

**An *IFC Reports* Interview with
Mr. Abdullah Al-Sharhan, Chairman,
Australian College of Kuwait**

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For our special report on Kuwait



IFC REPORTS: Education and health are often considered two of the main pillars of social economic development. What role do you believe will education play in the success of the country's recently approved Development Plan?

MR. ABDULLAH AL-SHARHAN: I think the Development Plan cannot progress without professional human beings. The main focus should be the development of the people of Kuwait so that they are able to develop the country. I believe education, training and research are of utmost importance to this plan. In general, the government has been doing a good job so far in developing the education sector. It really started to change the way we teach, develop and educate our young children to prepare them for specialized adulthood. All higher education graduates have to be trained and trainable in their field of choice. I personally would like to see curricula that offer the young the basic knowledge they need and also the basic requisites for higher education. Right now we are dealing with graduates that are lacking. It is not their fault nor is it the fault of the people at the top; it is the result of a series of mistakes made along the way. This is why we are still a developing country, because we have not focused on education and this is where you need to start.

As a higher education institution the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) offers a chance to all comers, but it requires up to one and half years of prerequisite foundation courses before they can progress toward a diploma or a degree. This foundation period has proved to be insufficient for many. We started with one year then we went to a year and a half and presently we are contemplating two years as the minimum for many of the students to progress in comfort. Change has to start with primary education. I realize that you cannot change education overnight. It will take a long time to turn around and in the meantime those in the pipeline will have to suffer.

The areas that need improvement are language, the sciences and above all math. There are two tools for learning: The first is communication. You learn through a language which must be developed at a young age, not when you get to higher education. The second is the ability to analyze and think critically, and you get that through learning math at an early age.

IFC REPORTS: Kuwait used to donate books and build schools around the region. How would you compare Kuwait's current educational system with the rest of the region?

MR. ABDULLAH AL-SHARHAN: Because we have not developed teaching staff to cover our needs we are still dependent on importing thousands of teachers. The teachers come here to teach as a job, not as a profession. This is one of the setbacks. I believe if a teacher does not care for his pupils he cannot be effective. If you care for a child you must firstly reach for his heart and that is the key to opening his mind. He has to know you care for him and that he is supported should he have any problems.

At ACK, the English language is the medium for communication and learning. The majority of our teachers are foreign, mostly Australian. As things stand, the need for teachers is growing. The number of students in general education has risen to 300,000. This requires thousands of teachers; most have to be brought from outside the country. There are very few Kuwaitis who qualify as teachers in the true sense of the word. They are government employees who treat teaching as a job with long holidays. This is one of the main obstacles which we have to address urgently.

When ACK recruits staff they must have a teaching certificate and teaching experience. ACK allocates a budget for professional training even for foreign staff that might leave tomorrow. Professional training is one of the priority items in ACK's budget.

In sum in Kuwait we need to work on the teachers; the curriculum is not such a big problem. Many high schools are producing students with high grades, but the good results are due mostly to students memorizing information that they may not understand fully.

IFC REPORTS: The Australian College of Kuwait commenced operations in 2004 and two years ago you started offering university degrees, as you previously mentioned. Could you provide us with an introduction to this institution and the reason it was established?

MR. ABDULLAH AL-SHARHAN: In the year 2000, Dr. Yousef Al-Ibrahim, the minister in-charge of Higher Education at that time, was able to pass the Private Universities law 34-2000 allowing the private sector to establish tertiary institutions for education, and we were the first to apply. We wanted vocational education specializing in two areas: engineering and business, as we believe the two will eventually merge with each other. Engineers must understand business and business people must understand technical aspects. At present, most bright students take engineering and then MBA's to better their future prospects.

In the end we would like to see the majority of our graduates go to the oil and business sectors, but we also want to have entrepreneurs, who can create new projects. ACK can play the role of an incubator and provider of technical and advisory support.

The government has now established a company for small business development. It provides the initial capital as a loan and expects to be paid back after five years. This company can be the partner on the financial side of development and ACK can be a partner on the technical side. We have to initiate opportunities for the youth of Kuwait. We are still far from being perfect, but we are just starting and we want the youth to love what they are doing. We are not here to have them fail; we will do everything to help them succeed.

IFC REPORTS: Given a large part of students from Kuwait tend to go abroad for further education and employment: usually to the U.S., the U.K. or Australia. What is the general consensus from the students in terms of the perception response they are receiving from having a Kuwaiti education?

MR. ABDULLAH AL-SHARHAN: Many young people of course like to go abroad, however since 9/11 parents are reluctant to send their children to the U.S. or even the U.K., for example, my son was studying in his senior year at Houston University at the time of 9/11, and fellow classmates abused him for being an Arab. There were many cases of such abuses and it was in Kuwait's private universities advantage, that parents did not want their 17 and 18 year old children being exposed to such treatment. In our time, forty or fifty years ago, it was beautiful; we lived with families that cared for us. My stay in the USA was a wonderful experience.

I tell Parents they could keep their children at ACK or any other local university, where they will gain an internationally recognized qualification before they go abroad. They are then more mature and better prepared for university life.

These are the main reasons parents have stopped sending their children abroad, especially girls. Nevertheless, there are thousands of Kuwaiti students who still go abroad for their higher education.

The government began to offer “internal” scholarships to attend accredited Kuwaiti institutions providing international curricula. Our graduates can go on to study for a master’s degree and/or a PHD abroad and to see what the world is like.

IFC REPORTS: You have played a big role in developing education. Given all the important positions you have held and your role in setting up various institutions, what is it that drives and motivates you to do this for Kuwait?

MR. ABDULLAH AL-SHARHAN: I love my country, I think we are so blessed to be here and we just need to do the right thing as citizens. We are also blessed with a central position in the world; our geographical position is wonderful and our grandparents became a thriving community on their own here in the days before oil. I am basically an entrepreneur and I love to see innovation. My great love is for the young, as they offer so much potential.

My passion is for vocational education, it is the reason so many young people succeed in their lives, as it teaches them what to do. Knowledge by itself is not sufficient. You need the skills to apply that knowledge. To answer your question, this is why I love my job. If you believe in something it will happen.

IFC REPORTS: It has been an absolute pleasure, thank you very much.