

Educating Saudi Women

An interview with Haifa Jamal Al-Lail, president of Effat University,
a women's university in Saudi Arabia

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL, a native of Saudi Arabia, joined Effat University in 1998 and began her tenure as president in May 2008. She was named one of 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005 and is the winner of the Distinguished Arab Woman Award in 2005. A respected author and researcher, she is well known for her expertise in privatization and empowerment of women. She is the author of a number of articles and has developed and taught undergraduate and graduate courses on topics such as public administration and public policy.

Before joining Effat University, Al-Lail was the first dean of girls' campus in King Abdulaziz University. She was a visiting scholar at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 2001. She participated in the Summer Institute for Women in Higher Education Administration at Bryn Mawr College in 2000. She received a PhD in public policy from the University of Southern California (USC).

IE: Can you describe Effat University and how you became its president?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: Effat University is a private nonprofit institution in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It started in 1999 with the vision of Queen Effat, the wife of the late King Faisal. She was really a leader in education. She's the one who established the first female high school in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I'm also a graduate of that. The name of the school is Dar al-Hanan School. It was established in 1955. From that time until 1999, when the government started to give licensing to the private sector to open higher education institutions, she applied to the king at that time (not her husband). It was another king, King Fahd, who gave her the license.

Effat University was started with only two majors—computer science and information systems. It was established only for women and had 37 students, two faculty, and one dean. I wasn't the dean at that time. I was a special adviser to Princess Lolowah, the daughter of the queen, who was running and is still running the institution until now. We had only six months to open the whole institution.

My own education in the kingdom and abroad helped me become president of Effat University. I also came to the United States and studied at the University of Southern California, and then came back to Saudi Arabia and taught and did some administrative work at King Abdullah University. The princess and the queen knew about me, and they invited me to be the president. Especially also I'm a graduate of the Dar al-Hanan School, which has the same traditions and culture, same mentality of thinking.

IE: How has Effat University grown since it was first established?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: We began from those two departments and it was a college at that time in 1999, until 2009, then we became a university. Now we're a university with four colleges, 17 programs, and 3,000 students.

IE: What are the opportunities for education for girls and women in Saudi Arabia and how does Effat University fill this need?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: What we're famous for is offering women opportunities that were never offered before in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We offer engineering for the first time for Saudi women because the colleges and the universities in the kingdom teach them only the business, the social sciences, but never had the chance to offer engineering as a subject for women. So we're the first institution to offer that for the Saudi woman.

IE: What makes Effat University unique in Saudi Arabia?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: There are a number of public universities and they do offer education for women. But the women's campuses are separate campuses. And it's always the men who are controlling the women's campus from the administrative point of view.

We are by women, for women, of women. We were founded by a woman. We are run by a woman. The students are women. We do have some male faculty, but it's unique in that it's the first women's university in the purest sense of the word.



Haifa Jamal Al-Lail, PhD

Even the chairman of the Board of Trustees, she's a woman. And this is rare to find something like this happening in Saudi Arabia. How do you lead all of these men and women? Because the Board of Trustees are not only women, but are men and women. But the al-Faisal family always gives priority by age and Sara Faisal, the chair of the Board of Trustees, daughter of the Queen, is the eldest.

IE: How did your experiences as an international student in the United States and being a visiting scholar at Harvard Kennedy School of Government influence your philosophy on education and leadership at Effat University?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: Honestly, it shaped my personality, my decisionmaking ability, and skills. It helped a lot really with knowing other ways of doing things. I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. I studied all my life from kindergarten until I finished my bachelor degree in Saudi Arabia. I traveled in different places in Europe and here, but I never had the chance to live and experience study or education in any part of the world except when I came to the United States.

I began my studies at USC knowing that there are different ways of thinking. That's really important to understand life, to understand how to make a decision. I have to understand how to respect the other, how to tolerate the other, how to integrate different things together.

So I learned something very important, that although you're different, that doesn't mean that you're not good. I look at difference and diversity from a positive point of view. It brings life. It enriches

the experience of the teaching and learning in any academic institution and in life, of course.

I spent 12 years of my life in the United States pursuing a master's degree and a PhD, and sometimes I worked here in academia as a TA, and also in some of the business community. I got really to know the flavor of the work and the educational life in the United States.

IE: How did your educational philosophy impact your thinking to get involved in the 1000 Peace Women campaign and what is your advice to other women pursuing higher education?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: If you want to start in your learning journey, how do you start it? With reading. I always base this on the *Quran*. Because in *Quran*, the first Arabic word that Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alaihi wa salam* or "peace be upon him") learned from Allah, was *iqra*, "to read". The revelation informed Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alaihi wa salam*) that you need to read to understand everything in life.

I build off of these four letters—IQRA. This became now the core principles, the core values of Effat University. I always say you need to research. The first letter is *Ibhath*, which is "search" or "research." And the second letter is *Qiyam*, which is that you need to appreciate the universal principles of ethics and values. The third letter is *Riyada*, which is "leadership." You need to learn leadership, it comes from within. It's not just to lead others but know how you control yourself, how you make sure that you lead yourself and not uncritically let somebody else lead you.

The last letter is *At-tawasul*, which is about how you always keep communication within yourself first because you want to reflect on what you do or think. So in communicating between you and yourself, it's very important to start the process of communication. Then how you communicate with others and how you communicate in public.

So these four principles of what we call the core values of Effat, we have in our teaching and learning, in our syllabus, in our way of doing things.

Effat University's core values are based on the divine commandment IQRA, "read." These values include the following:

I	<i>Ibhath</i>	undertake life-long research [cf. <i>albahth</i> : "life-long research"]
Q	<i>Qiyam</i>	ethical social and educational values
R	<i>Riyada</i>	responsible and creative leadership
A	<i>At-tawasul</i>	effective communication and reaching out to others

IE: What has been your greatest accomplishment as president of Effat University?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: My greatest accomplishment is taking the university from nothing to a university status, and from a univer-

sity status to getting full accreditation, and to have this international presence everywhere. So, I think it's how I see more accomplishment coming inside. It's intangible. But these are the most important things that I see and that really everybody can see.

No one knew about Effat University in 2001. But now Effat University is everywhere. Now it's connected to NAFSA. It's connected to EAIE (the European Association for International Education), and with the ACC&U (American Association of Colleges and Universities). We have contributed to them and they contributed to us.

IE: Does Effat University have international partnerships with other institutions?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: Yes, we have many international partnerships. We have 17 programs but each of our programs has a partnership. Some of the institutions we partner with in the United States for various programs include Duke University, Georgetown University, the University of Miami, and Syracuse University. We also have partnerships with institutions in several other countries such as Tokai University in Japan and Western Sydney University in Australia. So, it's a lot of collaboration. The model of collaboration is not built on something fixed. We really believe that small is beautiful. We usually start with these very small kinds of projects together with an institution. For example, they review our problem or develop with us that program or sometimes our students and their students work on a project. We don't like to put any pressure on the other institution because I know that in academia, human resources are really valuable to each institution and it's very hard to drain them by getting some of their faculty and to come and teach.

So, we always have our own faculty. We always have our own resources. It's the collaboration that matters to us. And their presence in our institution and our presence in their institutions—that's what matters.

IE: Do Effat University students study abroad?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: They do if there is a chance for them to attend one of the classes there or one semester abroad. We have actually a way and we have them do that. Some of our students, after they graduate, they go and study abroad for their graduate studies. And we just created a scholarship for our students to spend the semester abroad. So we'll be implementing that.

IE: Do international students attend Effat University?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: Bringing other students from any other institutions here is very hard. But that's something that we're trying to improve. Even Effat University students say they would like us to increase the number of students coming to visit us.

We offer the Arabic for nonspeakers diploma and some certificates, and with that international students gain insight into Saudi culture, history, and economics. It's a program that you can take any time, either in the summer or in the academic year. So it's not necessarily over a specific period of time. But it has levels of studying Arabic: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. And it has some of

the flavor of Saudi Arabia culture and heritage. For Muslim people, they can go to visit Mecca or Medina. For the non-Muslims, for example, they can go diving in the Red Sea and see the coral reef, or they can go to Mada'in Saleh, which is a very old historical site that a lot of people come from all over the world to visit.

IE: What would you like other educators in other parts of the world to know about women's education in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East in general?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: Higher education in Saudi Arabia has been in existence since 1960, but it has limited opportunities. Now it's open and the women in Saudi Arabia can study anything inside the country. But since the scholarship program that the King established in 1970, the women in Saudi Arabia have had the chance also to study abroad; otherwise, I wouldn't really have been able to do my education.

So at this moment, the thing that's needed now is the international flavor in it which can connect us globally with the world and increase the quality of education, which is not only for women, but also for men and women.

I would add to that that women in Saudi Arabia are really well known now in research, in contribution to science and technology. I think one of our Saudi women, she is a researcher in San Diego State University. Another woman, is working at Harvard on biotechnology. They're in the United Kingdom and in all parts of Europe, and in the United States and Canada. So they're everywhere suddenly.

And now with their *mahram*, they love to be with their *hijab* or with their culture. They're respecting their culture, but at the same time that is not limiting them from acquiring knowledge and from acquiring a degree or higher education. So now you see a lot of PhD faculty, Saudi faculty who are women.

IE: Why is it important for universities to empower and educate women everywhere?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: Because they need to have equal opportunities like men. And I think until now it's not only about Saudi Arabia. It's all over the world. The higher positions and the presidency, for example, of any country, if you count them, women's presence is less than the men in every field, in boardrooms everywhere around the world. Educating women is very important to prove to the world that they are equally capable of handling these kinds of jobs. So we want more representation in the different boards, in different country cabinets, and banks. Now most of these boards are men. Yes, we want equal opportunity.

IE: What's your vision for the future for Effat University?

HAIFA JAMAL AL-LAIL: I would love Effat University to be ranked among the first 10 in the world. If you want to dream, you need to dream big because those who dream the most do the most. **IE**

ELAINA LOVELAND is editor-in-chief of IE.