

Global Narrative

THE SAUDI R&D ECOSYSTEM IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS AND COLLABORATION

- The Kingdom has adopted “Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030” as a clear target for economic and developmental action. In its aim to grant the Kingdom a leading position in all fields, Vision 2030 seeks to identify the general directions, policies, goals, and objectives of the Kingdom, and to reflect on the Kingdom’s strengths and capabilities.
- The National Transformation Program (NTP) was developed, as one of several executive programs, to help fulfill Vision 2030. The program establishes strategic objectives that are based on the vision and addresses its challenges through 2020 in accordance with specific targets. The program identifies the initiatives necessary for achieving such goals and devises detailed plans on the basis of interim indicators that measure and monitor performance. In its first year, the program was launched across 24 government bodies, and there are plans to expand its coverage annually.
- As a core part of its contribution to the Kingdom’s economic and social future as laid out in the objectives of Vision 2030 and NTP, the Ministry of Education has committed itself to launch, support, and provide stewardship for a bold, integrated set of transformative science- and technology-related initiatives. Together, these efforts are designed to add unprecedented strength to the broad ecosystem of Saudi-based institutions, assets, and activities devoted to R&D and to the commercialization of its results.
- This dual focus makes compelling sense. It will, of course, vastly improve the quality and performance of newly equipped Saudi universities long into the future by supporting the development of a robust pipeline of first-class scientists and technologists. But it will also greatly accelerate the Kingdom’s strategic migration toward a more balanced, diverse, and sustainable economy.

- No other national priority set out in the Kingdom's development plans can come close to matching the high-leverage benefits of sustainably improving the performance, as well as the global standing, of Saudi universities and other R&D-related entities, while setting the nation's economy on a sound road to an ever-more competitive future. That is why this set of initiatives has received an initial budget allocation of SAR 6 billion throughout 2020.
- Today the Kingdom accounts for a little less than 2% of global spending on R&D, far below the levels of leading national economies. But simply throwing large chunks of this SAR 6 billion at current users and uses will not produce the systemic, step-change benefits desired – and required. Instead, these funds, and the initiatives they make possible, must be used to re-imagine, re-invent, re-frame, and re-structure the ways in which – and newly light-handed bureaucratic rules under which -- all entities within the R&D ecosystem operate and get held accountable for their performance.
- A related aim of the overall NTP is to have at least 5 Universities among the top 200 globally. The strengthening of the R&D ecosystem across the Kingdom will be an enabler of this and is key to the overall standing of our top Universities. The contribution of Saudi Universities in supporting the overall intent of the R&D programme is fundamental to success.
- Perhaps most notable about these performance levels and patterns today is the degree to which they reflect standalone activities by individual entities. There is very little cross-institutional collaboration in any phase of the R&D process – whether with other research institutions or with budding entrepreneurs, eager-to-scale SMEs, or even established commercial firms. Indeed, the “demand pull” from the private sector is extremely modest at best, reflecting a traditional preference for strategies and business models that rely not on technology-driven value but on low wage costs associated with jobs not well-configured for Saudis.
- Every bit as important, however, is the inescapable fact that current patterns and levels of performance also reflect – at every point and in every phase of the R&D ecosystem and its operations -- a studied lack of attention to building, maintaining, and leveraging robust collaborations and relationships with leading organizations and universities around the world. But it is precisely these arrangements – if designed carefully, supported robustly

and relentlessly, and overseen with light but firm hand – that can do the most quickly to accelerate the flow of ideas, work practices, and trained human assets essential to kick-starting in self-sustaining, upward-ratcheting fashion the nation’s internal “demand pull” engine. The Kingdom’s 21st century future depends on this.

- First and foremost, then, the Kingdom’s R&D ecosystem must look outwards if it is to rebuild within. Across all parts of that ecosystem, there must be urgent effort to seek, identify, invite, support, and master the work associated with constructing and leveraging a wide range of carefully designed, global, relationship-based collaborations. For the first time in its history, the Kingdom must seriously open all parts of its R&D ecosystem to such meaningful external collaborations and partnerships. This is aligned with the overall intent to attract the global private sector through a series of proposed incentives and making it easier for the international companies to establish across the Kingdom and therefore to make a positive contribution to the overall economy.
- Guided and energized by the Ministry of Education’s proposed set of R&D initiatives, it can and it will. Therefore, let the word go out: Saudi’s R&D ecosystem is now open for business and collaboration.