An Innovative Model of Medical Education for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Alfaisal envisioned becoming a world-class university and the best example of innovation and excellence in medical education, tailored to the needs and the culture of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Alfaisal University is Saudi Arabia’s first private, not-for-profit medical school. Under the leadership of Professor Khaled Al-Kattan, Dean of the College of Medicine, the University wanted to develop a new model of medical education that would not only differentiate the institution nationwide, but would also attract the best and brightest students throughout the Middle East. The University set out to identify the right partner to help achieve these objectives.

“We visited reputable medical schools in both the U.S. and Canada, looking for the best partner to affiliate with,” said Professor Al-Kattan. Their search eventually led them to then-Harvard Medical International (HMI), which later became Partners HealthCare International® (PHI).

“We found that PHI met our needs in many ways – from quality of services and history, to the personnel – who were all experts in medical education, administration and possessed broad international experience,” Al-Kattan added.

Transforming Medical Education – Together

In 2007, Alfaisal established what has now become a seven-year collaborative partnership with PHI. At that time a multidisciplinary group was formed that included senior staff members, clinical experts and faculty from the Academic Medical Centers of Partners HealthCare System, as well as faculty and thought leaders from Harvard University. “The PHI team worked ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ with Alfaisal to gain a better understanding of the local culture, the University’s goals and expectations, while also considering the desired impact for the University, its faculty, and ultimately the students,” said H. Thomas Aretz, MD, VP of Global Programs at PHI.

PHI worked with Alfaisal to review the strategic plan for the medical school, helped recruit and train faculty, and provided critical inputs into the curricula. “We co-developed courses and modules utilizing case-based and practice-based learning in a region where lecture-based learning had been the norm,” Dr. Aretz said.

Part of the work also involved hands-on interaction between Alfaisal and PHI. Surveys were developed and focus groups were conducted with multiple stakeholders at all levels. Professor Al-Kattan recognized PHI’s ongoing support through frequent conference calls, emails, and actual visits helped to facilitate greater cooperation with Alfaisal staff, and eliminated the “concept of distance” between the two organizations.

“The continuous visits and workshop activities reflected positively on us, our affiliates, and the medical education community within Saudi Arabia.”

Khaled Al-Kattan, Dean, College of Medicine at Alfaisal University

Unlike other medical schools and universities in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, Alfaisal University does not own a teaching hospital, but rather uses an “Affiliated Model”, first with one of its co-founders, the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Institute (KFSHRI). “The shared visits to KFSHRI and potential local affiliated hospitals were great and the team managed to impress these institutes and helped to accelerate the affiliations,” said Al-Kattan.

PHI does not export models or approaches that may be unsustainable or misaligned with a partners’ local context – the organization’s value lies in its ability to work with clients to co-develop solutions that address both challenges and opportunities specific to the client and their needs locally. “The client’s involvement is critical to the work and the desired outcomes,” said Dr. Aretz.

Professor Al-Kattan agreed. “The methodology used to meet our needs to co-develop the college structure, curriculum, admission criteria, faculty selection and the college facilities from design to implementation was excellent,” he said.

A Unique Model of Collaboration

“At PHI, we are not there to do the work for the client; we are there to work with them to customize solutions that fit their specific needs. In the case of Alfaisal, they had a dedicated team that was open to our methodology and our process for success. Now the University has a sustainable model of medical education, geared to Saudi Arabia,” Dr. Aretz added.

“we are looking forward to PHI playing a role in the future of healthcare and medical education in Saudi Arabia” Professor Al-Kattan

PHI is the international arm of Partners HealthCare, one of the largest healthcare systems in the U.S. Its founding members, Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital, are the two oldest and largest teaching affiliates of Harvard Medical School. “PHI represents the full dimension of Partners HealthCare’s expertise and experience in building global relationships that enhance the capabilities of health care worldwide,” said President and CEO Gilbert Mudge, Jr., MD. For the past 20 years, the organization has partnered with health care systems and educational institutions in more than 40 countries focusing on programs and initiatives to improve health care delivery.

Since partnering with PHI, Alfaisal Medical School has established itself as one of the leading institutions in the Middle East, and graduated its first class of students in 2013. “Because of the excellent outcome we will utilize PHI in future projects like the Alfaisal campus in Jeddah. We are looking forward to PHI playing a role in the future of health care and medical education in Saudi Arabia,” Al-Kattan said.
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