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U.S. Universities Join Saudis in Partnerships

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Three prominent American universities — the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California, Berkeley, and [Stanford University](#) — are starting five-year partnerships, worth \$25 million or more, with King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a graduate-level research university being built in [Saudi Arabia](#).

Under the agreements, the mechanical engineering department at Berkeley, the computer-science department and Institute for Computational and Mathematical Engineering at Stanford, and the Institute for Computational Engineering and Sciences at the [University of Texas](#) will help pick the faculty and develop the curriculum for the new university, known by the acronym Kaust, which is scheduled to open next year with a \$10 billion endowment.

Over the five years, each university will receive a \$10 million gift, \$10 million for research on their home campus and \$5 million for research at Kaust, as well as administrative costs.

“The agreement will allow us to improve our facilities here in California, and fund a stream of graduate students, without taxing our existing infrastructure,” said Albert Pisano, the chairman of Berkeley’s mechanical engineering department, which he said had voted 34 to 2 to proceed with the agreement. “We’re going to work on projects that are good for the Middle East and for California, like energy sources beyond petroleum, improved water desalination, and [solar energy](#) in the desert.”

Despite its enormous oil wealth, Saudi Arabia lacks world-class research universities. In the last few years, as the Persian Gulf nations have begun to worry about the eventual need to convert from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, they have started offering lavish inducements to American universities to bring their expertise to the region.

Although men and women will be able to mingle freely at the new university, faculty members at the American institutions said they were concerned about the possible pitfalls of working in a society where women cannot drive, gay rights do not exist and Israelis are not welcome.

The agreements do contain an exit clause. “We have a 30-day cancellation provision, allowing us to leave the agreement with no penalty if at any time we are dissatisfied,” Dr. Pisano said.

University officials said they had addressed the issues of academic and personal freedom head-on.

“We are working with a university that has guaranteed nondiscrimination on the basis of race, religion or gender,” said Peter Glynn, director of the Stanford institute. “We recognize that this university operates in Saudi Arabia. Having said that, this university recognizes that if it wants to be world-class, it has to be able to freely attract the best students and faculty from around the world.”

He acknowledged that the issue could be sticky. “We have several Israeli faculty involved with this, but to be honest, there’s very little of what Stanford will be doing that will involve travel to Saudi Arabia,” he said. He added that Stanford’s main role would be devising the curriculum and recruiting initial faculty members, from around the world. “We believe this university can have a major impact in Saudi Arabia and in the region, and that’s why we’re doing this.”

Kaust has already announced partnerships with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts, the Institut Français du Pétrole, the National University of Singapore, the [American University of Cairo](#), the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and others.

