

From the College of Sharia to International Universities (The Journey of Saudi Higher Education 1949–2024)

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has experienced significant transformations since the establishment of its first academic institution in 1949. This study aims to identify the key historical events and stages that have shaped the development of higher education in the Kingdom from its inception in 1949 until 2024. It employs both historical and descriptive-analytical methodologies to address research questions related to the origins, evolution, and influencing factors of the higher education system over several decades. The study finds that the College of Sharia in Makkah, founded in 1949, was the first institution of higher learning in Saudi Arabia, while King Saud University, established in 1957, is recognized as the first official university in the Kingdom. Additionally, the results indicate that women's higher education has undergone rapid changes, moving from initial social resistance to becoming the predominant demographic in higher education today. This shift reflects an increasing societal awareness of the importance of women's education and empowerment. Furthermore, the study reveals that Saudi Arabia's government-funded international scholarship programs were established before local colleges, highlighting the state's early recognition of the strategic value of higher education in developing national human capital. Since the inception of higher education institutions, the Kingdom has also consistently welcomed international students as part of its broader educational and cultural policy. The findings indicate that the first two decades of the 21st century witnessed an exceptional expansion in the number of public universities and the launch of the largest external scholarship program in Saudi history. Moreover, the study confirms that Saudi Vision 2030 marked a turning point in the higher education sector by introducing comprehensive reforms in governance, financing, and institutional autonomy. These changes have positioned the Kingdom as an emerging hub for global education, attracting renowned international universities to open branch campuses in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Higher education in Saudi Arabia, history of higher education, development of higher education in Saudi Arabia, development of Saudi women's education, teachers' colleges.

Introduction:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle East, covering an area of over two million square kilometers. It is divided into thirteen administrative regions. The country holds a significant religious status as it is home to the two holiest cities in Islam: Makkah and Madinah. With a population of approximately 33 million, Saudi Arabia boasts a robust economy, ranking seventeenth among the world's largest economies. It is one of the leading producers of oil and petroleum products, possessing vast oil reserves. Modern Saudi Arabia was established in 1932, building on earlier Saudi states that date back to 1727. In recent years, the country has undergone significant economic transformation as part of Saudi Vision 2030. This initiative seeks to achieve financial sustainability and diversify national revenue sources, reducing dependence on oil income (General Authority for Statistics, 2025; Vision 2030 Document, 2016).

Amid these national reforms, the Kingdom has witnessed remarkable advancements across various sectors, particularly in education, which is regarded as a cornerstone of comprehensive development. Today, Saudi Arabia hosts more than 35,000 schools, including over 23,000 public schools. The higher education sector has also experienced rapid growth since the establishment of the first higher education institution in 1949. By 2024, the sector had expanded to include 28 public universities and 65 private higher education institutions, in addition to numerous technical colleges, higher institutes, industrial colleges, and military academies. In the 2024 academic year, the number of students enrolled in Saudi universities exceeded 634,000, with approximately 470,000 female students, reflecting a significant numerical advantage for women in higher education. As part of its strategic commitment to the development of the sector, the Saudi government allocated nearly \$52 billion in its 2024 national budget to support educational institutions, including higher education, reaffirming the state's dedication to advancing this vital domain and its role in achieving sustainable national development (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Statement of Problem:

Higher education is one of the most essential pillars of national development and modernization. Since the establishment of the first institution of higher education in 1949 and the founding of King Saud University in 1957, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone significant historical phases characterized by institutional expansion, policy reform, and evolving educational priorities (Al-Ghamdi, 2000; Al-Salman, 1999 ;Al-Zahrani, 2006; Al-Otaibi, 2018). Despite the importance of these changes, there is still a noticeable gap in scholarly literature that systematically documents and analyzes the evolution of higher education in the Kingdom from a comprehensive historical perspective. This study aims to address the lack of an integrated historical analysis that traces the major phases, events, and policy shifts that have shaped the Saudi higher education system from its inception to the present. It will explore how national development agendas, political leadership, religious values, economic transformations, and social changes have influenced the sector's growth and direction. Additionally, the study will examine key turning points, such as

the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education, the expansion of international scholarships, the increased participation of women in higher education, the rise of private institutions, and the impact of Vision 2030 and the University Law of 2019. The scientific significance of this study lies in its attempt to fill a critical gap in the existing literature by providing a chronological and analytical account of the development of higher education in Saudi Arabia. It aims to document and interpret the stages of growth, underlying philosophies, and shifting governance models of the system. Furthermore, the study seeks to enhance our understanding of the historical context surrounding contemporary reforms and offers insights into the enduring challenges and strategic opportunities facing the sector in the twenty-first century.

Research Question:

What are the most significant historical events and stages that higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has experienced since its inception in 1949 until 2024?

Study objectives:

- Analyze the political, social, and economic conditions that accompanied the emergence of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1949.
- Identify the primary historical stages of higher education and describe the characteristics of each stage in terms of policies, legislation, and institutional development.
- Interpret major transformations in the higher education process, such as the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education, the expansion of scholarships, and women's education, and link them to national developments.
- Examine the effects of Saudi Vision 2030 on transforming higher education, focusing on institutional autonomy, diverse funding sources, and global competitiveness.
- Examine the historical implications of these stages for creating a modern and effective higher education system that aligns with the Kingdom's developmental changes.

Overview of Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

Higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia began in earnest in 1949 with the establishment of the first college specializing in Islamic sciences in the holy city of Makkah. A significant milestone followed in 1957 with the founding of King Saud University in the capital, Riyadh, marking the beginning of the expansion of higher education institutions throughout the Kingdom (Al-Salman, 1999 ;Al-Zahrani, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2003). By 2025, the number of Saudi universities had reached 43, in addition to approximately 50 colleges, as well as numerous community, technical, industrial, and military colleges (Ministry of Education, 2025). More than 1.1 million students are enrolled in higher education institutions, including approximately 65,000 international students.

King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah is the largest higher education institution in terms of student population, with 97,231 students. It is followed by Imam Mohammad

Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, with approximately 72,000 students, and Qassim University, with over 69,000 students. Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah has approximately 58,334 students, while King Khalid University in Abha is the largest in the southern region, with more than 56,460 students. Taif University, situated in western Saudi Arabia, enrolls over 53,000 students (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Higher Education Governance:

Higher education in Saudi Arabia is centrally administered. Previously, the Ministry of Higher Education oversaw the sector, setting goals and regulations for it. However, in 2015, it was merged with the Ministry of Education. Subsequently, the Council of Universities Affairs was established to assume strategic and regulatory functions similar to those of the former ministry. University presidents at public institutions are appointed by royal decree based on nominations by the Ministry of Education. Public universities rely heavily on government funding, with approximately 15% of the national budget allocated to education, a portion of which supports universities and colleges (Al-Juhani, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2025). Recognizing the growing financial burden of higher education, the Saudi government has implemented reforms to promote financial sustainability and institutional autonomy. Among the most significant of these efforts is the University Law issued in 2019, which grants public universities broader authority to diversify their funding sources.

Education Policy in the Kingdom:

The foundational framework for education in Saudi Arabia is the Education Policy Document, issued in 1970 and approved by the General Committee for Education Policy and the Ministry of Education. This document remains the principal reference for the educational system at all levels, including higher education (Ministry of Education, 1995). It comprises 236 regulatory articles, organized into nine sections, which emphasize the alignment of education with Islamic principles and the exclusive use of the Arabic language as the medium of instruction.

Although experts have repeatedly called for updates to this decades-old document to reflect societal and global changes, it has remained unchanged for more than fifty years (Al-Shahwan, 2012; Al-Munqash, 2006; Aoun, 2015). All laws and regulations related to higher education institutions align with this document, which includes a dedicated section outlining the goals and purposes of higher education. According to the 1970 policy, the primary objectives of higher education include:

- Reinforcing Islamic identity among students and instilling pride in their Islamic and Arab heritage.
- Preparing responsible citizens capable of contributing to national development.
- Providing opportunities for talented students to pursue higher education in various scientific fields.
- Promoting scientific research, authorship, and the translation of beneficial literature from other languages.

- Offering training and development programs for graduates (Ministry of Education, 1995).

Saudi Vision 2030 and Higher Education:

In 2016, the Saudi government launched "Vision 2030," a strategic plan aimed at transforming the Kingdom into a thriving and sustainable nation grounded in Islamic values. The 81-page Vision Document outlines broad objectives across multiple sectors, including education. Key educational goals include developing students' talents and skills, improving school outcomes, raising Saudi students' performance in international assessments, and modernizing curricula (Vision Document, 2016). Specific targets for higher education include placing at least five Saudi universities among the world's top 200 by 2030. Vision also aims to close the gap between university outputs and labor market needs, encouraging universities to respond to rapid global changes by introducing new, relevant academic programs. Higher education institutions are also expected to cultivate students' skills and foster their creativity and innovation (Vision Document, 2016). In line with these goals, several significant developments have occurred in public universities. For instance, King Saud University is now under the supervision of the Royal Commission for Riyadh City. At the same time, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals has come under the Ministry of Energy, marking a shift toward specialized oversight and greater institutional autonomy in support of national priorities (King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, 2025).

Study Methodology:

The study employed a historical approach to address its research questions. Additionally, it utilized both descriptive and analytical methods to interpret certain results. To answer these questions, the study reviewed official history books, documents, scientific studies, and newspapers.

Results:

1.1: The First Institutions of Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

The establishment of the College of Sharia in Makkah in 1949 marks the official beginning of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This college was founded under the supervision of the Directorate of Knowledge (Ma'arif), which was the governmental body responsible for education prior to its transformation into the Ministry of Education in 1953. Since its inception, the college has specialized in Islamic sciences and represented the nucleus of formal university education in the Kingdom. Today, it operates under the umbrella of Umm Al-Qura University. In 1960, the college changed its name to become the "College of Sharia and Education", following the addition of new departments: Islamic Studies and Sharia, Arabic Language, and Social Sciences. However, with the establishment of an independent College of Education in 1962, the original name "College of Sharia" was reinstated. The college offered a four-year academic program, and at the time, the majority of its faculty members were from the Arab Republic of Egypt, particularly graduates and

professors from Al-Azhar University. This reflected the college's early alignment with the high academic standards of leading Islamic institutions in the Arab world. At its founding, the college was led by Sheikh Muhammad bin Mani', who simultaneously served as the Director of Knowledge. He is considered one of the prominent figures in the history of education in the region, having contributed to the establishment of many modern schools across Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, including in Qatar and Bahrain. The academic curriculum evolved gradually. Initially focused solely on traditional Islamic subjects, it later expanded to include courses in education, psychology, history, and other subjects aimed at preparing and training teachers.

The second oldest institution of higher education in the Kingdom was the Teachers' College in Makkah, which was established in 1952 in response to the growing need to train qualified teachers for intermediate and secondary education. At that time, primary school teachers were not required to hold a higher education degree. The college was comprised of two central departments: Social Sciences and Arabic Language. Although there were intentions to establish a department for Science and Mathematics, financial and human resource limitations prevented its realization. The college functioned for several years before it was eventually closed in 1958. Subsequently, the college was restructured and merged with the College of Sharia. It later became part of the College of Education, which maintained a four-year program and remained under the supervision of the Ministry of Knowledge. Today, the institution is administratively and academically affiliated with Umm Al-Qura University. It is worth noting that the early development of higher education in the Kingdom was concentrated in the western region, particularly in the Hijaz, due to the presence of formal schooling in that area since the late 19th century. This stands in contrast to other regions of the Arabian Peninsula, which only became part of the Saudi state later in the 20th century (Al-Salman, 1999 ;Al-Zahrani, 2006;Ministry of Education, 2003).

1.2: King Saud University: Saudi Arabia's First University and Its Academic Evolution:

King Saud University is recognized as the first university established in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Founded in 1957 in the capital city of Riyadh, it marked a new era for organized national higher education following decades in which education had been mainly confined to religious institutions such as the College of Sharia in Makkah. The university began its academic journey by admitting its first cohort of students in the 1957/1958 academic year. That cohort consisted of 21 male students. Four years later, in 1961, the university graduated its first class of 15 students, including two international students. These early graduates were enrolled in the history and geography departments within the College of Arts, forming the foundation for the humanities disciplines at the university. In the 1961/1962 academic year, King Saud University made a significant advancement by opening admission to female

students for the first time. Four women were admitted that year, and in 1965, the first female graduate, Fatimah Mandili, completed her degree in English literature with a grade of "very good." She was later appointed as a teaching assistant and was awarded a scholarship to pursue graduate studies abroad. In 1977, she became the first Saudi woman to earn a Ph.D., which she obtained from Cairo University with a dissertation titled "The Conflict Between Myth and Reality: A Study of Female Heroines in the Plays of John Millington Synge."

Over the years, the university experienced consistent growth in student enrollment. The number of students rose from 783 in 1961 to over 47,000 by the year 2000. Similarly, the number of female students increased from only four in 1961 to more than 17,000 by the end of the 20th century. This expansion extended beyond undergraduate education to include graduate studies, which began in 1973 with the launch of the master's program. Initially limited to Saudi nationals, the program enrolled only two male students in its first year. By the following year, the first female student was admitted. Enrollment numbers continued to rise, reaching 2,392 students by the 1999/2000 academic year.

In 1978, Ahmed Omar Al-Zayla'i became the first student to receive a master's degree in history from King Saud University. He later served as a professor at the university and was a member of the Shura Council. That same year, Nora Al-Shamlan became the first woman to earn a master's degree in Arabic literature from the university. She would later become one of the first Saudi women to earn a Ph.D. from King Saud University in 1987. For the first six years, graduate programs were limited to Saudi students only. However, in the 1979/1980 academic year, the university admitted its first cohort of international graduate students—50 in total, including nine women. Doctoral programs were launched in the 1980s, but international students were not admitted to these programs until 1999/2000.

Since its founding, King Saud University has significantly expanded its academic offerings. After beginning with only the College of Arts, it went on to establish the College of Science in 1958, the first of its kind in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. In 1959, it founded the College of Commerce (later renamed the College of Business Administration) and the College of Pharmacy. In 1960, the university adopted an official internal system of governance, which helped to organize its administrative and academic structure.

By the mid-1960s, the university had established the College of Engineering (1965) and the College of Education (1966) with the support of UNESCO. Both colleges were formally integrated into King Saud University in 1968. During this period, the university's name was changed to "Riyadh University" before being reverted to its original name, "King Saud University," in honor of its founder. In 1967, the university launched the College of Medicine—the first of its kind in Saudi Arabia. Initially open only to male students, the college began admitting female students in 1978. In 1976, the university established the Center for Female Students, enabling Saudi women to pursue higher education in a gender-segregated environment. This policy remains in place in Saudi universities due to cultural considerations.

In 1978, the College of Graduate Studies was established, followed by the launch of a medical school in Abha in 1980. In 1981, a regional branch of the university was opened in the Qassim region. The university's development continued with the establishment of the Institute of Languages and Translation in 1991, the Institute for Research and Consulting Studies in 1997, the Community College in Jazan in 1998, the Medical College in Qassim in 2001, and the Community College in Riyadh in 2002. In 2004, the Qassim branch became an independent institution, now known as Qassim University.

In 2015, the Ministry of Higher Education was merged with the Ministry of Education, bringing King Saud University once again under the Ministry's authority. In 2019, a new University Law was enacted, granting public universities greater autonomy. In 2022, King Saud University came under the supervision of the Royal Commission for Riyadh City, making it the first public university to gain complete administrative independence from the Ministry of Education, after King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. In its early years, King Saud University faced a severe shortage of qualified academic and administrative staff. To address this, the university implemented an intensive scholarship program, sending high-achieving graduates abroad—particularly to the United States—to pursue master's and doctoral degrees, with full funding from the Saudi government. At the same time, the university recruited faculty from Arab countries, especially Egypt, which had a more advanced higher education system at the time. Egyptian academics held many leading positions at the university, including college deanships and academic chair roles. The first president of the university was Dr. Abd al-Wahhab Muhammad Azzam, an Egyptian scholar who passed away during his tenure in 1959. Over the course of more than seven decades, King Saud University has evolved into one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the Arab world. It consistently ranks highly in global university rankings such as the Shanghai Ranking and is positioned as a flagship institution in Saudi Arabia's vision for international academic leadership. By 2021, the university had enrolled over 63,000 students, including 2,215 international students from 92 countries. The majority of international students came from Asia, with Yemen contributing the largest student population among them (King Saud University 1987;1994;1999;2025).

1.3: The Ministry of Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1975–2015):

The educational system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, including higher education, has traditionally followed a centralized model. Public higher education institutions are subject to unified regulations and policies in most operational aspects, with only limited procedural exceptions. This centralization encompasses standardized employment policies for faculty members, as well as uniform salary scales for both academic and administrative staff across all public universities. Prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Education (formerly the Ministry of Knowledge) oversaw various aspects of higher education,

including the management of teachers' colleges, the administration of international scholarship programs for Saudi students, and the supervision of cultural attachés abroad. However, with the rapid expansion of the higher education sector and the increasing number of Saudi students studying overseas—most of whom were funded by government scholarships—the Saudi government recognized the need for a dedicated body to manage this sector. Consequently, the Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975. The Ministry continued to operate for 31 years until it was merged with the Ministry of Education in early 2015, as part of broader efforts to promote integration across all levels of education. Four ministers held the position of Minister of Higher Education during this period: Sheikh Hassan bin Abdullah Al Al-Sheikh; Dr. Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Khowaiter, who was the first Saudi to earn a PhD from the United Kingdom universities in 1960; Dr. Khalid Al-Anqari, who served the longest in this role for more than fifteen years; and finally, Dr. Khalid Al-Sabti, who was the last to hold the position before the merger. During the Ministry's tenure, the higher education sector witnessed significant growth. The number of public universities increased from seven to twenty-eight, in addition to a rise in the number of other higher education institutions. This expansion was fueled by rapid population growth and significant government investment in higher education, leading to a broader educational renaissance and improved access to university education throughout the Kingdom (Albeshir, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2025) .

1.4: Women's Education in Saudi Arabia: Historical Challenges and Transformations:

Educating girls, whether in schools or institutions of higher education, was not an easy mission in its early stages. Many families initially refused to send their daughters to school due to cultural concerns and fears that these educational institutions might corrupt girls' morals or instill beliefs contrary to Islamic teachings. Even though, from their inception until today, Saudi schools and higher education institutions have maintained gender segregation—with girls' schools staffed solely by female students and teachers and no male personnel allowed within the academic buildings—societal rejection of these institutions persisted for years, particularly during the early 1960s. Nevertheless, the government was determined to spread girls' education across the Kingdom, viewing it as an opportunity to develop both female potential and the broader society. In 1961, a dedicated authority for girls' education was established, operating independently from the Ministry of Education. Gradually, enrollment in girls' schools increased. By the 1980s, the rate of secondary school completion among girls surpassed that of their male counterparts—a remarkable transformation in the landscape of female formal education in Saudi Arabia. In the realm of higher education, some universities—such as King Saud University—began offering undergraduate programs for women in the early 1960s. However, participation remained limited at first due to the novelty of girls' schooling and the small number of graduates. The actual turning point for women's higher education came in the 1970s, when colleges exclusively for women were established under the supervision of a

dedicated authority known as the General Presidency for Girls' Education. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, numerous higher education institutions for women were founded, most of which focused on training female teachers for public schools. At the time, the scientific and medical fields were generally unpopular among female students and their families. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, many families preferred their daughters to enroll in colleges of education and become teachers if they chose to work, since teaching in public schools ensured gender segregation and minimal interaction with men. By the early 21st century, society had become increasingly accepting of women working in various sectors, including medicine and dentistry. The launch of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016 further accelerated cultural change, particularly through initiatives to empower women. As a result, women began pursuing a wide range of academic disciplines and entered diverse sectors of the workforce. The first women's college in Saudi Arabia was the College of Education in Riyadh, established in 1970. In 1974, the College of Education for Girls opened in Jeddah, followed by the establishment of a similar college in Mecca in 1975. In 1979, the first College of Arts was launched in Riyadh, offering majors such as Islamic Studies, Arabic Language and Literature, History, Geography, English, Home Economics, and Mathematics. That same year, a College of Education for Girls was opened in Dammam. In 1981, three more colleges were established in Medina, Qassim, and Abha, followed by another in Tabuk in 1982. The late 1970s and 1980s also witnessed the founding of many teachers' colleges for women, aimed explicitly at preparing educators for elementary and intermediate levels, as there was a critical shortage of female teachers in that era. Most teaching staff were recruited from Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. In 1977, the first graduate studies programs were introduced for women, starting with the College of Education in Riyadh. Over time, the number of women's colleges expanded significantly, reaching more than 70 across the Kingdom, including 23 in Riyadh alone. As a result, the first decade of the 21st century saw major restructuring in the higher education sector, including the integration of women's colleges into larger university systems. New public universities were established in smaller cities, such as Jazan, Najran, Al-Majma'ah, Qassim, Shagra, Jeddah, and Hafar Al-Batin. The 23 women's colleges in Riyadh were merged into Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, founded in 2006. It is now the largest women's university in the world, with over 35,000 female students. By the time of the official integration of women's colleges into the broader university system in 2005, the cumulative number of graduates had reached 888 PhD holders, 1,407 Master's degree holders, and 196,767 Bachelor's degree graduates. Today, Saudi women can enroll in nearly all academic disciplines available to men. Engineering programs have been opened to women at several universities since the early 2010s. Women have also been admitted to King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, which was previously reserved for men. The percentage of women completing secondary education and enrolling in higher education now exceeds that of men. According to the most recent statistics in 2024, there are approximately 634,000 female students in higher education compared to fewer than 470,000 male

students(Al-Dawoud,2008; Al-Jazirah Newspaper, 2011; Al-Murshid,2007;Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, 2025;Ministry of Education, 2003;2025).

1.5:The Development of Teacher Preparation Colleges for Men :

The history of formal education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia dates back to 1925 with the establishment of the Directorate of Education (Mudiriyat al-Ma'arif). One of its primary missions was to prepare qualified national teachers, stemming from the state's firm belief in the teacher's pivotal role in the progress and development of society. In 1927, the Saudi Scientific Institute was established in Makkah as the first institution specialized in preparing teachers. The program initially lasted four years and was later extended to five. Soon afterward, the Dar Al-Tawhid School was opened in Taif, where the study period extended to six years. This institution played a significant role in producing a generation of well-prepared educators. In 1953, the Ministry of Education was founded, marking a more structured and organized phase in teacher preparation. Several institutions under the Ministry were established to train and qualify teachers. Among the most notable were the Primary Teacher Training Institutes, which operated from 1953 to 1969 and served as the cornerstone for training elementary school teachers, focusing on pedagogical and instructional skills. Evening Teacher Training Institutes were introduced between 1964 and 1965, targeting those already employed but seeking professional development through evening study programs. These were followed by Elementary Teacher Preparation Institutes from 1965 to 1985, which expanded on the foundations of the previous institutes and introduced more modern educational approaches. Complementary Studies Centers operated from 1966 to 1983 and were created to offer training for teachers who had not enrolled in formal training programs. Additionally, Institutes for Religious Studies and Qur'an Memorization Teachers were established in two phases, the first between 1964 and 1965, and the second in 1977. These institutes were concerned with preparing teachers in Islamic education and Qur'anic studies. The Physical Education Institute for Teachers, operating from 1965 to 1992, was established to meet the demand for qualified physical education teachers in schools. Similarly, the Art Education Institute functioned between 1966 and 1991 and focused on training art teachers for all educational levels. A notable program was the English Language Teacher Preparation Program, active from 1973 to 1988, launched in response to the growing need for qualified English language teachers in the education sector. Moreover, the Science and Mathematics Center, which operated from 1974 to 1988, provided specialized training for teachers in scientific disciplines based on modern curricula. In 1976, the Intermediate College for Teacher Preparation was established and continued until 1987. These colleges granted an intermediate academic degree combining educational theory with classroom practice. In 1987, these intermediate colleges were transformed into full-fledged Teachers' Colleges that awarded bachelor's degrees. These colleges remained under the supervision of the Ministry of Education until a major restructuring decision in 2007, which integrated them into public universities. The merger was a response to the oversupply of teachers, as many graduates from the Teachers' Colleges were no longer able to find

employment in the education sector due to market saturation. Prior to their integration, there were 18 Teachers' Colleges distributed across the Kingdom, with their primary mission being the preparation of teachers for the elementary level. In contrast, Colleges of Education at universities were responsible for training teachers for intermediate and secondary education. After the merger, all teacher preparation responsibilities were transferred to university-level Colleges of Education, ensuring a more unified and advanced approach to educator preparation (Al-Salman, 1999 ;Al-Zahrani, 2006;Al-Murshid, 2007; Saudi Press Agency, 2005;Ministry of Education, 2003).

1.6: A Historical Overview of International Students in Saudi Higher Education Institutions:

The history of international students in Saudi higher education institutions dates back to the 1950s, coinciding with the early establishment of higher education in the Kingdom. The presence of international students began with the founding of institutions such as the Sharia Colleges in Makkah and Riyadh, as well as the establishment of King Saud University in 1957. Archival records confirm that international students were among the first cohorts at these institutions. For instance, in its founding year, King Saud University admitted three international students, representing over 14% of the total student body at the time. Two of them—Abdullah Al-Hajj Nasri and Ahmed Tayeb Abdel Raouf—graduated in 1961 with bachelor's degrees in history and were originally from Malawi. Further historical evidence suggests that international students were also present at the Sharia College in Riyadh, which is now part of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. Notably, a Pakistani student named Muhammad Sharif, who graduated in 1958, is believed to be the first international graduate of a Saudi higher education institution. During the 1970s, the number of Saudi higher education institutions increased, accompanied by a growth in international student enrollment. In the 1970/1971 academic year, international students accounted for approximately 16.5% of the total student population in the Kingdom. The majority of these students came from Arab countries, and male students were significantly more represented than females. International students have historically studied in Saudi Arabia on full scholarships provided by the Saudi government. These scholarships cover tuition, monthly stipends, annual travel, free housing, and healthcare. Unlike in Western countries, where international students are a source of economic income through tuition fees and living expenses, the Saudi approach is based on humanitarian and developmental goals, notably to support students from developing countries(Albeshir et al., 2024;2025; King Saud University , 1978;1994; Ministry of Education, 2025; University Alumni Directory, 1982).

By 2021, international student enrollment in Saudi higher education institutions had grown substantially. A total of 64,874 international students were enrolled, with 46,723 studying at public universities. Female students comprised approximately 37% of the international student population at public universities. Institutions such as King Abdulaziz University, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University, and Umm Al-Qura

University were the leading hosts of female international students. King Saud University ranked fifth in hosting non-Saudi female students that year. Yemeni students formed the largest international student group in the 2021–2022 academic year, followed by students from Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan. This demographic reflects the Kingdom's continued prioritization of Arab and Muslim countries in its international student policies. Internationally diverse in proportion to its total student body (Ministry of Education, 2025; UNESCO, 2024).

Founded in 1961 in Madinah, Islam's second-holiest city after Makkah, the university was initially established as a college and later became a full-fledged university in the 1970s (Al-Zahrani, 2006). From the outset, its mission was to serve international students from Muslim-majority countries, with a primary focus on Islamic studies and Arabic language instruction. The university's stated objectives include promoting the message of Islam globally through higher education and research, nurturing Islamic identity and scholarship, translating and publishing Islamic knowledge, preserving Islamic heritage, and fostering academic cooperation with institutions worldwide in the service of Islam. By 2021, the Islamic University had become the largest public university in the world by proportion of international students, with 9,522 international students enrolled, all of whom were male, as the university does not offer academic programs for women. The total student population that year was 12,846, indicating that international students comprised approximately 74% of the entire student body. Since its establishment, the university has graduated around 100,000 international students from over 170 countries, making it a central institution in Saudi Arabia's educational diplomacy and global Islamic outreach (Islamic University, 2025).

1.7: Private Higher Education Institutions: An Emerging Sector:

Private higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia represent a relatively recent experiment that continues to raise questions regarding their quality and competitiveness, except for a limited number of well-established institutions. The first private higher education institution in the Kingdom was King Abdulaziz University, established in the early 1960s. However, its private status did not last long. Due to significant financial challenges, the university's board of trustees submitted a request to King Faisal to convert it into a public institution (Al-Dawoud, 2008; Al-Zahrani, 2006). The government approved the proposal, and since then, King Abdulaziz University has operated as a public university. Most private colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia were established during the first and second decades of the 21st century, following increased government support during that period. The government has continued to provide significant support to enable the growth of private higher education institutions, the majority of which are classified as non-profit. A number of these institutions have gained a strong reputation in the job market. For example, Prince Sultan University is widely recognized for its academic quality, particularly in business and administrative sciences. Likewise, Alfaisal University is known for its excellence in medical education. Looking ahead, the private higher education sector is expected to continue its growth in light of Saudi Vision 2030, which encourages the

privatization of many sectors, including higher education. As of the 2023–2024 academic year, the total number of students enrolled in private higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia exceeded 117,000, with female students forming the majority—61,417 female students were enrolled. The largest private university in the Kingdom in terms of student enrollment is the Arab Open University, with more than 25,000 students. Prince Sultan University ranks second, with around 8,000 students, followed by Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University, which has over 6,600 students. The University of Business and Technology (UBT) ranks fourth among private universities, with approximately 6,000 students, while Al Yamamah University ranks fifth, enrolling 5,121 students. In total, Saudi Arabia currently has 15 private universities and 50 private colleges, with some of these colleges in the process of transitioning to full university status (Ministry of Education, 2025).

1.8: Saudi students studying abroad:

Since its establishment, the Third Saudi State has consistently emphasized the pivotal role of human capital in national development. From its early years, even prior to the full unification of the Kingdom under King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al Saud, the state prioritized education as a fundamental tool for modernization and progress. Despite facing severe financial constraints before the discovery of oil, the leadership remained steadfast in its commitment to expanding the education system. King Abdulaziz, in particular, envisioned a modern nation built upon a foundation of educated citizens and thus championed the development of formal schooling throughout the nascent state. A significant milestone in this endeavor was the establishment of the Directorate of Knowledge (Ma'arif) in 1926, with Sheikh Saleh Bakri bin Muhammad Shatta appointed as its first director. This institution marked the beginning of centralized educational planning in the Kingdom. In 1952, the directorate was elevated to the status of a ministry under the leadership of Prince Fahd bin Abdulaziz, who later ascended to the throne as King of Saudi Arabia. These developments signaled a systematic and strategic approach to human resource development. This paper aims to examine the Kingdom's long-standing investment in human capital through its international higher education scholarship programs. While early efforts focused on domestic educational infrastructure, the Saudi leadership also recognized the strategic importance of sending students abroad. Exposure to international academic institutions and diverse cultural contexts was seen as vital for acquiring advanced knowledge and skills needed for national development. Consequently, the Kingdom launched its first formal foreign scholarship initiative in 1927 by sending fourteen students to Egypt. This marked the inception of Saudi Arabia's international scholarship policy, initiated while the country was still formally known as the "Kingdom of Hejaz and Nejd and its Dependencies," prior to being renamed the "Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" in 1932 (Ministry of Education, 2019). The pioneering cohort included Ahmad Qadi, Omar Qadi, Fuad Wafa, Abdullah Nazir, Ahmad Al-Arabi, Walid Al-Din Asad, Muhammad Shatta, Saleh Al-Khatib, Hamza Qabel, Omar Nassif, Abdul Majeed Matbuli, Muhammad Bahanashal, Abdullah

Bahanashal, and Ibrahim Mohiuddin Hakim. These individuals pursued university degrees in fields such as Islamic jurisprudence, technical education, agriculture, medicine, and teacher training. The state allocated 1,600 Egyptian pounds annually to cover program costs, with an additional 100 pounds provided to each student as an academic incentive (Ministry of Education, 2019; Umm Al-Qura Newspaper, 1950). The scope of the scholarship initiative expanded in subsequent years. In 1930, Saudi students were sent to Lebanon, followed by a small group sent to the United Kingdom. By 1935, ten students were studying in Italy. That same year witnessed the establishment of the Preparatory School for Scholarships in Mecca, designed to academically equip students for enrollment in foreign universities. In 1939, the top ten graduates from this institution were awarded government scholarships to pursue higher education abroad. The increase in scholarship beneficiaries over time reflected the Kingdom's enduring commitment to educational advancement. The discovery of commercially viable oil reserves in 1938, and the commencement of oil exports in 1939, significantly enhanced the state's financial capacity to fund education. This economic shift enabled a rapid expansion of both domestic schooling and international scholarship opportunities. Additionally, private entities such as the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) contributed to this educational movement by sponsoring Saudi students for technical and higher education overseas (Ministry of Education, 2019). Parallel to government-sponsored efforts, a number of Saudis pursued education abroad independently. For example, Dr. Haider Othman Al-Hajjar, the inaugural director of Riyadh's first hospital, is believed to have been among the earliest Saudi recipients of a medical degree, graduating from Damascus University in 1941 (Al-Madani, 2018). Similarly, Dr. Hamad Abdullah Al-Hamad Al-Bassam, graduated with a degree in medicine and surgery from King Edward Medical College at Bombay University in 1943, exemplifying early individual contributions to the nation's professional landscape (Al-Bassam, 2021). The government-sponsored foreign scholarship program, launched in 1927, has continued uninterrupted into the present era. Despite the proliferation of higher education institutions within the Kingdom, this initiative remains a central pillar of national development policy and enjoys broad societal support. The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Scholarship Program, introduced in 2005, further institutionalized and expanded the Kingdom's international educational engagement. According to the 2019 Statistical Yearbook published by the General Authority for Statistics, a total of 100,585 Saudi students were studying abroad that year, including 32,593 female students. Of these, 86,018 students were government-funded, while 14,576 were self-funded. The United States remained the most favored destination, hosting 56,032 Saudi students in 2019—accounting for 56% of the total. The United Kingdom was the second most popular destination, with 14,936 students (approximately 15%). Around 10% of Saudi students chose to study in Arab countries, and approximately 7,000 were enrolled in Australian institutions, making Australia another notable academic destination. At the level of academic enrollment, undergraduate programs accounted for the largest share, with 45,196 students. Approximately 17% of students were participating in language preparatory programs to meet university admission criteria. Meanwhile, 15,333

students were pursuing master's degrees, 12,644 were enrolled in doctoral programs, and 3,241 were engaged in fellowship programs. Regarding fields of specialization, approximately 25% of Saudi students abroad in 2019 were enrolled in administrative and legal studies. Health sciences attracted 21,481 students, making it the second most pursued discipline, followed closely by engineering and manufacturing, which comprised about 20% of total enrollments. In contrast, enrollment in fields such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary sciences remained minimal, with only 66 students registered in those disciplines (General Authority for Statistics, 2019).

1.9: Higher Education for Individuals with Disabilities:

Higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has gradually evolved to become more inclusive of students with disabilities. Disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, hearing loss, visual impairment, autism spectrum disorder, and learning disabilities are among the most common categories recognized in the education system. The earliest structured educational services for students with disabilities began in the early 1960s with the establishment of specialized schools for students with hearing and visual impairments. Students with visual impairments were among the first groups with disabilities to access higher education in the Kingdom. As early as the 1960s, blind students were accepted into various academic programs, particularly within the fields of Islamic studies. Numerous blind students graduated from the Colleges of Sharia at institutions such as Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. Additionally, many notable scholars and faculty members in the field of Islamic law were themselves blind. Among the most prominent were Sheikh Abdulaziz ibn Baz and Sheikh Abdulaziz Al Sheikh, both of whom held senior academic and religious positions despite their visual impairments. Remarkably, two presidents of the Islamic University in Madinah were blind. The founding president, Sheikh Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al Sheikh, appointed in 1961, was visually impaired and later became the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia. His successor, Sheikh Abdulaziz ibn Baz, also blind, later served as Grand Mufti as well. The current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdulaziz ibn Abdullah Al Sheikh, is likewise visually impaired. He earned a bachelor's degree from the College of Sharia in the early 1960s and was a faculty member at Imam University. Several Saudi scholars with visual impairments also earned their degrees from international universities. One notable figure is Dr. Nasser Ali Al-Mousa, who studied at San Francisco State University in the United States, earning his bachelor's degree in 1980 and a master's degree in 1982. He later earned a Ph.D. in special education from Vanderbilt University in 1987. Dr. Al-Mousa went on to serve as a faculty member at King Saud University and was later appointed to the Shura Council. In terms of support for students with hearing impairments, some community colleges—such as the College of Telecommunications—have begun offering associate degree programs tailored for deaf students. In 2003, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University launched a program for deaf female students within its College of Education. However, the program was later suspended due to significant challenges related to students' reading and writing skills. Between 2003 and 2005, new academic programs for deaf students

were established at King Saud University and the Arab Open University. These initiatives opened the door for further academic advancement. Mr. Zuhair Al-Sayegh became the first deaf Saudi to earn a master's degree from an American university in 2000 and subsequently worked as a teacher in the United States. In 2024, Dr. Badr Al-Omari became the first deaf Saudi to earn a doctoral degree, receiving his Ph.D. in Deaf Education from Lamar University in the United States. Dr. Al-Omari currently serves as a faculty member at King Saud University. In the area of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Saudi higher education achieved a historic milestone in 2021 when Ahmed Issam Al-Mukainzi, a student diagnosed with ASD, graduated from King Saud University with a bachelor's degree in Art Education. He is believed to be the first Saudi autistic student to graduate from a higher education institution in the country (Al-Maliki, 2021; Al-Jazirah Newspaper ,2002; Al-Mousa,2008 Al-Ahmad, 2017;Saudi Press Agency 2022كSpecial Education Network 2025).

1.10: Academic Accreditation Commission:

The National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) was established in 2004 by the Higher Education Council to improve the quality of higher education in the Kingdom. Since its inception, the organization has undergone several restructurings and is currently known as the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation. This center now operates as part of the Education and Training Evaluation Commission, the national regulatory body responsible for overseeing educational and training quality in Saudi Arabia. As an independent, government-funded entity, the center has played a significant role in launching various developmental initiatives, including the development of standardized admission tests for higher education. Among the most prominent of these are the General Aptitude Test and the Scholastic Achievement Admission Test, both of which are required for high school graduates seeking admission to higher education institutions in the Kingdom. These tests aim to measure students' readiness for university-level studies in terms of cognitive and academic abilities. In addition, the center has developed standardized tests for students applying to graduate programs, along with other assessment tools that serve different educational stages. One of the center's most significant roles is evaluating the quality of higher education institutions—both public and private—by granting institutional accreditation. Over time, institutional accreditation has become increasingly important, and it is expected to become a mandatory requirement for official recognition of universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia shortly. In parallel, the center grants programmatic accreditation to academic programs that meet defined quality standards. This type of accreditation has become critical, particularly following the issuance of the new Universities Law in 2019, which mandates that all academic programs in Saudi higher education institutions must obtain programmatic accreditation. This requirement implies that unaccredited programs may face significant challenges in continuing their operations. These practices are part of the Kingdom's broader efforts to enhance the quality of higher education outcomes and to strengthen governance and accountability

within academic institutions(Board of Experts at the Council of Ministers,2025, Education and Training Evaluation Commission, 2025).

1.11: The Development of Higher Education: A Chronological Overview of Four Key Phases

The researcher proposes dividing the historical development of higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia into four primary stages. Significant institutional, structural, and policy transformations characterize each stage. The following is an overview of the first four stages:

1.11.A: Phase One (1949–1974): Foundation and Initial Expansion:

This phase marks the foundational era of higher education in Saudi Arabia and includes several milestone achievements:

- Establishment of the first colleges in the Kingdom, notably the College of Sharia in Makkah.
- The founding of King Saud University in 1957 in Riyadh laid the groundwork for a structured higher education system.
- Expansion of scholarship programs abroad, where Saudi students were sent to pursue higher education in foreign universities and later contributed to national development upon their return.
- The establishment of women's colleges, which provide opportunities for female students to access higher education, is a critical step toward gender inclusion in academia.

1.11.B: Phase Two (1975–2003): Creation of the Ministry of Higher Education and University Expansion:

This phase was defined by the establishment of a dedicated Ministry of Higher Education in 1975, which became the principal regulatory authority for universities and colleges in the Kingdom. Key developments during this period include:

- Transformation of several colleges into fully-fledged universities, such as:
- The College of Petroleum and Minerals was renamed the University of Petroleum and Minerals, which later became King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals.
- The Islamic College in Madinah was upgraded to the Islamic University of Madinah.
- The College of Sharia and religious institutes were consolidated into Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University.
- Expansion of graduate scholarships for teaching assistants, particularly to American and European universities, with graduates returning as faculty members to Saudi institutions.
- The upgrading of teacher institutes into colleges of education began offering bachelor's degrees to enhance the quality of teacher preparation.
- Transformation of university branches into independent institutions, including:
- The colleges in Makkah, previously affiliated with King Abdulaziz University, were incorporated into Umm Al-Qura University, established in 1981.
- The Abha branch of King Saud University became King Khalid University in 1998.

- Colleges affiliated with King Abdulaziz University and Imam University in Madinah were merged to form Taibah University.

1.11.C: Phase Three (2004–2015): Large-Scale Expansion and International Scholarships:

The most significant surge in both international scholarships and domestic institutional expansion characterizes this stage. Key highlights include:

The launch of the most extensive foreign scholarship program in Saudi history, known as the "King Abdullah Scholarship Program," sent tens of thousands of students abroad to pursue higher education and return as qualified professionals.

The establishment of new public universities across various regions, including small and mid-sized cities. Notable universities founded during this phase include:

- Jazan University
- Najran University
- University of Hafar Al-Batin
- Shaqra University
- Majmaah University
- Al-Jouf University
- Northern Border University
- University of Jeddah
- Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University
- Qassim University
- University of Tabuk
- Al-Baha University
- King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences
- Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University
- King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)
- Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University
- Saudi Electronic University
- University of Bisha

Rapid growth in the private higher education sector, with the emergence of several private colleges and universities offering specialized academic programs, including:

- Batterjee Medical College
- Al-Farabi Colleges
- AlMaarefa University
- Riyadh Elm University
- Dar Al Uloom University
- Jeddah International College

- There is a rising emphasis on academic quality and international rankings, particularly among the older public universities. This led to partnerships with international accreditation agencies and ultimately to the establishment of an independent national accreditation body—the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC), which oversees institutional and programmatic accreditation across the Kingdom.

- Closure of Teachers' Colleges and Women's Colleges, which were previously managed independently by the Ministry of Education. These colleges were dissolved and merged into existing public universities. This move aimed to unify governance, standardize academic programs, and align teacher education with university-level standards and quality frameworks.

1.11.D: Phase Four (2016–present): Higher Education in Light of Saudi Vision 2030:

The higher education sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone significant transformations in light of Saudi Vision 2030, launched in 2016 by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This ambitious national vision aims to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil revenues by developing key sectors, with higher education being a fundamental pillar. One of the most pivotal developments in this sector was the issuance of the New Universities Law in 2019, which was officially adopted in 2020. This legislation marked a significant shift in how higher education institutions are managed, reducing centralized control and granting public universities broad administrative, academic, and financial autonomy, thereby enhancing their governance and operational efficiency.

The new law has allowed universities to diversify their revenue streams beyond state funding. They are now permitted to establish strategic partnerships with public and private entities, sign funded research contracts, create university endowments, and charge tuition fees for postgraduate programs. In contrast, undergraduate programs remain free under government policy. Some universities, such as King Saud University, have already implemented these reforms by introducing tuition fees for graduate studies and leasing university facilities, such as its football stadium, to professional clubs for significant financial returns. In parallel, Vision 2030 has articulated the Kingdom's ambition to elevate Saudi universities' global rankings, particularly within prestigious indices such as the Shanghai Ranking. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has stated on multiple occasions that one of the key goals is to place King Saud University among the top ten universities worldwide, reflecting the country's unprecedented commitment to academic excellence and research leadership. Moreover, the Saudi government has launched a significant initiative to attract international students through the "Study in Saudi" program, which aims to increase the number of international students enrolled in Saudi universities and transform the Kingdom into a regional hub for higher education. The initiative offers three pathways for enrollment:

- Fully funded study, where the government covers all tuition fees,
- Partially funded study, and
- Self-funded study.

International students can pursue degrees in ten major academic fields, including education, law and political science, administration and economics, engineering and natural sciences, computer science, agriculture, Islamic studies and Arabic language teaching, and media.

In addition, recent regulations now encourage the establishment of international branch campuses in Saudi Arabia, aiming to enhance academic exchange and raise the standard of higher education in the country. The New Universities Law also allows Saudi public universities to establish branches abroad, particularly in neighboring countries where Saudi higher education has a strong reputation. This move opens new opportunities for regional academic expansion and collaboration. These efforts have already begun to materialize. In 2024, agreements were signed with the University of Arizona (USA) and the University of Wollongong (Australia) to establish branch campuses in Saudi Arabia, marking a significant step toward the internationalization of higher education and reaffirming the Kingdom's commitment to becoming a global leader in the academic landscape (Al-Maliki, 2024; Board of Experts at the Council of Ministers, 2025; Vision 2030 Document, 2016; Ministry of Education., 2025).

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