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Where English, neoliberalism, desire and internationalization are alive and kicking: higher education in Saudi Arabia today

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The internationalization of higher education globally continues to grow more and more towards commercialization and neoliberalism paths, despite growing concerns about the underlying consequences. Building further on our work and using Saudi Arabia as a national case, this article critically investigates how and in what ways the Saudi government’s desire to internationalize its higher education system has overlooked the many problems associated with its English-only policy, and the neoliberal shaping of social and economic pressures. The article also demonstrates the paradoxical messages concerning internationalization success, strategies, and visions conveyed by the Saudi government and by several institutions from English-speaking countries in response to Saudi Arabia’s aspiration for internationalization of its higher education. We draw on several data sources in this article, specifically: (1) the Colleges of Excellence (CoE) project documents—a major Saudi government’s initiative to restructure the technical and vocational education system; (2) Several publicly available news items released by technical and vocational colleges from Canada and the UK as well as by the UK government in relation to their participation in Saudi Arabia’s CoE project; and (3) publicly available news items published in a number of key local Saudi newspapers regarding various aspects of the CoE project.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; English-medium education; internationalization of higher education; neoliberalism; CoE project

Introduction

Today’s global higher education (HE) is in various ways shaped by neoliberal ideologies. In this context, the internationalization of HE is a domain where neoliberalism has played a dominant role, particularly regarding its exploitation of the market value of the English language and of the term ‘international’ (Chowdhury and Phan 2014). At the same time, the fast-growing international role of English in HE has both been a product and a promoter of neoliberalism. English has often been associated with social, linguistic, political, cultural, intellectual, and economic advantages, especially within the practice of neoliberal transformations of global HE systems (Barnawi 2012; Chowdhury and Phan 2014; Phan 2013; Park 2009; Piller and Cho 2013; Naidoo and Williams 2014; Stiglitz 2002). The intersection of English and the internationalization of HE is played out in education policy, practice, and pedagogy at all levels and with varied degrees and intensities across global contexts and settings, including the Middle East.

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Since the global financial crisis in 2008, English has become even more widespread in the oil-rich Gulf States of the Middle Eastern countries namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait, where English is often perceived as their political and economic connection to the rest of the world (Barnawi 2012). This perception has also caused the governments of the Arab Gulf countries to energetically internationalize their HE by adopting English as the medium of instruction (EMI) as well as by importing English products and services to their educational systems. The aim behind this major shift has been to accommodate the evolving socioeconomic needs of their citizens and to ensure international participation in the global economy and education (Barnawi and Phan 2014; Corbyn 2009; Wilkins 2011).

While this is happening, studies on English and the internationalization of HE indicate that the term internationalization also connotes a ‘deficient’ and ‘deterministic’ education model (Iñiguez 2011), embedding the neo-colonialism mentality (Altbach 2003, 2013; Bray 1993; Knight and Sehoole 2013; Nguyen et al. 2009; Yang and Welch 2012). Thus, such internationalization practices implemented in countries in the Middle East may bring about undesirable educational outcomes including low participation of local workforce, intellectual dependency, unethical practices involving the commercialization of HE and English, and concerns about declining knowledge production in local languages, as discussed in Kirkpatrick (2011), Phan (2013), Phan, Kho, and Chng (2013), and Yang (2012). In particular, Phan (2013) has questioned the competing discourses of internationalization and the conditions (e.g. unequal power relations and cultural-politics of internationalization) that enable and legitimize the institutionalization of desires for EMI in Asian countries where English plays different roles.

At the heart of the above debates and backgrounds lies governments’ desire and the power of the neoliberal market, in which stakeholders have exploited the symbolic power of English and internationalization to form convenient and somewhat artificial needs for the internationalization of HE in various contexts across the globe, as documented and discussed in the earlier works of one of us (Chowdhury and Phan 2014; Phan 2013, 2015). Focusing on Saudi Arabia (SA) as a national case and by analysing SA’s latest major government project called Colleges of Excellence (CoE) as both the research context and the data by itself, we shed light on HE in SA where the interdependence of English, neoliberalism, desire, and internationalization are expressed, enacted, and pursued by different stakeholders. The CoE project aims at reforming SA’s vocational and technical colleges through internationalization, and is worth over one billion dollars investment. CoE is aligned with the government’s massification and privatization of HE policy, and the project is a major part of the country’s comprehensive growth strategy. Specifically, in one decade, the number of colleges and universities in SA has increased from about 19 to over 127; and over the period of two years, 37 international branch campuses have been established under the CoE project. SA’s drastic and yet multidimensional reforms in its HE system invite a critical and insightful assessment.

**Neoliberalism and higher education**

Neoliberalism is generally referred to as the philosophy of sustaining entrepreneurial and competition-seeking practices under the umbrella of free markets (Connel 2013; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Teghe and Knight 2004). It also refers to the institutional practices in putting such philosophies into action in a ‘systematic, organized, and
orchestrated policy’ (Piller and Cho 2013, 24). The central thesis of neoliberalism is the de-regulation of the market for the benefit of individual competition and empowerment. It encourages individuals to freely enter the marketplace to compete and, at the same time, exit from it ‘at any time to produce goods or services, while operating their own interest’ (Gopal 2011, 236). Within the framework of neoliberalism, governments and states’ policies have been shifted from controlling to supporting the discourses of free markets principles so as to facilitate national economic welfare. One of the primary pillars of neoliberalism is centred on interests, i.e. the desires or wants of individuals, groups, institutions and/or governments in a particular context (Chowdhury and Phan 2014). This means neoliberalism values specific types of interests over others; thereby raising these interests to their peak when policies of governments, states and federal are endorsed (Bok 2004; Gopal 2011).

Indeed, according to Stier (2004, cited in Ilieva and Waterstone 2013, 16) ‘a predominant ideology of internationalization in higher education today is ‘instrumentalism’, with the goal to enrich the labour force and consolidate the economic prowess of a country, as well as maximize revenue for educational institutions’. As such, HE is projected as a commodity in the global marketplace (Connel 2013; Gopal 2011; Naidoo and Williams 2014), in which it is both forced to accommodate and proactively respond to the expectations of governments, industries, and the economic needs of societies. Marketization, different forms of competitions and consumerist mechanisms are now prevalent in HE globally, including North America, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (Harman 2005; Sidhu 2006; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Naidoo and Williams 2014), and Asia as in the case of China (Xiong 2012; Yang 2008, 2012), Malaysia and Singapore (Arokiasamy 2011; Mok 2011).

Significantly reduced public funding for HE in many parts of the world over the past two decades, particularly in North America, Europe, and Australia, is a reification of neoliberal free market ideologies that has shaped the status of global HE bodies in many ways. These HE bodies’ status also depends on how much academic and scientific capital they perceive and are perceived to have to resist these free market ideologies (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Collier 1988; Naidoo 2004; Naidoo and Williams 2014). Neoliberal ideologies and public funding reduction, among other factors, have caused many educational institutions to embrace market mechanisms and profits generation practices more aggressively. Naidoo and Williams (2014, 1) argue that ‘one significant [consequence] has been the re-conceptualization of students as consumers of HE’. There is an increasing ‘demand by the government that institutions publish increased data and performance indicators, which, it is presumed, will derive student choice and enhance market mechanisms’ (Naidoo and Williams 2014, 2). Another consequence is the re-conceptualization of HE as an import-export industry generating profits from international students (Chowdhury and Phan 2014; Connel 2013; Marginson 2009). A third consequence points to changes in governments, states and federal policies pertaining to HE funds across North America, Australia and the UK. Governments in these countries acknowledge that it is too demanding and complex to fund public universities and technical education institutes. Thus, creating conditions that allow HE entities to compete within and among one another has been a solution. It is hoped that this solution would enable HE institutions to push themselves through knowledge production and dissemination under the rules of neoliberalism to become more effective and competitive (Connel 2013; Marginson 2009; Naidoo and Williams 2014; Tavares and Cardoso 2013).

Under these circumstances, the internationalization of HE has been exploited by many institutions around the world to secure finances for their operation. Universities
and colleges in many English-speaking countries have been at the forefront of this practice. Their endeavours include establishing partnerships with overseas institutions, franchising degree programmes, launching joint programmes, and opening branch campuses. Such endeavours are further supported by the imposition and projection of ‘English as a natural and neutral language of academic excellence’ (Piller and Cho 2013, 24), something that ought to be desired and possessed by any institution claiming to be international.

**English, internationalization of higher education, and desire**

While the international and global role of English is not neutral and while its cultural politics has been examined in depth (Canagarajah 1999; Pennycook 1998; Phillipson 1992, 2009), much of the internationalization of HE and the globalization of knowledge has continued to be generated through English (Phan 2013; Phan, Kho, and Chng 2013; Piller and Cho 2013; Widin 2010). Internationalization has been equated with Englishization (Kirkpatrick 2011), McDonaldization (Altbach 2013), Westernization (Altbach 2003; Kubota 2002), and (neo)colonialism (Bray 1993; Knight and Sehoole 2013), all the connotations that have been attributed to globalization as well. Therefore, although there has been effort to differentiate globalization from internationalization (Knight 2004; Yang 2002, for instance), meanings and implications associated with these two terms overlap in many ways. The English language has appeared to play a central role in all these meanings and implications.

Together with English, such neoliberal doctrines as ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), ‘global academic excellence’ (Sapiro 2010), and ‘corporatization of universities’ (Piller and Cho 2013) have significantly influenced the interests of governments and policy makers in many countries in their pursuit of internationalization of HE. In this context, the desire to learn English as a national mission and to internationalize their HE has been clearly articulated in the Gulf countries’ strategies, educational policy reforms, and initiatives (Barnawi and Phan 2014; Wilkins 2011). These governments have, at varied levels, adopted an English medium instruction policy, imported English-medium educational and training products and services, franchised international programmes, offered generous financial support and incentives to overseas institutions to establish branch campuses locally, and undertaken major initiatives worth billions of dollars to reform and internationalize their HE systems (Barnawi and Phan 2014; Corbyn 2009; Wilkins 2011). The United Arab Emirates, in particular, ‘is by far the largest host of international branch campuses globally, with over 40 providers at the end of 2009’ (Wilkins 2010, 389).

As one of us has argued (Chowdhury and Phan 2014, 8),

> English has often been marketed as one of the most appealing elements and a must tick of the internationalization of higher education that would earn a nation competitive advantage and modernization as well as bring about jobs, status, knowledge and access.

At the same time, Chowdhury and Phan (2014) show the irony and paradox embedded in the term international and internationalization, pointing to the complex relations of power and interests perceived, expressed, and legitimized by providers and receivers of international education. For example, to many education providers internationalization of HE is a means to generate incomes from their international students seen as customers; and as such for these providers international means revenues, while students - the
receivers - tend to associate international with glamour and cosmopolitanism. Likewise, the import-export of international English-medium educational services and products globally tend to perceive non-English-speaking Western entities in deficit terms, thus a pressing problem needing to be fixed through internationalization (Phan 2013, 2015). Importers and consumers of international education such as universities, colleges, and students across the globe all play a role in legitimizing and normalizing such underlying discourses of internationalization of HE at their sites.

Within complex layers of interests, English and the internationalization of HE have been projected through a vast network of marketing discourses, politics, and ideologies in the academic world as well as in the English language teaching (ELT) industry. In the words of Durings (1999, 23),

> The cultural industry [of internationalization of HE] uses its own sophisticated ethnographic techniques to mediate the concept of the [internationalization and English] between producers and consumers. But it also simultaneously generates public desires by marketing its products as if they were already popular.

Building further on our work and using SA as a national case, as stated earlier, we investigate how and in what ways the Saudi government’s desire to internationalize its HE system has overlooked the many problems associated with its English-only policy, and the neoliberal shaping of social and economic pressures. We also demonstrate the paradoxical messages concerning internationalization success, strategies, and visions conveyed by the Saudi government and by several institutions from English-speaking countries in response to SA’s aspirations for internationalization of its HE.

**Methodology and data**

We treat the CoE project as the research site which has its own history, stakeholders, audience, actors, consumers, partners, authorities, activities, rules and regulations, and complexities. Under the scope of this article, we only focus on three sources specified below:

1. The CoE project documents – a major Saudi government’s initiative to restructure the technical and vocational education system;
2. Several publicly available news items released by technical and vocational colleges from Canada and the UK as well as by the UK government in relation to their participation in SA’s CoE project;
3. Publicly available news items published in a number of key local Saudi newspapers regarding various aspects of the CoE project.

These three sources of data are all situated in the context of the CoE project and are diverse in genres including policy texts, media reports and articles, government announcements, university news releases, and direct statements made by government officials. These texts were produced by different actors and stakeholders as well as by those concerned. The data were gathered at several points including in terms of space, source, time, phase, and progress of the CoE project. The majority of texts are in English, and some texts are in Arabic.

The study uses a thematic analysis based on the aforementioned generated data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Evans 2013). Specifically, the data are analysed and discussed according to the themes generated in the previous sections: HE and neoliberal market
ideologies, and the intersection of English, the internationalization of HE, and the desire for international education. We demonstrate how the various stakeholders of HE abuse, exploit, manipulate, and exercise their versions of the internationalization of HE, which in many ways is driven by neoliberalism while also reflects the multi-faceted cultural politics of the English language we have documented earlier.

By treating the CoE project as the research site, we acknowledge that there may be other ways to interpret what has been going on and in relation to the data sources that we draw on for the purpose set out in this article. Our interpretations and discussions are, nevertheless, central to many debates regarding HE, English as medium of instruction, internationalization, and neoliberalism.

Colleges of excellence (CoE) across KSA: ‘Paving the way toward International Education’

The CoE project is the Saudi government’s response to several concerns regarding its labour workforce’s capability and competitiveness in terms of skills, knowledge, and English proficiency. The population of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is nearly 28 million, with almost 40% under the age of 30. Yet, ‘about 6 million foreign workers constitute the engine of the economy, and worse still, 25% of Saudis are unemployed’ (Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi 2015, 8). According to Barnawi (2012, 2014), KSA, the biggest oil producer in the world, for decades has been regarded nationally and internationally as being unable to train a labour workforce that can fulfil its domestic market demand as well as can be globally competitive. This labour workforce is described as having a poor command of English and poor technical/vocational knowledge and skills relevant to the country’s ever-growing job market. This problem has led to KSA’s heavy dependence on foreign workforce for its economy and other important matters. Concerned that this dependence could cause social unrest, and at the same time acknowledging the need to develop highly skilled Saudi manpower, the Saudi government has determined to reform its technical and vocational education and training, at both the policy and practice levels. Specifically, in 2011, the government launched a 1-billion-dollar project called ‘CoE’ to realize the reform in the entire Kingdom. The executive summary of the project contains full-bodied evidence of the government’s strong quest for the internationalization of HE.

The CoE project is an ambitious attempt from the Saudi government to use education as a primary tool for producing human capital with good English command and with maximal exposure to Western best practices and knowledge through English-medium training. To achieve these aims, the project invites international training providers across the world to bid for technical and vocational education college campuses in KSA.

To meet its aspiration, the Kingdom intends to enroll international training providers who will help make this journey a successful one. With this in mind, it gives us great pleasure to announce the launch of a multi-stage tender process with which we will select the very best training providers globally to set up 26 new autonomous colleges in the Kingdom structured in 11 clusters of one to three colleges each. These colleges will be independently run by
international providers, and regulated, funded and overseen by Colleges of Excellence (CoE). CoE will also provide brand new college buildings built to state-of-the-art designs that can house up to 3,000 students. Colleges of Excellence, a public company jointly owned by the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF) and the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC), manages all current Public Private Partnerships (PPP) colleges and is extending PPP-based technical and vocation in the Kingdom. CoE provides ‘one-stop-shop’ services for providers to create and operate colleges in the Kingdom. (CoE 2012, 4)¹

As shown above, one key target audience of the CoE is international training providers. The Saudi government’s strong quest to reform its HE sector through internationalization and its willingness to offer generous financial support and incentives to overseas institutions to establish campuses in SA are well pronounced in the project’s executive summary. The summary also implies that SA’s success with its reform endeavours is dependent on the presence of international training providers across the country. SA’s generous invitation and its high regard of the role of international training providers expressed in the document have resulted in many international institutes bidding to establish college campuses in the country. Many such institutes are from the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, as further described below.

The technical and vocational colleges from a number of Western countries selected by the Saudi government

To date there have been over 37 technical and vocational colleges operated in SA and they are all run by the international entities selected by the Saudi government, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. These colleges are managed by either Western training companies/agencies, by Western colleges and universities, by a consortium of two or three Western colleges, or by a group of Western training companies and local Saudi organizations. Among these, 24 colleges are UK-affiliated and the rest are affiliated with colleges

Table 1. Western-based colleges and training companies operating in Saudi Arabia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Name of institute/training provider</th>
<th>Number of college campuses operated in KSA by each institute/training provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australian Aviation: Riyadh College of Excellence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Algonquin College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Niagara College</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>GIZ-Festo Training Services LLC</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>CINOP Middle East Company</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain and New Zealand</td>
<td>Mondragon (MEI, Spain) and Wintec (New Zealand)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>TQ Education and Training</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>GEMS Education and Moulton College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>ESG</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Lincoln College</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>NESCOT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Laureate International Universities</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Hertfordshire London college</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and training companies in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands.

There are currently 11,588 students enrolled in these 37 colleges, of which 19 are for male students and 18 are for female students. Any high school graduate in KSA can apply for a place at these colleges, and they are all required to study intensive English for one year before they start their specialized programmes, which are delivered in English.

On winning the bid to set up campuses in SA, a number of these colleges (have) shared the news with the wider public and with their own staff and students on their websites. In the case of the UK colleges chosen to participate in the CoE project, the UK government also endorsed its full support, evident in the speeches delivered by several high ranking officials. We provide the details and our analysis of these websites and speeches in a later section.

Many of these colleges offer both English intensive programmes and specialized courses to students, while others offer specialized courses only and partner with or contract other language centres to provide English language training to students before they take the main study.

**Articles published in local Saudi Arabia newspapers regarding the CoE project**

Since the launch of the CoE project in 2011, local newspapers in both Arabic and English, such as Okaz, Al-Watan, Al-Riyadh, Al-Jazirah, Arab News, and Saudi Gazzette, among others, have covered a wide range of issues associated with it. As will be shown in the subsequent sections, these issues include the Saudi government’s overconfidence of the project, the lack of transparency surrounding the implementation process, the
government’s rather uncritical stance towards English and consequences associated with English-medium education, the society’s scepticism about the success of the project, and growing concerns regarding the selection, operation, and management of foreign educational providers, to name a few.

**CoE project: internationalization of HE, neoliberalism, and the legitimization of foreign education providers as solution to KSA’s workforce problem**

The Saudi government’s post-secondary education policy reforms are primarily driven by social and economic pressure. The high unemployment rate among Saudi citizens has largely been attributed to their lack of English proficiencies and necessary skills and knowledge required for today’s workforce. This problem has pushed for KSA’s socioeconomic transformation directives that favour the internationalization of HE and the promotion of ‘English as a terrain where individual and societal worth are established’ (Piller and Cho 2013, 23). The CoE project is a realization and aspiration of such directives as well as a solution to SA’s national problem; and this realization is only successful with the help of international training providers as stated in the project documents. The Saudi Minister of Labor and Chairman of the Board of Directors of CoE, Adel Fakeih, underlined the impact of the CoE project on KSA, as reported in Saudi Gazette (2013):

> Education has a tremendous impact on both the nation and the lives of individuals. Behind every great nation is a great system of education. In collaboration with our international partners, the Colleges of Excellence will raise the bar in setting new standards for technical training in Saudi Arabia. (para# 4)

In addition, the Deputy Director General of the Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF), Dr Abdulkareem Al-Nijaidi, announced in Saudi Gazette that:

> Giving our people the right skills today will ensure that, as a country, we are best placed to create strong and productive industries that can serve customers worldwide, in turn benefiting from tomorrow’s growth industries.

The CoE project also serves as the Saudi government’s official interference into HE institutes and affirms its adoption of quasi-market ideologies and concerns of accountability regarding different stakeholders. While linking technical and vocational education to the market forces and needs, the government also attempts to limit the autonomy of its own HE institutes by taking over some autonomy and by transferring some autonomy to foreign training providers under its support. The government’s aspiration embedded in the CoE project presents Saudi technical and vocational training/education in the discourses of neoliberalism in many ways and at many levels. For example, the CoE promotes Public Private Partnerships (PPP) models and practices, those tenets that have been criticized by many scholars in education and development for their favour of education as private good and their institutionalized legitimacy of the privatization of education, as evident in all the fourteen chapters co-edited by Klees, Samoff and Stromquist (2012). These scholars have showed that the application of such PPP tenets has caused social and educational inequality and deepened social injustice in many developing countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Likewise, these PPP practices have appeared to worsen every effort to reduce poverty in affluent countries (Raffo et al. 2010). In an interview with the local newspaper Al-Riyadh (2014), the President of TVTC stated that:
The CoE project is the best choice for addressing job market needs across the KSA, in collaboration with top-notch international training providers. It is part of the comprehensive growth strategy of the country. The phrase ‘Colleges of Excellence’ was coined in order to ensure uniqueness in our new practices that embrace PPP-based technical and vocation training. Thanks to the Saudi Shura Council who has been offering logistic and financial support to realize our endeavours.

The language of neoliberalism in the CoE document is also evident in the KSA’s justification of its internationalization of technical and vocational education on the basis of human capital development and employability.

Ensuring high-quality jobs for Saudi Nationals is one of the most critical priorities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and The Custodian of the two Holy Mosques King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has been identified as the most critical lever for improving the value of human resources in the country, and helping Saudi youth, both male and female, to play a productive and meaningful role in the local labor market. The future of upcoming young generations of Saudi Arabia therefore depends on the success of the TVET project in the Kingdom. (CoE, 5)

As shown above, the pursuance of direct accountability to different stakeholders has led the government to link post-secondary education to the country’s economic and market forces, thereby weakening the autonomy of its own HE institutes and their scientific capital (Bourdieu 1986). At the same time, international institutions have joined the Saudi HE realms to help equip Saudi students with knowledge and skills needed for the job market. Specifically, the CoE project dictates very specific specializations to be taught across CoE including business and financial services, engineering (mechanical and electrical, and based transportation, aviation technology), beauty and fashion, construction, tourism, health and social care and information technology. In this regard, ‘students are no longer perceived to be potential contributors to the public intellectual capital of the nation, but instead as private investors seeking a financial return in the form of enhanced employability skills’ (Naidoo and Williams 2014, 6).

Evident in the language of the CoE project is the Saudi government’s assumption and expectation that foreign education providers would be able to help the country address its national problem of the unskilled and unqualified workforce, as indicated in the overview and analysis of the CoE project we have offered in the Methodology section and as shown in the texts and statements provided above. The CoE project has endorsed foreign vocational and technical training providers to be the main force behind KSA’s aspirations to be globally competitive and to respond to its national social justice issues caused by the current high rate of unemployment among Saudis. Local newspapers such as Okaz (2014), Al-Jazirah (2014), and Al-Watan (2014) also highlighted the government’s assurance that these international training providers were selected based on rigorous processes, in collaboration with top local government authorities including the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, TVTC, the Human Resources Development Fund, Saudi Telecom Company, and Saudi ARAMCO, to name a few. They further stressed that experiences of international training providers, quality of programmes and alignment of courses to the Saudi job markets were the main criteria for selection.

However, as we will demonstrate later in this article, many of the selected international training providers do not seem to genuinely share the Saudi government’s concerns about its labour workforce and about strengthening its vocational and technical education and training sector. They instead seem to be more interested in the revenues generated in
the process and the commercialization of education practices that are centrally embedded in their operation. In the same vein, local colleges and local authorities have also been participating in these activities, and in many ways have even validated and facilitated them.

Unclear roles and responsibilities assigned to international training providers leading to English-only practice, social problems, and intense commercialization of education

To actualize the government’s aspirations, the CoE project has circulated a list of specializations to be delivered and has also set roles and responsibilities for international training providers across the KSA.

Training providers will be expected to independently define their own courses and curricula in accordance with the minimum standards set by CoE and SSS. Since the ability of graduates to meet the needs of the local labor market is critical to TVET’s success, future training providers will need to adapt their existing programs and curricula to best meet local requirements in terms of:

Training duration. Full programs (Diplomas and Associate Degrees) will be three years in duration. An initial foundation year will focus on the English language, IT and other basic skills, followed by two years of technical education. The curriculum is expected to be modular, with students having the option to obtain a qualification/certificate after each year of study. Dual qualifications are welcome, but not mandatory.

Language taught. While currently most training is delivered in English, some programs could be delivered in Arabic going forward, for example in the retail industry.

Alignment with the Saudi National Occupational Skills Standards. NOSS in Saudi Arabia cover the expected skills and competencies in that given occupation that are required to be successful on the labor market. The Saudi NOSS are currently undergoing a thorough review in an effort to ensure that they are helpful to training providers and in the labor market. (7)²

The roles and responsibilities dictated by the CoE for international training providers, as shown above, are neither specific nor clear in the project documents. These roles and responsibilities are very generic and tend to implicitly encourage and legitimize these providers to customise their existing programmes to meet the needs of NOSS, which is still at its infancy and is currently undergoing a thorough review, as plainly stated in the project document. Consequently, the international training providers supported by the CoE project have exercised their (full) autonomy in operating their campuses in KSA. English has been adopted as the only medium of instruction in all their programmes. At the same time, to respond to the Saudi government’s HE reforms, local institutions have also internationalized their academic programmes by adopting English as medium of instruction and by importing English-medium products and services from English-speaking Western countries (Barnawi and Phan 2014 for more details). Notably, to date the number of private international institutes operating college campuses across the KSA parallels, if not exceeding, the number of public HE institutes nationwide.

Both local and international HE institutes require Saudi students to acquire a basic command of English after their one year foundation programme (i.e. an overall band of 4.5 or 5 in International English Language Testing System — IELTS or its equivalent) before they embark on their chosen specialized programmes. Ironically, findings from most recent local (see for example Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi 2015) and international studies (see the 2013 report of Education First) have reported that Saudi students’ literacy
in English is so low in that many ‘high school graduates cannot even differentiate between different phonics of English, let alone accomplish the tasks of writing their names or conducting a basic conversation in English’ (Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi 2015, 14). Yet, these students are now required to successfully complete the language proficiency requirements set by their respective colleges within one academic year so as to be allowed to do their college programmes entirely in English. This is totally unrealistic, impossible, and is sure to fail.

This English-only education has created a huge market for English language teaching and learning across the country, particularly English for academic purposes, and English for professional and vocational purposes. To meet the high demand for English dictated by the CoE, some of the international institutes such as Algonquin College, Lincoln College International, Laureate, Niagara College, Mondragon TQ and NESCOT, have subcontracted several independent local and international language centres/schools to run all English courses inside their campuses. Local media in SA, such as Okaz, Al-Riyadh and Al-Watan, among others, has reported cases where these subcontracted language schools have hired hundreds of freelance English native speakers to teach across the CoE while they also use these teachers as a marketing tool to win other tenders offered by the international training providers above them. In light of the CoE guidelines and regulations, these practices are deemed illegal. As discussed in Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2015), the issues of illegality in such practices reside in two ways: (1) subcontracting local and international centres/schools to run English courses while the actual contract between these international institutes and the Saudi government states that only faculty members from respective institutes will teach in the programmes and (2) hiring freelance English native speakers with qualifications ranging from short ELT teacher training courses, summer TESOL training, TESOL Certificates, CELTA, and CertTESOL across the CoE, while the agreements between the two parties are based on teachers having a relevant Masters as the minimum requirement of teaching qualifications.

All the practices discussed above have resulted in a growing shadow market of English education, which is there to accommodate the society’s need of English. Hundreds of private language schools such as Berlitz, Interlink, ELS, New Horizon, Direct English, International House, and Education First have opened branches nationally to offer around the clock English classes. The promotion of English native speakers as a marketing tool and as a safeguard of quality is used by many of these language schools. Local media and newspapers are also loaded with ads that invite Saudis to study four-week summer intensive English courses, for example in New Zealand, Australia, Britain, or the USA anywhere between 6000 and US$10000. For native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), the country has become one of the most generous EFL job markets on earth, in which wages on offer are extremely high (Barnawi 2012).

Together with the intense commercialization of education and of English language teaching in SA come undesirable consequences and problems, one of which concerns Saudi students’ limited access to HE in their mother tongue. These students’ choices of vocational training in Arabic language are openly denied by the government’s new HE reform policy. This is because the Ministry of HE has mandated EMI in all post-secondary education across the country (Barnawi 2012), and thus all the CoE international training providers have automatically endorsed their existing English-medium programmes in SA.

Another problem is centred on quality of training provided by the CoE colleges, when the entry level of many students is low and with little English. Ironically, while many students are aware of their unpreparedness to study in the medium of English at the college
level, they are also attracted to this idea, particularly following the government’s promise of job security after graduation and following the government’s full endorsement of English in education and job markets, as expressed in the CoE project context. Therefore, the number of Saudi students enrolled in these international colleges is high, currently 11,588, and is increasing fast, according to the information we obtained from the most recent International Exhibition for Higher Education (IEHE) held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on 15–18 April 2015, in which many CoE colleges had a booth to recruit Saudi students.

One more consequence is related to limited employment opportunities for local staff who wish to teach in the CoE colleges. At the policy and conceptual level, the CoE documents encourage all international training providers to recruit Saudi faculty members so as to create more job opportunities for Saudi academics and teachers and to build local capabilities (CoE 2011). However, as shown by Barnawi (2015), many Saudi academics in business and engineering with low proficiencies in English have found it challenging, even impossible, to get hired in the CoE. The root of the matter is that these academics are unable to deliver their teaching and content knowledge in English. They are also required to learn and improve English so as to be able to teach in English; and their intellectual capacities and capabilities within their own disciplines become second to their ability to teach in English to Saudi students (Barnawi 2015). While this issue in other contexts and settings such as Europe and Asia has been discussed widely in the literature (Huang 2009; Phillipson 2009), what is happening in KSA shows that English-dominant HE will continue to grow and shape policy, pedagogy and practice as well as the experiences of all stakeholders involved.

This rather whole-hearted promotion of English in KSA has created on-going debates in the local and international media that question the ideological, cultural, political, economic and sociocultural impacts of English and of the internationalization of HE led by the government on the nation’s education and on the society at large. Specifically, conservative wings ‘even claim that there is a conspiracy to destroy the Arabic language in the country and the Islamic heritage associated with it’, whereas senior officials in the Ministry of Higher Education insist that ‘English is a national strategic choice and regard it as a great tool for national survival in the 21st century, as well as being an urgent public requirement; since this is the case, opponents need to reconsider their reactions’ (Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi 2015, 17).

International media outlets such as CNN, BBC, and Time News have also highlighted the enthusiastic and intense promotion of English taking place across the Gulf region, including the KSA. For instance, the Washington-Post released an article entitled ‘Qatar reshapes its schools, putting English over Islam’ (Glasser 2003) which praises various decisions implemented by the Qatar Royal family to their English curricula, teaching methods, textbooks, and so forth. Karmani, a renowned Muslim applied linguist, offered a response in his article entitled ‘English, “Terror,” and Islam’ (2005) to counter the position expressed in the Washington Post article and to denounce Western allegations that ‘Islamic education breeds terrorism’ (263). The ‘More English, less Islam’ report (Cherise 2007), which critically situates the dynamic changes of English education across the oil-rich Gulf region countries because of ideological, religious, cultural and linguistic tensions, was another controversial document that further heated the debates over ELT in the Saudi context. Nevertheless, all in all, introducing more English education across the country is perceived by the Saudi government as a strategic response and as a step towards realizing healthy educational reforms (Barnawi 2015).

Together with the several problems associated with the commercialization of English language teaching and learning in SA discussed above, the CoE implementation
processes have also been charged with concerns from government authorities regarding the lack of transparency and unethical practices, as revealed by local newspapers in the past year. These concerns show that although the Saudi government has fully endorsed the CoE project, some bodies within the government have appeared to be more cautious and critical of it. For instance, Al-Watan (2014) highlights that the ‘Saudi Anti-Corruption Commission’ directs its lens toward the CoE initiative. It reported that the Commission had scrutinized several documents related to the CoE project, including contracts with international training providers, salary scales, and recruitment criteria, among other things. According to Al-Watan (2014), a local newspaper, Saudi Shoura Council members have also harshly criticized the current practices of the internationalization of education arguing that the CoE have been expanding their branches across the country without the government having a clear measure of the outcomes of this project. Another local newspaper, Al-Hayat (2014), covered the Saudi Shoura members’ warnings against the CoE project in a rather provocative title ‘Reveal the magic secrets and stop opening more branches of CoE across the country’. Shoura members stated that instead of opening more branches of CoE across the country, TVTC should evaluate the outcomes of the existing programmes offered by international training providers. Furthermore, the alignment of CoE programmes with the tradition, culture and values of HE in general, and the country’s national cultural identity in particular is yet to be assessed. Depending on international training providers to operate all technical and vocational schools in the KSA suggests that the government has clearly acknowledged its deficiency and dependency.

Another newspaper, Future Electronic (2014), highlighted concerns expressed by several educators and academics in SA, in which they were worried that inviting international training provider to operate college campuses inside the country would bring about self-doubt and intellectual dependency. Many educators and academics have reported that the CoE project is mostly run by international training companies, not by academic institutes. They have requested that the status, rankings, accreditation, and academic contribution of these international training providers in their home countries be assessed and publicized. Recently in early 2015, a top-ranking official at the Ministry of Civil Service revealed that the existing CoE programmes are not accredited by the Ministry, because these programmes have not been approved by the Ministry of Higher Education. Many local newspapers (e.g. Okaz, Al-Watan, and Al-Riyadh) have already reported on the matter and pointed out the associated meanings of such a controversial statement. This statement has indeed marred the future of the CoE project with tensions and doubts, and has raised more anxieties among stakeholders.

The concerns discussed above echo what several studies (Altbach 2013; Phan 2015; Shamim 2008; Tollefson and Tsui 2004; Yang 2008, 2012) have discussed, that adopting EMI programmes through the internationalization of HE in many contexts could create social sufferings as well as various cognitive, pedagogical and educational restrictions to the recipient. These studies argue that while such internationalization trends might help some individuals to have access to knowledge and social mobility, they could also place others at unfavourable positions within a society. Specifically, students with little or low English proficiencies are likely to fall behind linguistically and academically, given that one year of intensive English training is not enough for them to reach the level that would enable them to participate in English-medium content classes delivered almost exclusively by foreigners. According to Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2015), many Saudi families are financially exhausted because of their investment in their high school children’s English language learning, particularly those with lower incomes and not being familiar with HE. These families often hope that
their children would be admitted to an international college which would then help them get a good job in the future, but in reality many may take years to graduate given their inadequate English. High-paying jobs may, thus, not be possible after all. As Tollefson and Tsui (2004) note,

Medium of instruction policy determines which social and linguistic groups have access to political and economic opportunities, and which groups are disenfranchised. It is therefore a key means of power (re) distribution and social (re) construction, as well as a key arena in which political conflicts among countries and ethnolinguistic, social and political groups are realized (2).

The internationalization of postsecondary education in SA has made English the only choice for individuals hoping for their perceived better future. To dates, what has been happening in SA echoes the experiences of South Korea, as demonstrated in Piller and Cho (2013),

[Today], competing on the terrain of English is not a matter of individual choice but a collective imperative. While the imperative to compete is continuously exhorted as an individual responsibility, it is not the case that individuals can choose on which terrain they wish to compete. (29)

Unhidden aims: We are in the KSA to make money

A number of international institutes such as Algonquin College, Lincoln College International, Laureate, Niagara College, Mondragon TQ and NESCOT, among others, who won the bid from the Saudi government to participate in the CoE project, have used different rhetorical flashes to celebrate the news. At one level, these institutes see the winning of the bid as great opportunities to expand their services to international sites. At another level, they are very straightforward in describing their participation in the CoE project as a way to generate incomes, to secure their operational budget, to earn means to reinvest in their home campuses, and to spread their success and worthiness domestically and internationally.

In its official website, for example, Algonquin College from Canada posted ‘Algonquin College Wins Bid for New Female and Male Campuses in Saudi Arabia’ in 2014. The President of Algonquin College, Kent MacDonald, states that:

We are thrilled that today’s announcement will allow us to offer our unique brand of Canadian education to both Saudi women and men. Subject to Ontario government approval, the two campuses are expected to generate over $20 million dollars in net revenues for the College spread over the five years of the contract. These revenues will be reinvested to improve the learning experience for all Algonquin students.³

On its website Lincoln College from the UK advertises the news in the same manner, ‘Lincoln College has been awarded a contract worth £250 million by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as part of its ambitious Colleges of Excellence program’. The Managing Director of Lincoln College International, Simon Plummer, declares that:

It’s fantastic news for the college and the local communities it serves. Having been rated Outstanding by Ofsted, Lincoln College is one of the highest performing further education colleges in the country. Winning this contract affirms our position not only as a leading UK training provider but as a global leader in the provision of technical and vocational education
and training. We aim to replicate the success we’ve had in the UK in Saudi Arabia and help the 40% of under 30s who are currently unemployed to find jobs. Staff and students in the UK will also benefit as we will be able to ensure that surpluses resulting from this five-year £250 million contract will be used to further improve the facilities at its campuses in Lincoln, Newark and Gainsborough. Initially the college will be employing 100 staff, the majority of whom will be UK residents, to work across the three colleges, and there will be further recruitment drives in December and April.4

In a similar manner, on its official website, Niagara College also pronounces its participation in the CoE project as follows:

Our work in Saudi Arabia is part of Niagara College’s rich tradition in international education…. This new venture is part of the College’s efforts to expand its entrepreneurial revenue and international linkages by leveraging its global reputation for excellence in applied training, with a focus on student success and graduates who are both work-ready and world-ready.5

Clearly expressed in the above statements are the advance economic benefits and profitability associated with these colleges’ participation in the CoE project. The statements also show how desperate these colleges are in terms of generating financial incomes, and as such the CoE project has appeared to come at the right time to help them with their own operation and struggles at home. The Saudi government’s desire to reform and internationalise its vocational and technical education sector has indeed been enthusiastically paired up with the desperation to raise incomes and to expand globally by these international training providers. Both sides have participated in the neoliberal market of international education with different purposes.

In addition, while laden with the language of neoliberal market values, such as ‘revenues’, ‘incomes’, ‘surpluses’, ‘contract’, ‘entrepreneurial revenue’, and ‘venture’, and overjoyed by the big sum of ‘dollars’ generated from the Saudi government, the overt confidence and arrogance coupled with these colleges’ desperation for money is also expressed in the above statements. Without any effort to hide or moderate their excitement about the ‘billions in revenues’, these institutes portray themselves boldly as businesses whose services are their training products. Though neoliberal in orientation, at least the Saudi government’s CoE project still include educational agendas, while these foreign institutes tend to pay particular attention to opening new markets and how to multiply ‘surpluses’ in SA and how to market their training services more widely.

Market value of education is often expressed using vague and generic vocabularies, for example ‘highest performing’, ‘global leader’, ‘outstanding’, ‘leading’, ‘success’, ‘rich tradition’, and ‘excellence’ as in the case of all the three colleges presented above. Through the employment of these vocabularies and rhetorical flashes to promote their business overseas, these colleges hope to attract more international business and represent themselves as the-already-reputable global training providers, a phenomenon discussed thoroughly in Author 1 (2014).

What’s more, means such as media releases, government official statements and endorsements, and information about logistical support are often used as marketing and validation strategies by foreign universities to ascertain their national and international status. For instance, Trade Minister of the UK government, Lord Green, through his announcement of NESCOT consortium winning £75 million contract to run SA’s first women-only college, confirmed the UK government’s full support of its educational institutions going global through business deals.
This is really good news, and exemplifies the burgeoning demand from countries such as Saudi Arabia for the kind of quality education the UK can provide... UK education exports are currently worth more than £14bn every year, but we expect this to rise to £22.5bn by 2020 and to £27bn by 2025.⁶

Minister of State for Skills and Enterprise of the UK government, Matthew Hancock, who visited the Saudi capital to endorse the UK government support for such bids also emphasized the economic benefits of education as commodity:

These deals are a vote of confidence in the UK’s improving education system. Exporting helps companies grow and is a vital part of the government’s long-term economic plan to create jobs and reduce the deficit.⁷

HE as a commodity is spelt out in all the above posts, announcements, and declarations from various international training providers and from the UK government, Canada, and others, which are expressed in the language of commercialization, marketization and a sense of having the upper hand in technical and vocational training provision. These colleges also position the Saudi as solution seekers while asserting their own images as solution providers that could address any (economic and social) challenge in SA. Although we do not have enough evidence at this stage to make a more forceful argument about potential unequal relations between these ‘Western’ training providers and SA, what has been happening in the CoE site and space points to such a possibility.

Juxtaposing these posts against the aspirations projected in the CoE documents and the numerous concerns about the CoE and international training providers in the country expressed in the local Saudi media and by scholars such as Barnawi (2012, 2014), questions of ethics, language ideology, East—West dichotomy, and intellectual and academic dependency (Phan 2013, 2015; Phillipson 2009; Yang 2008, Yang and Welch 2012) continue to pervade and thus challenge policy and practice of the internationalization of HE, confirming it to be a site of contestations at all levels.

**Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have examined how the intersection between English, the internationalization of HE, desire, and neoliberalism has played out in SA’s ambitious CoE project. We have also demonstrated how various stakeholders have embraced these key elements to push for their agendas. We treat the CoE as both the research site and data. We argue that the current Saudi government’s policy of internationalization of HE has created an unregulated market of English medium institutes in the country, thereby forming multiple layers of relationships that are based on groups of interest across the government, institutions, language schools, faculty members, students, and society at large. This has adversely affected the government’s aspirations to restructure and strengthen the nation’s post-secondary education.

The CoE policy has not only turned vocational and technical training into an industry but also it has caused the overindulgence of English nationwide. Our examination of the policy and the accompanying practices and implementation has demonstrated that while benefits and opportunities associated with English and English-medium education for SA have yet to be realized, many problems have already arisen because of the government’s rather uncritical adoption of English and its over-reliance on international training providers. There is a clear rush from the government to import products and services to the
country with almost no clear processes and procedures in place to demand quality, transparency and to provide efficient support to all stakeholders directly and indirectly involved.

In principle, establishing partnerships with different niches of expertise from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, among others, to operate college campuses in the KSA could bring about rich educational experiences for its people. Nevertheless, what has been happening shows much more of the opposite. Largely driven by the commercialization of education and the drastic shift to English, the superficial appearance of having English-medium programmes in KSA’s colleges has indeed made it almost impossible to create any serious educational environment for both teachers and students. Instead, it has so far endorsed academic mediocrity and capitalism as well as the dominance of English and the legitimation of profit-driven educational entities in the country. While the hegemonic market dominance of English and the internationalization of English-medium have been allowed to penetrate into the policy, curriculum, pedagogies, and practices of SA’s immature and inexperienced HE system that has been over-expanded over a short period of time, undesirable consequences are likely to become paramount. Our future work continues to examine such consequences from the perspectives of various stakeholders across SA, particularly teaching staff and students.

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Notes

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