SAUDI BRITISH
JOINT BUSINESS COUNCIL

SBJBC Education Roundtable Three

Saudi Arabia's General Education Law and SEND Provision

In partnership with the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia

Thursday 12 November 2026

Summary

The Saudi British Joint Business Council (SBJBC), in partnership with the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, convened the third roundtable of its Education Programme on 12 November 2026. The session considered what Saudi Arabia's new General Education Law, and the regulation for private educational institutions that accompanies it, mean for UK schools, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) specialists and online providers. Representatives of the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in London and the Ministry of Investment (MISA) set out the Kingdom's priorities, Pinsent Masons explained the new framework, while UK providers with experience of the market shared what they had learned.

The legal framework is now falling into place, since the Law and the Private Education Regulations both take effect on 20 January 2027 and will bring foreign, premium and Saudi private schools under a single regulatory category with a two-stage licensing process. Saudi officials made clear that they want proposals from UK providers, particularly in teacher training, SEND, assessment and digital learning, and named the Cultural Bureau as the first point of contact in the UK and MISA in the Kingdom. Providers already operating in Saudi Arabia stressed that progress depends on a sustained presence, close partnership with Saudi stakeholders and the careful adaptation of UK practice, including SEND assessment tools, to the Arabic language and local needs.

Although the FCDO currently advises against all but essential travel to Saudi Arabia, SBJBC's assessment, which Pinsent Masons echoed, is that preparatory work on company formation, partnerships, curriculum and licensing can continue. SBJBC will take the discussion forward through its 2027 programme, which is expected to include education delegations, a possible side programme alongside the Human Capability Initiative and a matchmaking session with Saudi partners.

About the Roundtable

The session was the third in the SBJBC Education Programme, following roundtables at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce in November 2025 and at the Royal Embassy in April 2026. The programme aims to reduce the obstacles facing UK education providers in the Saudi market by bringing them into direct dialogue with Saudi government stakeholders, and this session concentrated on school education and SEND provision rather than higher education. Participants included UK independent schools, SEND and specialist providers, online schools, assessment bodies, teacher training providers and legal advisers, joined by Saudi officials in person and online.

Regional and Market Update

Robert McNamara, Head of Research at SBJBC, opened with an overview of the bilateral relationship, the travel position and the education market. He noted that 2027 marks the centenary of the Treaty of Jeddah, one of the earliest formal agreements between the United Kingdom and what became Saudi Arabia, and that since 2018 the relationship has been organised through the Strategic Partnership Council, chaired by the Crown Prince and the Prime Minister.[1] Education was confirmed in September 2025 as one of five priority areas under the Council's economic and social pillar, and the UK's International Education Strategy, published in 2026, names Saudi Arabia as one of five priority markets for UK education.[2] The UK concluded negotiations on a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council on 20 May 2026, the first G7 country to do so, and the legal text is being finalised ahead of signature.[3] Moreover, in June, SBJBC's sixth Investment and Partnership Summit brought more than 350 government, investment and business delegates to Banqueting House, demonstrating the significant level of activity between the two Kingdoms, even during a tumultuous period.[4]

Since 16 October the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has advised against all but essential travel to Saudi Arabia and against all travel within 10 kilometres of the border with Yemen, and the advice was updated again on the day of the roundtable.[5] McNamara stressed that the advice is not a prohibition and that the FCDO has not advised British nationals to leave, but standard travel insurance can lapse when travelling against FCDO advice, so insurers' terms should be confirmed in writing before any trip.[5],[6] At the time of the roundtable, Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport had reopened, British Airways planned to resume its Riyadh service on 11 January 2027, and Riyadh schools had been moving between online and classroom teaching at short notice.[7] SBJBC's assessment is that firms already in the Kingdom can continue with appropriate precautions, and that company formation, partner discussions, curriculum planning and early licensing can proceed remotely. SBJBC intends to take an education delegation to the Kingdom when the advice allows, and anyone planning travel should check the FCDO's current advice.

Spending and enrolment in Saudi general education held up through 2026, with more than six million pupils expected back at the start of the school year in August and 202 billion riyals allocated to education in the 2026 budget.[8],[9] The General Education Law was published in the Umm al-Qura Gazette on 24 July 2026 and takes effect 180 days later, on 20 January 2027. Foreign investment in schools is now provided for in the Law itself, and Al Tamimi & Company note that a foreign investor can own 100% of a school operating company, subject to an investment licence from MISA.[10]

British schooling in the Kingdom dates back to the British International Schools in Jeddah and Al Khobar, founded in 1977, but recent growth has come from UK independent schools opening campuses with Saudi partners.[7] The Independent Schools Council census, which counts only its members' campuses, recorded 4,313 pupils at six Saudi campuses in January 2026, compared with 1,574 at four in 2023, a near tripling in three years.[11],[12] Nine schools linked to UK independent schools are now open, beginning with King's College Riyadh in 2021, and further openings have been announced by King's College, Malvern College and Aldenham for 2027 and by Brighton College for 2028 and 2030.[7]

Statement from the UK Government

McNamara then read a statement from the UK Government, which described education and skills as a shared strategic partnership and committed the UK to working with Saudi Arabia across the whole education system, from early years, schools and SEND to vocational training, higher and transnational

education and education technology. The statement placed this work within the UK's International Education Strategy and Modern Industrial Strategy and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

In September, Professor Sir Steve Smith, the UK Government Special Representative to Saudi Arabia, and Baroness Smith, Minister for Skills at the Department for Education, held government-to-government talks in the Kingdom. Their programme included the Ministry of Education, the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC), which accredits private schools, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, the National Competitiveness Center and the Human Capability Development Program, together with the team organising the 2027 Human Capability Initiative.[13] The delegation also visited Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University and the Academy of Defence Industries, which is partnered with Lincoln College International, and received a Ministry of Education presentation on the new General Education Law. More recently, Lord Sarwar, Minister for Trade at the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, spoke with the Saudi Vice Minister of Commerce, and the two reaffirmed education and skills as a key pillar of the bilateral trade relationship under the Strategic Partnership Council.

The UK Government looks forward to the Human Capability Initiative 2027 and the Education Global Exhibition, at which the Kingdom has invited the UK to be the only Country of Honour, and described the engagement as a major milestone in the relationship between the two kingdoms. Further visits led by the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, with the Department for Education, the FCDO and the British Council, will follow, and the UK Government will invite expressions of interest from the UK sector to take part. The statement closed with thanks to the Cultural Bureau, the Embassy and SBJBC, and with apologies for the Government's absence on the day.

Begbie added that SBJBC will circulate a 2027 calendar, including events postponed from late 2026, education delegations covering both higher education and SEND, and SBJBC's participation in the Human Capability Initiative, and invited organisations wishing to take part to contact SBJBC.

The Saudi Perspective: The Cultural Bureau and the Ministry of Investment

Rawan Adham, Director of Communications and Partnerships at the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in London, explained that the Bureau is part of the Ministry of Education and supports between 13,000 and 14,000 government-sponsored Saudi students in the UK and Ireland. It also identifies suitable UK partners and introduces them to Saudi counterparts in order to bring investment into the Kingdom. Adham described the General Education Law as a milestone in Saudi Arabia's educational reforms under Vision 2030, since it replaces policies dating back to 1969 with a single legal framework from nursery to Grade 12, giving international providers one route in place of several overlapping decrees. A General Education Affairs Council chaired by the Minister of Education will bring together nine government sectors, among them sport, culture, investment, finance and health.

The Law asks schools to prepare students for a changing economy and to preserve national identity, the Arabic language and Islamic values while developing critical thinking, research skills and foreign languages. Licensed schools may offer their own curriculum, provided national identity is integrated within it, and Adham said the Kingdom particularly wants UK expertise in safeguarding and wellbeing, SEND and gifted education, assessment and accreditation, and teacher training. The Law also recognises e-learning for the first time, which she described as especially helpful for pupils with disabilities who cannot attend school, although digital tools are meant to support classroom teaching rather than replace it.

Adham outlined two stages to market entry, qualification followed by licensing, and stressed that no partnership will be approved without a licence from the Ministry of Education, which will monitor partnerships and can suspend operations. For UK organisations that are new to the market, the Cultural

Bureau is the first point of contact. It will pass proposals to the Ministry of Education and can draw on the mechanism it already uses with UK universities to help schools map their route into the Kingdom.

Rafat Malik, Deputy Chair of SBJBC, explained that technology and artificial intelligence are being built into Saudi education as tools for learning, SEND provision and the wider student experience rather than taught as subjects in their own right, a direction set by a major Ministry of Education announcement on AI in 2025. In his view, digital infrastructure in Saudi schools, which now reaches kindergartens, is more advanced than elsewhere in the region, so providers with a clear technology proposition will be well placed.

Dr Nora Alkhathlan, Education Director at MISA, joined online and described opportunities across the whole education value chain, from early childhood to executive education and lifelong learning, with SEND, teacher training, curriculum design and education technology among the priorities. She directed UK investors to the education and training section of the Invest Saudi platform, where published opportunities set out market size, demand, indicative investment and possible operating models, and to the Ministry of Education's Study Saudi platform for higher education. Describing the Saudi market as the largest in the GCC, she said that providers considering the Kingdom should approach MISA while their plans are still taking shape, and that a short project brief is enough to start a conversation. MISA can then tailor opportunities, introduce Saudi operators and investors, and clarify which approvals are needed and from whom.

Later in the session, Dr Alkhathlan emphasised that the Investment Law allows international investors 100% ownership of their operations, and that MISA wants to see large providers enter on that basis while partnership with local investors remains an accepted model. A UK independent school currently going through licensing described MISA's support as very helpful in a process that is not straightforward, and welcomed the new regulation as a means of managing the market so that the Kingdom attracts higher-quality schools. Malik observed that Saudi policy evolves faster than in most jurisdictions, so providers benefit from following changes closely and from feeding back on what works.

The New Framework: A Legal Perspective

Dr Sairah Narmah-Alqasim, Partner and Head of Education Middle East at Pinsent Masons, joined from Saudi Arabia to explain the framework in more detail. She noted that travel in and out of the Kingdom continues, if sometimes by longer routes, and described education as a sector that is resilient to conflict and recession, with a significant shortage of school places and strong encouragement for international providers.

The Law was approved by Council of Ministers Resolution No. 103 of 7 July 2026 and enters into force on 20 January 2027.[14] The Private Education Regulations, approved by the General Education Affairs Council on 11 October 2026, take effect on the same day and set out how the Law applies to private and non-profit institutions, covering establishment, licensing, operation, governance, tuition fees, supervision and closure. The Law repeals earlier instruments, including the Private Schools and Foreign Schools Regulations, although existing provisions continue to apply on a transitional basis until replacement rules are issued, for no more than a year from the Law's entry into force. Dr Sairah cautioned that this period should not be treated as a blanket extension of every school's compliance deadline.

Under the new framework, foreign, premium and Saudi private schools are treated alike as private educational institutions. Ministry approval is required to establish an institution, transfer ownership or a licence, relocate, rename, change the educational stages offered or introduce international programmes. Schools keep their choice of curriculum but must teach national identity subjects approved by the National Curriculum Centre, and they require accreditation from ETEC or an international body that ETEC approves, together with participation in national and international assessments administered by ETEC. Arabic remains

the primary language of instruction, with other languages permitted under controls approved by the Council, and fees may be adjusted only in line with criteria set by the Ministry. The gender separation requirement that applies to government schools does not automatically extend to private institutions, and non-compliance can lead to warnings, suspension of student registration, fines or revocation of a licence.[14]

Licensing takes place in two stages, beginning with qualification from the Ministry of Education, which is issued within 10 working days of a complete application and is valid for one year, with possible extension. Qualification is not an operating licence, so a qualified applicant cannot register students, provide services or collect fees, although limited advertising for investment, recruitment or construction is allowed if its status is made clear. The final operating licence covers corporate authorisation, premises and safety, facilities and curriculum approvals, and the Ministry must decide within 30 days of a complete application and give written reasons for any refusal. Franchise and third-party operator models remain permitted, but the licence holder keeps ultimate responsibility before the Ministry, and Dr Sairah noted that the Ministry expects UK schools in such arrangements to be actively involved.[14]

Dr Sairah advised schools already operating in the Kingdom to confirm their licence holder, structure, approvals and transitional position now, and to complete a readiness assessment before 20 January 2027. New entrants should build qualification and final licensing into their project plans before committing to launch dates, and align leases, construction, financing and recruitment with licensing milestones. Further forms, manuals, fee provisions and a schedule of violations and penalties are expected, as are processes for bringing teachers and students into new schools, and she recommended that organisations assign someone to monitor these developments.

Discussion: Accreditation, Teacher Training and the SEND Workforce

An international qualifications provider asked whether the Kingdom would publish a list of the international accreditation bodies approved under the Law. Dr Sairah said she did not expect a published list, but that accreditation from globally recognised UK and US bodies are generally accepted and can be made equivalent with the Ministry of Education's help, with schools expected to follow ETEC's protocols once their first cohort has completed. According to Malik, ETEC assesses incoming organisations against the accreditation they hold at home and works from a reference list that is not public, which makes it a sensible first port of call. Adham confirmed that nothing had yet been published and offered to relay specific questions.

The same participant asked whether schools would have to fund the additional teacher training required under the Law from their own budgets. Adham noted that the Law requires teachers to hold professional licences. She expected training for public school teachers to be funded by the government, although she could not confirm it, and said that for new private schools the Kingdom wants to partner with providers whose teachers already have the necessary skills. Dr Alkhathlan described teacher training as a significant investment opportunity in both public and private schools, noted that MISA has published an opportunity setting out needs, regional gaps and market size, and invited interested UK providers to contact MISA. Begbie observed that SEND teacher training is a particular gap because it must be delivered in Arabic.

A representative from Pearson, asked whether there are plans to develop the wider SEND workforce, including educational psychologists and speech and language therapists, and Adham replied that the Kingdom is seeking UK ideas across all these professions. The representative later explained that many SEND assessment tools are developed in English, so adapting them can require substantial cultural and linguistic change, and every adapted tool must be validated and normed on the local population, since a translation that does not reflect the population it serves has little value. That work takes time and fieldwork,

which Begbie noted sits uneasily with the need to recruit much of the SEND workforce locally to work with pupils who speak only Arabic.

Perspectives from UK Providers

A representative from King's College Taunton reflected on nine years of engagement with the Kingdom. King's College began discussions in 2017, opened King's College Riyadh in 2021 and has worked throughout with ministries, regulators, investors and developers, including MISA, the Royal Commission for Riyadh City and ROSHN. Pupil numbers have grown from 163 to 865, and a second campus with capacity for 2,000 pupils will open in 2027 within ROSHN's SEDRA community, while the existing campus will become more of a senior school.

The representative argued that clarity matters because schools make decisions that play out over decades, recruiting internationally, investing in facilities and making long-term commitments to families. In his experience the regulatory position has become steadily clearer, and the Law will consolidate that, while UK schools already working under inspection regimes such as ISI and British Schools Overseas will welcome a clear benchmark. He described strong demand for high-quality international education, with schools increasingly planned into new residential communities from the outset. On SEND, he noted that the Kingdom is broadening the threshold for inclusion in mainstream schools while recognising a continuing need for specialist settings.

His advice to those considering entry was to commit time, to understand what the Human Capability Development Program means to the Kingdom, and to approach the market as a partnership that involves listening rather than prescribing. Asked about parents' expectations, he said families have been receptive to character education beyond the curriculum and to a longer school day with extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. Malik observed that over the past decade Saudi education has moved from exam preparation towards a more rounded development that equips young people for roles that do not yet exist.

Asked by a UK school group about recruitment, the Kings College representative said perception is the main obstacle, which King's addresses by bringing staff through the UK school, offering a competitive package and making practical arrangements easy, although recruitment is currently harder. Quality assurance runs through termly governors' meetings with the operator, at which relevant UK staff join the education committee, an annual visit of several days, and regular online contact.

A representative of Bridge Online School, part of Cambridge Online Education, described a group of four online schools with just over 1,200 students in the UK and internationally. For young people facing significant barriers to learning, including SEND, severe anxiety, medical conditions or disengagement from school, online education can be the only realistic alternative, and the group offers bespoke individual programmes. The representative from Bridge Online School noted that UK online schools are accredited through a voluntary scheme rather than routine Ofsted inspection, and that the group is pursuing accreditation to strengthen its credibility with overseas partners. Its provision also includes arts-based programmes for those aged roughly 14 to 25, assessed by portfolio through UK awarding bodies, and a new international access course for university entry.

Begbie noted that online provision could widen access beyond Riyadh and the other main centres in a country of Saudi Arabia's size, and that arts-based work would align with the forthcoming Saudi-UK Year of Culture. Malik pointed out that the ministries of culture and sport, industry-focused ministries and companies such as HUMAIN are prioritising vocational routes and a wider diversity of skills, which creates openings for providers in both SEND and mainstream vocational education.

Next Steps and the 2027 Programme

In closing, Begbie said that SBJBC wants to move from consultation to clear initiatives in 2027 that help members make practical progress in the Kingdom. SBJBC will circulate its 2027 calendar, which is expected to include education delegations in the first half of the year, subject to travel advice, and a side programme alongside the Human Capability Initiative focused on teacher training, vocational education and SEND. Drawing on the discussion, SBJBC proposes a matchmaking session within that programme, bringing together UK providers, potential Saudi partners and operators, and universities that train teachers. SBJBC will contact MISA and the Cultural Bureau to organise it; Adham noted that the Ministry of Education's investment department already holds monthly virtual matchmaking sessions, and Dr Alkhathlan said MISA would welcome taking part.

Organisations wishing to join a delegation, contribute to the 2027 programme or be introduced to the Cultural Bureau or MISA are encouraged to contact SBJBC.

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