

An *IFC Reports* Interview with

**Prof. Abdullatif Al-Bader,
President
Kuwait University**

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For our special report on Kuwait



IFC REPORTS: The country's first school was established in 1912, and the educational system was put under state control in 1935. Today, education and health are 2 of the main pillars of socio-economic development, and are considered as key performance indicators (KPI's) by investors. Given this and Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's vision of positioning the country as a regional financial and commercial hub in the coming years, kindly discuss the importance of education to Kuwait.

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: Education is important for any society, including Kuwait. We all begin by being educated at home by our parents. Then we move into schools to learn and take the directions that we want to take, as far as the areas of learning is concerned. The rest is history.

Education in Kuwait is similar to any education in the world where you start at the age of 6. After which, you study for 12 years. This can be divided into 4 areas: preliminary education, intermediate school, secondary education and tertiary education.

In the past, Kuwait had a lot of intermediate schools, but only one high school. Because there was only a single high school, you only had one kind of exam for every Kuwaiti. This was the national exam. The unification of the minimum standard made Kuwaiti education very strong because it provided a clear picture of the students' performance all over the country. In developed countries like the US, they accomplished this sort of unified standard through different ways (e.g., the SATs, the licensing exam, the bar exam, the postgraduate exams, the Allied Medical courses Admission Test or the AMCAT, the American Board of Internal Medicine or ABIM exams, etc.). Through this model, the best students were selected for scholarships, and sent overseas for further education. The success rate of this paradigm was very high.

As the number of high schools began to increase, the country adopted the US's liberal philosophy of education. Under this structure, the students had the freedom to select their preferred schools and courses, and accumulate the required credit hours. Unfortunately, when that shift came, they overlooked the adoption of a national exam, which establishes our national minimum (i.e., the yardstick to which we measure the quality of education against). In the US, for example, you have to take up the SATs before heading off to college. Looking at the performance of the students in one educational institution in reference to the performance of other students in other educational institutions allows them to establish school rankings and identify the best teachers and students in the country.

In my opinion, our failure to have a national minimum during that time brought down our system of ranking and selection. When I was a Dean in Medical School, I had no choice but to accept a student with A's over students with B's, even when I think that the latter is better than the prior because he or she comes from a school with higher standards. I had to follow the standard established within the system.

Through a lot of discussions and our own tireless persistence, we have managed to bring back the national minimum standard. However, as with every country, changes in the system take place very gradually. Now, we have a better educational system; although, I feel that it can still be further refined.

IFC REPORTS: Can you please provide us with an overview of Kuwait University (KU)?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: KU was established in 1966. Compared to the old universities around the world, KU is relatively young. However, more than 40 years is enough time for it to become a mature university. KU is a developed and mature university, with a focus on various centers of excellence.

IFC REPORTS: As a former Dean of the Medical School, how would you assess Kuwait's medical education?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: KU was the first to start medical education in Kuwait. Before KU, we had to send students overseas to take up medicine. This was all well and good, except that we could not keep on doing that forever. Sending Kuwaiti medical students overseas to earn their degrees meant that by the time they got back, their backgrounds were so diverse that it would take them a great amount of time to adapt to a more unified philosophy. This makes it difficult for them to adjust when they have to work in teams. So much time is wasted in arguments because of their varied philosophies. As a result, things did not get accomplished as quickly as we hoped.

KU changed a lot of that by establishing the first medical school in the country. However, when the first class graduated in 1983, another challenge surfaced. We realized that we needed a proper residency program in Kuwait. We needed more organized training in the hospitals.

In answer to this, the Kuwaiti Government established the Kuwait Institute for Medical Specialization in July 1984. It was the first of its kind in the country. Initially, we had to send some of the students overseas. Some have gone to the US. A lot were sent to Canada when they opened up because of their budgetary situation. Practitioners were sent to Canada with the support of their respective source countries. There was a mutual interest there. It provided exposure and training for our medical graduates. A lot of Kuwaitis got their qualifications and specializations. A lot of those who went to Canadian schools took up the American Board Exams, in addition to the Canadian Board Exams. When they came back, they became good ambassadors for Canada and the Canadian/North American system.

The earlier batch of Kuwaiti medical students has been sent to the UK. As you know, the UK system is a little bit different. Everything there is structured by tradition. What works for the UK does not necessarily work for Kuwait because we do not have the same tradition. This has changed over time. Kuwait is adopting its own way through the creation of the Kuwait Board.

IFC REPORTS: Are the same developments taking place in the other disciplines?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: Yes, the same thing is happening in the other disciplines (e.g., Engineering, Science, Arts, Law, etc.). They are all fully developed and offer postgraduate education. A lot of the graduates go overseas and contribute (just like any university in the world).

IFC REPORTS: How would you rate Kuwait's educational system, compared to its regional neighbors?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: I always hesitate to make general comparisons because, in my opinion, this requires thorough studies. Without the information to support it, it becomes nothing more than an unsubstantiated claim.

However, I would tell you that here in Kuwait, we are looking into other areas of accreditation and certification. In many of the colleges (particularly, in the areas of Science and Medicine), we are trying to adapt the External Examiner system because we believe that it is always good to have the assessment of an independent, third party with a bird's eye view on things. They would give us a confidential report where they can freely express their views. The collection of External Examiner reports that we get serves as a basis of our system improvements. Every year, a few External Examiners come to KU. I collect the reports that we get from these External Examiners throughout the years, and work from there. A few years ago, we had External Examiners from the US and the UK. They looked into the areas of general medicine, general surgery, pediatrics, and obstetrics & gynecology.

A graduating med student got an A in general medicine, general surgery and pediatrics, and an A- in obstetrics & gynecology. The External Examiners for general medicine, general surgery and pediatrics were surprised that she got an A- in obstetrics & gynecology because they thought that she could not go below A. They believed that she performed better than any of the other students in the other universities. They even said that they had not seen a student like that for many years. They raised this issue with the External Examiner in obstetrics & gynecology, and asked if it was possible to upgrade her A- to A, and give her the full mark. I was embarrassed by the reply of the External Examiner in obstetrics & gynecology. He said that from the first instance, he knew that she could answer any of the questions that he asked. Because of that, he refrained from checking her knowledge in obstetrics & gynecology. Instead, he examined her personality as a prospective physician. He then asked her how she would manage a pregnancy made out of wedlock. He said that her answer reflected her social and religious beliefs, rather than her responsibility as a physician. That is why in his opinion; she could not get an A. I was impressed by his answer and recommended that we close the case. That is a good enough reason for the assessment, and we go from there.

Even during the earlier stages of our medical school, we manage to come up with good graduates. Our colleagues outside would attest to this. Even the Professor and Chief of the Division of Vascular Surgery and Endovascular Surgery at the University of Toledo Medical Center in Ohio has a medical degree from Kuwait.

For over 40 years, KU has produced quite a number of outstanding graduates. Many of the leading people in the country and the gulf come from KU. We also have many successful KU graduates all over the world.

IFC REPORTS: Teaching in Kuwait used to be primarily done by expatriates. By 1998, this figure had changed and where more Kuwaiti faculty members than before. What is the current ratio of Kuwaiti and expatriate teachers?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: What happened was a natural development. When the universities started, we had very few Kuwaitis who were qualified to teach in a university, so we had to resort to expatriate teachers. Over the years, more Kuwaitis got qualified. They began to teach. They started young, like everybody else. The existing expatriate teachers, on the other hand, grew old over time and retired. Most of the expatriates who have left KU did so because they have reached their retirement years.

IFC REPORTS: What are some of the things that KU has in the pipeline? What sets it apart from other universities, internationally?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: I believe in demonstrating excellence in anything that you do. If you work on yourself, develop yourself and make yourself shine, you will be recognized. Do not compete with others. Compete with yourself.

In terms of KU, if I can do anything during my time here, I would like to set the direction where we can demonstrate excellence by doing what we do, studying what others do, and learning from the successes and failures of others as well as our own mistakes and triumphs.

A university is a center of excellence; therefore, nothing short of excellence should be acceptable. If we can do that, we can be recognized. I do not think that any university in the world started by trying to compete with others. It is all about working hard to get to where you want to be so that eventually, people will recognize you.

I believe that if my reason for working hard is for recognition, I will never get there. However, if I work hard to develop myself (and be satisfied in terms of what goes on in other places) then I am sure that one day, I will be recognized.

I believe that we have to compete with ourselves, demonstrate excellence, and establish a center of excellence. Of course, we cannot accomplish this in a cocoon. We have to venture out to see what others are doing. We have to send our students there (e.g., university exchange programs where we send some of our students to another university for a semester and vice versa). Yesterday, I had a Polish Professor here, and he was talking about an old European university in Krakow. Because I was familiar with that university, I told him that we can agree on an exchange program. We can agree on a course that can be recognized here by a particular college, and they can agree on what course we can teach here that can be recognized in their colleges. By creating this sort of international relations, we can make our students aware of what goes on there. With that, we can develop academic traditions that are everywhere. After all, traditions are learned from each other. If you look at us in Kuwait, because of our location and proximity to the likes of India, Iran, etc., a lot of our traditions have an Indian flavor, an Iranian flavor, etc. However, if you compare this to the other Arab countries, you will find that we do things differently. There are countries that are closer to Europe or the Mediterranean, and they may have traditions that have those influences. The interaction is important. We cannot create a system in a cocoon. We have to have an open system.

IFC REPORTS: What role do American universities play in terms of your interactions and exchange programs?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: The US did not intend to play a role in this area. It only happened as a natural result of us sending our students to the US. During the 1960s, we sent most of our Kuwaiti students to American universities. These students who have gone to the US to earn their degrees come back to the country to become ambassadors of the US educational system, just like the Kuwaiti UK graduates became ambassadors of the British educational system. Those who have been sent to other parts of Europe for education are the minority because of the language barrier. In this respect, the US plays a big indirect role. The US is the professional parent of the Kuwaiti students who have gone to the US to earn their degrees and practice. This is the example that I used for our Ph.D. program. I have my natural children and I have my professional children. My graduate students are my protégés. They are the ones who will take up the flag and carry on with the profession when I retire.

It is important to accept international students to be recognized outside of the country. I think that a lot of KU's non-Kuwaiti graduates have brought a lot of credit to the university and the country. All of them remember the country fondly because they were educated and trained here.

IFC REPORTS: You have been a part of KU since 1978, in various capacities. Can you tell us more about your impressive career?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: I joined KU in 1978 as an Assistant Professor of Pathology at the Medical School. During the last leg of 1981, I was asked to be the Vice Dean of Academics for the Medical School. I thought that I was too junior for that position. I was around 34. I turned down the job because I wanted to be free to take on my other pursuits. My professors from Houston, Texas advised me to resist taking on invitations for administrative positions as much as I can because I was involved with them in a lot of things. For instance, when a group came to discuss grants, I was involved, defending some of the grants. A lot of the professors and the Chairman then tried to convince me to take on the position, and I eventually accepted the offer. I was the Vice Dean for Academics in Medical School until 1988, during which time I changed a lot of the Medical School's curriculum. It was also at that period when I began Chairing the committee to establish the Dental School.

In 1988, I became the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine. I stayed on until 1992. Then I became the Vice President for the Health Sciences Center (HSC). Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer became the Dean. After that, I decided to take a sabbatical for two years. However, this was cut short because Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer wanted to leave the Deanship after a year. I received all kinds of calls to take on my old post. I remained the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine until January 2003. After 2003, I enjoyed being just a Professor at the Faculty of Medicine until 2009, when Dr. Hilal Al-Sayer became a Minister, and asked me to lead the Kuwait Institute for Medical Specialization (KIMS).

IFC REPORTS: How does this experience help you as the President of KU?

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: This background helps me a lot as the President of KU. It gave me the experience that I needed. I have dealt with students and professors from all over the world. I have participated in formulating the curricula. I have had a hand in the development of the Dental School. I have helped in the expansion of the curriculum and the physical facilities of the HSC. I was highly involved in the development of the Diabetes Center. Together with the Director of Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science (KFAS), I went to Joslin in Boston and had a meeting with the people there. We had extensive discussions. While we were there, I suggested to the Director of KFAS that we get in touch with the Stubbins Group, the ones who built the HSC. We met with them in Boston to design the Diabetes Center. Right now, KIMS is designing a purpose-built building that caters to the various medical specialties. The building is designed to become a monument for the society to recognize (similar to the Royal Colleges in the UK, or the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, etc.). Through this project, we hope to make the people of Kuwait aware of the high quality healthcare system. They can go to the hospital without worry. We strongly believe that the mental comfort is half of the treatment, if not most of it. All these combined help me function effectively in my post.

IFC REPORTS: What are some of the main changes that you would like to achieve in KU during your time as President?



Highland House 165 The Broadway Wimbledon SW19 1NE
Tel: 44 20 7493 5599
E-mail: ifc@ifcreports.com
www.ifcreports.com

PROF. ABDULLATIF AL-BADER: Whatever I do, I want it to lead to excellence. I want to position KU as a center of excellence that anybody would want to be a part of.

You are right. I do have a lot of ideas. However, they will remain ideas until I discuss them with my colleagues. I am the type of person who likes to present his ideas and have others critically analyze and refine them. After which point, we do what we do. In my experience, that is the only way to get something done correctly. The idea is to research on a concept and present it for others to critique and make positive recommendations. This will possibly change 80% of it, but you end up with something better.

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