



Beyond borders: The role of education in strengthening India - Saudi Arabia bilateral relations

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Abstract

Educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia have witnessed significant growth and diversification in recent years, driven by the mutual recognition of the importance of education in strengthening bilateral ties and fostering cultural exchange. This abstract provides an overview of the educational relations between the two countries, highlighting the key facets of collaboration, initiatives, and trends that have shaped this bilateral engagement. Education has been a significant component of the growing ties between these two nations, characterized by exchanges, academic partnerships, and cultural exchanges. Both countries have recognized the importance of education as a bridge to strengthen diplomatic relations and foster people-to-people connections.

This research paper highlights the key aspects of the educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia.

Research Questions:

- What are the important areas of academic collaboration between educational institutions in India and Saudi Arabia?
- What are the important factors contributing to the accessibility and affordability of education for students from both countries?
- How do the cultural exchange programs and initiatives, including language courses and cultural events, impact the cross-cultural understanding between Indian and Saudi students?
- What is the role of the Indian Embassy's Cultural Attaché office in Riyadh in promoting Indian culture and language among Indian students in Saudi Arabia?
- How have scholarships and financial assistance programs influenced student mobility and educational opportunities between India and Saudi Arabia?
- In what ways has Saudi Vision 2030 shaped educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia, particularly in emerging sectors like technology, healthcare, and tourism?
- How does cultural exchange, facilitated through education, contribute to the soft power strategies of both India and Saudi Arabia?
- How do educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia influence their broader diplomatic and international relations?
- What are the potential future directions and challenges in furthering educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia?

The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the main aspects of the educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia.
- To investigate both countries' educational policies and frameworks concerning bilateral relations, international student exchange, and academic cooperation.
- To explore the role of cultural and language factors in shaping educational relations between the two countries and their impact on the educational experience of Indian students in Saudi Arabia.
- To assess the prospects of educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia, including potential areas for expansion, cooperation, and academic innovation.
- To contribute to the broader understanding of educational relations between these two countries.
- To examine the socio-cultural impact of educational exchange programs, including how they contribute to cultural understanding, tolerance, and global citizenship.

This study aims:

- To comprehensively understand the educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia, including their historical context, current state, and potential future developments.
- To identify important trends and patterns in student mobility, academic collaborations, and cultural exchanges between the two countries.
- To analyze the challenges and opportunities inherent in the educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia, and to propose strategies to maximize opportunities and address challenges.
- To encourage and promote bilateral cooperation in the field of education and research between India and Saudi Arabia, fostering stronger diplomatic and cultural ties.
- To foster cross-cultural understanding and dialogue between Indian and Saudi Arabian students and academics through educational exchange programs.
- To facilitate the transfer of knowledge, skills, and expertise between India and Saudi Arabia, supporting their respective development goals.

Keywords: Educational relations, Saudi Arabia, India, Bilateral, student exchange programs

Introduction

India and Saudi Arabia enjoy pleasant and friendly relations reflecting the centuries-old economic and socio-cultural connections. The formation of diplomatic interactions in 1947 was followed by high-level visits from both sides. King Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited India on a 17-day trip during November-December 1955, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Kingdom in September 1956. The visit of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Saudi Arabia in April 1982 further consolidated two-sided relations. The historic visit of King Abdullah to India in January 2006 was a watershed moment that resulted in the signing of the 'Delhi Declaration', imparting fresh momentum to the bilateral relationship. The reciprocal visit by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to Saudi Arabia from February 27 – March 01, 2010, and the 'Riyadh Declaration' signed during the visit, elevated the bilateral relationship to a 'Strategic Partnership'. The visit of His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to India in February 2014 further deepened the relations between the two countries, particularly in defense cooperation. [1] The visit of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in April 2016 captured the spirit of enhanced cooperation in the political, economic, security, and defense realms. During the visit, King Salman conferred the Kingdom's highest civilian honor on Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, indicating the importance Saudi Arabia attached to its relations with India. The visit of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to India in February 2019 further took forward this momentum. During the visit, it was announced that the Kingdom would invest approximately US\$100 billion in India and six MoUs/Agreements were signed in the fields of investment, tourism, housing, and exchange of audio-visual programs, and an agreement was signed to pave the way for Saudi Arabia to join the International Solar Alliance (ISA), which was launched by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi.

Prime Minister Modi visited Riyadh again on October 28-29, 2019, during which the Strategic Partnership Council (SPC) Agreement was signed, which established a high-level council to steer the Indo-Saudi relationship. Twelve MoUs/Agreements were signed during the visit across several fields, including energy, security, defense production, civil aviation, medical products, strategic petroleum reserves, small and medium-scale industries, and the training of diplomats. [2] During the visit, PM Modi also delivered the keynote address at the Third Future Investment Initiative Summit.

The approximately 2.2 million-strong Indian community is the greatest expatriate community in the Kingdom and is highly respected due to its sense of discipline, as well as its law-abiding and calm nature. The contributions made by the Indian community to the development of Saudi Arabia are well acknowledged. Saudi authorities announced an amnesty period between April – November 2017 during which around 70,000 Indians were issued travel documents to return to India. Further, during the PM's visit to Riyadh in October 2019, the two sides announced that India's e-Migrate system would be integrated with the Kingdom's e-Tawtheeq system to streamline the migration process for workers.

The annual Hajj pilgrimage is another important component of Indo-Saudi bilateral relations. During the Crown Prince's

visit to New Delhi in February 2019, it was announced that India's Hajj quota would be increased by 24,975 in 2019, enabling 2,00,000 Indians to perform Hajj in August 2019. India has also digitized the Hajj process by providing the Hajj mobile app, health facility - e-MASIHA, e-luggage pre-tagging, and linking the HGOs (Hajj Group Organizers) with the digital system, which has simplified the procedures for pilgrims. [3]

Educational Relations

India and Saudi Arabia have had a growing and multifaceted relationship in various sectors, including education. Both countries have recognized the importance of education in strengthening their bilateral ties and fostering people-to-people connections. These educational relations encompass various dimensions, including student exchanges, academic collaboration, cultural centers, and skill development initiatives.

Indian students have been pursuing higher education in Saudi Arabia, while Saudi students have been attending Indian universities. Academic institutions from both nations have engaged in collaborative research projects, faculty exchanges, and academic conferences to promote knowledge sharing and innovation.

The key aspects of the educational relations between India and Saudi Arabia are:

1. Student Exchange Programs
2. Scholarship Programs
3. Academic Collaboration

Student exchange programs

India and Saudi Arabia have initiated student exchange programs to facilitate the movement of students between the two countries. Indian students have been traveling to Saudi Arabia for higher education in fields such as medicine, engineering, and management. Conversely, Saudi students have been pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Indian universities. These programs offer students the opportunity to study abroad and gain exposure to different academic systems, cultures, and languages.

Student exchange programs between countries are typically facilitated through bilateral agreements between educational institutions or government bodies. India and Saudi Arabia had such agreements in place to support student exchanges.

[4] Students who wish to participate in these programs must meet certain eligibility criteria, including academic performance and language proficiency requirements. Eligibility criteria may vary depending on the specific program and institutions involved. Participants in student exchange programs often require student visas or relevant permits to study in the host country. Students need to familiarize themselves with the visa and immigration requirements of both India and Saudi Arabia. Student exchange programs can vary in duration. Some may last for a semester or an academic year, while others might be shorter or longer. It depends on the specific program and the goals of the exchange. Students usually enroll in academic courses at the host institution and earn credits that can be transferred back to their home university. The choice of courses and the transfer of credits should be discussed and approved in advance. The financial aspects of the exchange

program, including tuition fees, living expenses, and travel costs, should be clarified before departure. Scholarships, grants, or financial aid may be available to support students during their exchange. Many programs offer cultural orientation and language courses to help students adapt to the host country's culture and language. This can be especially important for students going from India to Saudi Arabia or vice versa due to significant cultural differences. Exchange programs often assist students in finding suitable accommodation options, such as on-campus housing or host family arrangements, to ensure their comfort and safety during their stay. Exchange students need to have adequate health insurance coverage during their time abroad. Institutions or program organizers may provide information or assistance in this regard. Participants should be aware of the safety and security situation in both India and Saudi Arabia. They should follow guidelines or recommendations provided by their home institutions or program organizers. One of the primary goals of student exchange programs is to foster cultural understanding and global awareness. Students are encouraged to actively engage in cultural and social activities, interact with local students, and explore the host country. [5]

The various types of exchange programs include University Exchanges, High School Exchanges, and Language Exchanges. Student exchange programs offer numerous benefits, including the opportunity to broaden one's horizons, gain a global perspective, improve language skills, and develop valuable interpersonal and intercultural skills. The exchange programs have become increasingly popular as globalization and internationalization efforts in education continue to grow in both countries. These programs foster cross-cultural understanding and help prepare students for an increasingly interconnected world.

Scholarship Programs

Both the Saudi government and Indian institutions have provided financial assistance to students pursuing educational opportunities in each other's countries. These scholarships have often been focused on fields that address critical labor market demands. The Saudi government, through the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, has provided scholarships to Indian students pursuing higher education in Saudi Arabia, particularly in medical and technical fields. KAUST Scholarship in Saudi Arabia is a Fully Funded Scholarship golden opportunity for international students who want to pursue their Undergraduate, Master's, and Ph. D. degree Programs. The number of scholarships is 150, and international students from around the world can apply for this scholarship, including India. There are a few Scholarships in Saudi Arabia where students from India can apply. These are (i) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Scholarships, (ii) KAUST Fellowship, (iii) King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals Scholarship, (iv) King Abdulaziz University Scholarship, and (v) Islamic Development Bank Scholarship. [6]

From both countries, sincere efforts are underway to strengthen this process of educational and cultural exchange, as it will be a useful tool to deepen the bilateral relationship. Agencies like the Indian Centre for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the Ministry of Culture of Saudi Arabia organize events on different occasions like on Indian national holidays and host Indian cultural weeks, etc. Besides this ICCR promotes bilateral exchanges through

scholarship schemes for foreign candidates. India and Saudi Arabia have signed agreements like "Agreement in the Field of Youth and Sport", "MOU on Scientific and Educational Cooperation Between Ministry of Human Resource Development, India and Ministry of Higher Education, KSA" and other MOUs on scientific and information technology cooperation. These scholarships and financial assistance programs have facilitated access to education for students from both nations. [7]

Academic Collaboration

Several Indian universities and institutions have collaborated with their Saudi counterparts to promote academic research and cooperation. These collaborations refer to partnerships and cooperative efforts between educational institutions, researchers, or scholars to achieve common goals related to research, teaching, or other academic endeavors, which are marked by joint research projects, faculty exchanges, and academic conferences, and have enriched the knowledge landscape of both countries. These collaborations have advanced research and innovation, reinforcing the position of India and Saudi Arabia as hubs for academic excellence in their respective regions. These can occur at local, national, or international levels and can take various forms.

Saudi Arabia and India have also promoted language and cultural exchange programs, which include the teaching of the Arabic language in Indian schools and the promotion of Indian languages and culture in Saudi Arabia. Cultural centers, such as the Indian Embassy's Cultural Attaché office in Riyadh, have played a pivotal role in promoting Indian culture and language education in Saudi Arabia. These centers offer language courses, cultural events, and academic support to Indian students, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage. The Saudi Cultural Office in New Delhi also plays a vital role in promoting education to Saudi Nationals in Indian Universities, the office has particularly an academic section for Saudi students. As per 2015 statistics released by the Royal Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in New Delhi, there were 165 Saudi students enrolled in 11 Indian Universities for different courses.

In 2019, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Education, Yousef Al-Benyan, met with India's ambassador to the Kingdom to discuss ways to enhance cooperation in the education field. During his meeting with the Indian Ambassador to the Kingdom, Dr. Suhel Ajaz Khan, Al-Benyan discussed ways to develop cooperation between Saudi Arabia and India in the fields of university education, scientific research, and innovation. Al-Benyan and Khan also activated existing cooperation agreements between Saudi Arabia and India and supported cooperation between universities in the two countries. [8]

The two sides have also reviewed future cooperation opportunities between the two countries, in a way that enhances the fields of joint work within the education system, and the field of scientific exchange and scholarships between Saudi Arabia and India.

Online education has emerged as a prominent mode of learning, especially during the global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online education, providing further opportunities for collaboration. Indian universities and ed-tech companies have offered online courses, made education accessible to students in

Saudi Arabia, and strengthened educational relations. The Skill Development and Vocational Training sector has accumulated attention. Both countries have expressed interest in enhancing vocational training and skill development programs to address the demand for skilled labor and professionals in various sectors. Due to the Saudi government's interest in preparing the workforce in technical and vocational fields and the increasing need to qualify Saudi youth in technical and vocational fields, it has been decided that all areas of technical and vocational training will be under one organization. Skill development and vocational training have also emerged as significant areas of cooperation, with discussions and agreements aimed at addressing the demand for skilled labor and professionals in various sectors.

In 2021 the Indian Embassy in Saudi Arabia launched the Indian Education Forum to not only facilitate higher education of Indian students in the Kingdom but also to provide greater ease and access to the Indian education system. It was decided that the Indian students, parents, academicians, and educationists would work under the embassy's supervision. The education forum is one of the initiatives that has been launched to mark India's 75th Independence Day by India's Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Ausaf Sayeed, in 2021. August 15, 2021 also marks the 75th anniversary of bilateral relations between India and Saudi Arabia.^[9]

Furthermore, the broader economic reforms and modernization efforts, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, have opened new avenues for educational collaboration. This visionary initiative aims to diversify the Saudi economy and promote sectors like technology, healthcare, and tourism, offering ample opportunities for both nations to forge educational partnerships aligned with these goals.

The 18th G20 Summit of 2023 recently concluded in New Delhi, India, marking the first-ever G20 summit hosted by the country. The summit's theme, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (One Earth, One Family, One Future) is rooted in ancient Sanskrit texts and the goal of sustainable development. During this G20 Summit, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi engaged in a series of bilateral meetings with world leaders. India was successfully able to achieve consensus around the New Delhi Declaration early in the G20 Summit.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the significance of Saudi Arabia as "one of the most important strategic partners of India." The exchange between the two nations occurred during the state visit of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia. Their discussions encompassed various aspects of cooperation, including energy, defense, security, education, technology, transportation, healthcare, tourism, culture, space, and semiconductors. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, govt of India, at the invitation of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of the Republic of India, Shri Narendra Modi, and in the context of strengthening bilateral relations and strategic partnership between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of India, His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia paid a State visit to India on September 11, 2023. The visit followed the landmark visits of Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in October 2019 and that of HRH Crown Prince Mohammed

bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to the Republic of India in February 2019. The Saudi side extended its congratulations to the Republic of India for its successful presidency of the G20 Summit, which was held during the period of September 9-10, 2023, and commended the excellent organization and leadership that contributed to the conclusion of the Summit with constructive decisions and recommendations. The Indian side appreciated Saudi Arabia's cooperation and close and effective engagement in the G20 meetings. Official talks were held between His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia and Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, during which they reviewed means to deepen the strategic relations between the two friendly countries. In addition, views were exchanged on current regional and international issues. During the visit, the two leaders co-chaired the first meeting of the India - Saudi Strategic Partnership Council (SPC) which was set up with the signing of an Agreement by both leaders in October 2019. In this regard, the two leaders reviewed the work done under the framework of the Strategic Partnership Council and expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of the works of the two Ministerial Committees namely: (a) the Committee on Political, Security, Social and Cultural Cooperation and their subcommittees and (b) the Committee on Economy and Investments and their Joint Working Groups, which have deepened the strategic partnership between the two countries in diverse fields.^[10] At the end of the Meeting, the two leaders signed the Minutes of the Meeting in which one of the points was that "The two sides welcomed the raising of the level of scientific and educational cooperation between the two countries in the fields of higher education, research, and innovation. They also encouraged direct relations between universities and scientific and educational institutions in the two countries to achieve comprehensive and high-quality education for all."^[11]

Conclusion

The educational relationship between India and Saudi Arabia has witnessed remarkable growth and diversification in recent years, forming a crucial dimension of the evolving bilateral ties between the two nations. These developments go beyond traditional diplomacy, entering the realm of educational diplomacy, where the exchange of knowledge and academic resources plays a pivotal role in fostering mutual understanding and long-term cooperation. At the heart of this educational engagement lies the exchange of students, an important pillar of people-to-people diplomacy. A growing number of Indian students are pursuing higher education in Saudi Arabia, attracted by the quality of education, expanding academic programs in science, technology, and Islamic studies, as well as increased availability of scholarships. Conversely, Saudi students are enrolling in Indian universities, especially in fields such as medicine, engineering, and information technology, due to India's globally recognized educational institutions and cost-effective education. These exchanges are not merely academic—they contribute significantly to cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect. Students become informal ambassadors of their respective cultures, facilitating a broader awareness and appreciation of each other's traditions, values, and societal norms. This cultural

exchange nurtures a generation of leaders and professionals who are more globally aware and interconnected.

Academic collaboration between Indian and Saudi institutions has also deepened. Universities and research centers from both countries have entered into memoranda of understanding (MoUs) for joint research, faculty exchanges, and participation in academic conferences. These collaborations promote knowledge sharing, innovation, and academic excellence, especially in priority sectors such as energy, climate change, medicine, and digital technologies. Such partnerships not only improve research outputs but also enhance the global academic standing of both Indian and Saudi institutions. Indian expertise in Information Technology, pharmaceuticals, and management, combined with Saudi investments and strategic initiatives, creates a synergistic environment that benefits both countries.

The Cultural Attaché office of the Indian Embassy in Riyadh plays a vital role in sustaining these educational and cultural ties. The office promotes Indian culture and languages by organizing language courses (such as Hindi and Sanskrit), film screenings, festivals, and seminars. These initiatives serve to support Indian students in Saudi Arabia, helping them retain a connection to their roots while engaging in meaningful cultural dialogue with the host country. Moreover, such cultural activities align with broader educational goals by fostering a multicultural and inclusive academic environment. They contribute to soft diplomacy, where mutual respect and cooperation are built through shared cultural experiences rather than political negotiations alone.

Another important aspect of this evolving educational relationship is financial accessibility. Both governments and institutions have extended scholarship programs to facilitate higher education for deserving students, reducing financial barriers. In addition, the growth of online education platforms—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—has enabled broader participation in educational programs from both countries. These online initiatives are particularly impactful in expanding vocational and skill development courses, catering to a new generation of learners who are looking to gain practical skills flexibly and affordably.

The development of educational ties between India and Saudi Arabia is also closely aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which emphasizes diversification of the economy, modernization of society, and investment in human capital. Education is a key pillar of this national strategy. India, with its massive education sector and expertise in human resource development, stands as a strategic partner in helping Saudi Arabia achieve these goals. Areas such as technology, healthcare, renewable energy, and tourism have become focus points for expanded cooperation, offering opportunities for curriculum development, specialized training programs, and applied research. These engagements ensure that the educational partnership is not static but evolves with the changing socio-economic landscapes of both countries.

The strengthening of educational ties also contributes to India's soft power in the Gulf region. By supporting the development of a modern, globally connected Saudi youth who are familiar with and appreciative of Indian educational values, India can create a long-lasting impact on regional dynamics. These ties not only solidify diplomatic relations but also establish a mutual dependency based on knowledge, skills, and human development.

As both countries navigate the complexities of a globalized world, their shared commitment to education serves as a vital force in enhancing bilateral cooperation, fostering innovation, and promoting cultural harmony. Through these sustained efforts, India and Saudi Arabia are not only shaping their destinies but also contributing meaningfully to regional stability and global progress.

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