

Things Under Way in Saudi Arabia's Universities

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Saudi Arabia's higher education leaders are obsessed at the same time with rankings and aware that their universities neither compete well nor that the rankings serve to measure the most effective standards in their universities. The country has invested heavily in higher education and currently is engaged in a massive expansion and upgrading of the higher education establishment. Twenty-eight percent of the national budget is devoted to education. With 24 public and 9 private universities and in the country, quite a few in provincial cities have been upgraded from teachers colleges and other specialized institutions to university status.

Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University is the country's first women's university. Located in Riyadh, it has 52,000 students—the largest women's university in the world. The new state-of-the-art campus, now under construction at lightning speed, will be internally connected by the country's first elevated railway. (Women are not permitted to drive cars and thus a transportation alternative is necessary.) Women constitute 60 percent of total enrollments in the country—despite a general agreement that their institutions are in many cases not as good as those serving males. Strict gender segregation exists in higher education as in all areas of public life.

The city's two major public institutions, King Saud University and Imam Mohammed Bin Saud University, are also undergoing significant upgrading of their already impressive campuses. The science, technology, and business facilities are already close to world class, although the social sciences and humanities fare somewhat less well. Each of these institutions serves more than 35,000 students, with a full array of master's and doctoral courses. Many of the science, medical, and business faculties function entirely in English.

Expansion has created serious problems for the system—especially for the new and upgraded institutions in the provinces and for women's higher education. Riyadh's upgraded women's university will significantly improve the quality of higher education currently available to women.

This higher education system faces a severe shortage of qualified professors. The Saudi government, through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, provides 100,000 scholarships for overseas study, mainly at the master's and doctoral levels, and almost all Saudi students return home. Many of the scholarships are given to able graduate students who are promised academic jobs upon degree completion. Yet, it will take time to fill staff shortages. Incentives have been provided for professors at urban universities to take jobs in the provinces—including significant salary increases—but there are not many takers.

The structure of academic careers creates additional problems. Most academics are given permanent appointments upon being hired, and salary increases are largely unrelated to productivity. This practice leaves few incentives for high performance. Further, teaching loads tend to be high, even in universities seeking to improve their research profile, leaving little time for

research. Considerable “inbreeding” appears in Saudi universities, with many of a university’s brightest graduates being hired, offered overseas scholarship, and then promoted up the ranks.

Saudi rectors and other policymakers recently met in Riyadh to consider all of these issues in the context of a desire to become “world class.” Saudis are not pleased with their lack of visibility in the international rankings but understand that their universities are mostly new and serve many national needs. They have had problems grappling with the idea that not all of the country’s public universities can aspire to be research universities and the attempt to develop ways of recognizing teaching, social involvement, and other functions as central to the missions of the universities. The idea that Saudi universities can be “world class” in areas other than research is attractive, although it is the case that only research can be fairly easily measured. The rectors discussed the idea of a “world-class university system” in which institutions would have differentiated missions but at the same time be respected and rewarded for these roles. Specific universities would have defined missions and would be expected to excel at them. Not all of the universities would be expected to be research intensive. There would be less emphasis on the international rankings—probably a good thing given the complex needs of Saudi society. Universities could define for themselves what is most needed for their regions, and the all-powerful Ministry of Higher Education could help to ensure a rational mission for each of the country’s universities.

Saudi academic and governmental leaders are seriously considering strategies for academic development. Thus, how Saudi universities might compete globally while at the same time serve national and regional needs is an indication of a maturing academic system.

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