

Saudi Vision 2030: Research and Educational Opportunities

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On April 25, 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia unveiled its first 15-year vision to the world. It charted what the nation wants to be by 2030, and the guidelines on how to achieve that.

As a Saudi academic who has been involved with Australian academia and research for eight years, I can appreciate the opportunities that Vision 2030 could present to Australia's education institutions and research centers. In all of this, we must bear in mind the economic environment that Australia and the Kingdom share.

So, what is the economic environment of the two nations and what opportunities is Saudi Vision 2030 offering?



As the Australian and Saudi economies transition from the resource boom, they need to increase their focus on innovation, explore the potential of renewable energies, move quickly to eliminate inefficiencies, and place greater emphasis on the contribution of the private sector to their research and education systems.

Furthermore, any transitioning economy will need to retrain its workforce to ensure a pool of available talent is locally available, that is more competitive and better paid than foreign recruits. In this context, the Australian economy is currently more diversified and further down the path of transitioning than Saudi.

There are nine areas highlighted in Saudi's Vision 2030, which may represent significant opportunities for foreign educational institutions and research centers:

- Continuation of sponsoring Saudi students to further their tertiary education abroad. Currently, the Saudi Government sponsors about 138,000 students studying abroad.
- Train 500,000 public sector employees through distance learning by 2020.
- Train 1,000 teachers and education leaders overseas annually.
- Expand vocational training in order to drive forward economic development.
- Increase the number of Saudi universities in the top 200 world rankings from the current two universities to at least five by 2030.
- Ensure that Saudi generates an initial target of 9.5 Gigawatts of renewable energy, with the localisation of a significant percentage of the renewable value chain (including research).

Vision 2030 has also set a favorable legal environment for its bold plan by liberalising the Saudi market through initiatives such as permitting 100 per cent foreign ownership, streamlining the business visa process, and declaring a partnership between the government and private sector to invest in education and research.

In light of the above, Australian education institutions and research centers are well placed to engineer creative synergies with their Saudi counterparts that could be of huge potential to both nations.

As a starting point, Australia has managed to add about 20,000 Saudi students to its alumni community over the past decade. This provides a ready made network of contacts for any Australian project in Saudi. My country's various scholarship programs mean Australian universities will continue to receive Saudi students. The annual training of a thousand Saudi teachers and education leaders overseas has already commenced, with the Saudi Minister of Education announcing in early May 2016 that Australia is among the preferred destinations for the training.



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Building on the achievements of the two Saudi universities that secured a position in the top 200 universities in world rankings, the Vision aspires to have at least five Saudi universities in the top 200 by 2030. This will require the establishment of robust partnerships with international universities. Elements of such partnerships may include sister-universities, twinning-programs, two way student exchanges, and joint academic sabbatical arrangements. An example of this is the recent announcement of the establishment of Prince Muhammad Bin Salman College for Administration and Entrepreneurship in collaboration with American partners.

Innovation, entrepreneurship and research are areas that Australia and Saudi Arabia can work together on closely. This is especially the case because both nations' governments have stated that these are the areas that will deliver for their transitioning economies well into the future. Australia already has a head start in the field of renewable energy, and it shares some climatic similarities with certain regions in Saudi. On this basis, Australian research centers that are interested in renewable energy can find their Saudi counterparts as a good match to potentially pool technical and financial resources, and commercialise the output into the rapidly growing Middle East market.

The question now, for both nations, is how and when these opportunities can start to be pursued.

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