

# ICEF Monitor

## Report: Saudi scholarship programme to sharpen focus on top universities

*Short on time? Here are the highlights:*

- *The Saudi government is moving aggressively to cut spending this year on the heels of a US\$100 billion deficit in 2015*
- *The 2016 edition of the International Exhibition & Conference on Higher Education (IECHE) in Riyadh has been cancelled*
- *The Saudi government has introduced a cap on pre-academic language studies in the US*
- *The government has also recently announced new eligibility requirements for students who apply for funding after enrolling in institutions abroad; those students must now be in one of the world's top 50 academic programmes in their field or one of the world's top 100 universities*

Very few international education initiatives have had the impact of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah Scholarship Programme (KASP). First established in 2005, the programme has sent hundreds of thousands of Saudi students abroad in the years since with full funding support.

At its inception in 2005, there were just over 3,000 Saudi students in the US, a country that has been the primary destination for KASP-funded students in the years since and that saw its Saudi enrolment swell to just under 60,000 students in 2014/15 (for a nearly 2,000% increase over the last ten years). For the past five years in a row, Saudi Arabia has been the fourth-largest sending country for the US.

Canada has enjoyed similar growth and hosted about 14,000 Saudi students in 2014. Saudi Arabia is Canada's fifth-largest sending market as well, and accounted for just over 4% of the country's international enrolment in 2014. Saudi Arabia plays a smaller, yet still notable role in the UK, where it is the seventh-largest sending market.

### Shifting focus

KASP has been extended three times since 2005, [most recently in 2012](#) when it was announced the programme would continue through 2020. As recently as two months ago, the projection was that the KASP would fund as many as 55,000 students up to 2020. It has been clear, however, that the programme is also becoming more targeted in an attempt to address persistent labour market issues in Saudi Arabia.

The current iteration of KASP is focused on current public-sector employees as well as candidates who have a job offer from a governmental organisation – under the theme “[Your Career, Your](#)

[Scholarship](#)” – the idea being that scholarship recipients would then have a secure job to return to in Saudi Arabia.

One of the implications of this is that KASP has become a more restrictive programme in some respects, and now operates with a higher threshold for academic and language qualifications. The practical implications of this decision began to show in 2015 when the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM), the body that oversees KASP in the US, introduced [a six-month limit on funding for pre-academic language training](#).

At that point, Saudi Arabia was the leading sending country for Intensive English Programmes (IEPs) in the US and accounted for about 30% of all IEP enrolment in America. The effect of the new six-month limit on language study has already been felt with many IEPs in the US reporting a decline in enrolment in the months since.

Sending to top universities

More recently, there have been signs of further significant changes in KASP, and perhaps more broadly in Saudi education.

First, there was the news that International Exhibition & Conference on Higher Education ([IECHE](#)) would be cancelled this year. The IECHC has been held in Riyadh every spring for the last six years, and had quickly become the region’s leading international recruitment event. The reason for this year’s unexpected cancellation remains unclear. There is, however, some suggestion that it may have simply been a financial decision as it was reportedly an expensive event for the sponsoring government ministry to mount.

Reports also began to circulate late last year of a significant change in policy for KASP, one that would see the programme refocus its funding to support only students enrolled at the world’s top universities. One update, from [CBC News in Canada](#), quoted Peter Halpin, the executive director of the Association of Atlantic Universities, as saying that he had been advised that KASP was being “reshaped and would now only support students at the world’s 200 best universities.”

There has been no official confirmation of this policy. Indeed, official policy is difficult to track with any precision in Saudi Arabia. Earlier this month, however, we saw the first indication of a government statement on a new direction for KASP.

Reuters has reported on a cabinet statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA). The statement indicated that [the government has set new eligibility requirements for KASP](#), including that students who apply for funding after enrolling in institutions abroad must now be in one of the world’s top 50 academic programmes in their field or one of the world’s top 100 universities, as determined by the Saudi Ministry of Education.

This move appears in part to be an attempt to constrain one of the ways through which students have accessed scholarship support in recent years, and could be seen as an extension of the government’s previously announced commitment to tie scholarship funding more explicitly to secure public-sector employment in Saudi Arabia. To this point, there have been two broad paths to KASP

funding for Saudi students: (i) apply for funding before going abroad to study or (ii) first begin studies abroad and then apply for funding support. The tighter eligibility requirements introduced by cabinet this month appear squarely aimed at limiting access for the latter group.

“The new rules were proposed by a council chaired by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that is reining in state spending and seeking greater efficiency in many areas to narrow a huge state budget deficit caused by low oil prices,” adds Reuters. “The tighter requirements look likely to bring down government spending on a programme many young Saudis have come to view as an entitlement.”

The underlying story here of course is the collapse of world oil prices. Plunging commodity prices have hit the Saudi treasury hard and led to [a deficit of nearly US\\$98 billion in 2015 alone](#). The government is now moving aggressively to cut spending and reform its finances. The 2016 budget aims to reduce spending by roughly 14% this year, and further reductions are expected in the years ahead if indeed oil prices remain near their current levels for any length of time.

All of this means that students, and agents, and educators will be watching closely for further shifts in KASP policy in the months ahead. It is hard to overstate the significance of the programme, both in terms of the impact on destination countries but also in [its social and cultural impacts](#) – to say nothing of its popular appeal – within Saudi Arabia. Any significant shift in access to the programme would be widely felt within destination countries but also of course by Saudi students and employers.

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