, which also called the Follow-up stage. This stage was a two-year program with the same daily schedule as the Fighting Illiteracy. It focused on supporting students who completed the first level to continue their education and encourage them to be lifelong learners. Students who graduate hold a certificate equivalent to the elementary certificate. In 1979, within the framework of the Ministry of Education's development plan, the Ministry of Education collaborated with the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development to conduct two educational experiments regarding adult education and illiteracy. Based on the World Bank's suggestions related to the 1977 Riyadh experiment, the Ministry of Education and the National Center of Adult Education in Riyadh changed the curriculum and the duration of the Fighting Illiteracy stage to a one-year program and 10 classes per week and kept the Follow-up stage as it was (Alsonbol et al., 2016). The number of Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers for some years between 1975 and 2019 had changed significantly. Table 1 illustrates the number of Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers, classes, students, and density per class for both males and females.

Table 1

Illiteracy and Adult Education Centers, Classes, Students and Density per Class in Saudi Arabia by Gender

Year	Centers		Classes		Students		Density per Class	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>						
1975	1020	485	2789	1425	62911	26721	22	19
1980	2208	1037	5726	3249	91280	46025	16	14
1985	1475	1547	3291	5221	70755	62015	21	12
1990	1265	1001	3110	4049	62930	61167	20	15
1995	1210	1434	2496	5821	41441	69301	17	12
2000	*3262	2339	7501	35168	74648	15	10	
2012	1617	2041	5916	5415	132863	47648	22	8
2015	1547	1519	3935	4399	105008	53058	27	12
2017	1350	1448	4394	4308	87661	51838	20	12
2020	1509	1437	3797	3878	66681	52203	18	13

Note: For the year 2000, the total number of illiteracy and adult education centers was for both males and females' centers (Alsonbol et al., 2016).

Summer Campaign Program

Summer Campaign Program (SCP) was initiated in 1968 to serve Bedouins and farmers who usually do not live close to cities where public education is affordable and cannot attend the Night Literacy Schools and Adult Education Centers. The Ministry of Education prepared a comprehensive plan for SCP within the framework of the 20-year Plan and one of its aims was the domiciliation of Bedia (Alsarhani, 2003). The duration of SCP was 100 days during the summer. It took place in informal settings and usually near oases and springs where most Bedouins and farmers live (Alsonbol et al., 2016). Teaching methods of SCP included study circles, short lectures, and collaborative learning activities (Alsarhani, 2003). SCP's staff should have a doctor, veterinary doctor, agricultural engineer or technician, and adult teacher(s), social workers, and sometimes other professionals depending on the size and needs of the community. The Department of Adult Education and Literacy assigns SCPs' locations, staff, budget, and equipment. The Department also leads the collaboration with other governmental agencies involved in SCPs (Fairaq, 1981).

There are several goals for this program. First, increase literacy among Bedouin and farmers. Second, provide educational and cultural services such as religion studies, social studies, health, agriculture, and ranching. This includes helping individuals to increase their ranching or farming production. Finally, due to the continuous movement of Bedouin, skills and education provided by SCP increased the chance for people to settle in one place to provide them better services (Qamar, 2001). The lack of school buildings and educational materials forced SCP staff to deal with many challenges, such as the high temperatures and extreme environments, since most Bedouins live in deserts with no access to school (Fairaq, 1981). The first Summer Camp was held in 1968 in Khoa, Al

Jouf province (Qamar, 2001) to teach 350 all men, which was one of the weaknesses of this program because no women attended this SCP (Fairaq, 1981), and the budget was only 140,700 Saudi Riyal equivalent to \$37,520 (Alhilwah, 1980). Seventy-nine SCPs were offered between 1968-1990 and 126,000 individuals attended these programs (Alsonbol et al., 2016). After the first camp held in Khoa, Al Jouf, each SC covered many nearby places around the main SCP location, which were called assisted places. These places assigned by the Department of Adult Education and Literacy as the most in need location for SCPs. The number of SCPs and students increased gradually every year between 1968 and 2018. See Table 2 for the number of summer camps, assisted places, and students involved with the SCP.

Table 2

Summer Camps (SC) in Saudi Arabia between 1968 and 2018

Year	SCs	Assisted Places	Students
	n	n	n
1968	1	1	350
1974	2	3	1628
1979	4	4	1108
1997	4	13	18690
2003	3	17	17489
2007	13	466	76540
2013	9	113	25546
2018	6	250	21551

Social Development Centers

The first Social Development Center (SDC) was opened in 1960 in Alderiah as an experimental center supervised by the Ministry of Education. In the first year, its committee established a cooperative association of youth and *Girl House*, which later became a school for girls (Ministry of Human Resources (HR) and Social Development website 2020). In 1961, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs was established as the umbrella for SDCs in Saudi Arabia and took upon itself the responsibilities and the expansion of this project to establish several SDCs in urban and rural areas alike.

SDCs, in the light of what is stated in the executive rules of SDCs regulation issued by the Cabinet resolution no. 161 on 28/05/2007, are considered social institutions based on convincing citizens with the needs of their communities to grow and develop, and involving them in examining their needs and problems, and planning the necessary reform programs and their participation materially and morally in the implementation of these programs (Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers Website, 2020, items 2, 3, and 4).

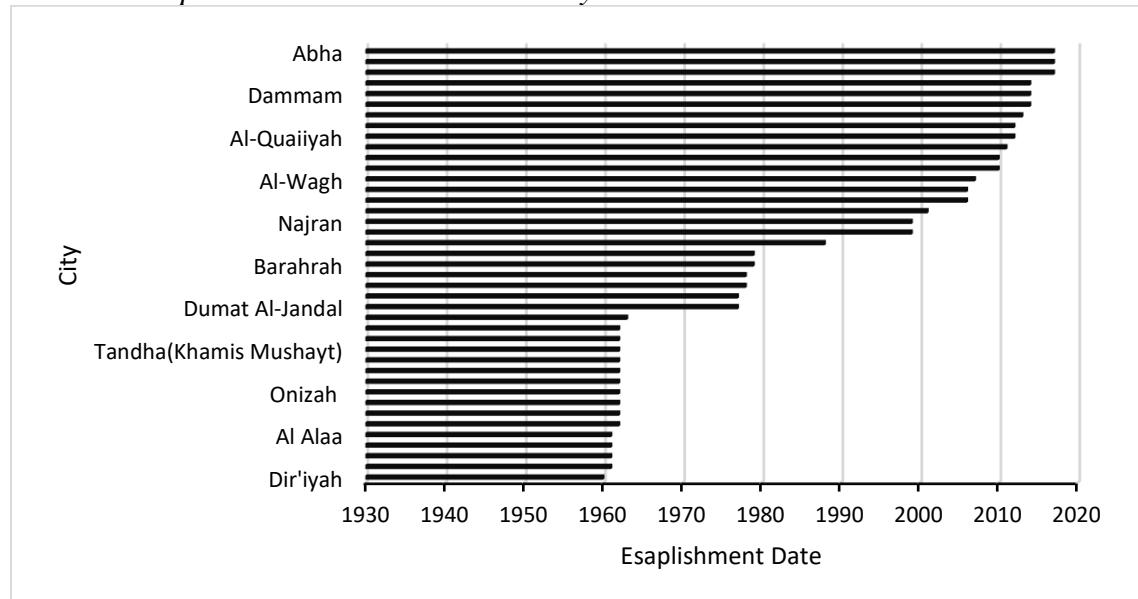
By 2017, there were 41 SDCs in Saudi Arabia serving 15,826,000 people (Alghamdi, 2018) and employing more than 502 committees for Social Development including 62 new committees not yet started (Ministry of HR and Social Development Website, 2020).

See Figure 2, which provides a historic timeline of SDCs for selected cities in Saudi Arabia.

SDCs mainly focus on activities that increase social awareness, encourage education, and develop social support. Also, SDCs focus on discovering local leaders, who can improve their leadership skills. It also focuses on how to enhance community lifestyle. For example, SDCs provide training programs in family lifestyle, learning English, typing, and other training courses that might be beneficial to improve the community lifestyle. SDCs have special adult education programs for people with disabilities, for example, social and vocational rehabilitation for people with disabilities (Alghamdi, 2018). These customized programs provide disabled individuals with training based on their needs and active involvement in the community (Alsonbol et al., 2016).

Figure 2

Social Development Centers Establishment by Date and Location



Recent Adult Education Degree Programs in Saudi Arabia

Higher education in Saudi Arabia started to support adult education after public education when King Saud University established the first Continuing Learning and Community Services Center in 1982 (Alsonbol et al., 2016). Most of the universities in Saudi Arabia, who do support adult education, provide training certification programs via Community Colleges to adult learners mainly to help them find jobs, to register for university, or to be certified in several areas such as computing, leadership, human resources, and so forth. (Abdulaziz, 2019). The first university to support adult and continuing education was King Saud University and is the only university, at the present, to provide academic degrees in adult and continuing education. The Adult and Continuing Education Department under the Department of Educational Policies at King Saud University was established in 1967. It is considered one of the oldest departments in the College of

Education at King Saud University. It provided some courses in philosophy of continuous education, illiteracy and its effects, the older learner, origins of teaching the elderly, and evaluation teaching the elderly programs in its curriculum for Masters, and Ph.D. programs. The Department of Educational Policies oversees one academic degree, which is a Master's for Adult Education and Continuing Education, and one academic degree, which is a Ph.D. in Adult Education and Continuing Education (King Saud University, 2020).

The department heads of the Department of Educational Policies at King Saud University were pioneers who played a vital role in adult education in Saudi Arabia. Among the pioneers was A. Alsonbol, who was the President of the Arabian Adult Education Association in Morocco and the Vice President of the Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and Science. Another one of the department heads was M. Al Rasheed who worked as the General Manager of the Bureau of Education for the Arab Gulf States and later became the Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia. H. Albader, who was one of the faculty in this department, worked in the General Secretariat of the Shora Council (King Saud University, 2020). These department heads and other faculty/staff of the Department of Educational Policies participated in the development of Adult Education in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world.

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