



Interview

Mohammed Saleh Al-Sada, SEC Member A Marine Geologist and Engineer Delves into Education Policy

Mohammed Saleh Al-Sada is one of the members of the Supreme Education Council drawn from Qatar's leading industries and businesses. Born in Doha and raised in the coastal village of Al-Ruwais, Dr. Al-Sada inherited an early fascination with marine life from his father, who was a pearl diver. He earned his Bachelor's degree in Marine Science and Geology from Qatar University and began his career with Qatar Petroleum (QP) on offshore projects. Dr. Al-Sada, a father of five, went on to obtain Master's and Doctorate degrees in Corrosion Science and Engineering at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology in the U.K.

Dr. Al-Sada, 45, has stayed with QP and now serves as its director technical, where he directs management of multi-million-dollar projects for the company. He also has become increasingly involved in civic activities, participating

in a range of efforts to develop Qatar's public institutions. As such, he was a member of the committee that wrote the country's 2003 Constitution, has served on the national committee for human rights, and helped set up the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, among other public-sector endeavors. As a member of the executive committee and board, he helped establish the Qatar campus of the College of the North Atlantic. In this exclusive interview with "Education for a New Era", Dr. Al-Sada discusses what industrialists and businessmen bring to the SEC, how industry stands to benefit from reform, and ways the Council is reinforcing its institutions.

Q. As an industrialist, can you tell us how you became involved in developing and implementing educational policy?

As a firm believer in the profound effect of education in the development of our people and

generally in human development, in the industry we feel the need more than anybody else for competent staff to sustain the continuous development of our economy.

Q. What roles do industry and business play in the reform process?

Industry and business are partners in education, as they are not only the eventual recipients of the outcome of education, but also partnering the process of developing education. They participate in various facets, and in fact it is evident now, especially at the higher-education level, that curriculum and some of our institutions are mutually developed. In addition, they make sure the supply of trainees and students is continuous. At the K-12 level, there are strenuous efforts to develop stronger ties, and personally I believe these ties are bound to be as strong as possible, because this is the foundation basically for the prosperity of education.

Q. What do business leaders bring to the SEC, which is composed of members from varied backgrounds, that's unique?

Well basically linking the industrial sector to the education policy-making level, on the one hand. On the other hand, we give the required support and advice to the Council from the industrial angle. As you can see, the composition of the Council is of a diversified nature. And that helps a lot, because matters are being discussed from various facets and in a comprehensive manner.

Q. Are Qatar's industries benefiting from the reform drive already, even though it is only a few years old?

We firmly believe that eventually industry and other sectors in our

country will definitely benefit from the reform. The thing is that the reform is a long-term enterprise and we should watch and wait for the results as they come gradually. It takes time, but it's worth it.

Q. How long do you think it will take for Qatar's schools to begin producing graduates who are fully prepared to compete in the job market?

Some of the higher education institutes of Qatar have already directed their policies towards hands-on types of occupational training. This type of training gives us the benefit directly so that we don't have to retrain. That is only one of the fruits that we are getting. Others, from K-12 basically, need time. But we think that it's worth it and we think that they will eventually come with a better foundation so that they can join higher education and eventually join the industry.

Q. What is it about the reform initiative, and the Independent Schools, that will better equip students for the job market?

Critical thinking is a pillar in education. Development and curriculum are definitely important. However, there are other skills required, like thinking from a wider angle, like relating things together, developing personal opinion in matters, discussing things freely, judging for themselves. Those skills are of crucial importance in my view.

Q. On the policy side, are there any new initiatives that the SEC is planning to adopt in the next year or two?

Yes, in fact the Council is very active in pursuing a number of initiatives. I can cite some, such as institutional development. We have a team now consisting of

some members of the SEC with the directors of the Institutes to develop the organization, the processes, the human development of employees, staffing appropriately, linking the institutions with schools in a smooth manner, allowing the institutes to work independently while working with each other. We are engaging

“Industry and business are partnering the process of developing education”

an external consultant to help out. As you know, the ultimate target is to get a world-class education in Qatar. That requires world-class Institutes. And this is what we are heading for.

Q. What is the status of the project to build new facilities to house the SEC and its Institutes?

The new building is under the design phase now. The government gave us prime land just next to Qatar University and Qatar Petroleum is honored to be trusted with the supervision and management of this project. I think the construction phase is planned to start toward the end of this year. The idea is to house in one place everybody involved in this reform.

Q. Outside streamlining the functioning of the SEC and Institutes, what other institution-building initiatives can you mention?

We also have the teachers' development program for pre-service training, and this is jointly done between Qatar University and Texas A&M. In-service development is another thing. We are pursuing national professional standards for teachers. At the same time, as we progress, we are evaluating our reform through different means, and we already orchestrated mechanisms to evaluate it. Qatar will participate for the first time in international studies to benchmark the standards of our students to their international counterparts. We will start this March with some international screenings like PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS.

Q. In general, is the SEC satisfied the Independent Schools -- their operators, teachers and students -- are producing the expected results?

They are progressing very well. They are learning themselves because the system is quite new. They are producing results. However, a lot of support is coming from the Institutes. The Institutes are giving them guidance and following progress and trying to de-bottleneck issues of a difficult nature.

Q. Is there discussion within the SEC of the issue of maintaining two parallel public education systems?

Our government is looking at the Independent Schools as only part of the education reform. As we are progressing well, as we are producing more results, certainly the government will opt for what is best for the students. This is why we are continuously evaluating the reform, and certainly as we can see now the education reform is progressing well and producing results. And that encourages us to turn more and more schools into Independent Schools.