

RIYADH TO SUNDERLAND AND BACK Bridging the Gulf with a twinning initiative

When it comes to cross cultural communication, the hearing impaired win hands down. That was certainly the case with Jonathan Carter a catering student at City of Sunderland College and Muhammed Alghamdi, an IT student at College of Telecommunications and Information, who met for the second time in April when a delegation from Sunderland visited their counterparts in Riyadh as part of a British Council sponsored twinning initiative between the two colleges.

Jonathan and Muhammed, together with another hearing impaired student from Riyadh, had met previously in March this year when the Saudis undertook their leg of the twinning visit to the North East of England. The lads got on like a house on fire. Said Ian Chamberlain the group's signing interpreter, "Although Saudi and British signing is different, there is enough in common for people from different countries to make themselves understood in sign language." Not so for the speakers of English, who struggled to master even the most rudimentary elements of Arabic and will need a little time before they can comfortably converse.

Language aside, many of those who took part in the exchange visits felt that this was one of the most successful projects they have been involved in. "The two colleges are almost perfectly matched," explained Stuart Laverick, Vice Principal of Sunderland and delegation leader. "At Cisco Academies we teach the same thing and this will make it very easy for us to work together." The similarities also meant that the British trainees had no trouble fitting in. After the first morning of classes in Riyadh the Sunderland

students were impressed, "That was great," said one. "Very practical," another enthused, "Never done that before; take the chip out of the mobile and clean it up. Back in UK we'd tend to replace the part."

A particular highlight of the visit was the signing, on April 28, of a memorandum of understanding between the two institutions by Laverick and Dr Ahmed Al-Hamed, Dean of the Riyadh College. The MoU sets forth a plan for joint cooperation over the next five years. The two colleges have committed to working together on a wide range of activities including student and staff exchanges, delivery of joint programmes, development of mutually beneficial links between local industry and the formulation of shared strategies that will allow both parties to respond to the rapidly changing training environment of the 21st century. They have also agreed to work together to train their teams for the World Skills Competition that will be held in London in 2011.

Saleh Al-Isa, who studied IT and telecommunications in Japan for many years, and is now a trainer at the Riyadh College, was delighted with the twinning project. "It's a great opportunity for us to show the British team the way we do

