

Berkeley and Stanford Sign Deals With New Saudi University, Despite Some Professors' Misgivings

By [KARIN FISCHER](#)

King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, the ambitious \$10-billion research institution that Saudi Arabia plans to open in 2009, announced on Tuesday that it had signed agreements with Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley to help it design an academic curriculum and hire faculty members.

The agreements are the first of several such deals with foreign colleges anticipated in the coming weeks.

Under the arrangements, the two American universities will each receive \$10-million over five years to collaborate on joint research projects with Saudi faculty members, along with additional funds for research and unrestricted money.

The deals were signed despite worry among some faculty members at the California institutions about potential limits on academic freedom and possible discrimination against women and others in the religiously and socially conservative kingdom. Officials at both American universities, however, and their Saudi counterparts downplay such concerns, saying that members of the teaching staff at the Saudi institution, known as Kaust, will have the academic and cultural freedoms of professors at other international research universities.

"Those are uninformed criticisms," Ahmad O. Al-Khowaiter, the Saudi institution's interim provost, said in an interview on Tuesday. "Kaust was established on the highest standards of nondiscrimination."

The partnerships are part of Kaust's bold plan to establish itself as one of the world's leading research institutions from Day 1. The university, which was founded with an endowment from the Saudi king, is expected to open in September 2009. It will accept both women and men ([The Chronicle](#), September 14, 2007).

An Upward Climb

The dilemma confronting a fledgling institution with Kaust's ambitions, Mr. Al-Khowaiter said, is that high-quality faculty members are traditionally attracted to institutions with other top researchers and teachers. In addition, Saudi Arabia has little history of investment in research—until recently, it spent less than one-quarter of 1 percent of its gross domestic product on scientific research. "It's a chicken-and-egg problem," Mr. Al-Khowaiter acknowledged.

Kaust's solution is to contract with leading foreign universities to act essentially as all-star recruiters. Mr. Al-Khowaiter said Kaust had specifically sought out relationships with institutions that have world-class graduate departments in specific fields.

Berkeley will work with Kaust to recruit faculty members and design a mechanical-engineering curriculum, while Stanford's focus will be on applied mathematics and computational science. The agreements will last five years, although they can be terminated at any time, by either partner, and without penalty.

The American universities will each identify and nominate candidates for 10 faculty positions over the next two years, although Kaust will be solely responsible for hiring. If Kaust is unable to fill all the positions by the time classes begin, it may invite Stanford and Berkeley professors to teach on a visiting basis or use distance education to allow Saudi students to take courses offered at the partner institutions.

Peter W. Glynn, a professor of engineering and director of Stanford's Institute for Computational and Mathematical Engineering, said professors there had already consulted their Rolodexes. Six Stanford faculty members are serving on a recruitment committee, while four others are working on curriculum development for graduate degrees to be offered at Kaust.

Albert P. Pisano, chairman of Berkeley's mechanical-engineering department, said faculty members there were also attracted by the opportunity for collaborative research. The joint work will be in areas such as improving ways to obtain drinking water from the ocean and developing alternative energy sources—projects that could have benefits in both the Middle East and California, he said.

Each institution will receive funds to carry out joint research projects and additional dollars to carry out projects of their own choosing.

According to Stanford's five-year agreement, \$2-million a year will be designated for research projects at Stanford that will involve collaborative activity with newly hired Kaust faculty members; \$1-million dollars a year will be for collaborative research projects at Kaust; and \$2-million a year will be in unrestricted money to be shared by Stanford faculty members in computer science and computational and mathematical engineering.

Mr. Pisano said the funds would allow his department, in a time of constrained state budgets, to recruit more female students and help finance scholarships for graduate students. Some money also may be used for facilities' upgrades.

Misgivings and Support

Still, some academics are asking if such partnerships are worth the price. A Berkeley faculty leader told the *Contra Costa Times*, a local newspaper, that the arrangement had raised "huge" concerns among faculty members about Saudi Arabia's reputation for religious and social intolerance. A blog posting in *The Chronicle* over the weekend about the then-pending agreement has attracted dozens of comments, almost all negative ([The Chronicle](#), March 1).

And at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, a deal with another Saudi university, Jubail University College, led College Republicans to call for a protest on Tuesday.

Mr. Pisano, at Berkeley, said faculty members there had initially expressed misgivings about the partnership with Kaust. But in the end, he said, 34 of 44 mechanical-engineering faculty members had voted to support the agreement, and just two voted in opposition. (The others did not vote or were not present.)

At Stanford, Mr. Glynn said faculty members there were, in fact, motivated by the opportunity to participate in the creation of a university that they hope will bring more intellectual freedom and diversity to Saudi Arabia.

"This is an opportunity to educate a set of students who will hopefully take away a worldview from this campus that recognizes the value in inquiry, the value in other beliefs," he said. "I hope this can have an impact in the kingdom and in the region."

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