

# General Education Curricula in Saudi Arabia: A Study of Trends and Methods

Ayed T. Alharbi

Dr. Ayed T. Alharbi, Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, ayedtt@qu.edu.sa , Orchid ID: <https://orcid.org/000-000-019-726-5387>

**Objectives:** This research aims to examine contemporary trends and methods to improve general education curricula in Saudi Arabia. The study employs a qualitative technique based on recent research, books, journals, and other publications. The findings of this study show that the ministry of education in Saudi Arabia must follow current trends and approaches in improving general education curricula that strive to afford educated individuals with a suitable scientific education that prepares them for life in the twenty-first century, which leads them to the acquisition and mastery of advanced and usable scientific concepts. There is, also, a greater understanding and mastery of advanced scientific concepts, as well as the ability to apply science skills and processes, which led to an improvement in students' innovative and creative abilities, positive scientific attitudes towards science, and the ability to make sound personal and social decisions. It is possible to develop an educational curriculum in a variety of ways, such as by staying abreast of changes in the work environment which also ensures professional and individual growth. The changes in the economy, the agricultural sector, culture, education, availability of suitable logistics, and a balance between theoretical themes and practical applications are all components of the general education curricula in Saudi Arabia.

**Key words:** Saudi Arabia, General education, Curriculum, Recent trends, Approaches.

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## Introduction

Developing communication and technology usage in the twenty-first century (especially with the emergence of Covid-19) has dramatically boosted interest and demand for English as the preferred language of communication, bringing together under this common language millions of people. The extensive use of English in all domains, particularly in social, political, and economic situations, has a definite and vast impact on educational policy. As a result, governments must

examine all societal changes to ensure that their plans concur with the times ( Nur & Vardar, 2021).

Curriculum is considered one of the most essential components of the educational system as the means to accomplish society's goals inside and outside educational institutions. Additionally, they are a frame of reference that encompasses social knowledge, natural and human phenomena, values, job skills, study, investigation, analysis, and the resolution of current issues such as unemployment and others. On the other hand, curriculums play an essential part in the educational process since they are a rich source of information and knowledge that

instills good ideals in students' attitudes that represent the philosophy of society.

Students are one of the most important foundations on building any educational curriculum because they function as a fundamental and living pillar when guided in the proper direction and infused with current concepts, resulting in wonderful creations that contribute to the desired growth of the individual and the society. However, this is done by introducing advanced technologies and devices such as computers, laboratories, and tools necessary for each field. Moreover, also imperative is introducing new teaching approaches that balance the relationship between curricula and society, and adopting international experience in developing the curricula and adapting them to host religion and heritage. From this standpoint, generations of conscious and persistent students who can achieve and develop their country's goals can be created (Mhi & Jabr, 2017).

In this sense, building normative specifications for curriculum development processes to keep up with the modern educational trends and recent global experiences is extremely important. Based on identifying strengths and weaknesses in the processes used to develop general education curricula in the Kingdom are matters that must be considered. According to the importance of the above, this study will discuss the recent trends and approaches in developing general education curricula in Saudi Arabia.

### **Objectives of the study**

This study aims to discuss the recent trends and approaches in developing general education curricula in Saudi Arabia. The objectives may be accordingly stated as:

1. Identifying the importance of making adjustments in educational curricula in view of recent trends in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA),
2. Exploring the most essential international experiences used in developing curricula with the recent trends in focus,
3. Exploring the strategies to be followed by the

Ministry of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in developing curricula in the light of recent global trends, and

4. Introducing standard specifications according to which educational curricula should be developed to ensure they stay relevant.

### **Methodology**

The researcher in this study used qualitative methodology based on surveying other available literature such as research studies, books, and articles.

### **Education curricula**

Today, the world has become a small electronic screen, not a small village, due to the tremendous technological progress and the information and communication revolution as societies with different characteristics and cultures have become interconnected and highly dependent on each other. So, possessing new knowledge, values and skills is the need of the hour. The importance of educational curricula lies in reflecting the hopes and aspirations of peoples and societies. Also, they play an important role in the educational process in the context of creating generations and preparing them to advance their societies (Abdel-Khalek, 2018; Alkodimi & Al-Ahdal, 2021).

The recent global developments forced students to acquire basic knowledge of using modern technologies as educational tools as the entire process of education shifted to these technological tools. Today students attend their classes virtually due to the spread of Covid-19. Though the academic community experienced some degree of shock initially when this change occurred, all indications are that it is here to stay given its many merits. So the digital generation must adapt themselves and become competent in handling these technologies.

The definition of school curriculum differs from one to another. Where some scholars see school curriculum as the cumulative education via organized knowledge found in academic subjects, others opine that school curriculum comprises methods of thinking and researching about a

phenomenon, and a third viewpoint is that school curriculum is the sum of all human experiences. There are also other definitions of the concept of the curriculum, more accurate than the previous ones that confirm its importance as follows (Al-Tamimi, 2012):

- 1- Directing the selected experiences provided to the students.
- 2- Attention to planning to achieve the student's learning goals.
- 3- Attention to learning outcomes.
- 4- Attention to methods of achieving educational outcomes, such as focusing on achieving behavioral goals.

This leads us to a very important issue, which is the selection and formulation of the objectives of the curriculum with a precise and clear form. So if the goals were carefully chosen and then formulated in clear terms, then we can lay out a theoretical outline of what the curricula content should be, provided that the appropriate choice is made in the light of linguistic surveys and scientific studies, as it appears clearly that the choice of the content of the materials should be based on the educational goals drawn.

### **The emergence of E-learning due to Covid-19 and the necessity for adjustment**

It is a fact that most educational institutes switched from face-to-face to online education to stop the spread of this pandemic (Pakhomova et al., 2021; Sayeh, & Razkane, 2021). Evans et al (2020) stated that the education sector has not been immune to this health pandemic. They reported that more than 1.5 billion students attending schools and universities were affected by nationwide closures in more than 188 countries as on 2 April 2020. So several institutes, especially in poor countries that did not have the technical infrastructure to deliver the education content via the internet, failed to adopt and adapt this new compulsory method. In contrast, in other countries, the educational process shifted smoothly from mere traditional to virtual classrooms. So these institutions, fortunately, had the ability to apply new methods and techniques to modify the way of dealing with teaching content and the design of the curricula.

### **The importance of making adjustments in educational curricula in KSA**

The current curricula in KSA were designed quite some time ago and were appropriate for the social conditions at that time. They played a prominent role in serving the community throughout that period. However, since then, rapid developments occurred in contemporary society in terms of cultural, economic, and technical levels, daily lifestyles, means of living, production, transportation, communication, and urban expansion in cities and villages. The associated immigration from the countryside and the desert to the city, additionally, had implications for the development of many social relations. On the other hand, the global openness ushered in by various media outlets and internal and external trips greatly impacted social traditions. All of these causes call for a parallel educational change (Mahmoud, 2009).

The underlying reasons behind the importance of making adjustments in educational curricula in view of recent trends in the KSA are listed below (Hussein, 2017):

1. The massive and accelerating epistemic revolution.
2. Technical progress.
3. The presence of a local, national, and global struggle for survival which consequently affected the educational institutions' performance and role in preserving cultural identity.
4. The emergence of new tasks for the school imposed by current and expected as well as unexpected changes and transformations in the future, including in particular preparing the learner for global competition and providing him/her with several skills, such as the ability to compete, choose and the ability to anticipate change and prepare for it.
5. The rapid expansion in the field of computers and communication media affected the nature and tools of education, especially with the emergence of Covid-19 such e-learning tools and methods, which imposed themselves, and the demand for implementing them increased dramatically.
6. The emergence of new areas related to human life, such as environmental preservation and protection, combating violence, drugs, peace, international cooperation, and many sciences related to human

health and disease treatment, necessitating their consideration in teaching practices and research into how to incorporate them into school curricula. Improving knowledge in all fields requires the skill of self-learning as every day witnesses the emergence of information and discoveries in all disciplines in a way that imposed on specialists in various fields to extend qualitative knowledge to obtain new or complementary knowledge that qualifies them to carry out their tasks according to the requirements of the times and techniques.

7. Media openness and cultural communication via satellite channels and multiple media (Facebook - WhatsApp - Twitter - Instagram - and others) led to the development of society and its characteristics, which necessitated education to focus on its primary function in preserving the positive side of heritage in the new generations.

The rapid progress and development that has been taking place in the KSA in recent years necessitate reevaluating the curricula to keep pace with this development and updating these curricula in a manner commensurate with social and economic transformations and global changes so that the educational curricula must be developed to achieve the following (Habshan, 2013):

1. Achieving interdependence and complementarity between different materials.
2. Define educational goals at various levels.
3. Taking into account the needs of learners through the different stages of their development in view of new social and economic changes.
4. Achieving compatibility between the academic subjects and the existing and expected needs of Saudi society.
5. The link between the educational process and working life, by providing the learner with various professional experiences.
6. Focusing on developing scientific research skills and practical experimentation.
7. Focusing on developing higher mental skills, such as critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, and problem-solving skills.

### **The international experiences used in improving curricula in the light of recent trends**

Saudi curricula designers must bear in mind that the process of educational improvement is a, difficult, complex, and very slow one. For instance, Alnahdi (2014, p.4) stated that Finland started a complete school reform in the 1970s; this reform and change took more than thirty years and went through three phases. As a result, changes must be well-considered, and it is critical to learn from the experiences of other countries. Reforms should cover all areas of education rather than being limited to the content of textbooks. Saudi Arabia currently tries to catch up with developed countries in education.

The Ministry of Education has undertaken several prior programs in this area, although the majority of them were aimed solely at altering the content of textbooks in response to calls for school curricula to be updated to reflect economic and social changes according to Vision 2030. The Ministry of Education created committees to evaluate themes taught at all levels of school and problems pertaining to adult education, measuring and testing, special education, and student counseling, which required that learning outcomes be compatible with these changes according to Vision 2030.

Let it suffice to say that educational curricula in many countries have diligently followed a continuous movement for polishing and improving, reformulating and reforming since the mid-twentieth century. This scientific but complicated long process aims to prepare curricula to keep in touch with scientific and technological developments, in light of the keenness of many countries in the world to prepare scientifically qualified and capable human-powered change and contribute to the progress of nations and societies.

To this end, nations were eager to follow global trends and attain global education standards in order to gain a foothold among the developed countries that are the benchmarks of scientific accomplishments and applications. Many developed countries, including the USA, Australia, UK, the Netherlands, and Sweden, as well as many developing countries, have based their curricula on the ideas presented by curriculum reform movements, which emphasize the investigative

aspect of science and provide students with scientific thinking skills, problem-solving, mental development, and resistance to conventional indoctrination.

The most prominent and important projects in the field of developing educational curricula are (Aslan, 2011):

# I. The Curriculum Reform Movement and the Interaction between Science, Technology, and Society.

The interaction movement between science and technology and society is the most important movement to reform curricula and develop its content in pursuit of scientific culture. It appeared in the United States of America due to criticisms directed at the science curricula in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century because they were not focusing on the mutual relationship between science and technology. In addition to the emergence of issues and problems of a scientific and technological nature that the science curricula could not keep up with. However, this movement generally sought to provide educated individuals with an appropriate scientific education (scientific-technological culture) that prepared them for life in the twenty-first century and assumed that learning and teaching science within the framework of (STS) necessarily lead to the acquisition and mastery of educated individuals with advanced and enjoyable scientific concepts, and the ability to use them effectively. Further, the application of science skills and processes leads to improving the level of students in innovative, creative skills, positive scientific trends towards science, and making sound personal and social decisions. In view of this approach, programs have the following characteristics:

- The student identifies problems that suit his interests.
- Reliable (human and material) local resources are used to solve the problem.
- The active participation of the student in the search for knowledge that can be applied in solving real-life problems in life.

- Extended learning outside the classroom, laboratory, and school.
- Focus on the impact of science and technology on the life of the educated individual.
- Emphasizing the skills of science operations that the student uses to solve his problems.
- Emphasizing professional awareness, especially science and technology professions.
- Determine the role of science and technology in the various aspects of life, which is likely to influence the present and future.

## II. Project (2061) Science for All Americans:

The project's main objective is to assist all students in the United States with pre-university education to possess the appropriate scientific, mathematical, and technological culture for the end of the year 2061. This project is concerned with scientific enlightenment and defining the basic concepts, topics and trends of all citizens in a scientifically enlightened society, which must be included in the curricula in the various stages of education such as the nature of science, the nature of mathematics, the nature of technology, the relationship between science and mathematics and technology, the history of science and technology, the environment of life, the human society, in addition to a large number of common topics in science curricula such as material composition, the basic functions of the cell, disease prevention, and communications technology. The project consists of three stages:

- The first stage: In this, scientific knowledge, skills, and attitudes have been identified that all students must acquire through school education, and at this stage the following is emphasized:
  - Reducing the amount of content in the curriculum courses.
  - Eliminate the barriers separating different areas of knowledge.
  - The interdependence between science, mathematics, and technology.
  - Encouraging higher order thinking skills.
  - Present science as influencing and influenced by society.
- The second stage: In this, the recommendations of the first stage were translated into action plans, and the development of several models

for the curriculum, and these curricula were implemented in some schools selected in the United States of America in an attempt to reform the teaching of science and mathematics and this phase ended in 1992 by publishing the report entitled (criteria/intents Quality for Scientific Culture).

- The third stage: This stage continues into the twenty-first century, in which the outputs of the first and second phases are widely implemented.

### III. National Science Education Standards (NSES)

It is a project affiliated with the National Academy of Sciences at the National Research Center (NRC), wherein 1995 national science education standards were defined in America to achieve scientific enlightenment for all students in general education stages, and the standards were derived from Project (2061), and are based on the following principles and foundations:

- Knowledge for all students.
- Learning science is an active process.
- The intellectual and cultural traditions that characterize contemporary science practices are reflected in study science.
- The reform of science education is part of the reform of the educational system as a whole.

### The development of general education curricula in Saudi Arabia

Individuals can be prepared for the future if they have the ability to plan properly, predict change, anticipate the future, make the appropriate decision, and deal intelligently with advanced technologies. Also, by the acquisition of human skills such as being capable of dealing with others, regardless of ethnic, professional or social affiliations, and by having a mentality that elevates its owner to the spaciousness of the world instead of Bigotry and not accepting the other. The curricula, therefore, should

also strive to instil a spirit of tolerance and freedom and teach values through an encouraging environment that respects the entity of learners and their humanity and allows them to open up to the world of research and knowledge (Hussein, 2017).

The process of developing the curriculum is to convert it to the best possible form so that it achieves the desired goal efficiently at the lowest costs, time and effort. However, the development differs from change because change maybe for the worse, but the development is always for the better. Many factors can guarantee the development of educational curricula, as they must be characterized by the following (Mahmoud, 2009):

- 1) Clear vision.
- 2) A specific goal and strategy.
- 3) Development of human potential (technical innovation).
- 4) Keeping up with developments in the nature of work and professional development.
- 5) Responding to changes in the economy, agriculture, culture, and education.
- 6) Balance between theoretical topics and practical applications.
- 7) Availability of appropriate logistics (unrestricted access to computer-based education techniques, and use of e-mail).

Also, there are many recommendations that deserve to be taken into consideration in the development of education curricula according to the international education issue, as shown in table (1) (Almogbel, 2015):

Table (1): International education issues to be included in the curriculum.

Education Level	International education issues to be included in the curriculum
Elementary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop the basics of international education.</li> <li>• Develop local awareness of multiculturalism.</li> <li>• Develop awareness of human rights and emphasize respect for others</li> <li>• Develop belonging and loyalty to the homeland.</li> </ul>
Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop awareness of multiculturalism globally.</li> <li>• Consolidate the values of peace, security and disarmament.</li> <li>• Develop an awareness of human rights and an emphasis on freedom.</li> <li>• Promote environmental sustainability.</li> <li>• Provide solutions to local problems.</li> </ul>
Secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidate the values of peace, security and disarmament.</li> <li>• Provide solutions to global international problems.</li> <li>• Achieve awareness of belonging and provide a fair international order.</li> <li>• Develop belonging and loyalty to the homeland.</li> <li>• Develop human rights awareness and emphasize democracy.</li> <li>• Achieve awareness of cultural international understanding</li> </ul>

The educational curriculum developed must be based on the interdependence and complementarity of science. And that is feasible by following certain criteria in selecting the vocabulary of the educational curricula, as follows (Mohhamed, 2011):

- Taking into account the level of learners and their mental preparations.
- The educational curriculum should be useful for the various problems of the learner.
- Curricula must be comprehensive for educational materials.
- Curricula should be flexible and changeable.
- The educational curricula must be able to add new meanings to the experience of the learner.
- The curriculum must be appropriate for the learner to be able to respond to it.
- Educational curricula must be subject to evidence of reason, observation, and senses and be experimental.
- The educational curriculum must include the basic compulsory sciences and the intended optional sciences.

### Conclusion and recommendations

In this study, the researcher has endeavored to discuss the recent trends and approaches in developing general education curricula worldwide and the need for this in Saudi Arabia. The first section discusses the importance of making adjustments in educational curricula in view of recent trends in the KSA. The second section discusses the international experiences used in developing curricula in view of recent trends. The third section discusses the development of general education Curricula in Saudi Arabia. The study found out that the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia needs to adopt the recent trends and approaches in developing general education curricula that seek to provide educated individuals with appropriate scientific education to prepare them for life in the twenty-first century, lead them to the acquisition and mastery of the advanced and enjoyable scientific concepts, and the ability to use and apply of science skills and processes, which in turn leads to improving the level of students in innovative, creative skills, positive scientific trends towards science, and in making sound personal and social decisions. Many factors can guarantee the development of educational curricula such as they



must be characterized by clear vision, a specific goal and strategy, development of human potential, keeping up with developments in the nature of work and professional development, responding to changes in the economy, agriculture, culture, and education, balance between theoretical topics and practical applications and availability of appropriate logistics.

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