Original Paper

An Educational History of Kuwait: A Focus on Schools

Basemah Al-Senafi[1] & Sarah AlSabbagh[2]

[1] PhD., The English Language Department, College of Basic Education, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), Kuwait

[2] PhD., The Language Centre, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), Kuwait

Abstract

This paper examines key milestones in Kuwait's educational development as well as exploring the history of education in Kuwait including government initiatives, policy changes, and the influence of external factors such as oil wealth and international partnerships. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, specifically document analysis, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Kuwait's educational system has evolved by analyzing the challenges and successes encountered along the way, as well as investigating the educational reform initiatives throughout the years. Additionally, this paper sheds light on the efforts to address various educational needs and the strategies employed to overcome obstacles, thereby illustrating the dynamic nature of educational development in Kuwait. The study further evaluates the impact and effectiveness of various educational reform initiatives introduced over the years, shaping the current educational landscape. Through this detailed examination, the paper offers valuable insights into the ongoing efforts to improve and innovate within Kuwait's education system.

Keywords

Kuwait, history, schools, education, policy, development

1. Introduction

The State of Kuwait is an Islamic constitutional monarchy with a mixed ruling government from the Emir along with the National Assembly Parliament. As for the constitution of Kuwait, as of 1962 after its independence from the United Kingdom, laid out a general legal framework and a mission statement on education. Consistent with this, the main objective of education in Kuwait, as stated by the Ministerial Decree in 1979, is to develop a Kuwaiti society with youth within "an integrated scientific, spiritual, moral, intellectual, social and physical framework, in the light of the principles of Islam, of the Arab heritage and of contemporary civilization" (*World Data on Education* 2010:3). Based on this

decree, the MOE functions, manages and develops the necessary roles and responsibilities to administer education on the primary, intermediate and secondary level.

The State of Kuwait's proactive vision "New Kuwait 2035" (New Kuwait, *nd*) aims on transforming Kuwait into a financial and trade hub both locally and internationally and becoming more attractive to investors. It aims at equipping the country's children with the knowledge necessary to succeed in a sustainable diversified economy by making the country internationally competitive without only relying on oil revenues. In order to meet the needs of the twenty first century, education reform is required to "realise the national economic visions of diversifying away from oil towards a rapidly growing knowledge-based economy" (Mohamed & Morris, 2019:14). Through the government's regular expenditures and specific development projects focused on education, graduates from the schools in Kuwait need to be prepared to respond to and compete in a global knowledge-based economy. The key challenge of Kuwait's educational system would be on how to transform it so that it produces a workforce and population that can engage in tomorrow's economy and society, both nationally and globally. This overall goal and vision is based on His Highness, the late the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah AlAhmed Aljaber Alsabah.

This following sections highlight key aspects of educational and human development in the State of Kuwait. By understanding how "the education system in Kuwait has developed significantly over recent years owing to large-scale investments in education infrastructure and various government incentives towards advancement of the system" (KDIPA, 2016) will help support Kuwait's educational development goals. Understanding the educational system in Kuwait is crucial for it provides an understanding into what eventual gaps arise and need to be filled in order to find the best way to address and improve them.

2. History of Kuwait's Educational System

Education in Kuwait went through two phases, the first was the period before formal education, which is education by the *Kuttab*, and the second was represented by formal education in schools (MoE, 2015). The first formal school was established in 1911, the Mubarakiya school, and it was the nucleus on which education was built in Kuwait. It taught students arithmetic skills, commerce, and writing letters. After the establishment of the Mubarakiya School, education developed significantly and schools spread in all regions of Kuwait where the number of students started increasing.

In the school year 1916/1917 there was a total of 341 students (Al-Risheedi, 2012). In 1921, Alahmadeya school was established where it was the first school to offer the English language (MoE, 2002). Table 1 shows the most important historical features of education in the State of Kuwait. This development culminated in the establishment of Kuwait University in 1966. Table 1 gives a timeline of the most important historical features of education in the State of Kuwait.

Table 1. Timeline of the Most Important Historical Features of Education in the State of Kuwait

Year	Event
1911	The first formal education school, Mubarakiya, was established for boys (formerly
1921	Establishment of Al-Ahmadiya school where English language was taught
1935	The beginning of public education where education was placed under the control of the State
1936	The first Council of Knowledge was established headed by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber
1937	The first formal education school, Al-Wusta, was established for girls
1938	The first private school was established to run a modern educational system, the Al-Jafari National School.
1941	The first student scholarship abroad (Bahrain)
1942	The first Kuwaiti teacher is Mrs. Maryam Abdul Malik Al-Saleh, who joined the education
1953	The first secondary school for boys was Shuwaikh School, and Al-Mirqab school for girls
1954	The establishment of the first Technical College
1955	The first kindergarten for Muthanna
1955	The establishment of the first school for people with special needs (Al-Nour School)
1962	The constitution of Kuwait was issued and the Ministry of Education was established
1966	The opening of Kuwait University
1967	A law was passed regulating private education (Arab and foreign)
1987	The establishment of the Supreme Council for Education
1988	The establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education
2004/2005	Changing the educational ladder to 5 – 4 – 3
2006/2007	Implementation of the unified system in the secondary stage of the tenth grade

(MoE, 2015)

In the late 1930s, when the pearl industry collapsed, modern education in Kuwait went underway in 1935 as the Emir of Kuwait understood that to protect the State from economic crisis in the future, education needed to protected by State funding. Therefore, ever since the oil boom in 1950s, Kuwait rapidly developed. From an economy based on pear diving, fishing, and trading and an education through the *Kuttab*, "Kuwait entered the twenty-first century with one of the most generous, comprehensive, and technologically sophisticated educational infrastructures in the Middle East" (Kuwait, Educational System – Overview, *nd*).

3. Kuwait's Constitution and Education

The Kuwaiti constitution is the first in the Arab Gulf region. It was issued on November 11, 1962 during the reign of Emir Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, and the work on it officially began on January 29, 1963. The Constitution of the State of Kuwait is a group of articles that define the system of

government in Kuwait, and it establishes the rules that govern the three legislative, executive and judicial authorities (Khedr, 2019). The State of Kuwait has paid great attention to education, and this interest has emerged through the Constitution of the State of Kuwait, which made education compulsory for citizens, with the state ensuring that education of its children is free, because education is a right and it has a major role in the advancement of society. Below are a list of the three articles in the constitution that emphasize education.

Article 40

(1) Education is a right for Kuwaitis, guaranteed by the State in accordance with law and within the limits of public policy and morals. Education in its preliminary stages is compulsory and free in accordance with the law.

(2) The law lays down the necessary plan to eliminate illiteracy.

(3) The State devotes particular care to the physical, moral, and mental development of the youth.

Article 13

Education is a fundamental requisite for the progress of society, assured and promoted by the State.

Article 14

The State shall promote science, letters, and the arts and encourage scientific research therein.

The Kuwaiti government is responsible for planning educational policies to fulfill the constitution articles above. For example, Article 40 (1) the text is clear that education is a right and free of charge for Kuwaitis, and the state has the responsibility to guarantee this right in accordance with the law. The preliminary stages in Kuwait is compulsory from Grade 1 to 9 as stated by the compulsory education law that was issued in 1965. These stages are compulsory as it is considered a prominent milestone and the state recognize the role of education in ensuring the physical, moral and mental development of youth. In 1995, the educational ladder in Kuwait was 4 years of primary school, 4 years of intermediate school, and 4 years of secondary school (4-4-4). In the school year 2004/2005 this changed to an educational ladder of 5 years of primary school, 4 years of intermediate school, and 3 years of secondary school (5-4-3) in order to ensure that students get 9 years of compulsory preliminary schooling instead of 8 and to be in line with global educational developments. As of 2018, Kuwait has 636 public schools, 548 private schools (*Annual Bulletin of Education Statistics*, 2018).

4. Kuwait's Educational System

The Ministry of Education's organizational structure begins at the head with the Minister of Education, under the Minister is the Undersecretary of the MoE where there are 8 departments each with an assistant undersecretary head to supervise the unit, its tasks and duties. These 8 departments are the Department for Educational Development and Activities, the Department for Public Education, the Department for Research Education and Curriculum, the Department for Privat Education, the Department for Financial affairs, the Department for Administrative Affairs Development, the Department for Educational Planning, and the Department for Legal Affairs.

47

"The decree of 1979 issued by the Emir regarding the Ministry of Education defined the objective of the Ministry as the development of Kuwaiti society and the upbringing of its young within an integrated scientific, spiritual, moral, intellectual, social and physical framework, in the light of the principles of Islam, of the Arab heritage and of contemporary civilization, in keeping with the national environment and in realization of its progress and development. It is on such basis that the decree defined the functions of the Ministry of Education in administering education and instructed the Ministry to undertake all that is necessary for its management and development" (UNESCO-IBE, 2011).

Furthermore, the Supreme Education Council (SEC), the Kuwaiti National Commission for Education, Science and Culture, the General Secretariat of the Council of Special Education, and the Public Relations and Education Information Department are all attached to the Minister's office all assist in the strategic direction of educational policy (UNESCO-IBE, 2011; OBG, 2019). The SEC is an independent government institution that was established in 2016 to improve educational outcomes across the Kuwait and to "assist in the strategic direction of education policy" (OBG, 2019). The MoE also works in close conjunction with the National Centre for Educational Development (NCED), which is responsible for conducting school inspections and administering international tests (OBG, 2019).

4.1 Public and Private Schools in Kuwait

The Ministry of Education oversees and administers all public and private schools in Kuwait. The Public Administration for Education supervises all public schools in Kuwait; and the Public Administration for Private Education supervises all private schools in Kuwait. Public schools include all mainstream public schools, special needs schools and religious schools that follow Islamic teachings. Public schools have four stages: kindergarten (2 years), primary (5 years from Grade 1 to 5), intermediate (4 years from Grade 6 to 9), and secondary (3 years from Grade 10 to 12); and private education follows those stages as well. Although private education is not funded fully by the government, it is subsidized generously. As per the Compulsory Education Law that was issued in 1965, primary and intermediate schooling is compulsory (9 years of schooling).

There are six educational districts in Kuwait which are Al-Asima, Hawalli, Al-Ahmadi, Al-Farwania, Al-Jahra, and Mubarak Al-Kabeer. In the early 1980s, due to Kuwait's population growth and the increased demand for educational in residential areas, the need for educational zone administrators was established. Their tasks and responsibilities are to evaluate the efficiency of school performance (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). In terms of the number of student enrolments, Al-Ahmadi has the highest number of students. While enrolment growth over 2015-18 has been the fastest in the Al-Asima district at a growth rate of 5.3% (GFH, 2020). Education in all public schools in Kuwait is free for its citizens as per the decree, and foreign residents are schooled in the private sector. the variety of private schools reflect the different expatriate communities in Kuwait, including private Arabic, British, American, Bilingual, Indian, Pakistani, Pilipino, French, Iranian and Canadian schools. Private schools follow their own foreign curriculum, for example British schools follow the International General Certificate of

Secondary Education (IGCSE). Private schools are popular amongst Kuwaiti nationals and a large number enrol of them. The reason some parents choose to enrol their children in private schools especially British and American schools reflects in the value they place in learning English and earning an education from a foreign curriculum with foreign teachers. Public education includes all public schools, special needs schools, and religious education schools. In the school year 2018/2019, there was a total number of 1,210 schools, with 636 public schools and 548 private schools. With primary and secondary education (between the ages of 6-14) being compulsory, Kuwait has a high enrolment ratio in schools (GFH, 2020). According to Oxford Business Group, 2019, the "demand for public and private schools in Kuwait is expected to increase by 15.7% between 2017 and 2022". In the school year 2017/2018 statistics, the number of Kuwaiti students who went to private schools represented 27% of student population (OBG, 2019). According to the Oxford Business Group report titled "Kuwait: 2019", it predicts that the primary education segment is estimated to grow 3.8% annually between the years 2018-2023 from 279,956 enrolments in 2018 to 337,500 enrolments in 2023. As for the secondary segment, it is also estimated to grown 3.8% annually from 2018 to 2023, from 310,611 enrolments in 2018 to more than 374,500 enrolments in 2023 (OBG, 2019).

5. Kuwait's Vision of 2035

Kuwait's vision of 2035 entitled "New Kuwait 2035" envisions Kuwait becoming the region's financial and trade center. The vision requires a focused transformation that includes balanced human development and the safeguarding of social values, national identity, and community values (Badry & Willoughby, 2015). Practically, this vision implies that the State of Kuwait will "develop a diversified economy and reduce dependence on oil export revenues" (New Kuwait, *nd*).

This vision concurs with that of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which in its April 2019 appraisal of Kuwait's economy wrote "Kuwait needs to reduce dependence on oil and create more private sector jobs. This requires persevering with fiscal and structural reforms to boost savings for future generations and transform Kuwait from a public sector and oil-driven economy to one led by the private sector" (International Monetary Fund, 2019). The transformation the IMF envisions includes education reform to "produce a better-skilled and more productive workforce" (International Monetary Fund, 2019) and preparing young graduates for in-demand jobs. As the world shifts to a knowledge-based economy, developing creative and skilled labour force and entrepreneurs will be key to realizing the diversification of Kuwait's economy.

As for The Kuwait National Development Plan (KNDP), it is a consolidated approach towards a prosperous and sustainable future. KNDP stems from his Highness the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's conceptualized vision of a new Kuwait by 2035 which aims to diversify Kuwait's economy. To achieve the objectives of the development plan, 7 main pillars and 5 themes targeting the transforming of Kuwait into a leading regional, financial, commercial and cultural hub by 2035 were planned (Figure 1).
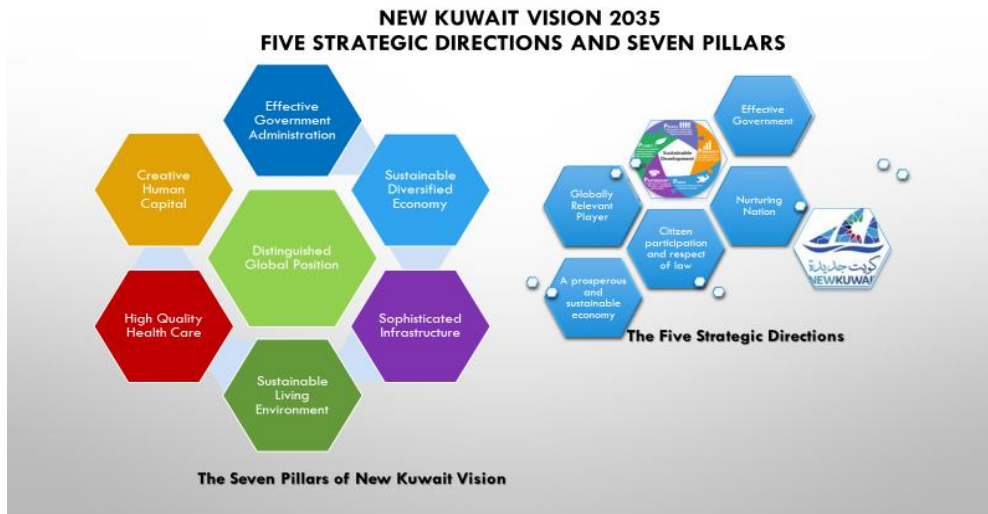
49

Figure 1. Vision 2035 - Five Strategic Directions and Seven Pillars

The nation's long-term development priorities are organized around five strategic directions:

1. Citizen Participation and Respect of the Law

This theme aims to strengthen rule of law by building confidence in and respecting rules of society, and improving citizen participation in government. This entails reinforcing rules and regulations and increasing enforceability and accountability within public institutions. It also entails supporting the development of Kuwait's civil society and increasing participation in governance.

2. Effective and Transparent Government

This theme aims to reinforce transparency, effectiveness, and efficiency in Kuwait's public institutions. This involves fairness and responsibility in policymaking, institutionalized rules and regulations, and proper implementation of formulated policies.

3. Prosperous and Sustainable Economy

This theme aims to achieve strong and stable economic growth by combining an increasing role for the private sector with diversification away from oil.

4. Nurturing and Cohesive Nation

Developing a nurturing and cohesive nation and citizenry involves providing high quality healthcare and education for all residents at a sustainable cost to the government. It also encompasses ensuring that a well-balanced national economy and a modern infrastructure will give all residents access to a good quality of life.

5. Globally Relevant and Influential Player

Kuwait aims to develop a stronger and more influential regional and international presence through trade, political influence and humanitarian support. This includes maintaining strong political and diplomatic influence internationally and developing significant economic influence internationally through investment abroad. Furthermore, the development of the above themes can only be accomplished through the seven pillars of Global Position, Human Capital, Healthcare, Living

50

Environment, Infrastructure, Economy and Public Administration; Figure 2 presents Kuwait's National Development Plan, including the 7 pillars.

Figure 2. Kuwait's National Development Plan

The second pillar, Human Capital, is explained as "reform the educational system to better prepare youth to become competitive and productive members of the workforce". The country's efforts at strengthening education and human capital development is key to accomplishing the other pillars and the overall vision as well. It is the core of the second development plan which relies on supporting human development, promoting education, training, and research thereby increasing the skills of Kuwait's population.

6. Methodology

The research employed a qualitative research method by using document analysis as the primary method to investigate the evolution of Kuwait's educational system. Since documents are known to be a rich source of data for education and social research (Punch, 2011), document collection and analysis was beneficial in understanding the history and the development of the Kuwaiti educational system. Document analysis is chosen due to its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of historical developments, policy changes, and the impact of external factors on the education sector. Furthermore, Byram (2008) believes that reviewing documents is expected to provide authentic and meaningful data. Against the above context and background, the overall aim of this research is to explore the development of education in Kuwait and hence lead to the following research question:

How have government initiatives, policy changes, and external factors influenced the development and effectiveness of education in Kuwait over the years?

51

6.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The documents collected for analysis in this study were carried out in two stages: initially, the process was carried out in two stages: initially, by reviewing the Ministry of Education (MoE) website to examine the available documents, including policy statements, reports on education in Kuwait, and historical accounts of Kuwait's educational system. Subsequently, additional documents were gathered directly from the Ministry of Education and UNESCO during fieldwork.

A comprehensive collection of documents and materials was gathered to support this research. The first set includes government reports and policy documents, such as official publications from Kuwait's Ministry of Education, national education plans, and strategic frameworks that detail the government's educational policies and initiatives. The second set consists of historical records, including archival materials like educational statistics, school data, and records related to changes in educational and curriculum planning, which trace the development of Kuwait's education system. Lastly, agreements and reports from international organizations, such as UNESCO and the World Bank, provide insights into the impact of global partnerships on Kuwait's education system. Table 2 presents a detailed list of the collected documents.

Table 2. Documents Collected

Document	Type	Publisher	Content	Year
The Official Document of Education for Primary School in the State of Kuwait	Report	Ministry of Education: State of Kuwait	1. Vision and mission of MOE 2. The overall goal of MOE 3. The philosophy behind primary education 4. General goals of primary education 5. Particular goals of primary education	2014
World Data on Education	Report	International Bureau of Education (IBE) UNESCO	Principles and General Objectives of Education	2011
The National Report: Development of Education in the State of Kuwait	Report	International Bureau of Education (IBE) UNESCO	The development of education	2004-2008
The Constitution of Kuwait	Law	State of Kuwait	A list of all the law articles in Kuwait	1962
Kuwait National Curriculum. Primary Education. Curriculum and Standards for	Booklet	Ministry of Education: State of Kuwait	A guide for teaching as per the new curriculum	2015

English Language.				
Educational Statistical Group	Booklet	Department of Educational Planning, Ministry of Education: State of Kuwait	Statistics on the different aspects of education in Kuwait such as number of schools and students	2019
Education for All Report	Report	Ministry of Education: State of Kuwait	Report on education for all alongside a list of goals to be achieved such as quality of education	2014

The analysis of the collected documents followed a thematic approach, identifying key themes and patterns that highlight the progression of educational development in Kuwait. Three primary themes emerged: milestones in educational development, which identified key moments and policies that marked significant changes in the educational landscape. Next government initiatives and reforms, focusing on the nature and impact of government-led initiatives aimed at enhancing the education system. And external influences, examining how factors such as oil wealth and international partnerships, particularly with the World Bank and UNESCO, have shaped educational policies and practices.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has provided a detailed exploration of the key milestones, structure, achievements, educational and historical developments that have shaped Kuwait's educational system. By examining the government initiatives, policy changes, and external influences such as oil wealth and international partnerships, it becomes clear that Kuwait's education sector has undergone significant transformation. The analysis of challenges and successes highlights the resilience and adaptability of the system, as well as the ongoing commitment to reform and improvement. The educational reform initiatives discussed in this study underscore the country's dedication to enhancing the quality of education, ensuring it meets the needs of its evolving society. Ultimately, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the factors that have influenced the evolution of education in Kuwait, and it provides valuable insights into the future direction of educational development in the country.

References

Al-Risheedi, G. (2012). *The educational system in Kuwait*. Kuwait: Al-Falah Publication.

Annual Bulletin of Education Statistics. (2018). State of Kuwait Central Statistical Bureau.

Badry, F., & Willoughby, J. (2015). *Higher Education Revolutions in the Gulf: Globalization and Institutional Viability*. London: Routledge.

GFH (2020). *Sector Report GCC Education*. Available from: https://gfh.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GFH-Education-Sector-Report-2020.pdf

International Monetary Fund (2019). *Kuwait: Article IV Consultation– Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Kuwait*. IMF Country Report No. 19/95.

Khedr, A. (2019). *Kuwait Legal System and Research*. Available from: https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Kuwait1.html

Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA) (2016). *Investing in Kuwait: A Guide for Investment Opportunities in Kuwait*. Kuwait. Available from: https://e.kdipa.gov.kw/main/4Education.pdf

Ministry of Education (2002). *History of education in Kuwait*. Documentary study: Part 2. Centre of Research and Studies on Kuwait: Kuwait.

Ministry of Education (2015). *History*. Available from: https://www.moe.edu.kw/about/Pages/History.aspx.

Mohamed, M., & Morris, P. (2019). Buying, selling and outsourcing educational reform: The Global Education Industry and 'policy borrowing' in the Gulf. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*.

New Kuwait (*nd*). Available from: http://www.newkuwait.gov.kw

Oxford Business Group (2017). Government Reforms to Change Kuwait's Education Sector. Available from: https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/time-transition-extensive-government-reforms-signal-change-kuwait's-education-sector

Oxford Business Group (2019). The Report: Kuwait 2019. Available from: https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/high-standards-recent-reforms-look-improve-quality-teaching-and-encourage-private-sector

Punch, K. (2011). *Introduction to research methods in education*. London: SAGE Publications.

State of Kuwait Central Statistical Bureau (2018/2019). Annual Bulletin of Education Statistics.

UNESCO-IBE (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - International Bureau of Education) (2011). Kuwait. *World Data on Education*. 7th Edition.

UNESCO-IBE (2015). *Repositioning and conceptualizing the curriculum for the effective realization of Sustainable Development Goal Four, for holistic development and sustainable ways of living*. Discussion paper presented at the World Education Forum, Incheon, Republic of Korea, 19–22 May 2015, Geneva.

World Data on Education (2011). Available from: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Kuwait.pdf