

BILL RAMMELL MP, BRITISH MINISTER FOR LIFELONG LEARNING, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION VISITS SAUDI ARABIA

The British Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Education Higher Education, Bill Rammell MP, visited the Kingdom from 18-21 February, with a high-level delegation of British educationalists. The aim was to build upon the existing educational links between Saudi and the UK, and open the way for greater engagement.

Educational reform and development is recognised to be of crucial importance by the Government of Saudi Arabia. Education accounted for 26% of the last budget. The aim, as in any country, is to equip young people to enter the workplace and take a productive and fulfilling role in the economic development of the country. Education is also one of the highest priorities of the British Government. There is great interest in both countries in developing cooperation.

Mr Rammell's delegation included the full range of British expertise in the higher and further educational field: 19 leading universities, colleges of further education, as well as the professional bodies and institutions that support them.

The Minister and his delegation held talks with the Saudi Ministers of Education, Higher Education, Labour and the Majlis Al-Shura in Riyadh, and also visited the vocational training agency GOTEVOT, and public and private universities and colleges.

The follow-up to the visit has been rapid: 8 return visits scheduled for the first month alone with longer term plans for further visits in both directions. The visit was certainly not an end in itself, but a precursor to ever more intensive mutual partnership between the two nations.

Mr Rammell's speech to the King Saud University

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, What makes man man? What makes human beings human? In the 18th century, it was suggested that what made man man was that he was a cooking animal. A century later the theory was that man was a tool-making animal. Sooner or later someone is going seriously to suggest that man is an iPod-using animal.

Such theories - like most theories - tell us more about the preoccupations of the times in which they were dreamt up than the condition of man.

You won't be surprised to know that, as a practising politician, I don't care much for such theorising. But I do care passionately about delivering what the British people sent us to Westminster to do. For them, as for us, one of our highest national priorities is, has been, and will be education. As Tony Blair said before we entered government, our priorities were, and are, education; education; and education.

And, Your Excellency - Sheikh Khalid [al-Anqari], it is education which brings me here this afternoon, to Saudi Arabia's oldest university. Not because we in Britain have all the answers. Not because we in Britain haven't made mistakes. Not because we in Britain don't still have much to learn. But because my government, like yours, knows that the future for our Kingdom

as for yours lies in education. Education is not just what separates a civilised nation from barbarism. Education is what enables us to compete, survive and prosper in a world in which no successful man - still less no successful country - can be an island. A world in which the WTO and the wireless internet are more important than frontiers posts and customs collectors.

A generation ago the great King Faisal had the vision to invest in Saudi Arabia's future by sending your brightest and best to study at some of the world's finest universities. I say "some", because perhaps a greater proportion of those young Saudi scholars crossed the Atlantic than I, as a British Education Minister, might be expected to think ideal. But today the rich harvest of human capital reaped by King Faisal's determination is seen across the Kingdom, and indeed around this room. You have one of the most highly-educated and effective elites in the world. Not many countries - certainly not mine - can boast a legislature two thirds of whose members have American doctorates - even if, as one wit once said, PhD does stand for Phenomenally Dumb!

But now, in the early 21st century, the challenge for both our countries, for both our governments, is more complicated. We both of us have the structures and systems to educate those who will be leading our societies thirty years from now. But education is about more than elites. About more than tending the academic grove. Now, as we equip our young people for the demands and difficulties of a globalising world, we realise that education - in the broadest sense of the term - needs to reach deeper, and last longer, than ever seemed the case. My rather bizarre Ministerial title gives a clue: Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education.

And in this, as in so much else, we need to work together. Just as centuries ago the torch of learning passed back and forth between the great cities of Arabia - among whose finest flowers were the ancient academies of Mecca and Medina - and those of a Europe stumbling through a dark age, so today the flow of knowledge and understanding back and forth around and among the cities of our common civilisation is as intense as ever. Only now the vectors of transmission are not wandering scholars moving hesitantly across the desert but terabytes of data travelling at the speed of light.

The scale of the co-operation between us is good. Three thousand Saudi students at British universities and colleges. Eight thousand more on part-time or language courses. The agreement between King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah and 20 UK universities on joint supervision of women doctoral students. Technical co-operation between the UK Quality Assessment Authority (who are represented on the delegation) and our Higher Education Statistics Authority and their Saudi counterparts on standards, statistics and benchmarking. The recent agreement between Oxford and Prince Sultan Universities on exchanges of students and faculty - sometimes, on difficult days, I would gladly swap even more of ours for more of yours, students or lecturers - and on joint research.