Chapter 15
International Collaboration

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Introduction

The decision to move down a path of international higher education collaboration is not one that should be taken lightly by Saudi universities. Significant resources and investment in time and money are required for success. This chapter will explore the issues confronting higher education in Saudi Arabia as it moves towards globalisation of learning and research and the integration of its universities into national economic and social policy frameworks.

Internationalisation and Globalisation

The terms internationalisation and globalisation are often used interchangeably. In this chapter, internationalisation will be used when referring to aspects of curriculum and research programmes, student bodies and so on, while globalisation will be used more generically, such as education by working in different geographies. Interestingly, transnationalism is also a term increasingly encountered in higher education (HE) and perhaps best describes the situation where a university has multiple geographic locations and a presence across more than one country.

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Internationalisation of Higher Education: Global Trends

Internationalisation of higher education and its impact on universities continue to be of great interest to global institutions and stakeholders. The recent *3rd global survey* by the International Association of Universities (IAU) (2010) reported that internationalisation is central to future planning and is of growing importance. The IAU survey listed the top five reasons for a university to go global as:

- Improving student preparedness
- Enhancing the institution's international profile
- Strengthening research and knowledge production
- Internationalising the curriculum
- Diversifying faculty and staff

The survey also reported significant differences between regions: for example, North America and Latin America gave much more importance to international preparedness of students than Europe, while the African nations gave maximum priority to strengthening their research and knowledge production. Alternatively, the Middle East countries all gave equal importance to student international preparedness and strengthening research. One surprise survey finding was that the geographic region to which the majority of the 115 countries turned to for international collaboration in the first instance was Europe, followed by the Asia Pacific and thirdly, North America.

Higher education in most countries is seen as a national symbol and for some, a political tool (rather like national airlines were a few decades ago). Although the potential benefits of entering international partnerships are considerable, high risks also exist. Such partnerships could result in commodification of critical programmes, reduced education standards and inappropriate alliances could be costly and time consuming. In the corporate world, successful collaboration through partnership (particularly of core functions) is proving difficult to achieve for high-value services (Burdon et al. 2009). A recent Deloittes research paper on the top ten issues facing higher education in 2011 (Aguilar 2011) identified global partnerships as one of these but highlighted the difficulties of achieving success:

> Universities and colleges are under considerable pressure to enter global partnerships. Yet this is not a decision to undertake lightly. Organisations need to make sure that they pick the right partner, identify the best fit, structure an appropriate programme and define the benefits and risks well in advance. (p. 1)

Current Strategy and the Role of International Collaboration

International collaboration has been used to meet at least some of the objectives of the current Ministry of Education 10-year plan for Saudi Arabia. For example:

1. A major goal of the Ministry is to devise syllabi for the development of the Islamic personality so that students will have pride in their faith and loyalty to their country. A major impediment to this strategy has been the inadequacy of distance education infrastructure, including appropriate learning resources, to serve students in the Kingdom 'who cannot avail themselves of regular education facilities for reasons such as geographical distance, job circumstances and age differences' (Sawahel 2011: 2). A cooperative arrangement was created among a number of Middle East countries to deal with the infrastructure issues and, in particular, the lack of appropriate Arabic learning materials. An action plan was initiated in 2010 which involved Bahrain's first Asian e-University, the United Arab Emirates-based Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University and the Kuwait-based Arab Open University. It also involved the Open University of Malaysia and the Asian e-University (AeU) in Singapore.
2. In recent years, considerable emphasis has been placed on government vocational and technical training. The Ministry of Education has enhanced the benefits of programmes and projects by establishing a number of collaborations with foreign governments; for example, an agreement has been signed with the Japanese government for advanced technology training of Saudi students in vehicle maintenance and technology. As well as international government collaboration, partnerships have been developed with overseas multinational corporations. These include arrangements with the Accor Group (France) which helped to set up and fund three training institutes in cooking and hospitality and with General Motors (USA) where programmes were created to provide vehicle maintenance and sales skills. Arrangements were also made with large Saudi corporations, such as the Bin Laden Group, for joint funding and operation of three institutes involving training for architecture, construction and building maintenance.
3. In 2007, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud made an initial endowment of US$10 billion to set up the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). Its aim was to be in the top 20 science and technology universities in the world within 10 years. Considering that Berkeley took 40 years and Stanford 60 years to achieve this outcome, this is indeed a very bold and ambitious initiative. To assist in achieving this outcome, the Saudi government has negotiated partnership agreements worth over US$500 million with a number of major international universities, including Stanford University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Texas and Cambridge University.
4. The Saudi government is developing the King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC), which is designed to be a key commercial hub for the Kingdom as well as a business district, industrial zone and seaport. It will also have an educational zone which is planned to consist of multiple university campuses flanked by two research and development parks. The campuses will accommodate 18,000 students and up to 7,500 faculty and staff members. In September 2010, Saudi Arabia's General Investment Authority (GIA) signed a letter of intent with Georgia Institute of Technology in the USA to build a centre for applied research degrees. The Georgia Institute of Technology Saudi campus will be the first

to offer foreign-accredited research degrees inside the Kingdom, while Saudi students will be able to choose from courses at Georgia Tech's campuses in the USA, Europe and Asia.

Future Strategy and the Role of International Collaboration

Future Vision

Saudi Arabia is embarking on a 10-year plan for expanding and improving the quality of its higher education system. The plan involves:

- Rapidly growing student enrolments to produce a pool of labour to power a growing economy.
- Establishing nodes of excellence in academic teaching and research. These nodes of excellence will also proactively facilitate linkages with outside agencies, businesses and multinational corporations (MNCs) to commercialise their intellectual knowledge for the achievement of wider economic and social targets. Such an approach will require the creation of a number of new partnerships and collaborations.
- Investigating the possibility of allowing a number of overseas universities to set up centres for learning and research within Saudi Arabia and perhaps even Saudi itself setting up programmes and centres overseas.
- Building a knowledge-based economy.

Regional Hubs of Excellence and Global Aspirations

Currently, just under 50 % of tertiary graduate students in Saudi Arabia are enrolled in the humanities, arts and education streams. The government's policy of supporting the historic Islamic and Saudi culture suggests that collaboration in these discipline areas is likely, at least in the first instance, to be with Middle East countries and other Islamic countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. In comparison, the science and technology streams make up 24.6 % of the graduate profile, and a policy decision has been taken that the research and learning should be on an international scale with leading universities in these fields.

In the last 5 years, Saudi Arabia has increased its focus and determination to improve its education sector: indeed, its education spending has risen from 6.8 to 8.3 % as a proportion of GDP. However, some critical issues need to be reviewed for the success of future strategy and international collaboration.

First, the notion of attracting overseas students to Saudi universities needs investigation. If Saudi Arabia aspires to be a regional hub of excellence, then it should seek strong partnerships with the governments of other Middle East countries

to facilitate the entry of their students into the Kingdom. This will require a strategy for drawing the very brightest students through targeted scholarships. It could also include Saudi universities making arrangements with other preferred universities in the Middle East for reciprocal short-term student exchange programmes and dealing with the complexities of equivalent educational standards.

Second, alternate models for Saudi students studying overseas should be pursued. By the end of 2011, there will be 130,000 Saudi students enrolled overseas and a significant number of these are financially supported by the Saudi government. Compared with other nations, the level of financial support is generous with allowances for accommodation and family support often included. By all accounts, this has been a very successful initiative which has enabled many of the most talented Saudi citizens to gain wider global experience with their tertiary education. Nevertheless, consideration might be given to the model being enacted in several countries (such as Sweden and Australia) for undergraduate studies whereby the overseas education experience is limited to 1 or 2 years, rather than for the full degree course, by entering into joint degree arrangements with international universities. Such a model would not only reduce the cost to the Saudi government (thus freeing up money for other educational initiatives), but it would also ensure that students contextualised their international learning in the cultural, economic, social and religious environment of Saudi Arabia, thus improving their employment prospects in the Kingdom on completion of their degree.

Collaboration with Multinational Corporations (MNCs)

Saudi Arabia's plans to build a knowledge-based economy will require proactive collaboration with international MNCs at a government level. Saudi Arabia's ability to attract these partners and to be viewed as an attractive regional hub can be enhanced by government investment and grants and by the development of its information and communication technology (ICT) systems to world standard.

The Saudi *Communications and Information Technology Commission Annual Report* for 2009 placed a particular focus on the need to significantly improve the nature and availability of ICT services and infrastructure in the Kingdom as well as the need to implement strategies to markedly increase ICT usage and awareness. It argued that these initiatives were critical to any strategies for enhancing national economic efficiency and productivity. The report noted that since competition policy in the IT industry was introduced in Saudi Arabia in 2005, impressive increases in the use of mobile technology had occurred, with mobile penetration achieving 75 %. Broadband tele-density and internet penetration, however, were both still at only 10 %. A number of nations have set 5-year digital economy-integrated plans in order to address their need to rapidly expand their information technology base and activity. This concept was initiated first in Asia, with Korea being the best known, but other nations such as Malaysia have followed this approach. If such a plan was initiated in Saudi Arabia, then the higher education system

would have a critical role to play in building skills and playing a major role in technology research as a base requirement for a successful digital economy. Setting up a research centre of excellence between universities and industry that involves 'cutting-edge' international partners would be a useful initiative. It is probable that multinational corporations would be particularly keen to engage in collaborative funded research and development in ICT and would be very willing to enter into collaborative arrangements to establish relevant research and development centres in the Kingdom.

The annual growth in research and development (R&D) in the fields of science and technology in Saudi Arabia has historically not been strong. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is in a very powerful position in the oil and gas industry to persuade large global oil companies to establish a strong collaborative R&D presence in the Kingdom, in terms of both research and regional headquarter presence and their support for skills developments.

Another area of potential collaboration with global MNCs is to institute a system of interchange between high-potential science and technology academics and young high-potential executives. Sweden has been very successful in implementing such a system whereby academic candidates for professorial appointments spend a year with a sponsoring international organisation and one of the organisation's executives spends a year contributing to academia. For this to work, the Saudi government would need to provide a top-up sum for the executive working in academia, so that their take-home pay would not be affected during this procedure. Another initiative that has been used successfully in Australia and other countries is to approach the MNCs to get them to provide internships for undergraduate engineering students as part of their course requirements for an undergraduate degree. This approach has been very successful, with an extremely high employment take-up rate for students who have completed this course of study.

Entrepreneurship

The Saudi government has a strong policy to encourage entrepreneurship and the setting up of new businesses, particularly those associated with the knowledge economy. In the current digital age, the world's most successful entrepreneurs are often technology graduates who came up with their 'ground-breaking' idea while at university and then progressed to building some of the largest global MNCs and becoming among the world's richest individuals. Many of them studied at Harvard or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the USA. One can think of Mark Zuckerman (Facebook), Bill Gates (Microsoft) and Jack Ma (Alibaba). Government policy can play a major role by establishing in the community a climate whereby it is easy to do business.

Table 15.1 is an extract from the World Bank's *Ease of Doing Business Index*, published in 2011 (World Bank 2011). Saudi Arabia is positioned at a very credible overall ranking of 11, which is significantly better than all other Middle East

Table 15.1 Ease of doing business index: comparison of middle east and selected other countries

Overall ranking	Country	Starting a business	Getting credit	Protecting investors	Enforcing contracts
1	Singapore	4	6	2	13
2	Hong Kong	6	2	3	2
11	Saudi Arabia	13	46	16	140
21	Malaysia	113	1	4	59
40	UAE	46	72	120	134
50	Qatar	111	138	93	95
94	Egypt	18	72	74	143
127	Brazil	128	89	74	98

countries, and only lags behind countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong, both of which have already established major higher education centres of excellence. If Saudi Arabia could deal with the two issues of getting credit and enforcing contracts, their good comparative position would improve even further.

Innovation

Entrepreneurship is closely allied to the concept of innovation, which is a subject that in the last decade has received an enormous amount of focus. As the world becomes more competitive, the balance of global economic power is shifting. The fast-growing, evolving economies of countries such as China, India and Brazil have intensified competitive pressures, and many developed countries have placed a strong focus on their nation becoming more creative and innovative. Saudi Arabia is ideally placed to form strong collaborative arrangements with some of these emerging economic powerhouses, and collaboration among the higher education sectors would be central to any such move. However, innovation and entrepreneurship within a global context are not natural components of traditional Saudi society, and so if Saudi Arabia is to achieve its economic objectives, a strategy for overcoming the cultural barriers needs to be put in place. Such a strategy will not be easy to develop and implement, because the need to retain Saudi culture and the need to collaborate on a global scale on entrepreneurial and innovative endeavours are both important, but somewhat antithetical, objectives.

Concluding Comments

The role of globalisation and international collaboration for the Saudi higher education sector is a complex issue. This chapter has attempted to explore the trend of globalisation and its advantages in terms of leveraging access for Saudis to the

increasing globalisation of knowledge, particularly in ICT and business. This trend will have an impact on recruitment of highly qualified and experienced university academics to meet the learning and research needs of the community. However, moving in this direction needs to be balanced against the social identity and culture of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its own specific social and economic needs.

Saudi Arabia must find effective ways of addressing and capitalising on three separate spheres of influence for international collaboration: firstly, the Middle East, where social and cultural values are more similar to Saudi Arabia; secondly, a wider Muslim country collaboration with other non-regional countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia; and thirdly, and perhaps the most challenging, global collaboration. In this context, the recent decision to establish the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) is an interesting initiative as it creates a separate culture and operating conditions along with a new governance structure, all of which are focused on international collaboration and global positioning. However, if the objective of building a leading knowledge-based economy is to be achieved, other models and initiatives for maximising the benefits of international collaboration are required.

Globalisation and international collaboration will need to find its place among Saudi Arabia's vision and goals for the future and its strategies and plans for improvement. Internationalisation is a choice, not a necessity. It carries risks as well as rewards. Determining an appropriate development strategy that balances those risks and rewards is critical to the Kingdom's future. So too is a world-class university sector that is enriched through relevant and effective international collaboration.

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