



SAUDI BRITISH
JOINT BUSINESS COUNCIL

Post-Event Report

Education for Inclusion: UK Independent Schools and Special Educational Needs in Saudi Arabia.

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Executive Summary

The Saudi British Joint Business Council (SBJBC), in partnership with the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, convened a high-level roundtable on April 2nd, 2026, to address the demand for inclusive education in the Kingdom. As Saudi Arabia undergoes a significant transformation under Vision 2030, the education sector has emerged as a key element of the bilateral relationship and SEND has equally been identified as a national priority.

This roundtable forms part of the Education stream at SBJBC, building on the roundtable in Jeddah in November 2025. The SBJBC Education Programme aims to identify and reduce the challenges facing UK education providers seeking to enter the Saudi market, while prompting the ongoing developments and opportunities in the Kingdom for UK educational entities. Through research, roundtable discussions, and policy recommendations, the programme facilitates direct engagement between UK institutions and Saudi government stakeholders. As a whole, the programme supports the alignment of UK educational expertise with Saudi Arabia's demand for international schooling and specialist provision under Vision 2030. SBJBC's efforts encompass UK Independent Schools, training entities, SEN and SEND providers, and UK higher education institutions. We encourage entities related to education in the UK or Saudi Arabia to reach out to SBJBC and discuss their specific situations.

Introduction

This event brought together representatives from UK Independent schools and SEND specialists to engage directly with Saudi Embassy officials, Ministry representatives, SBJBC and its members. With a private K-12 market projected to reach USD 13.26 billion by 2030, the Roundtable facilitated discussion on how British expertise in special needs education can bridge the Kingdom's current provision gap. Discussions focused on navigating market entry, lived-experiences of schools operating in the Kingdom, the integration of AI into education and the transition from segregated specialist centers to fully inclusive mainstream schooling.

Strengthening Bilateral Relations: Insights from the Ambassador and Sir Steve Smith

The Roundtable commenced with an opening address from HRH Prince Abdullah bin Khalid bin Sultan Al Saud, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Kingdom. His Royal Highness expressed gratitude to Sir Steve Smith, the UK Government Special Representative for Education to Saudi Arabia, for his continued commitments to bridging the educational landscape between the two nations. Identifying education as the most critical sector for national investment, the Ambassador highlighted that 70% of the Saudi population is under the age of 30. The Ambassador recognised the UK as a great education champion, citing the 11 UK schools already announced in the Kingdom as a testament to the depth and success of this strategic partnership. His Royal Highness emphasised the government's commitment to expanding high-quality schooling beyond Riyadh to all regions of the Kingdom. The success of the Ministry of Education's bilateral efforts was highlighted as a model for partnership, supported by the Ambassador's personal visits to both countries to establish these links.

Following the Ambassador, Sir Steve Smith reinforced the strategic nature of the KSA-UK relationship. He noted how Saudi Arabia remains the only country with a dedicated UK Special Representative, which signals the importance of this relationship in the UK government's international strategy. Professor Sir Steve Smith's mandate focuses on removing barriers to entry in higher education, English language training and SEND provision, which has emerged as a primary topic in meetings with the Ministry of Education. He stated that there was a direct synergy between the UK industrial strategy and Saudi Vision 2030 and a need for a stronger, more resistant partnership.

SEND Education in Saudi Arabia and Advice on Entering the Market

Robert McNamara, Head of Research at SBJBC, presented a comprehensive overview of the Saudi Arabian SEND landscape, tracing its transformation from early charitable origins to the rights-based framework established by Vision 2030 and the Human Capability Development programme. His findings identified a critical gap in workforce capability, while the Ministry of Education has set an ambitious target to increase students receiving SEN services from 77,000 to 200,000, a structural shortage of specialists exists due to the closure of local bachelor's programmes in special needs education. He argued that the UK is uniquely positioned to bridge this gap, offering regulatory frameworks, professional training, assessment tools, specialist deployment, institutional models and professional bodies that can be adapted to the Saudi context. The complementary nature of the partnership between the UK and Saudi Arabia was emphasised; Saudi Arabia has the capital, demographic demand and political commitment

while the UK has decades of SEND experience and specialist models including the “Experts at Hand” service. While bilateral trade exceeds £16 billion, SEN-specific cooperation remains a distinct gap in formal agreements, this roundtable there offered a platform to enhance bilateral cooperation in this area .

Dr. Sairah Narmah-Alqasim from Pinsent Masons presented on the practical hurdles of making international education a reality in Saudi Arabia. She emphasised that the regulatory framework is significantly more complex than the UK’s, requiring navigation of the Ministry of Education for licensing and the Ministries of Investment, Commerce and Human Resources & Social Development as well as the Saudi Business Center and the Municipalities & Civil Defence. It was noted that the MoE treats SEN schools as private educational institutions rather than medical or care facilities. The presentation placed significant emphasis on the necessity of a letter of Intent at the outset and the importance of a clear plan of action that includes age ranges, curriculum, specific SEND specialisms and financial goals. The early stages of planning were identified as the most vital, as the Ministry of Education expects schools to open in age phases and align strictly with local requirements, including the eventual acquisition of a Commercial Registration (CR).

Potential hurdles for new entrants were also outlined, including the tendency to underestimate timeframes; providers were therefore advised to allow more time than they would for other regional markets such as the UAE and warned against marketing prior to obtaining a license. Regarding workforce, while Saudisation ratios do exist, points were raised about the Ministry of Education’s flexibility regarding teacher ratios, allowing international teachers to be brought in. Operationally, the common pitfalls for independent schools outlined include financial planning, data protection and safeguarding frameworks and weak exit and dispute planning. Documenting all progress and agreements was advised.

Discussion: Learning from Schools already Operating in Saudi Arabia

The subsequent discussion provided a platform for schools and SEND organisations already operating in the Kingdom to share their lived experiences. Contributions from institutions with around five years of operational history in Riyadh and Jeddah showcased different strategies to approach staff training and acquisition. Several organisations noted the importance of maintaining consistent collaboration between schools in Saudi Arabia and the UK. One organisation noted that KSA-based staff had trained on UK campuses to ensure consistency, standards and shared values. A critical point raised for those considering expanding into the Saudi Arabian market is that visiting the Kingdom is essential to gain an understanding of the on-the-ground situation and to distinguish between perceptions and reality.

A significant portion of the dialogue focused on the wider societal and cultural understanding of SEND. A frequently cited barrier is the challenge of communicating special needs and specialist education to parents and families. Progress needs to be made in building awareness, requiring sensitive conversations in order to shift the narrative toward the benefits of early intervention and inclusive schooling. A key cultural challenge identified was that children in Saudi Arabia often do not enter formal education as young as they do in the UK, making early identification of learning difficulties harder. Despite these challenges, the success of the UK model was evidenced by a SEND entity reporting a 97% accreditation rate for their specialist school in Riyadh.

From a financial perspective, it was noted that KSA uses a separate, enhanced budget line for SEND students to cover needs such as equipment and therapy. Ensuring this provision is appropriate and effective is a growing priority. Attendees mentioned that special consideration must be given to SEND provisions due to the high cost of equipment, therapy, assessment, and the cost of each student's teaching. UK SEND entities were eager to highlight that cost is one key barrier facing any international expansion, not just in Saudi Arabia. Support is critical at all levels to ensure a successful launch, and being deliberate in cash-flow planning and pricing levels is essential.

The roundtable also addressed the future of education through the lens of technology and artificial intelligence. Representatives from the UK education sector emphasised the importance of an AI-integrated curriculum, where traditional methods are blended with AI-literacy to prepare students for a rapidly evolving global workforce. Given Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a global AI hub under Vision 2030, this was identified as a primary area where the UK can contribute significant expertise. By incorporating digital literacy, including assistive technologies in SEND education, UK providers can support the Kingdom's broader goal of creating an inclusive, prepared education system.

Presentation from Talemia: Insights into Current SEND Education in Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Abeer Alhudhair and Dr. Sara AlAssaf from Talemia provided an overview of the integrated support services available to international partners seeking to operate in the Kingdom. With operations across four core business areas including educational technologies, infrastructure, school transportation and specialised educational services, they currently support over 90,000 students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. A significant highlight of the presentation was an insight into the specialised 'cities' model currently operating in Saudi Arabia. These hubs, such as Sinad City in Makkah, the Prince Sultan Center in Riyadh and the Hemmah Centers in Khobar and Al-Qassim function as self-contained ecosystems, designed specifically for SEND students. Within these cities, diverse institutions including schools, diagnostic centers and therapy clinics coexist to provide comprehensive support for students and their families. Talemia emphasised that these cities are actively open to international partnership and investment.

Key Insights and Practical Considerations

The opportunity within the education market, specifically in the SEND sector, is clear and UK companies are well positioned to contribute and share their expertise in this area. Establishing an institution in the Kingdom does require careful planning and an understanding of the regulatory requirements, flexibility regarding timelines is equally as important. Cultural nuances emerged as a key theme regarding SEND, as what works in the UK may not work in Saudi Arabia's social and cultural context, so flexibility and adaptability are required. The positive experiences of institutions already operating in the Kingdom showcase the sector's potential, reinforced by the Saudi government's commitment to enhancing education and creating a more inclusive environment. This sector represents a key area of growth where the UK's experience and expertise align directly with Saudi demand.

Conclusion

This roundtable has reinforced the significant opportunities for UK independent schools and SEND specialists to expand into the Saudi market. With SEND identified as a national priority, remarks from the Ambassador further underlined the Saudi commitment to transforming the sector. The UK is well placed to meet this demand by offering practical experience in both delivery and the integration of inclusive practices into mainstream education. The discussion also emphasised the growing importance of AI in the classroom, which is an area for knowledge transfer, investment and long-term partnership.

SBJBC extends its gratitude to the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia for hosting the Roundtable as well as to all speakers: Professor Sir Steve Smith (UK Government), Dr. Sara AlAssaf (Talemia), Dr. Abeer Alhudhaif (Talemia), and Dr. Sairah Narmah-Alqasim (Pinsent Masons). Please reach out to SBJBC should you have any enquiries or questions regarding the programme.