

Rising ranking of Saudi universities in global science

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Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle East and the fifth largest in Asia. It holds immense economic importance in the region and has a wide range of salient natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals. The government of Saudi Arabia recognizes the importance education holds in today's world and in transforming a society economically and socially. Therefore, it has developed several universities and research institutes which have transcended national boundaries and have extended to remote regions of the country.¹

The government of Saudi Arabia has been improving the current educational system by building new schools, colleges, and universities, as well as implementing modern educational courses and curricula. Under the Vision 2030, the government acknowledged the critical role education and research hold in economic diversification. As a result, substantial investments were made in expanding and modernizing the country's universities. Promoting an environment of education and technology and pushing for sustainable development amongst the community will allow the government to shift away from its dependence on oil and further diversify its economy. Creating a top-tier university centered around research and linking this research with industrial development via technology incubators is one unique feature of this strategy.²

Moreover, the number of universities in Saudi Arabia has increased dramatically. In 1970, there were only 3 universities across the entire country. This number has increased substantially, with Saudi Arabia now boasting a total of 68 universities, as per the Ministry of Education's Data. This includes 25 public universities, 9 private universities, and 34 private colleges.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has continuously increased funding for education. The education budget, which was \$36.63 billion in 2010, has now

increased to SAR 195 billion (\$52 billion) for the year 2024. This budget is allocated to education, ensuring continuous progress within the sector, the educational infrastructure, improved scholarship programs, and initiatives in research, development, and innovation.³ Saudi Arabia has introduced many motivations that continue to enhance the research output, and research performance has markedly increased.⁴

King Saud University (KSU), founded in 1957, one of the country's oldest and most prestigious universities, is a prime example of how increased funding positively benefits higher education. It consistently ranks highly in global university rankings, particularly in majors such as medicine, engineering, and agricultural sciences. KSU's research centres and institutes have worked hard to produce innovative and groundbreaking work, contributing to the university's robust international standing. Shanghai Ranking of Universities was released on August 15, 2024, and is among the world's most reliable global rankings.

The majority of the top 100 universities in the world are from the USA (36), China (14), the UK (8), Australia (5), Switzerland (5), Germany (4), France (4), and Saudi Arabia (1) (Table 1). However, Harvard University is the number one university in the world.

This is the first time King Saud University achieved a place among the top 100 universities (90th) in the world.⁵ (Table 1). This accomplishment is a testament to the university's commitment to excellence and its impact on global research. His Excellency Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who himself is a graduate of this university, aims to drive KSU into the world's top 10 universities. This ambitious objective would be a significant achievement that would cement KSU's legacy as a global institution and leave a lasting mark in the field of higher education. Apart from KSU, eleven other universities have made it into the top 1000 universities across the globe. These include King Abdulaziz University (223), King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (224), and Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University (342).⁵

In alignment with this global vision, the Saudi government is also expanding its international education reach to ensure exposure to global universities. Therefore, the Saudi government plans to send 70,000 students to over 200 approved foreign institutions by 2030

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Table 1 - Geographical distribution of the top 100 universities in the world.

Country	Number of top 100 universities in the world
USA	38
China	14
UK	8
Australia	5
Switzerland	5
Germany	4
France	4
Israel	3
Canada	3
Japan	2
Netherlands	2
Sweden	2
Denmark	2
Singapore	2
Belgium	2
Saudi Arabia	1
South Korea	1
Norway	1
Finland	1
Total	100

under an updated approach for the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Scholarship Program. This pathway is designed to allow young students to kickstart their educational journey at institutions abroad, elevating the kingdom's regional and global competitiveness. The program will then ensure supporting their graduates once they complete their studies and return to their motherland.⁶

Despite these achievements, Saudi universities face challenges in their quest for global scientific leadership. One of the primary challenges is not just to attract but to retain top international faculty and researchers. Noteworthy progress has been made, but there is still a need for a more diverse and globally recognized academic staff. Another challenge is translating research into commercial applications. Although basic research at Saudi universities has improved, there is still room for improvement in the commercialization of innovations and their incorporation into the broader economy.

Regardless, Saudi universities' future in global science looks promising. With continued government

support, strategic international partnerships, and a focus on research and innovation, Saudi universities are well-positioned to enhance their standing further. The emphasis on fostering innovation, encouraging entrepreneurship, and building a knowledge-based economy aligns well with global scientific trends.

In conclusion, Saudi universities have made remarkable progress in establishing themselves as significant contributors to global science. While challenges remain, the combination of development under Vision 2030, strategic investment, and ambition bodes well for the future, ensuring that Saudi Arabia will remain a key player in the global scientific community.

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