

The Development of King Saud University in the Twentieth Century (A historical perspective)

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to explore the most important events that led to the development of King Saud University in the twentieth century. The study used a historical approach, as appropriate to the objectives and research question. The most important findings are as follows: King Saud University was founded in 1957 as the first modern university in the Kingdom. Its name was changed to "University of Riyadh" in 1964, before being renamed "King Saud University" in 1982. In its early years, the Egyptian scholar Dr. Abdul Wahab Azzam assumed the position of the university's first president. In the same year, the College of Arts was established as the first college, comprising four departments: Arabic Language, English Language, History, and Geography. The initial nucleus of the faculty consisted primarily of non-Saudi professors from sister Arab countries, given the recent university experience and the scarcity of qualified national talent at the time. The first four years of study were limited to male students, followed by female students in higher education in 1961. The university has welcomed international students since its first year. The first accepted class in 1957 included three international students compared to eighteen local students. As the academic structure consolidated and the colleges expanded, graduate programs began in the early 1970s, ushering in a new phase of academic and research development that strengthened the university's standing at the national and regional levels.

Keywords: Higher education in Saudi Arabia, development of education in Saudi Arabia, King Saud University, history of higher education in Saudi Arabia.



Introduction:

By the end of 2024, Saudi universities had achieved an unprecedented milestone, with twelve higher education institutions ranked among the top 1,000 universities worldwide. These include: King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, King Khalid University, Taif University, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, Qassim University, Umm Al-Qura University, King Faisal University, and Jazan University. This remarkable progress reflects the maturity and strength of Saudi higher education, particularly the sustained excellence of public universities (Council of Universities' Affairs, 2025; Shanghai ranking, 2025).

Historically, higher education in Saudi Arabia began in 1949 with the establishment of the College of Sharia in Mecca, followed by the founding of several other colleges. In 1957, the Kingdom established its first university in the capital, Riyadh — King Saud University — marking a foundational turning point in the evolution of higher education in the country (Al-Dawoud, 2008; Al-Salman, 1999; Al-Zahrani, 2006). It is noteworthy that the Saudi government has been the primary initiator in establishing and managing higher education institutions; universities were originally public entities, and the private sector did not enter this field until more than four decades after the establishment of public universities (Al-Ghamdi, 2015). Today, the highest-ranked Saudi universities remain predominantly public institutions.

King Saud University has been ranked first among Saudi and Arab universities in the 2024 Shanghai Ranking (ARWU) (Council of Universities' Affairs, 2025; Shanghai ranking, 2025). The university's ambitious development plans align closely with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, aiming to strengthen its global competitiveness in the coming years (King Saud University, 2025). Accordingly, this study seeks to document the major historical milestones that accompanied King Saud University from its establishment in 1957 until the end of the twentieth century (1999), and to analyze how these key moments have shaped its academic identity and its national and regional standing.

Statement of the Problem

Although higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia were formally established in 1949—following an earlier phase during which Saudi students were sent on scholarships to study in Egypt, Lebanon, Italy, and the United States—and despite the expansion of the system to more than 32 universities and over 50 university colleges, scholarly documentation and historical research in this area remain limited (Albeshir, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2003; Council of Universities' Affairs, 2025). Based on the researchers' review, only a small number of peer-reviewed studies have addressed the development and history of King Saud University, the oldest and most prominent University in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf. Accordingly, the problem of this study lies in the knowledge gap represented by the scarcity of documentary and historical literature on the university's evolution. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by providing a historical and analytical documentation of the trajectory of



King Saud University and by contributing to the broader academic literature on the development of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Study Objectives :

This study aims to explore the institutional and academic development of King Saud University during the period from 1957 to 1999, through the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the development of colleges at King Saud University from its establishment in 1957 until 1999, and to analyze the stages of their academic expansion.
2. To identify the presidents of King Saud University during this period and study the impact of their leadership on the university's academic and administrative progress.
3. To analyze the methods of preparing and developing faculty members at King Saud University during the same period, focusing on scholarship policies, academic qualifications, and diversity of academic backgrounds.
4. To study the development of academic programs at the university and to highlight the influence of international models—particularly the American model of higher education—on program design and structure.
5. To trace the development of local students' enrollment at King Saud University during the specified period and to analyze the related social and educational trends.
6. To identify the stages of women's education development at the university and to examine the historical progress of female participation in higher education.
7. To document the development of international student enrollment at King Saud University between 1957 and 1999, and to analyze changes in admission policies and academic support programs for international students.

Study question:

How did the institutional growth, leadership changes, and enrollment trends at King Saud University from 1957 to 1999 shape its academic identity and enhance its national and regional standing?

Study Methodology:

The researcher adopted the historical approach because it aligns with the study's objectives and central question. This approach was achieved by tracing and documenting facts and analyzing their temporal contexts. This approach was based on primary sources (administrative documents, university regulations, annual reports, speeches, and newspapers) and secondary sources (relevant studies and books), with comparison, verification, and triangulation to enhance credibility (Aziz, & Hamid, 2021).



Significance of the Study

This research is significant because, as noted by the researchers, there is a lack of peer-reviewed, published studies on the history of King Saud University. It aims to fill a gap in Arabic literature by providing valuable documented material that enriches the Arabic library. This work will benefit not only researchers but also those interested in the history of higher education and policymakers. Additionally, it contributes to preserving the memory of the university and enhances the understanding of its development over time.

Result:

A- Colleges:

Since the university's launch in 1957, successive waves of colleges have been established. The founding phase began with the College of Arts (1377 AH/1957 AD) as the primary lever for the humanities, followed by the College of Science (1378 AH/1958 AD) to consolidate the scientific knowledge structure. The system then rapidly expanded with the launch of the College of Business Administration (1379 AH/1959 AD) and the College of Pharmacy (1379 AH/1959 AD) in response to the needs of the economy and the emerging health sector. With the College of Engineering (1382 AH/1962 AD), the university entered the field of building national technical capabilities. It then strengthened its connection to food security and applied research with the establishment of the College of Food and Agricultural Sciences (1386 AH/1966 AD). The following year, two basic components of the development triangle were completed: the College of Education (1387 AH/1967 AD) to build human capital in general education, and the College of Medicine (1387 AH/1967 AD) to empower the health system.

By the early 1970s, the university had become more open to serving both the local and international communities. The Arabic Language Institute for Non-Native Speakers was established (1394 AH/1974 AD) as a global cultural and linguistic arm, followed by the College of Dentistry (1395 AH/1975 AD) to complement the health sciences system. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, signs of urban and digital transformation emerged with the establishment of the College of Computer and Information Sciences (1404 AH/1983 AD) and the College of Architecture and Planning (1404 AH/1983 AD), enabling the university to play a greater role in technological transformation and urban planning. This was followed by the College of Languages and Translation (1415 AH/1994 AD), which strengthened the university's bridges with the world (King Saud University, 1994;2006) .

B- Faculty members:

In the early years following the establishment of King Saud University's colleges, the university faced a limited availability of qualified national faculty. Colleges such as Science, Business Administration, Engineering, Medicine, Dentistry, Education, and Arts were among the first academic institutions in the Kingdom. The number of Bachelor's degree holders was insufficient even to fill teaching assistant positions. Consequently, the university's early faculty members were primarily recruited from

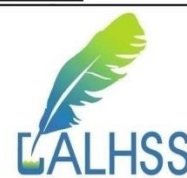


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neighboring Arab countries, particularly Egypt—then a regional leader in higher education—along with professors from Palestine, Iraq, and Syria. The adoption of Arabic as the official language of instruction in most disciplines (except medical fields, which used English) further supported this approach. As the first cohorts of students graduated, the university selected the most outstanding among them for academic positions and sent them abroad to pursue graduate studies, primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom. Over time, most faculty members obtained their master's and doctoral degrees from American universities, which positively influenced the development of the university's academic programs. Consequently, King Saud University adopted many features of the American philosophy of higher education, both in program design and in the graduation requirements for undergraduate and graduate levels (Albeshir, 2022; Al-Dawoud, 2008; Al-Salman, 1999; Al-Zahrani, 2006; King Saud University, 1987).

C-Administration:

Since its inception, King Saud University has been shaped by a series of prominent leaders. The journey began with Dr. Abdul Wahab Azzam, an Egyptian scholar who founded and led the University from April 14, 1957, to January 17, 1959. Azzam brought extensive academic and diplomatic experience from Egypt, London, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, instilling the university with its original academic spirit before he passed away in January 1959. King Fahd bin Abdulaziz, who was the Minister of Education at the time, mourned Dr. Azzam, stating, "Our loss in losing the scholar Dr. Abdul Wahab Azzam, the first director of our university, is more devastating than the loss of his family and his country, Egypt. We are the ones who are grieved by his passing, and there is no power or strength except with God." (King Saud University, 1987; 1999; 2025)

Following Dr. Azzam, Sheikh Nasser Al-Manqour became the first Saudi director of the university, serving from January 21, 1959, to December 21, 1960. Al-Manqour rose through the ranks in education and administration, eventually becoming Director General of Education at the Ministry of Education. He led the university during a transitional period and later took on several ministerial and diplomatic roles, leaving a significant administrative legacy. In the early 1970s, Dr. Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Fada served as the university's president from 1971 until January 4, 1979. Before his presidency, he was the Dean of the College of Education, making him the only Dean from that college to assume the presidency. Dr. Al-Fada continued the planning for the new university campus to accommodate the growing student body. During his tenure, the university celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 1974. He also initiated the tradition of scientific conferences and seminars, laying the groundwork for the university's research-focused identity. Next came Dr. Mansour bin Ibrahim Al-Turki, who served from October 28, 1979, to March 9, 1990. This era was marked by significant construction and expansion, including the development of new headquarters, colleges, laboratories, and libraries. The university welcomed a large number of scholarship students and introduced new departments and specializations to

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meet contemporary needs. Dr. Al-Turki's tenure also saw the celebration of the university's twenty-fifth anniversary under the patronage of King Khalid bin Abdulaziz. During this event, the historical name "King Saud University" was restored, affirming its original identity. Dr. Ahmed bin Mohammed Al-Dhubaib took over the presidency from March 10, 1990, to July 29, 1995. He addressed the overlap between the faculties of arts and sciences and education, established the College of Languages, and continued to promote academic activities despite various challenges. Al-Dhubaib's career included significant academic experience in Mecca, Medina, Cairo, and Leeds, culminating in his roles at King Saud University, where he progressed from professor to deputy for postgraduate studies and scientific research. Institutional expansion continued during the leadership of Dr. Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Faisal, who served as the president of the University from July 30, 1995) until March 21, 2007. During this time, the university saw the establishment of several important institutions, including the King Abdullah Institute for Research and Consulting Studies, the King Fahd Cardiac Center, the Deanship of Scientific Research, the Documentation Center, and the University Property Management Department. Additionally, new colleges, graduate programs, and medical fellowships were introduced. At the national level, the Qassim branch was transformed into Qassim University, and King Khalid University was established by merging the Abha branch with the Imam University branch. (King Saud University, 1987;2025)

D- Students:

King Saud University was established in 1957 in Riyadh. King Saud University began accepting its first batch of students in 1957/1958. The first batch consisted of 21 students, all male. In 1961, the first batch graduated, consisting of 15 students, including two international students. The first batch graduated from the History and Geography departments. The following students graduated from the History Department in the first batch of the University: Abdullah Aqeel Angawi, Muhammad Saeed Al-Siddiqi, Ahmed Abdullah Khudairi, Saleh Badr Al-Haidari, Abdul Rahman Hijazi, Abdullah Al-Hajj Nasri, Ali Hassan Bashir, and Ahmed Tayeb Abdul Raouf. Seven students graduated from the Geography Department in the first batch of the university. The following students are involved: Ibrahim Faris Khoja, Hussein Hamza Bandakji, Khaled Abdul Aziz Babtain, Muhammad Asad Allah, Hussein Muhyiddin Ilam, Muhammad Saber Buqabas, and Abdul Halim Buqas (King Saud University, 1987).

In 1961/1962, female students were accepted for the first time at the university, with four students. In 1965, the first female student, Fatima Mandili, graduated from the university with an excellent grade in the English Department. Mandili worked as a teaching assistant at the university, where she was sent on a scholarship to complete her postgraduate studies. She was the first female student on a scholarship to return with a doctorate, which she obtained in 1977 from Cairo University. The title of her doctoral dissertation was: The Conflict between Myth and Reality: A Study of the Heroines of the Play by John Millington Synge (King Saud University, 1987).



A table showing the development of the number of university students in the twentieth century at the undergraduate level (King Saud University, 2006).

academic year	Number of female students	Total number of enrolled students
1957/1958	nothing	21
1961/1962	4	783
1965/1966	89	1349
1970/1971	219	2889
1975/1976	1180	7546
1980/1981	2920	14096
1985/1986	6402	26326
1990/1991	11028	30195
1995/1996	12772	39148
1999/2000	17326	47017

Graduate students:

In the academic year 1973/1974, King Saud University began offering graduate programs. The Master's program was open to Saudi students only. In the first year of the Master's program, only two male local students were enrolled. In the second year of the Master's program, the enrollment rose to 30 students, with only one being a female student. Female students were accepted to study at the Master's level in 1974/1975. The number of Master's students then increased until it reached 2,392 in 1999/2000. In 1978, the first student to receive a master's degree from the University was Ahmed Omar Al-Zayla'i. He obtained a master's degree in history from the College of Arts. The title of his thesis was: Mecca and its Foreign Relations from 301-487 AH. Al-Zayla'i worked as a professor at King Saud University, specializing in history and archaeology, and also worked in the Shura Council. At the end of 1978, Noura Saleh Al-Shamlan became the first woman to receive a master's degree from King Saud University. Her thesis was titled "Abu Dhuayb Al-Hudhali: His Life and Poetry." She earned her Master's degree from the Department of Arabic Language in the College of Arts.



Al-Shamlan worked as a professor of classical Arabic literature and criticism at King Saud University (King Saud University, 1987). Graduate programs at King Saud University continued for six years exclusively for Saudi students. In the seventh year of the University's Master's programs, the first group of international students was accepted in the academic year 1979/1980. Fifty international students were accepted at the Master's level that year, including nine female students. The total number of students enrolled that year was 227. Doctoral programs were launched at King Saud University in the 1980s, but international students were not accepted into the doctoral program until 1999/2000 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2000). In 1987, student Muhammad Batel Al-Harbi obtained a doctorate in the Arabic Language Department at the College of Arts. The title of his thesis was: Poetic Witness in Arabic Grammar: A Documentary Study. Al-Harbi worked as a professor at King Saud University in the College of Arts before his death. (King Saud University, 1999) .

A table showing the development of the number of students enrolled in the Master's stage at King Saud University.

Academic year	Number of females	Total number of Master's students
1973/1974	0	2
1974/1975	1	30
1979/1980	58	227
1985/1986	155	543
1990/1991	312	1075
1995/1996	560	1725
1999/2000	826	2392

International students at King Saud University

King Saud University first accepted students in 1957/1958. The number of enrolled students was 21, all males studying in the College of Arts, which is the oldest college in terms of establishment. The students were studying history and geography. Three non-Saudi students were present among the first batch of the University (King Saud University, 1987). In the second academic year of the university, the number of enrolled students rose to 64, all male. In the third academic year of the university, the number of enrolled students increased significantly, rising from 64 to 211, including 31 international students. The fourth academic year, 1960/1961, saw a significant

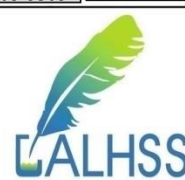


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increase in both local and international students, with the total number reaching 541, including 151 non-Saudi students. This year, the first class of 15 students graduated from the university, specializing in history and geography, including two international students. The two international students who graduated in the first class were studying history. They were from Malawi, a country in East Africa that was under British occupation at the time. According to the source, 15 students from the Faculty of Arts, specifically in the History and Geography departments, succeeded. They represent the first batch of university graduates in 1961. Seven students graduated from the Geography Department, all of them citizens.

In comparison, eight students graduated from the History Department in that academic year, two of whom were from the Republic of Malawi. The first international student, Abdullah Al-Haj Nasri, obtained a bachelor's degree in history with a good GPA and was ranked sixth out of eight among his classmates. The second student, Ahmed Tayeb Abdel Raouf, obtained the same academic degree mentioned above, with an acceptable GPA, and was ranked last among his classmates.

The fifth academic year of King Saud University witnessed a significant historical event in the history of Saudi women, as it was the first time that women were accepted into higher education institutions. The number of female students in the first batch was nearly four, and this was in the academic year 1961/1962. All the female students were Saudi citizens. The total number of students in that year was 783, including 111 international students. In the sixth year of the university's life, female international students were accepted for the first time in 1962. The total number of female students in that year was 20, including 12 international students. The percentage of international female students was greater than that of national female students at that historical stage. This is an important point that clarifies the extent of the scientific renaissance of Saudi women, who currently occupy most of the higher education seats in Saudi Arabia. The number of enrolled students in 1962/1963 reached 985 students, including 162 international students. In the academic year 1963/1964, the number of enrolled students reached 1,032, including 207 international students. In the following year, the total number of students was 1,194, including 248 international students. In the ninth academic year of the university, specifically in 1965/1966, the total number of students reached 1,349, including 275 International students. In the tenth year of the university, specifically in 1966/1967, the total number of students reached 1,351, including 114 female students. The number of international students in the tenth year of the university's history was 296 (King Saud University, 1999).

It is noted that in the first ten years of the university's existence, the representation of non-citizen students increased compared to citizens. In the first year of the university in 1957, the percentage of international students was about 15%. By the fifth year in 1962, this percentage had decreased to 14% of the total number of students enrolled. It is also noted that the percentage of international students at King Saud University has increased over time, with approximately 22% of the total in the academic year 1966/1967 (King Saud University, 1999).



The second phase from 1967-1976:

This period witnessed a change in the name of the University from King Saud University to Riyadh University for several reasons. Then, the name of the university was returned to its old name, King Saud University, in the early 1980s. The second decade of King Saud University's history witnessed a significant increase in the number of international students, both male and female. The number of international students in the academic year 1967/1968 reached 392, compared to 296 in the previous year. The total number of students this year reached 1,819 (Al-Zahrani, 2008), King Saud University, 1987. In the year 1968, the total number of students at the university reached 2,185 students, including 534 international students. In the third year of this decade, the total number of students reached 2,889, including 587 non-Saudi students. At the beginning of the last century, the total number of students at the university was 3,598, including 259 female students and the rest male. The number of international students reached 687.

In 1971, the number of students enrolled at the university was 3,753, including 729 international students. The following year, the number of international students at this university was 818, while the total student body was 4,238. In the academic year 1973/1974, the number of students reached 5,563, including 983 international students. The following year, the number of university students exceeded the six-thousand mark for the first time in the university's history, as the total number of enrolled students reached 6,586 students. The year 1974 also witnessed the number of international students exceeding the one thousand mark, with a total of 1,105 students. In the mid-seventies, the number of students at King Saud University reached 7,546 students, including 1,340 non-local students. In the twentieth academic year, specifically in 1976/1977, the number of international students reached 1,352, while the total number of students was 7,934. What is noticeable in the second decade of King Saud University is the increase in the number of international students from 392 in 1967 to more than 1,352 in 1976. Despite the steady increase in the number of international students, the proportion of international students compared to Saudi students began to decline gradually. In 1967, the proportion of international students was 21.5% of the total student body. In 1973, the proportion decreased to about 19%, and by 1976, it reached 17% when comparing the number of international students to the total undergraduate enrollment at King Saud University. It is noteworthy that postgraduate studies began at the university in the academic year 1973/1974. Initially, only citizens were accepted, and international students were not admitted until the late seventies, specifically in the academic year 1979/1980, when 50 international students applied. To study for a master's degree.

The third stage from 1977 to 1987:

The third decade of King Saud University's history is considered the golden decade for international students in the twentieth century. In 1977, the number of undergraduate students reached 10,000, the first year in the university's history. The number of female students reached 2,110, compared to 1,388 the previous year. The

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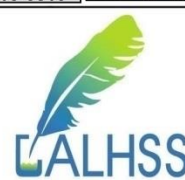


total number of international students was 1,795 non-Saudi students. The following year, the number of international students exceeded the two-thousand mark, with non-Saudi students reaching 2,128, while the total number of male students was 12,363 (King Saud University, 1999). In 1979, the total number of students was 13,007, with 2,181 international students, including 451 non-local students. In 1980, the number of undergraduate students at the university exceeded 14 million. A thousand students, and the number of international students was 2,290. The following year, the number of non-Saudi students reached 2,712 students, compared to a total of 16,486 students at the undergraduate level in the US. In 1982, the number of undergraduate students in the US exceeded 19,000, including 3,620 non-Saudi students. In the academic year 1983/1984, the number of students enrolled in the undergraduate level at the US exceeded the twenty thousand mark for the first time in the university's history, as the total number of students in this level was 20,404 students, including 5,453 female students, while the number of international students was 3,626. In 1984, the number of international students exceeded the four thousand mark, reaching 4,562, while the total number of Bachelor's degree students was 24,369. The following year, the total number of undergraduate students in the USA was 26,324, of whom 4,985 were international students. The university witnessed a historic event in 1986, when the number of undergraduate students in the USA exceeded thirty thousand, and the number of international students reached 5,919.

The number of students, including both male and female local and international students, continued its rapid rise in the third decade of the university's existence. In the academic year 1987/1988, the number of international students at King Saud University reached its peak, with 5,952 enrolled —the most significant number at the undergraduate level in the university's nearly seventy-year history. The total number of students at this level was 32,762, including 10,016 female students. It is noticeable that in the third decade of King Saud University's existence, the number of students of all categories, including female students, increased rapidly. There was also an increase in the number of international students in this decade. The number of national students rose to 5,95, marking the highest number of graduate students in the university's history until 2024. The percentage of international undergraduate students compared to Saudi students remained stable between 1977 and 1987, with the percentage of international students compared to Saudi students at the undergraduate level ranging between 17-18 % for all years of the third decade of the university's history, which is the oldest university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The fourth stage from 1988 to 1999 :

This period witnessed many economic and political challenges in the Gulf region, most notably the Second Gulf War and its negative impact on countries like Saudi Arabia. In recent years, there has been a significant decline in the number of international students at higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia in general and at King Saud University in particular. Since the academic year 1988/1989, the number of international students at King Saud University has been declining at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The decline included both male and female



international students. The number of international students peaked in 1987, when it reached 6,147 students. This number includes undergraduate and Master's students, as international students had not yet enrolled in doctoral programs (King Saud University, 1999). In 1988, the total number of international undergraduate students in the US was 5,109, compared to 5,952 the previous year. In 1989, the number of international students continued to decline rapidly, with 4,117 international undergraduate students and 31,080 enrolled at this level.

In 1990, the year of the Second Gulf War, the total number of international students reached 30,195, compared to 3,293 in the previous year. The following year, the number of international students decreased to more than a thousand, dropping to 2,129. Compared to the total number of students at this stage, it was 28,721 students. In 1992, the number of undergraduate students at King Saud University was 28,372, including 1,468 international students. In 1993, a significant event occurred in the history of international students and King Saud University, as the number of international students at the undergraduate level fell to less than 1,000. This was the first time in nearly two decades, as the number of international students had not fallen below 1,000 learners at the undergraduate level at the university since 1974. This year, the total number of international students at the undergraduate level was 955, while the total number of university students exceeded thirty thousand. The number of students enrolled at the undergraduate level in the USA reached 30,109 students. In 1994, the number of students enrolled was 34,600, while the number of international students was 570. The following year, the number of international students continued its rapid decline, with only 301 students enrolled in the undergraduate level in the USA compared to more than 39,000 local students that year. In 1996, the number of international students enrolled in the USA was only 221; this was less than in 1966, when the number was approximately 296 students. In this academic year, the number of students enrolled in the undergraduate stage at US surpassed the forty-thousand-student barrier for the first time, with a total of 44,093 students. In 1998, the total number of undergraduate students enrolled at King Saud University was 48,665, while the number of international students was 251. At the end of the twentieth century, specifically in 1999, the number of international students reached 491, while the number of students enrolled at this level was 47,017.

It is noteworthy that during the years extending from 1988 to 1999, the number of undergraduate students at the university increased from 31,080 students in 1988 to 47,017 students in 1999. The number of female students at the university increased from 10,416 in 1988 to 17,326 in 1999. However, in recent years, there has been a significant decline in the numbers and percentages of international students at King Saud University. The number of international students at the undergraduate level at the university was 5,109, but by 1999, this number had decreased to only 491. The decline in the number of international students coincided with their representation in the overall undergraduate population. In 1988, the proportion of international students at the undergraduate level was 16.4% of the total number of students enrolled at the university, while the proportion declined sharply after that. For example, in 1993, the



proportion of international students at the undergraduate level at the university was only 3% of the total number of enrolled students, while the proportion of international students at the undergraduate level at the university was only 1% of the total number of enrolled students in 1999, which is the lowest proportion of international students since the university was founded in 1957.

The reality of international students at King Saud University in postgraduate studies, between 1979 and 1999

Graduate programs at King Saud University, specifically the Master's program, were launched in the 1973/1974 academic year, with only two Saudi male students accepted into the first year of graduate studies at the University of Riyadh (now King Saud University) (Statistical Book, 1975). In 1978, Ahmed Omar Al-Zayla'i became the first student to earn a master's degree from King Saud University, completing his thesis titled "Makkah and its Foreign Relations from 301 to 487 AH." He later served as a professor of history and archaeology at the university and was a member of the Shura Council for several terms.

In the same year, 1973, Saudi female students were allowed to enroll in graduate programs. The first female student to obtain a master's degree from the University was Noura Al-Shamlan in 1978, whose thesis was titled "Abu Dhuayb Al-Hudhali: His Life and Poetry." Al-Shamlan later earned a Master of Arts degree in Arabic Language from King Saud University in 1999. The first doctoral degree awarded by the university was to Muhammad bin Batel Al-Harbi in 1987, for his thesis titled "Poetic Evidence in Arabic Grammar - An Applied Documentary Study." Al-Harbi, who passed away in 2020, worked as a professor in the Department of Arabic Language at King Saud University (Al-Shamsan, 2020).

Although graduate programs at King Saud University started in 1973, international students were not accepted into Master's programs until the 1979/1980 academic year. International students were first admitted into doctoral programs in 1999, as reported by the University and the Saudi Ministry of Education. In 1999, one international student enrolled in a doctoral program at King Saud University (Ministry of Higher Education, 2000).

In 1979, 50 international students were enrolled in Master's programs, including nine females, out of a total of 227 students (King Saud University, 1999). By 1980, the number of international students in the Master's program had increased to 118, and the following year, it reached 151. In 1982, the total number of students at King Saud University was 567, with 144 of them being international students. In 1983, there were 479 students enrolled in the program, including 119 international students. The following two years saw the number of international students rise to 129. In 1986, there were 140 international students enrolled, and the total student count reached 603.



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The 1987/1988 academic year marked the highest number of international students ever enrolled in the Master's program in the university's history, with 195 international students and a total of 825 enrolled students. However, in the 1988/1989 academic year, the number of international graduate students began to decline rapidly, with 182 students enrolled at the university, followed by 138 the next year. In 1990, during the Second Gulf War, King Saud University had a total of 1,075 Master's degree students, including 112 international students. A significant change occurred in 1991 when the number of international graduate students fell below 100 for the first time since 1980, when there had only been 77 international students. Despite an overall increase in the number of local students in the graduate programs, the number of international students continued to decline. In 1992, there were 1,124 students enrolled in graduate programs, of whom 65 were international students. The following year saw only 34 international students out of a total of 1,256 enrolled students. In 1994, there were just 24 international students compared to 1,368 local students. In 1995, this number dropped to 21, then to only 10 the following year.

By 1997, a total of 2,085 students were enrolled in Master's programs, but only eight were international students. In 1998, there were just seven international students among 2,170 total students in the Master's program. However, 1999 marked a historic event when the first international student (a female) was accepted into the doctoral program. In the academic year 1999/2000, there were 28 international students, 21 of whom were male, while the overall enrollment in the Master's program reached 2,392. Notably, the number of international students at the Master's level increased during the initial nine years after the programs started, followed by a sharp decline. From 1979 to 1987, the enrollment of international students rose significantly, from 50 in 1979 to 195 in 1987.

The reality of international female students at King Saud University between 1962 and 1999.

King Saud University began admitting Saudi female students in the academic year 1961/1962, enrolling four compared to 779 male students. Initially, only Bachelor's degrees were offered, with graduate programs introduced in the 1970s. International students were allowed in Master's programs by the late 1970s and in doctoral programs by the end of the 20th century, with male international students consistently outnumbering female students. In 1962, the university welcomed international students, admitting 12 female students among 162 males, representing 7.4% of total international enrollments. During the first five years of admitting international female students, the number of international female students exceeded that of Saudi female students. For example, in 1964, there were 47 international female students compared to 33 local students, highlighting an initial lack of interest among Saudi females in higher education due to cultural resistance to formal schooling. The number of international students steadily increased over the first two decades. From 12 in 1962, the count grew to 102 by 1970, doubling to 200 by 1973, and reaching 372 in 1976. By 1978, there were 451 non-Saudi female students, or more than 22% of the total



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international student body, compared to 1,635 male international students (King Saud University, 1987).

In 1979, King Saud University began admitting international students to its Master's program, with female international students in Bachelor's programs making up the majority of enrollments. Notably, the university was briefly renamed Riyadh University during King Faisal's reign before reverting to King Saud University under King Khalid (Al-Salman, 1999; Al-Zahrani, 2008). This overview focuses on the enrollment of international female undergraduate students from 1979 to 1999, as well as their representation at the Master's level. The number of international female undergraduates rose significantly from 451 in 1979 to 2,155 in 1987, marking a peak during that century. In 1979, international female students constituted 21% of all international students. By 1983, the female enrollment crossed 1,000, representing over 28% of international students, and increased to 1,674 by 1985. However, this upward trend reversed in 1988, leading to a decline in international female students. Their numbers fell to 1,886 in 1989, dropped below 1,000 by 1991, and reached just 272 by 1999. Despite the overall decline, the proportion of international female students increased. In 1996, they surpassed male students for the first time, making up 57% of the international student body. By 1999, 55% of all non-Saudi undergraduate students were female (King Saud University, 1999). Over the decades, international female students often outnumbered Saudi females until 1967, when Saudi enrollments began to exceed those of international students. In 1962, 60% of female students were international, but this percentage steadily declined to just 21% by 1982. The largest number of international female undergraduate students at King Saud University occurred in 1988.

The reality of international female students in graduate studies from 1979 to 1999:

In 1979, King Saud University welcomed its first international female students in Master's programs. By 1999, the first international female doctoral student was enrolled at King Saud University (King Saud University, 1999). This study focuses on female students at the Master's level, excluding those in higher diploma programs, and examines international female enrollment in Master's programs from 1979 to 1999. Initially, there were only nine such students in 1979, with a peak of 64 in the 1988/1989 academic year. However, this number drastically declined in the 1990s, falling to just two students by 1996, as the doctoral level remained unavailable for university students. Throughout this period, non-Saudi male graduate students consistently outnumbered female students. In contrast, Saudi female students surpassed their non-Saudi counterparts in all years except during the first five years of female admissions at the undergraduate level.

In 1979, international female Master's students made up about 18% of the total international enrollment. By 1980, this number increased to 34, while international male students numbered 84. In 1986, female students from other countries represented 23% of all international students at the graduate level. Despite the peak of 64 international female students in 1988, their numbers declined sharply after 1989. In 1991, there were 30 international females, constituting 39% of non-Saudi students,



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but by 1996, enrollment dropped to just two. By 1999, 29 international graduate students were enrolled, including eight females. In comparison to Saudi female students, international female students comprised 16% of all female Master's students in 1979. In 1988, this figure increased to 24% with 64 international students, but dropped to just 14% in 1993, highlighting a decline in their proportion relative to Saudi female students.

Conclusion:

Between 1957 and 1999, King Saud University (KSU) underwent a transformative evolution that shaped its academic identity and elevated its status as a leading institution nationally and regionally. This transformation can be understood through three interconnected dimensions: institutional expansion, leadership transitions, and enrollment dynamics.

1. Institutional Expansions: Building a Comprehensive Academic Framework

Since its establishment in 1957 as the first University in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region, KSU expanded from a single college—the College of Arts—into a comprehensive university offering diverse disciplines in the humanities, sciences, health, engineering, and applied fields.

1. In the 1960s, the founding of the Colleges of Science (1958), Business Administration (1959), and Pharmacy (1959) laid the foundations for multidisciplinary education.

2. The 1970s and 1980s marked rapid growth, with the creation of colleges such as Engineering (1962), Medicine (1967), Computer and Information Sciences (1983), and Architecture and Planning (1983).

3. This diversification aligned with national priorities in industrialization, healthcare, and education, establishing KSU as a cornerstone for human capital development in the Kingdom.

The university also expanded its research and service units, including the King Abdullah Institute for Research and Consulting Studies, which enhanced its applied research mission and strengthened its link with national development goals.

2. Leadership Transitions: Strategic Vision and Institutional Continuity

KSU's leadership played a central role in shaping its academic ethos and strategic direction. Each president left a distinct imprint:

1. Dr. Abdul Wahab Azzam (1957–1959) established KSU's academic foundation and international character.

2. Sheikh Nasser Al-Manqour (1959–1960) localized governance, ushering in Saudi academic leadership.

3. Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Fada (1971–1979) promoted research culture and campus planning during the expansion of higher education.

4. Dr. Mansour Al-Turki (1979–1990) oversaw major infrastructure and programmatic growth.

5. Dr. Abdullah Al-Faisal (1995–2007) advanced institutional modernization through the establishment of research centers and specialized deanships.



Collectively, these transitions reflected the university's shift from a small national institution to a large, research-oriented university, deeply embedded in Saudi Arabia's modernization and educational reforms.

3. Enrollment Dynamics: Gender Inclusion and Internationalization

The evolution of student enrollment between 1957 and 1999 mirrored broader social and policy transformations:

1. Initial cohorts (1957–1960) were exclusively male, but by 1961/1962, female students were admitted—an important milestone in women's education.
2. International students were part of KSU's identity from its inception, representing up to 22% of total enrollment in the 1960s–1980s. This positioned the university as a regional hub for Arab and Muslim students.
3. Graduate programs were introduced in the 1970s, and by the late 1980s, KSU had become a major center for postgraduate education, awarding master's and doctoral degrees that contributed to national academic and professional capacity.
4. Although the 1990s saw a decline in international student numbers—partly due to geopolitical factors such as the Gulf War—the period also witnessed a surge in female enrollment, reflecting the growing role of Saudi women in higher education.

4. Academic Identity and Regional Standing

By the end of the twentieth century, these combined developments had crystallized a distinctive academic identity for King Saud University, characterized by:

1. Pioneering status as the first Saudi and Gulf university.
2. Comprehensive academic scope, integrating liberal arts, science, and professional disciplines.
3. Commitment to research and national development aligns closely with state modernization efforts.
4. Regional influence, as KSU became a model for subsequent university establishments across the Arab world.

Through its sustained institutional growth, visionary leadership, and inclusive enrollment policies, King Saud University evolved from a small, state-initiated institution into a national symbol of academic excellence and a regional benchmark for higher education development.

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