The Status of Geography in Saudi Universities with Special Reference to King Saud University

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Abstract: Although there are several departments and subdepartments of geography in Saudi universities and other institutions, these departments have so far failed to produce professionals who are capable of filling the posts offered by the employers in both the public and private sectors. This paper suggests that since the demand for geography graduates with general training is rather low at presents, it is time for geography departments to turn to professionalism in the field so that geography graduates can compete favourably for the available posts. This calls for a new look into the geography curriculum, particularly at university level with a view of improving the skills and aptitude of geographers to assume a more positive role in the process of development. The paper also calls for the regional specialisation of geography departments in Saudi Arabia as a step forward towards solving the existing job problem for geography graduates, as well as underlining the involvement and commitment of geographers to issues of development at the local, regional and national scales.

The fundamental importance of geographic knowledge is universally acknowledged at almost all levels of educational institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and geography as a discipline forms an essential part of the curriculum at all these levels. Geographers have also played a great part in staffing posts in many sectors of the civil service, particularly in the fields of teaching and administration.

Teaching of geography begins first in the 4th form of Elementary Schools and then goes on through Intermediate and High Schools. However, the courses offered at these levels as well as the text-books which are especially prepared for them, treat geography in a very general and traditional way and tend to be repetitive. The courses are not designed to expose the pupils to the diversity and riches of the environment and culture both at the local and the international scales. At the secondary level the courses do not introduce the student to an understanding of why the landscape has come to look as it does i.e. how and why areas vary in configuration, in population density and in the levels of economic and cultural development. Moreover, students are not trained to conduct serious field-work and thus the rich and diversified Saudi environment, both physical and cultural, is not exploited to generate students' interest in geography as well as enhancing and sharpening their power of observation of geographic phenomena, and their spatial interrelationships in the field.

At the university level geography assumes a different status. Fully-fledged courses, covering almost all branches of geography and cartography, are offered in four geography departments, while some universities offer selected courses only. The numbers of graduates of geography in King Saud University (KSU) are shown in Tab 1. The picture in KSU is indicative of the situation in other universities. Geography indeed views for second or third position after History and Sociology with respect to the enrollment of students in the College of Arts at KSU. Here is a short preview of the status of geography in universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia.
King Saud University, Riyadh; College of Arts

This is the oldest department of geography in the kingdom, being established in 1957. At this main department students study 66 compulsory credit-hours and choose 20 out of 44 elective hours at the BA level. The department also offers a post-graduate programme leading to the MA degree, comprising 4 compulsory courses (8 hours) and 15 elective courses from which the student chooses 5 courses (10 hours) in addition to submitting a dissertation (6 hours). A programme leading to the Ph.D. degree has already been submitted to the university authorities for ratification and approval.

A sub-department also existed in the College of Education between 1971 and 1984 to cater for the needs of students graduating to become teachers. Since 1984 this sub-department has been integrated into the main department in the College of Arts. Similar courses to those given in the College of Arts are offered to students in Education, and these consist of 58 compulsory and 15 elective credit-hours. The same courses are also offered in the Department of Geography, College of Education at Abha, but due to lack of staff members, all these courses are not taught at the same time. Here students study 70 hours of geography divided into 58 compulsory and 12 elective credit-hours.

Imam Mohamed bin Saud Islamic University, Riyadh

Courses offered here cover almost all branches of geography, but with a bias towards the Islamic concept in geographic teaching in accordance with its main objective, i.e. the propagation of Islamic ideas and concepts through scientific knowledge and teaching methods. There is also the declared policy of meeting the need for trained geographers who will be able to contribute in tackling the changing environmental and economic problems in such a way as to serve the needs of both Saudi and Muslim societies at large. To achieve this aim, the curriculum has been revised three times since the establishment of the department in 1969; the new courses are geared towards fulfilling the economic or development requirements of the country. At the BA level students are offered a total of 94 hours of geography according to the prospectus of 1983–1984. In the branches of the University at Abha, Buraydah (Gassim) and Al-Hufuf there are geography departments offering similar courses. A post-graduate programme leading to the MA and Ph.D degrees is also offered at the Riyadh department of the Imam Islamic University.

King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah

The department of geography in this university is 14 years old, and offers courses covering all branches of geography. Students take 58 credit-hours of compulsory subjects and 18 hours of elective courses, totalling 76 credit-hours. After a preliminary move towards specialization in the field of "Physical Geography", "Human Geography" and "Oceanography", the department has opted, according to the latest prospectus, for courses similar to those offered in the other geography departments in the Kingdom.

Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah

This is the second department of geography to be established in the Kingdom, being 21 years old. It was first part of the College of Education, but is now housed in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Courses offered are similar to those of other departments and consist of two levels:

Major (Geography only) in which students study 52 credit-hours of compulsory courses and 8 credit-hours in all, of which 12 are compulsory and 8 elective.