

## **Advancing UK-Saudi Educational Partnerships Pre-Roundtable Summary**

### **Purpose of This Summary**

This document presents findings from a survey of 19 UK and Saudi education-related entities examining opportunities and challenges faced when establishing educational institutions or engaging in the education sector in Saudi Arabia. The survey collected responses across 80 items rated on a scale of 1 (positive) to 5 (negative), complemented by 86 qualitative text responses. This analysis forms the SBJBC Insight Report on Entry and Operation in the Saudi Education Sector.

Attendees of the Education Roundtable in Jeddah receive this summary, rather than the full report, because the complete analysis will incorporate insights from the 6 November roundtable hosted at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce. This approach ensures that discussion points, observations, and recommendations emerging from the roundtable inform the final document. The survey, roundtable, and resulting report constitute Phase One of SBJBC's Education Programme, establishing the foundation for future programming.

The key findings from SBJBC's research are related to asymmetric information. By this, SBJBC has found that there is a perception gap between educational entities currently operating in Saudi Arabia compared to those currently exploring the market. Those operating consistently evaluated the items as less of a concern, or no concern, compared to those exploring who rated items more negatively. This suggests an information gap is present. Therefore, the report's key recommendation is to improve communication and clarity between the UK and Saudi Arabia in relation to what educational entities need to do to be successful in the Kingdom. In addition, the report emphasises the need for UK entities to conduct comprehensive market research and work closely with support organisations to ensure that regulations, initiatives, and opportunities presented by Saudi Arabia to encourage and ease access to the market are understood and acted on effectively.

References to specific figures and findings in this summary will help inform discussion during the roundtable, enabling participants to engage with evidence from UK and Saudi institutions currently operating or exploring market entry.

### **Survey Methodology and Participants**

The survey employed both quantitative ratings and qualitative open-text responses to capture comprehensive perspectives. The 19 participating entities comprised seven UK independent schools, five Saudi educational entities with international curricula, two universities, four education service providers and consultancies, and one property developer engaged in education infrastructure.

This distribution reflects the strong interest from UK independent schools in international expansion and provides Saudi perspectives on local market conditions. Response rates varied from 12 to 15 across thematic categories, with land access receiving 15 responses and property financial considerations 12 responses. SBJBC recorded another 10 UK universities that were contacted to take part in the initial data-gathering stage but reported either time constraints or insufficient knowledge to participate effectively. These 10, however, noted interest in joining future programming in 2026 and expressed eagerness to learn more about the Saudi education sector and its opportunities.

## **Market Context**

Saudi Arabia's education sector is projected to grow from USD 4 billion in 2017 to USD 15 billion by 2030. The sector received SAR 201 billion in the 2025 national budget, representing substantial government expenditure, and Vision 2030 aims to increase private-sector participation from 15 percent to 25 percent by 2030.

The Kingdom operates over 30,000 schools serving six million students, with 60 percent of the population under age 35. Private education accounts for 73 percent of enrolment in the UAE and 40 percent in Kuwait, while Saudi Arabia's private sector currently serves 15 percent of students. This gap represents an opportunity for international providers, operating within quality standards and national identity requirements, to enter and contribute effectively to Vision 2030's human development goals.

British curriculum programmes account for 41 percent of international schools globally, and approximately 10,000 Saudi students pursue higher education in UK universities. This suggests both global and local familiarity with the British education system, its values, and operations. Recent bilateral initiatives include the March 2023 education trade mission and the Strategic Partnership Council agreement to establish 10 British schools by 2025. Kings College Riyadh opened in 2021 as the first direct franchise school, followed by Reigate Grammar School, Downe House, Aldenham Prep School, and Sherborne School. UK universities have also been licensed, including the University of Strathclyde, with partnerships involving institutions such as SOAS.

## **Survey Findings**

### **Participation and Interest**

78.9 percent of respondents either currently operate in Saudi Arabia or are actively exploring market entry, demonstrating strong interest from UK entities in Saudi educational opportunities. However, concerns persist across some operational categories, with land access and regulatory complexity emerging as areas requiring attention or improved information sharing to enhance international understanding of Saudi systems and regulations.

### **Barrier Hierarchy**

Analysis reveals a hierarchy of concerns. Items scoring above 4.0 (major concerns) include land allocation processes and timelines (4.13) and availability of land plots (4.07), representing constraints on institutional establishment. Items scoring 3.5–4.0 include multiple regulatory body requirements (3.69), staff children's schooling options (3.57), and zoning restrictions (3.69). Items scoring 3.0–3.5 include Saudisation requirements (3.47), gender workplace regulations (3.53), housing availability for expatriate staff (3.29), initial capital requirements (3.00), and banking access (3.23). Items scoring below 3.0 include infrastructure quality and basic regulatory compliance, with security concerns rated lowest at 1.93.

### **Experience Effects**

Institutions with operational experience consistently rate items more positively than those exploring opportunities. Regulatory framework understanding showed a 1.11-point differential, with operating institutions rating this at 2.14 compared to 3.25 for exploring institutions. Infrastructure investment

concerns showed operating institutions rating total infrastructure investment at 2.60 versus 3.38 for exploring institutions, with return on infrastructure investment scoring 2.40 versus 3.25.

Workforce concerns showed minimal differential: Saudisation requirements rated 3.40 for operating institutions and 3.50 for explorers, while gender workplace regulations scored 3.60 and 3.50 respectively. This convergence indicates that workforce items represent genuine, lived concerns rather than perception issues.

### **Information Asymmetry**

Information availability emerged as a challenge across all concern areas. Respondents highlighted difficulty accessing information about regulatory requirements, market conditions, and operational procedures. One education service provider noted the need for a mechanism where regulatory queries could be answered clearly, explaining that lack of clarity often arises from different entities having conflicting requirements. An independent school reported challenges finding clear information on the regulatory environment alongside legal and tax implications affecting school setup and operation.

The challenge extends beyond information availability to interpretation and application. Regulatory requirements may be published, but understanding their practical application, identifying responsible authorities, and navigating approval processes remains unclear. This ambiguity increases reliance on consultants and intermediaries. However, such asymmetry is to be expected when international entities enter new or previously unexplored markets. It represents a typical market-entry reality rather than an insurmountable barrier, with specialist educational advisory firms offering viable support mechanisms.

### **Partnership Dynamics**

Partnership requirements featured prominently in qualitative responses. Institutions recognised partnerships as essential for market entry but sought clarity on partnership development. One secondary school requested introductions to partners who would work with UK independent schools, distinguishing between property partners and operating partners. An all-through school noted having an operating partner but lacking a property partner, highlighting how partnership needs evolve through development phases.

Partnership challenges extend beyond identification to negotiation, structuring, and governance. Respondents sought model agreements, case examples, and regulatory clarity on partnership structures. The absence of frameworks creates uncertainty and increases transaction costs. However, this could be mitigated through expansion of, or modelling on, the Royal Commission for Riyadh City's *International Schools Attraction Programme*, which has successfully attracted British independent schools to Riyadh. Other models or frameworks may need adaptation for British universities and other entities with specialist criteria.

### **Workforce Considerations**

Workforce concerns revealed interactions between regulatory requirements, market conditions, and lifestyle factors affecting recruitment and retention. One service provider explained a preference for employing single expatriate staff with no dependents due to challenges supporting families through residency requirements, schooling, and housing costs. Total package costs for families make this

prohibitive except in specialist cases, typical across many international campuses, not only those in Saudi Arabia.

Gender regulations also generated concern. One institution identified gender workplace regulations as a factor in recruiting British staff. These regulations affect recruitment, operational design, facility requirements, and programme delivery. However, some concerns may stem from misconceptions rather than reality, suggesting that increased information and experience could alleviate them. Furthermore, the intersection of Saudisation requirements with quality control also creates tension. Institutions support workforce localisation but struggle to find qualified Saudi nationals for certain positions. One respondent advocated for reduced Saudisation requirements for educational institutions where qualified national teachers are lacking. Targeted interventions in the teacher training pipeline could address this issue quickly.

### **Financial Security**

Financial concerns extended beyond initial capital to payment security, revenue predictability, and sustainability. Payment reliability emerged as a concern, with one service provider emphasising the need for rules ensuring companies pay on time, noting that international companies have lost money waiting for Saudi entities to settle invoices. While this represents a single respondent's experience, it may reflect a broader theme requiring attention across sectors.

Fee regulation was also noted as creating planning challenges. An independent school observed that fee approval requirements make it difficult to operate during the setup years when bursaries and discounts are offered to build enrolment. Banking relationships posed challenges, with one respondent observing that the Saudi banking system does not tend to finance schools, necessitating alternative funding strategies and higher capital reserves.

### **Institutional Variations**

#### **Independent Schools**

Independent schools emphasised curriculum and operational challenges. Respondents noted that reform allowing co-educational schooling up to A Level would improve operational viability. Others highlighted that reduced Saudisation requirements in the absence of qualified national teachers would ease staffing pressures. These institutions also sought quality-assured processes enabling fair and timely decision-making.

#### **Universities**

Universities focused on research infrastructure and recognition, with concerns centred on intellectual property protection, research facility requirements, and qualification recognition. One university respondent acknowledged insufficient knowledge to assess barriers, underscoring information gaps affecting decision-making.

#### **Service Providers**

Service providers emphasised operational flexibility and payment security. One provider stressed the need for rules ensuring timely payments, while another sought designated educational land in

demographically viable locations where purchase or rental costs align with economic viability for investors.

### **Discussion Points for Roundtable**

The findings identify areas for discussion during the roundtable across the strategic focus areas of regulatory reform, real estate and infrastructure, operational models, and financial incentives. Land allocation processes emerged as a leading concern, suggesting that mechanisms for educational land provision warrant further examination. The perception gap between operating and exploring institutions, particularly regarding regulatory understanding, indicates that improved information dissemination and experience sharing could address perceived barriers. The potential impact of the forthcoming property law on land allocation and ownership also merits further research.

Workforce localisation balanced with quality maintenance presents another key discussion area. Data show that Saudisation concerns persist across both operating and exploring institutions, suggesting that solutions must address structural factors such as teacher training pipelines and qualification recognition rather than relying solely on regulatory exemptions.

Partnership facilitation mechanisms also deserve attention. The distinctions respondents made between property partners and operating partners, and the progression of partnership needs through development phases, suggest that framework approaches may help institutions navigate entry strategies. Mentoring or matchmaking programmes, if implemented through credible entities such as embassies, trade organisations, or education ministries from both Kingdoms, could streamline this process.

Information provision emerged as a theme transcending all other concerns. The request for a mechanism where regulatory queries receive clear answers, alongside reports of conflicting requirements between authorities, highlights the need for stronger coordination and communication. Discussion may explore how information flows between regulatory bodies and prospective institutions can be improved.

Financial security, particularly payment reliability and fee regulation during establishment phases, represents another area for shared experiences and possible solutions. The banking sector's approach to education financing may also benefit from examination. Finally, geographic considerations, including opportunities in Jeddah and other cities beyond Riyadh, deserve discussion to identify viable locations for new educational institutions and partnerships. Jeddah's international, diverse, and growing population makes it a prime target for international education entities, supporting efforts to diversify quality education across the Kingdom.

### **Conclusion**

The survey demonstrates strong interest from UK institutions in Saudi educational opportunities, with 78.9 percent currently operating or exploring market entry. However, concerns persist around land access, regulatory coordination, workforce development, and information provision. The systematic differences between operating and exploring institutions suggest that perceived challenges often exceed operational realities, indicating that information sharing and experience transfer could effectively address barriers.

The roundtable provides an opportunity to discuss these findings, share experiences from operating institutions, and identify mechanisms to address concerns. Discussion points include land allocation processes, regulatory coordination, partnership facilitation, workforce development, and information provision. Insights from the roundtable will inform the final report, ensuring that recommendations reflect stakeholder perspectives and operational realities.

This summary establishes the foundation for discussion, enabling participants to engage with evidence from UK and Saudi institutions and contribute perspectives that will shape the final analysis and recommendations emerging from Phase One of SBJBC's Education Programme.