

KSA: Education becomes major money churning

Saudi Arabia is investing heavily in building its knowledge infrastructure. The international education industry has already taken notice and is heading for the Kingdom. **Syed Faiz Ahmad** reports from Riyadh.

During his recent State of the Union speech, US president Barack Obama said: "In the 21st century, one of the best anti-poverty programmes is a world-class education." Surely, education is the key to taking a nation ahead on a path of progress, prosperity and peace. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is very cognizant of this fact, which is why enhancing and promoting education remains a cornerstone of his development policies in the Kingdom.

The Saudi government has made a tremendous effort to better the country's education system over the past decades. This has been done by introducing new education programmes, research and development initiatives and building numerous schools and universities. Several education projects have been combined with the building of the six economic cities across the Kingdom. The private sector has become vigorously involved in the development of knowledge-based industries in the Kingdom through participation in initiatives such as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) near Jeddah, the education section of King Abdullah Economic City in Riyadh and institutions in Prince Abdul Aziz bin Musa'ed Economic City and the Knowledge Economic City – KEC.

The founding of KAUST has especially brought Saudi Arabia onto the world map of education and is the

centrepiece of the Kingdom's long-term goal to attain the status of a knowledge-based economy. It is a pet-project of King Abdullah, who said: "I wish to rekindle and spread the great and noble virtue of learning that marked the Arab and Muslim worlds in earlier times." KAUST is an independent entity and is the only one that is not controlled by the ministry of higher education. It was founded under the auspices of ARAMCO and has its own board of trustees. Prof. Dr. Choo Fong Shih, president of KAUST, told *Times Higher Education* that the university represents a "new paradigm" and is at the forefront of leveraging on the interconnectedness of science, engineering and innovation.

Fostering education

The Kingdom's commitment to fostering better education is evident from the continued upward trends in the budgetary allocations for the Kingdom's education sector. For the past several years, strong government budgets have accompanied the development of general education to emphasise sustained government support for continued growth of the education sector.

The FY 2010 budget is both a record and a historic one. King Abdullah has announced an impressive budget of US\$146 billion, with more than a quarter of it for the education sector. This has marked a 16 per cent



increase in budget allocation compared to the last fiscal year. Dr. Ali Al-Attayah, the Kingdom's deputy minister of higher education, was upbeat and remarked that the allocation of US\$36.6 billion for education and training emphasised the government's desire to invest in Saudi citizens, considering human development as the core of real development.

This remarkable increase in the education budget this year is designed to fund the King Abdullah Project for Development of Public Education – an ambitious SAR9 billion programme that envisages being implemented over the next six years with a focus to guarantee the availability of a highly skilled and motivated workforce in the future. As part of this programme, 1200 new schools would be built this year and 3000 school buildings that are already under construction would be completed.

Generating interest

In higher education, this budget would fund the construction of four new universities in Dammam, Al-Kharj, Majmaa and Shaqra. It would also allow expansion of the existing ones, increase student enrolments at institutes of higher learning and facilitate scholarship programmes abroad. The Saudi government offers more than 60,000 scholarships to Saudi students around the world. The size and quality of Saudi education has been growing impressively to meet the demands of an increasing population and a diversifying economy. In this budget, the Kingdom's 24 state universities are also going to receive some SAR35 billion. This increased allocation would allow some 5000 Saudi students to study abroad. All of these form a part of King Abdullah's ambitious scholarship programme for Saudi students to foster higher education among the Saudi youth.

The first-ever International Exhibition for Higher Education that concluded recently in Riyadh was in fact a part of a continued Saudi government policy to encourage Saudi students to interact with foreign

universities for pursuing their higher studies. This grand gala event – an unprecedented one and the first of its kind in Riyadh – was a great success, as it attracted about half a million visitors including Saudi and expatriate students and their parents and guardians. The exhibition also showcased around 350 universities from 35 different countries around the world. Around 50 high-profile worldwide education experts also delivered keynote speeches on education topics and freely mixed with the audience to answer queries.

The ministry of higher education organised the exhibition and the venue was the Riyadh International Exhibition Centre. Dr. Al-Attayah, who was also chief of the organising committee, said that the purpose of the exhibition was to bring international universities of repute face to face with Saudi students.

During the exhibition, several protocols and MoUs were signed between Saudi Arabia and foreign universities, including some in the US. According to statistics from the ministry of higher education, about 23,500 Saudi students are currently studying at US universities. That figure is expected to rise to 30,000 by the end of 2010. Some 3000 Saudi students are also expected to graduate from US universities this year.

It is significant that the exhibition reportedly generated about a million enquiries, which is an indication of how successful the event was and how much interest the education industry is generating among the citizens of the Kingdom. A huge rush was noticed at the stalls of the universities from the US, the UK, Canada, France and Germany. But many students, especially Saudis, were also seen making a beeline for the stalls from India, Japan and Korea. The representatives at these stalls reported that thousands of enquiries were generated, mostly from young Saudi men and women.

This international education exhibition was such a resounding success that the ministry of higher education announced that it will host another show in April 2011. 

