

Rethinking Strategies for Higher Education Policies as a Soft Power Tool to Navigate an Age of Uncertainty: The Case of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

With geoeconomics on the rise, the rethinking of the global cyber order, and the dynamics of the geopolitical landscape evolving at an unprecedented rate, this paper employs secondary research to examine the ongoing transformation of Saudi Arabian higher education (HE) policies, and the concurrent reframing of Saudi cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool, in three areas: new developments of scholarship programs, the expansion of strategic educational partnerships with foreign countries, and plans to open foreign university campuses on Saudi soil.

The author looks at how present and future Sino-Saudi educational exchanges might implement a threefold use of soft power (cultural diplomacy, knowledge diplomacy, academic diplomacy) to navigate these times of uncertainty.

Keywords: academic diplomacy, Saudi Ministry of Education, Sino-Saudi knowledge diplomacy, study in Saudi, University of New Haven

1. Introduction

In recent years, and notably since the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 in April 2016 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2025), Saudi Arabia — one of the most ambitious emerging middle powers at global level, seeking to gain regional and global influence — has been using cultural diplomacy as a strategic tool to enhance its prestige, to counter hostile propaganda, to diversify its economy and to establish or renew economic and political ties, to attract foreign investments, and to boost the overall human and economic development of the nation.

Cultural diplomacy — a component of public diplomacy — is a type of soft power that utilizes the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations to foster mutual understanding (Cummings, 2009; Waller, 2009).

The tools of cultural diplomacy typically include the visual arts and exhibitions, language education, and study abroad scholarship programs, among others.

Given the rise of geo-economics and the rethinking of the global cyber order, and the unprecedented speed at which the dynamics of the geopolitical landscape are evolving, the purpose of this paper is to make a critical examination of the way that Saudi Arabian higher education (HE) policies are currently being transformed, in the wider perspective of efforts to reshape Saudi cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool, deployed in three areas: new developments of scholarship programs; the expansion of strategic educational partnerships with foreign countries (US, UK and China) to enhance academic and research cooperation; and plans to open foreign university campuses on Saudi soil.

2. Methodology

This paper is a theoretical study that employs secondary research, collecting information from extensive web searches: news articles, academic journals, e-books, reports and government records.

Secondary research is also known as desk research (University of Arizona, 2026) and syndicated research (Oxford Reference, 2026).

Despite its limitations (Smith, 2008, and EBSCO, 2026, among many others), secondary research plays an essential

role (“No Primary research should be done without conducting Secondary research first!”: University of Iowa, 2026) when dealing with research funding: “Research funding is obtained only by using secondary research to show the need for the primary research you want to conduct. In fact, primary research depends on secondary research to prove that it is indeed new and original research and not just a rehash or replication of somebody else’s work” (Illinois Institute of Technology, 2026).

As far as this paper is concerned, on the one hand, the methodology of secondary research was adopted because it is cost-effective and time-saving; on the other, particular care was taken to update the sources (based on age of data), check their authenticity, and verify the quality of the content (regarding dependency on primary research), so as to ensure that the limitations typical of secondary research would be properly addressed.

3. A New Wave of Scholarship Programs

2025 has seen the Saudi government allocate approximately \$53.5 billion to the education sector, which represents 16% of total public expenditure. The defence budget has been set at approximately \$72 billion, 21% of total government spending (Ministry of Finance, 2025).

Caught between shifting budget priorities and new ambitions at home (Saudi Vision 2030) and abroad (pursuing global engagement as an emerging middle power in the global geopolitical scenario), balancing its traditional generous support to study abroad scholarship programs for Saudi citizens — the first of which date back to the 1920s: Pavan, 2013 — with the need to recalibrate the former King Abdullah Scholarship Program (renamed in 2015 as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’ External Scholarship Program - CTHM, sponsored by the Ministry of Education), the Saudi government has taken an important step in recent years (Pavan & Alruwaili, 2023), launching new internal and external scholarship programs sponsored by different actors (ministries, government and private entities, cultural centres etc.).

These programs target specific areas within the overarching goal of Saudi Vision 2030 across all sectors, in that they are designed to diversify the Saudi economy and enhance the country’s global competitiveness, by reducing unemployment and improving the employability of the Saudi workforce, developing renewable energies, raising digital awareness, fostering employment opportunities for women, nurturing creativity and entrepreneurship, attracting foreign investments, and expanding the private sector.

The CTHM is tailored around the country’s development goals, and the selection of applicants to the program — through which Saudi students are sent to graduate at foreign institutions with high academic rankings — is based on a combination of academic merit, field of study, and alignment with national priorities.

Saudi Arabia has always seen its scholarship students abroad as ambassadors of the country and its culture, and the establishment of Saudi clubs at foreign universities has always been instrumental in enhancing the image of the country. However, this very Saudi-specific tool of cultural diplomacy apparently presents its own (undisclosed) challenges, given that on the website of the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the US (SACM, 2025), the Saudi cultural attaché exclaims, “our mission as a soft power isn’t easy!”, albeit without offering any additional explanations.

All of the giga projects (Neom, Qiddiya, Red Sea Global, Roshn Group, Diriyah Company) boast a variety of social responsibility initiatives, vocational training programs, internal and external scholarship programs, awards, and resources-training-mentorship for small-medium enterprises (PIF, 2025).

And while the Ministry of Sports (2025) relentlessly promotes sports culture and excellence, at home and abroad, the Ministry of Tourism (2025) also has various educational and training programs.

The Saudi Data & AI Authority (SDAIA, 2025) already runs a study abroad scholarship program, and has now also created its own academy to train a Saudi generation capable of building a national economy driven by data and artificial intelligence (AI).

4. Expanded Educational Partnerships

Agreements, memoranda and partnerships with foreign institutions for educational and training programs have always been part of Saudi HE policies.

Hitherto, the most important of these partners in educational programs have been the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), but now, China is also emerging as a promising counterpart in Saudi HE policies.

The historically strong educational partnership between Saudi Arabia and the UK was underscored in 2020 by the appointment of the UK Prime Minister's special representative to Saudi Arabia for education (Education and employers, 2025). And the long-standing educational collaboration with the US was enhanced in November 2024 by a memorandum of understanding signed in Riyadh, with the aim of attracting American graduate students to study in Saudi Arabia for the first time, and to encourage student and faculty exchange (MoE, 2024, November 20).

The introduction in 2022 of the 'Study in Saudi' platform for international students to enrol at Saudi universities (MoE, 2025) is a tool intended to present a dynamic and open image of the Saudi HE landscape — and indeed of the country in general — through a new educational outreach that is targeting international students like never before.

In this context, the strategic HE partnership developing between the Kingdom and China merits special attention.

4.1 Saudi Arabia and China: Cultural Diplomacy, Knowledge Diplomacy, Academic Diplomacy

Diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and China were established in 1990, but it was only following the launch of China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative: Belt and Road Portal, 2025), in 2013, and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 in April 2016, that political and cultural exchanges materialized and made progress, along with new agreements in the fields of finance, energy, technology, defence and security (Alghannam, 2025). Today, bilateral relations between China and Saudi Arabia have developed into a comprehensive strategic partnership (Qamar, 2025).

Sino-Saudi cultural ties have entered a new era (Ali, 2024) since March 2024, when the Saudi Ministry of Culture and the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Beijing to increase cooperation in the areas of museums, cultural heritage, theatre and the performing arts, visual arts, architecture and design, libraries, and traditional arts and crafts (Arab News, 2024, March 27). Clearly, this MoU is a tool of cultural diplomacy that seeks to be broad in scope, aimed at building not only mutual understanding and trust, but also economic and geopolitical benefits.

In addition, Saudi Arabia has great expectations that China can play a crucial role (one it has already started to play) in ensuring the success of Saudi tourism policies (Law, 2023; Wang, 2024; Gov.Sa, 2024), bringing tangible and mutual benefits in terms of image and therefore smoother political and economic relations (Chinadvisory, 2024).

In October 2023, education authorities from Saudi Arabia and China signed an agreement to enhance cooperation in Chinese language education (Middle East Monitor, 2024, November 18), and in September 2024, a pilot program was launched to teach Chinese Mandarin classes at schools in six of the thirteen Saudi administrative regions (Arab News, 2024, September 11; The Japan Times, 2025, March 7).

In 2022, according to the Saudi Ministry of Education, there were 174 Saudi students at Chinese universities, including 131 scholarship recipients and 43 self-funded students, and 477 annual Chinese students studying at Saudi universities, thanks to Saudi government-funded scholarships (MoE, 2022, December 9).

At present, seven Saudi universities (King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, Princess Nourah University, Jeddah University, Saudi Electronic University, Prince Sultan University and Umm Al-Qura University) offer classes teaching Chinese language and culture, based on agreements and memoranda with Chinese universities (Chinese Language Education in Saudi Arabia, 2025).

During April 2025 in Beijing, as part of the Saudi-Chinese Cultural Year 2025, the Saudi Education Minister held talks with heads of Chinese universities, institutes and other centres of learning, on ways to improve academic and research collaboration, the exchange of expertise in postgraduate studies, and innovation (MoE, 2025, April 21a).

Various goals were discussed, as the participants explored strategies for encouraging Chinese universities and educational institutions to invest in Saudi Arabia, and examined scholarship opportunities for Chinese students through the 'Study in Saudi' platform. They also considered the prospect of new opportunities for Saudi students to gain admission to prestigious graduate programs at prominent Chinese universities (MoE, 2025, April 21b).

Cultural and educational exchanges, tourism policies, and language studies are among the more typical "soft domains" (Qamar, 2025, p.8), whereas "bidirectional interaction of language education and cultural dissemination" has the ultimate goal of "laying a solid foundation of public support for the long-term stability of Sino-Saudi relations" (Xu, 2024, p.1340).

The most recent academic exchanges between Saudi Arabia and China encompass the three defining elements of knowledge diplomacy, a type of soft power exerted through higher education (higher education and training; research for the generation, use and sharing of knowledge; innovation, i.e. the application of new knowledge for added value: British Council, 2018; Knight, 2022, which introduces a more comprehensive conceptual framework for knowledge diplomacy).

Whether Sino-Saudi knowledge diplomacy will achieve its multiple goals, only time will tell: possibly in the medium term, maybe even sooner.

In the meantime, it might be more appropriate to see the development of Sino-Saudi HE partnerships, with the emphasis on mutual respect, shared learning, and peaceful cooperation, as being the product of Track 2 Diplomacy, and more exactly, academic diplomacy (Zreik, 2025).

5. Foreign University Campuses in Saudi Arabia

In 2014 Saudi Arabia began the process of determining criteria for the opening of foreign university campuses on home soil. Finally, in August 2023, the University Affairs Council issued the Statute Regulating Foreign Universities' Branches (Council of Universities' Affairs General Secretary, 2025), a complex and intricate set of rules and requirements that make the establishment of a foreign campus in Saudi Arabia a lengthy business for the universities that undertake it (Pavan, 2025, January 15) — and several of these, reportedly, happen to be Chinese (Pavan, 2025, December 17).

In August 2024, it was announced officially that five international universities had obtained a foreign investor license to open a branch campus in Saudi Arabia. In April 2025, a sixth university stated that it would open a campus in Riyadh in late 2026 (University of New Haven, 2025, April 13).

As of December 2025, there have been no official announcements on the nature or content of academic courses starting at foreign campuses in Saudi Arabia in the upcoming academic year.

Recent developments in the admission of foreign campuses and their projected establishment, along with the new wave of scholarship programs and the expansion of educational partnerships, could be seen as reflecting a new Saudi perspective on the use of cultural diplomacy through higher education.

5.1 A New Chapter in Cultural Diplomacy Through Higher Education

Unlike neighbouring countries that have had foreign campuses on their soil for many years, Saudi Arabia has in the past always chosen to send its students abroad, in their hundreds of thousands. In return for generous state sponsorship, students are expected to be ambassadors on a mission of cultural diplomacy, promoting the image of Saudi Arabia worldwide. This has been the policy for decades, until recently.

It would appear that Saudi Arabia has decided on the one hand to make it more attractive for Saudi students to study in their home country, by offering an array of new internal scholarship programs, while at the same time rendering access to study abroad scholarships more competitive and more attuned the needs of the national labour market.

On the other hand, new plans have been introduced to attract foreign students (the 'Study in Saudi' program, first and foremost), and foreign campuses welcomed in order to meet an increasing demand for higher education (Colliers, 2024), which suggests a shift in focus, with cultural diplomacy exercised through higher education at home.

In effect, the cultural diplomacy aspect of Saudi HE policies is now predominantly home-oriented, in line perhaps with the ambitions and plans of an emerging middle power seeking to exert increased global influence.

6. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has become fully engaged in the tough global competition for supremacy in the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution, with the adoption in 2023 of the National Strategy for Data and AI (NSDAI), and in May 2025 launching Humain, a Public Investment Fund (PIF)-owned company that will be a comprehensive AI solutions provider (Malin, 2025, May 12).

However, the Kingdom has not yet established anything comparable to the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI), the world's first AI postgraduate research university, which opened in Abu Dhabi in 2019.

Moreover, although the new Universities Bylaw of 2019 allows Saudi universities to expand regionally and internationally by setting up branches abroad, no Saudi university has disclosed plans to open a foreign branch as yet.

At present (2026), the definition of "multi-option education and training model" (Pavan, 2023) for higher education in Saudi Arabia (Saudi colleges-universities; internal and external scholarship programs; foreign campuses in Saudi Arabia) still holds good.

Saudi Arabia's new strategy for its higher education policies is based on a threefold use of soft power: cultural diplomacy (new scholarship programs; cultural agreements; foreign campuses on Saudi soil); knowledge diplomacy (expanded educational partnerships); and academic diplomacy (agreements with foreign universities, recently Chinese for the most part).

And to face the uncertainty accompanying global changes, Saudi Arabia is hedging its bets where higher education policies are concerned: on the one hand, using cultural diplomacy at home, and consequently reversing the tradition of promoting the country's image through a scholarship program that has now become too expensive; and on the other, trusting in current and future Sino-Saudi educational exchanges — which incorporate all three aspects of the use of soft power in higher education settings — to navigate the times of uncertainty we are witnessing.

Knowledge diplomacy, in particular, could have a strategic role, albeit both countries would need to play their hand wisely and skilfully, as the adoption of knowledge diplomacy involves a major challenge, given that it “does not mean zero pursuit of self-interest, but requires wisdom to find a common ground of mutual interests and to achieve a win-win situation for all” (Liu et al., 2025, p.193).

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