

# Admission Obstacles for Masters and PhD Students in Kingdom Of Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract.** Graduate studies in Saudi Arabia furnish scholars with strategic impetus balancing between extracurricular activities and the academic life. Lavish architecture, rejuvenating spa facilities, high tech gadgets and splendid scenic views such as of the Red Sea, intersperse the academic life of the sacred few who pass the disastrous admission process. This article dissects the admission barriers into Graduate courses, succinctly, Masters and PHD, for scholars in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This is despite a shortage of Saudi PHD to meet the spiraling demand in various faculties that are presently expatriates dominated. Adopting a blended qualitative and quantitative research approach, the researcher unravels the endemic hiatus for efficacious admission into Graduate studies in Saudi Arabia. The investigation revealed pedantic admission barriers, demotivating potential Saudis from pursuing graduate studies as: astronomically high financial cost of Graduate course and especially in private universities, family commitments, English as a language of delivery, length of course, lack of time and the commitment constraint to completing a Graduate course, university's capacity and other restrictive admission requirements. The investigation further revealed predominant facilitators for admission into the Graduate studies in KSA as career progression, work experience and intrinsic personal motivation such as attaining personal goals. The research concludes with recommendations to ease, facilitate, smoothen and tackle the Graduate admission hurdles.

**Keywords:** Graduate, Extracurricular, Admission, Barriers,

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1932, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a pauper nation with bare education program of 700 students housed 12 schools. Massive oil resources' discovery in 1938 changed the fortunes for the kingdom and increased the student's population to 42,000 in 365 schools resulting to establishment of Ministry of Education in 1954. At the time, only male students learnt, while females did not.

Increased economic development demanded the need for trained labor force. Higher learning institutions were established to meet this new demand such as the King Saud University in Riyadh in 1957, Islamic University in 1961, King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals in 1963 and King Abdul Aziz and Um Al Qura Universities in 1967. King Saud together with religion's scholars established the need for female education culminated in the first government female only school in 1960.

The principles of Islam govern women education in Saudi Arabia. As a result, women and men are taught in different classes, except at the medical schools and facilities, and at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) (*KAUST*). Notably, three of the 36 universities exclusively enroll female learners. Globally, Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University is the largest women's only university.

Both Saudi and Non-Saudis study in elementary and secondary schools at no cost, as the government funds. 95% of higher education, however, is exclusively for Saudis at no cost while the remaining 5% is reserved for sponsored and on scholarship international students (*MOE*). Saudi undergraduate and graduate scholars receive government funded stipends for joining tertiary institutions.

Over the past century, higher education in Saudi Arabia whizzed to become the most important national priority (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). According to the current crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) prince Mohammed bin Salman's development strategy as contained in *Aafaq*, momentous investment in education and economics will yield the nation's major advancement by 2030 (*MOE*). True, Higher education in Saudi Arabia takes as much as 23% of the annual government's spending. Consequently, the Saudi University system witnessed massive capacity growth between 2009 and 2018 with enrollment increasing with over 50%., and Masters and PHD study becoming a favorite for many scholars (*MOE*).

Still, the universities over the period perpetually received improved global rankings, thereby, earning outstanding global merit and recognition. For instance, King Abdulaziz University and King Saud University ranked 123 and 245 respectively globally for excellence, according to Webometrics (*WEBOMETRICS*). The global repute drew 71,773 international students into Saudi Arabia universities as at 2018.

#### Aim of Study

This research, therefore, aims at:

- a) To investigate the admission obstacles to Masters and PHD studies among universities in KSA
  - b) To assess the significance of the barriers to admission obstacles
  - c) To recommend potentially viable resolutions to each of the barriers
  - d) To attempt to forecast the future of Graduate studies in Saudi Arabia Universities
- Study Outline

The research paper is organized in five parts. The following part discussed means and ways in which the researcher identified the barriers to admission obstacles for Masters and PHD studies in Saudi Arabia. A review of the admission process is reviewed in depth and valuable statistics provided. The next part discusses the results of analysis of the statistics gathered in the previous part.

## 2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

In almost all profession, continuing professional development is an important goal. The careers professionals and scholars quest to sustain continued professional competency growth, often through advanced studies such as Masters and PHD. The number of Graduate scholars in the Kingdom of Saudi has quadrupled over the past quarter of a century.

Despite the massive investment in Saudi Arabia's tertiary education, about 60,000 Saudis cannot access Graduate studies. Increased human population growth rate coupled with demand of the economy further exacerbate the situation. The King Abdullah Scholarship program, for instance, incentivizes Saudi National to further their studies abroad. A big number of willing learners, cannot, however be admitted into Graduate studies in Saudi number to a number of reasons.

With population increase in Saudi Arabia, so does the demand for trained and competent professionals in the various fields such as health, education, Oil and gas, technical and financial sectors of the economy. Yet, the pipeline for preparation of these professionals is significantly buttressed by inadequate Saudi trainers and so expatriates prop the system.

Worse, available institutions do not have the capacity to offer graduate trainings. According to Andy, graduate degrees furnish professionals with advanced competences to conduct research, thereby developing the theoretical foundation and knowledge underlying respective practice areas. Further, graduate degrees prepare the scholars for faculty positions in education programs, impacts development of industry policy and produce qualified leaders.

Oil explosion and economic growth affects Graduate studies in Saudi Arabia. Similar to other Gulf nations, Saudi Arabia's Graduate studies largely rely on oil revenue for financing. Just like China, Saudi Arabia's diverse economy is traversing towards knowledge, competence and high quality skills. Graduate studies sit atop the oscillating crescendo of this movement. The crown prince's change of tune towards making the universities world class is pegged on admission of students into the Graduate studies.

An online desktop review coupled with review of literature did not reveal any research conducted to identify barriers to admission into Graduate studies in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf region. As a Saudi scholar, however, the researcher's personal experience and observation reflects those of other Saudi students while applying for Graduate studies.

Desk based research involves scouring academic online databases using a suitable online search engine to gather research materials. Search parameters included the content, accuracy, scope, authority and relevance of web based reports, articles and materials. The majority of sources entailed peer reviewed journals supplemented with national reports from Saudi Government agencies and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

While retrieving the information, it was not lost to the investigator that local studies often appeared as peripheral to mainstream western based in context literature prevalent in scholarly journals. Consequently, this article offers a novel contribution to privilege and legitimize local Saudi based studies; juxtaposing Western focused literature, that predominantly mirror Canadian, European and north American cultures, for instance. Nonetheless, a few items are drawn from these literatures more so to explore, compare and explain resemblance to graduate studies admission barriers in Saudi Arabia. The researcher is a native Saudi scholar offering "cultural insider" perspective into the plight of native Saudis interested in pursuing graduate studies locally.

## **2.1 University Admission for Graduate Courses in KSA**

The Council for Higher Education's resolution no.3 in its (6<sup>th</sup>) Session of the year 1417AH in article 1 clarifies that the objective of graduate studies includes:

- a.) To enable outstanding students among bachelor degree holders to carry on their higher education locally
- b.) To prepare specialized scientific and professional competencies and give them high rehabilitation in various field of knowledge
- c.) To encourage scientific competencies to cope with the rapid progress of science and technology and encourage them on creativity, innovation and the development and direction of scientific research to address issues of Saudi Society (Abdulcalder, 2015).

The article further stresses that while the University Senate shall award the PhD (Al-Alimiyyah Al-Aliyah), Masters (Al-Alimiyyah) and Diploma, the Deanship of Graduate studies sets the threshold prerequisites for admission into a graduate study.

At present, there are 30 state funded and 10 private funded universities in Saudi Arabia complemented by 42 higher education colleges authorized to offer Graduate studies in the kingdom. Admission into Graduate studies in the kingdom mirror similar systems in United Kingdom and United States of America. As a prerequisite, students must possess a Bachelor's degree prior to Masters Graduate study. Equally, admission into a PHD program requires one to have a Master's degree. The students must also provide proof of mastery of English language, more so, where the studies are delivered in English. According to Richards, barriers to graduate studies among learning adults could be categorized into three, namely: institutional barriers, situational barriers and dispositional barriers. Institutional barriers include university based admission hindrances that discourage or exclude adults. Institutional barriers also include barriers gyrating around the application process. Situational barriers are encumbrances that arise from a potential learner's life situation such as financial impact, work-life balance, family and personal commitments, as well as age, while dispositional barriers refer to a person's perceptions and attitudes as a graduate learner and concerns such as returning to study.

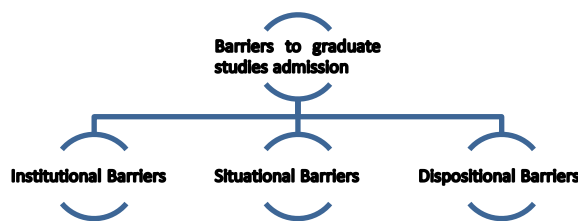


Figure 1 Barriers to Graduate Studies Admission

## 2.2 Capacity of Saudi Universities to offer Graduate Studies

The biggest capacity challenge for most universities in Saudi Arabia to offer graduate courses is inadequate native PHD holders. Foreign expatriates dominate in all faculties. This is incongruent with the Ministry of Education's policy that demands 80% of faculty members in any school must hold doctoral degree, largely fueled by few Saudi nationals with doctorate degrees.

## 3.0 RESULTS

According to survey published by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia in September 2018, 46% of all PHDs in the country belong to Saudi nationals while 54% belong to non-Saudis. The survey focused on faculties among the 36 universities in Saudi Arabia. According to the survey, there were 33,787 PHDs among the 36 universities. Of these, 10,650 Saudis held them while 23,137 non-Saudis held the rest. The table below summarizes distribution of PHDs among a few universities in Saudi Arabia.

Table 1 PHDs distribution in KSA Universities

Sno	University's Name	No of Saudi PHDs	No of non-Saudi PHDs	Total No of PHDs	% of Saudi PHD
1.	Bisha University	40	342	382	10.47
2.	Jouf University	100	562	662	15.11
3.	Northern Borders University	70	505	575	13.86
4.	Prince Sattam University	165	912	1077	15.32
5.	Jazan University	149	792	941	15.83
6.	Hafr Al Batin University	41	185	226	18.14
7.	Hail University	136	580	716	18.99
8.	Qassim University	456	1341	1797	25.38
9.	Tabuk University	167	638	805	26.18
10.	Taif University	411	1194	1605	25.61
11.	King Faisal University	292	751	1043	28.00
12.	Shaqraa University	189	416	605	45.43
13.	Princess Noura University	674	295	969	69.56

Towards effecting the Ministry of Education's policy, universities must continually enroll native Saudi nationals into their graduate study courses, establishing, creating and expanding the current Masters and doctorate programs, for both men and women alike (Al-Dali,Fnais & Newbould, 2013). For instance, Master's degrees for female nurses are offered at only three colleges in the whole kingdom. There are no master's degree programs for men, yet there is an increasing demand for male nurses.

Aligned to gender segregation philosophy, none of the universities offer nursing doctoral degrees to either of the gender. The following table summarizes Masters and PHD enrolment in Saudi Arabia universities between 2013 and 2016 according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

Table 2 Trend Analysis of Graduate Studies enrolment in KSA

Graduate Course	2013	2014	2015	2016
Doctorate	5652	5607	7164	7584
Masters	66074	70411	75225	79100

The picture below is a graphical representation of Masters and PHDs enrolment trend in Saudi Arabian universities according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

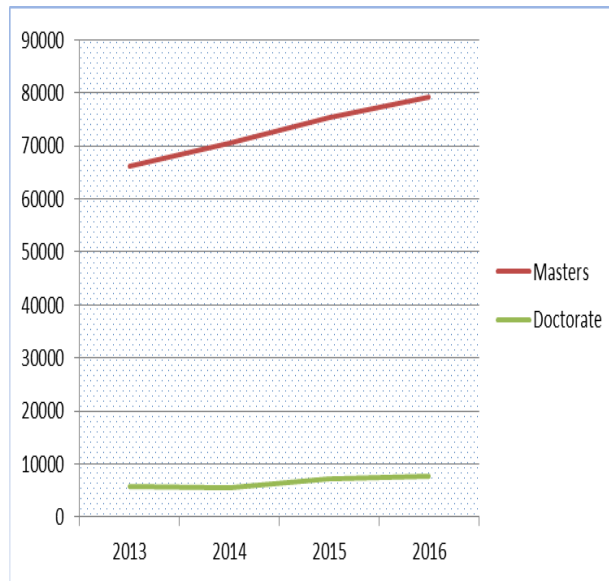


Figure 2 Trend analysis in Masters and PHD enrolment in KSA universities

The table below summarizes native Saudi nationals holding various leadership positions in Saudi Universities.

Table 3 Graduate leaders in KSA universities

Position	Number of Women	Number of Men
Deputy Dean of Faculty	228	542
Dean	61	330
Vice President	12	128
Director of University	1	33
Total	302	1033

Notable researches identify linguistic barrier as a predominant encumbrance to graduate studies admission in Saudi Arabia (Ibeaheem, Elawady & Ragmoun, 2018). In particular, English language poses difficult challenges for most target graduate learners. A majority of potential graduate scholars fail to secure admission due to insufficient mastery of English language and motivation and vice versa. Gardner describes a motivated graduate learner, in this context, as one who desires to scale a particular height and experiences satisfaction while undertaking activities aimed at accomplishing this milestone.

## 4.0 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers include university based admission hindrances that discourage or limit persons from successful admission into them. Associative institutional barriers for Saudi Arabian universities include application deadline, course length, demand for English language

proficiency tests, geographical locations and courses on offer (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). The Saudi Arabian universities are fairly distributed in the 13 administrative units but are found in major towns, do not offer online graduate courses and offer a restrictive application deadline. English language too, presents as a major restrictive bar to graduate studies admission.

According to Gardner, learner's motivation influences their language achievement together with experiences in informal and formal language context influence motivation and attitudes (Ibeaheem, Elawady & Ragmoun, 2018). Consequently, integrative-ness reflects an assertive interest towards another group or language. Naturally, learning English language comprises association with the English culture. As a result, attracting English speakers into the Saudi Arabian daily lives will motivate attitudes towards English culture. Language attitude has been found to be the best pointer to English language achievement among successful learners followed by attitude towards the learning institution. Similar studies conducted among military personnel yielded same results.

Bartley found significantly lower aptitude scores among drop outs of English language study (Ibeaheem, Elawady & Ragmoun, 2018). Such students also showed less positive attitudes to as compared to students who desired to advance their studies. Native Saudi students apprehensive to learn English language best fits within the definition of the term language anxiety. It refers to the apprehension experienced when a context demands use of a second language, succinctly, which the learner is not fully proficient. This causes a learner to react nervously when listening, reading, speaking and writing in the second language.

#### 4.2 Graduate studies Affordability

Private Universities in Saudi Arabia represents recent development trends in higher education in the Kingdom. They are perceived to offer higher quality education as juxtaposed by the public universities (Ibeaheem, Elawady & Ragmoun, 2018). The latter provide better and blended learning, teaching and extracurricular activities. Still, private universities are perceived to exponentially increase graduates' employability due to their superior features as listed above in addition to stressing on practical class assignments complemented with internships that bridge graduates more directly with the labor practices (Aldogailbi, 2015). The private universities augment the state sponsored universities in enabling students' access higher education.

The Saudi Arabian government through the ministry of higher education funds the state universities. The government, therefore, is the sole source of funding for the universities. There is a trend among private universities to solely depend on student loans and tuition fees to finance their activities. Universities end up surcharging exorbitant and restrictive tuition fees, and especially for graduate studies. For instance, the average admission fee for a Master's degree course is SAR 1050 which is also nonrefundable (Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013). The table below summarizes average graduate admission cost for selected private universities in Saudi Arabia.

**Table 4 Graduate studies admission cost in select Private Universities in KSA**

University's name	English Placement Test Fee (SAR)	Graduate Admissions Test (SAR)	Tuition Fee (SAR)
Effat University	630	420	273294
Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd University	660	0	125000
Alfaisal University	500	5000	200000
Almaarefa University	3000		

Despite these costs, a graduate student incurs additional costs such as library access, travel, thesis development, books and research costs. Additional auxiliary costs include accommodation, housing, groceries, meals and attending conferences. These costs and especially among learners in private universities hinder many from pursuing or getting admission into graduate courses.

#### **4.3 Time**

As part of Situational barriers to admission into graduate studies, studied participants emphasized anticipated challenge managing school and personal and work life to strike a crucial balance. In a group of eight studied participants, five regretted the importance of personal and family time needs vice vis graduate study time, and that the latter would envelop their lives with stress, thereby hindering them from applying into a graduate study program (Al-Dali,Fnais & Newbould, 2013). Competing time demands for life and work balance worsened by the recognition that graduate studies added to their over the brim with schedules life, required personal sacrifices, unappealing to the majority. The thought that graduate studies such as Masters and doctorate degrees took two to three and half years was unfathomable to say the least among studied scholars.

Associated with time was the applicants' age. Most expressed concern at their age, experience level and time of life at which they joined graduate study course mattered as it was a life changing decision. Younger potential learners are more likely to succeed in graduate study admission process than their older mates.

#### **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The native Saudi Arabian scholars' quest to pursue graduate studies for three main reasons, namely: personal and professional challenge, attaining professional goal and mentor, role model or peer support fueling. While focusing on students with bachelor's degrees likely to study graduate studies, their responses were purely observation based rather than based on their personal experiences. Barriers to admission into graduate studies among native Saudi Arabia were divided into three, namely: situational, dispositional and institutional barriers.

Situational barriers include work life balance, financial impact and personal and family commitments of potential graduate study admission applicant. Institutional barriers identified as associative to Saudi Arabian universities included the location, application deadline, graduate study courses on offer, English language proficiency requirement, inadequate native Saudi Arabia masters and doctorate role models and unaffordable tuition fee especially among the private universities.

Identified dispositional factors included the possible applicant's attitudes and perspectives towards graduate study courses. Despite this, the study identified possible solutions as establishment and expansion of current universities and especially in rural areas. The government's active deployment of significant resources to higher education sector including stipends to university scholars are smart strategies in the right direction. Further, alternative education strategies in graduate studies such as open and distance learning, online learning and satellite campuses will attract native Saudis into graduate study courses.

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