Positioning Vision 2030 within the International Higher Education Landscape: Saudi Higher Education and International Transformation

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Abstract
This study explores how the Saudi Universities Law of 2019 is transforming higher education in Saudi Arabia and shaping universities' contributions to Vision 2030. It examines how institutions are modernizing curricula, strengthening governance, fostering industry partnerships, and developing diverse revenue streams. The study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design whereby data was collected through semi-structured interviews with maximum-variation sample of 25 faculty members from 14 universities across six provinces.
Findings reveal that Saudi universities are embracing modernization, with the law providing autonomy and guiding reforms in curricula, technology integration, and program accreditation. Supported by the Ministry of Education, universities are aligning education with labor market needs, pursuing financial self-sufficiency through partnerships and paid programs, and attracting top local and international talent. Accreditation by the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA) has strengthened standards, improved program quality, and enhanced competitiveness. Technical colleges complement these efforts by equipping students with practical skills, while universities increasingly bridge the gap between graduate qualifications and workforce demands.
The main implication of this study is that Saudi Arabia's national vision can be most effectively achieved when institutional excellence is not confined to a small number of internationally competitive universities but gradually expanded across the broader higher education system.
Key words: Higher education, Policy, Universities law of 2019, Vision 2030, Modernization, Labor market

I. Introduction:

Higher education systems are undergoing fast and deep transformations driven by globalization, the digital revolution, international competitiveness, the knowledge economy, and the growing drive toward internationalizing higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019; Marginson, 2022). In addition, major national visions have emerged as strategic frameworks for reshaping the roles of higher education institutions. These visions focus on ensuring the enhancement of universities' international competitiveness, improving the quality of their outputs, and broadening their contributions to economic, social, and cultural development (Deem, Mok, & Lucas, 2008; Salmi, 2009). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

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was introduced as a comprehensive transformative project that aimed at restructuring all national sectors, including higher education. This restructuring of higher education was accorded a strategic priority and considered one of the primary drivers for building human capital, advancing the knowledge economy, and achieving global competitiveness (Al-Youbi, Al-Zahrani, Hajailan, & Almanie, 2020; Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabia, 2017).

There is a growing body of literature, which addresses both Vision 2030 and Saudi higher education. Yet, most of these studies have focused on issues such as educational quality, digital transformation, global rankings, or labor market alignment. Accordingly, this uncovers gaps in literature manifested in not providing a comprehensive analysis of how Vision 2030 is positioned within the international higher education context (Hamdan, 2014; Abalkhail, 2020; Elyas & Picard, 2013). Another gap also exists and manifested in connecting Vision 2030 with the concept of "International Transformation" in higher education from strategic and comparative perspective that examines Saudi Arabia's positioning within the international higher education environment (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Levin, 2020).

The research problem of this study thus emerges from the absence of a framework that interprets the way Vision 2030 is positioned within the international higher education landscape. This framework is needed to provide analysis of the dimensions of the international transformation that Saudi higher education is undergoing within the international higher education context (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2015; Rhoads & Torres, 2006). Most importantly, the research gap is further characterized by the scarcity — indeed near absence — of scientific studies that have addressed this subject directly and comprehensively within the scope of the current study, particularly in terms of linking Vision 2030 to the international transformation of Saudi higher education within a comparative global context (Al-Rawabdeh, 2021; Jamjoom & Kelly, 2013).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is positioned within the international higher education landscape, and to explore the outlines of the international transformation that Saudi higher education is undergoing. This will be accomplished through answering the following research question: How is Saudi higher education repositioning itself within the international higher education landscape through the reforms driven by Vision 2030 and the Saudi Universities Law of 2019? Answering this research question supports the exploration of the policies, initiatives, and institutional transformations that are associated with the Vision, and the analysis of their implications for international competitiveness, internationalization, scientific research, global partnerships, and human capital development (Teichler, 2017; Scott, 2011; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). The study further attempts to offer an analytical framework that can contribute to understanding the future of Saudi higher education in light of rapidly accelerating global transformations.

II. The Transformation of Saudi Higher Education in the Context of Vision 2030: From Structural Constraints to International Repositioning

A. Fundamental Pillars of Saudi Vision 2030

Saudi Vision 2030 rests on three fundamental pillars anchored deeply in the Saudi soul. First, the Kingdom will play a major role in the Middle East region and beyond, as it is the vibrant heart of the Arab and Islamic world. Second, the Kingdom will become a world investment “Power House.” Third, the Kingdom will transform its unique strategic location into an international trade “hub,” connecting the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa.

The Crown Prince and The Prime Minister, His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, was convinced that the vision he laid out for his country, with his Father’s blessing, is ambitious yet easily achievable (The Economist, January 6, 2016). For, the Kingdom, he asserted, is endowed with ample natural resources, enjoys collective determination, exudes optimism for the future, has a strong legacy, and offers a special promise for its citizens. It is important to note that the passion and the pride that permeate Saudi Vision 2030 come from Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who wanted to have the aspirations and ambitions of his people quickly realized and see his country as a place where all Saudis can fulfill their dreams. “We will not rest until our nation is a

leader in providing opportunities for all through education, training, and high quality services, such as employment initiatives, health, housing, and entertainment." (Al Otaiba and Al Shadi, 2020).

To realize his and his Father's dream, his Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia called on all private and public Saudi institutions to commit to advancing the realization of Vision 2030. In particular, his Royal Highness called on Saudi higher education institutions to reform, focus on the development of Saudi human resources, native talent, and the graduation of qualified Saudi students to meet the requirements of the Saudi labor market and beyond. Through vision 2030, his Royal Highness asked schools and universities, teachers, faculty, and staff to work together to strengthen the fabric of Saudi society and provide students with a strong education defined by "academic excellence, compassionate behavior, exemplary character, and proper qualifications for the Saudi labor market." In sum, he wanted Saudi higher education to become a major force in the realization of Vision 2030.

B.The Saudi State of Higher Education before the Promulgation of Saudi Universities Law of 2019 in Response to Saudi Vision 2030.

The Saudi government established in 1975 the Ministry of Higher Education to plan for and coordinate the education and training of young Saudi men and women to contribute meaningfully to the Kingdom's development, run competently an increasingly sophisticated oil and gas economy, and serve well Saudi society (Al Aquil 2013; Al-Yami 2018).

To that end, the newly created ministry proceeded to establish new institutions of higher education throughout the Kingdom and strengthen already existing ones. Unfortunately, Saudi universities did not all maintain high academic standards and continued to graduate large numbers of students unqualified for the requirements of Saudi labor market (Al-issa, 2017; Jameh, 2011; Nashash, 2015), as indicated in 2013 by the Ministry of Education's Agency for Planning and Development. Even before the establishment of Vision 2030, Albahsin (2006), Dimanhouri (2013), and Al Otaiba (2010) flagged this challenge.

C. Reasons for the Inadequacy of Saudi Graduates for the Saudi labor Market Were Many and Varie

First, there was a minimal input by the Saudi business community into the making of Saudi academic programs to qualify graduates for employment in the Saudi labor market and contribute to the realization of Vision 2030 (Yunus, 2002 and Al Sissi, 2018). The Saudi private sector did not share with Saudi higher education institutions the requirements for employment in the Saudi labor market (Aref and Others, 2018; Badri, 2017; Fadil 2010). Thus Saudi universities continued to graduate large numbers of unqualified young Saudi men and women for the Saudi labor market and contribute to a serious unemployment challenge in the Kingdom (Al Mulatham and Al Basari 2016). Second, the slow pace with which Saudi higher education responded to the needs of the Saudi labor market, which was "hangry," for relevant talent (Al-Yami 2018), was a serious issue even before the promulgation of Vision 2030 and Universities Law of 2019. Third, the speed of change that is gripping the Saudi and the world labor markets in response to the requirements of the new economies, and the rapid technological developments, including AI and its progeny, that are driving everything we do, have not yet had a significant impact on Saudi higher education (Yunus 2002; Al-Sissi 2018). Fourth, according to Hadia Al Baqi (2018), the structure in Saudi universities and colleges with a few exceptions (e.g., King Abdul Aziz University; King Fahd University), did not encourage enough innovation, creativity, and critical thinking. The Saudi government responded to this challenge by adopting the Universities Law of 2019.

III. The Saudi Universities Law of 2019 and the Modernization of Saudi Higher Education in Line with Vision 2030.

To help Saudi institutions of higher education modernize (Al-Harbi; Abdel Qadir 2020; Al-Sissi 2018) and meet the goals of Vision 2030, the Saudi Minister of education announced, on behalf of the Saudi government, the establishment of the 2019 Universities Law. The new law called for improvement in the preparation of Saudi youth for the Saudi labor market and beyond; strengthening the effective use of human capital in Saudi institutions of higher education (Al-Harbi 2022); empowering Saudi universities to define their strategic direction; and realizing a significant level of national and international distinction

and competitiveness. Realization of the new goals in Saudi higher education were essential to the rapid economic and social advancement of the Kingdom.

Moreover, the new law granted universities "responsible independence", ability to decide on their academic programs and areas of specialization, guided by Vision 2030 and local needs. The Saudi government hoped that by implementing the new law, Saudi institutions of higher education would rely less on the Kingdom's national budget, decrease the cost of running their universities, and find new sources of revenue through the establishment of independent investment companies or in cooperation with the private sector.

Further, the new Law required Saudi universities as well to achieve accreditation, allowed them to have independent boards of trustees, and urged them to apply the new law gradually with the guidance of the Council of University Affairs, chaired by the Minister of Education.

The Saudi government hoped that the new law would help Saudi higher education institutions modernize their academic programs, strengthen governance, promote national and international distinctiveness and competitiveness, and realize effective human, academic, and administrative resources in accordance with established international standards. To help Saudi institutions of higher education modernize their curriculum offerings to suit the needs of the local and international labor market, the law also urged Saudi companies to define for the benefit of Saudi higher education the professional, trade, and digital skills needed by the private sector in a growing economy (Aram and Sabeth, 2023).

It is important to note that Lina Bint Sleiman Al-Khlewi in a study done in 2018 and published in Al Balqah Journal (2020) pointed to the important role of Saudi technical colleges in preparing Saudi students for employment in the labor market. Other experts recommended the expansion of continuing education offerings to help employed Saudis upgrade their skills and refine their talents as required by a constantly changing employment market (Al Ahmadi, 2016). This concern was addressed to a certain extent by the establishment on October 8, 2011 of the Saudi Electronic University that offers both graduate and undergraduate degree programs with life-long learning to complement the program offerings of regular higher education institutions (Al Otaiba 2018).

IV. Research Methodology

A. Methodology Section

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design which is suitable for exploring participants' perspectives, constructing meaning from lived experiences, and illuminating the complexities of educational policy in context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach emphasizes depth in analysis, allowing participants' own words and experiences to serve as the primary source of analytical -an epistemological stance especially appropriate for examining multifaceted policy reforms such as those embedded within the Saudi Universities Law of 2019 and the broader Vision 2030 agenda.

B. Data Collection

The study utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. This method provides flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, perspectives, and concerns, while simultaneously ensuring thematic consistency across interviews through a shared set of guiding questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each participant responded to ten open-ended questions covering the following core domains: awareness and understanding of the Universities Law; perceptions of higher education modernization; alignment between graduates' qualifications and labor market needs; accreditation effectiveness; institutional financial independence; and vocational and technical training within the Vision 2030 framework. The interview protocol was developed iteratively, drawing on a review of relevant policy documents and existing literature. Interviews were conducted in Arabic language, audio-recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim, then translated to preserve the integrity of participants' accounts.

C. Sampling Strategy and Participant Characteristics

A maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) was deliberately adopted to ensure a diverse and representative range of perspectives across multiple dimensions, including academic rank, disciplinary background, institutional type, and geographic location. This strategy aimed to enrich interpretive depth

and enhance the transferability of findings by capturing the widest possible range of relevant experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A total of 25 faculty members from 14 universities located across six of Saudi Arabia's 13 administrative provinces participated in the study. The geographic distribution was as follows: four universities in Mecca Province (nine interviewees); four universities in Riyadh Province (seven interviewees); one university in Tabuk Province (three interviewees); one university in the Northern Borders Province (one interviewee); three universities in the Eastern Province (four interviewees); and one university in Al-Qassim Province (one interviewee). This distribution ensured the inclusion of institutions where the new law was among the first to be implemented—namely King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, and Imam Abdul Rahman Bin Faisal University—alongside a range of other public universities, thereby enabling meaningful comparative analysis across institutional contexts.

Participants represented a range of academic ranks, including assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors, drawn from diverse disciplinary fields including the sciences, humanities, engineering, social sciences, and education. This variation was intentional, as differences in rank and discipline may shape faculty members' differential exposure to, and interpretation of, policy reforms. All participants had a minimum of three years of experience within the Saudi higher education system, ensuring a sufficient baseline of institutional familiarity to speak meaningfully to the research questions.

D. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework, which provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. This approach was selected for its compatibility with an interpretive epistemological stance to develop conceptual synthesis and analytical abstraction (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

The analytical process followed six main phases. First, all interview transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the data, and initial notes were recorded in a research journal. Then open coding was used whereby codes were generated from participants' own words and relevant meanings. These codes were grouped into possible themes based on shared ideas and links to the research questions. The themes were reviewed against the coded extracts to ensure that they were clear, coherent, and meaningful. Each final theme was then defined and given a suitable name that reflected its main idea. The final report presented the themes with selected participant quotations and discussed them in relation to previous studies.

To enhance the analytical rigor, the two authors coded a randomly selected subset of transcripts independently, after which codes and emerging themes were compared and discussed until consensus was reached. Any coding disagreements were resolved through inter-rater reliability in qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, as the data collection process extended over a period of more than one year and a half. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, both authors independently reviewed and coded a sample of the interview transcripts. The researchers then compared their interpretations and discussed any differences until agreement was reached. This collaborative process helped improve consistency in coding and supported the trustworthiness of the findings.

Triangulation was maintained through variation in the interview context. Some interviews were conducted online using Zoom or Microsoft Teams, while others were conducted face-to-face in participants' offices. This variation helped capture participants' views across different interaction settings. It also reduced reliance on a single mode of data collection and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

E. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were assigned alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1, P2 … P25) in all reporting to protect their identities. Participation

was entirely voluntary, and participants were explicitly informed at the beginning of each interview of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

F. Limitations

The main limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. Although the sample was intentionally diverse, it cannot statistically represent all stakeholders in Saudi higher education. The findings reflect the views of the participants who were available and willing to take part in the study. Other limitations include the possible influence of translation from Arabic to English and the changing nature of Saudi higher education policy during and after data collection. Therefore, the findings remain valuable, but they should be interpreted with caution and not generalized too broadly.

V. Results and Discussion

A. Familiarity with Vision 2030 and the Universities Law of 2019

Participants demonstrated strong awareness of Saudi Vision 2030 and the Universities Law of 2019. However, their interpretations of the reform varied according to institutional context, professional experience, and level of involvement in university governance. Across the interviews, the Universities Law was not viewed merely as an administrative reform; rather, participants perceived it as a transformative restructuring intended to reposition Saudi universities academically, financially, and globally.

Several participants described the pre-2019 higher education system as highly centralized and standardized. Participant (P15) explained that Saudi universities previously operated under "a unified regulation for all universities," which resulted in universities becoming "almost similar copies" in terms of programs, structures, and outcomes. This perception was echoed by participant (P7), who stated that universities before the reform represented "a similar educational system performing the same role and objectives," with programs replicated across institutions without differentiation.

Participants interpreted the new Universities Law as an attempt to move institutions away from uniformity toward institutional autonomy, specialization, competitiveness, and innovation. Participant (P2) described the reform as "a shift from centralization to semi-centralization," emphasizing that universities were gradually gaining greater authority over their own operations while still functioning within a nationally guided framework. Similarly, participant (P3) stated that the reform aimed at "freeing universities from bureaucratic restrictions," particularly in areas related to academic approvals, curriculum development, and administrative procedures.

The notion of autonomy emerged repeatedly across the interviews. Participant (P7) emphasized that the law granted universities "financial and administrative independence" and enabled them to apply "global practices" in order to become internationally competitive institutions. Likewise, participant (P20) argued that the reform "gave universities flexibility and administrative and financial independence," allowing them to develop programs and better serve society. Participant (P21) similarly explained that the reform represented "a positive step toward administrative and academic independence" and reduced bureaucratic rigidity within universities.

Participant (P24) also perceived the Universities Law as part of a broader transformation intended to align higher education with national development priorities and market changes. The participant explained that the system was updated "in a way that keeps pace with the changes occurring in the market and with the flexible achievement of Vision 2030 objectives." Furthermore, the participant emphasized that universities should become "an active element in helping students acquire the skills and knowledge needed by the Kingdom to achieve Vision 2030."

Participants also linked the reform directly to Vision 2030 and the Human Capability Development Program. Several interviewees viewed the law as part of a broader national transformation agenda aimed at enhancing institutional quality, competitiveness, and responsiveness to labor market needs. Participant (P23) explained that the purpose of the reform was "to keep pace with global best practices" and improve educational outcomes in support of national human capability development goals. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing that Vision 2030 seeks to reposition Saudi universities as globally competitive institutions capable of supporting economic diversification and knowledge-based development (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016; Elyas & Picard, 2018).

Participant (P25) similarly emphasized that the Universities Law represented a major shift because it replaced a system that had remained in place for more than twenty-six years. The participant explained that one of the most significant objectives of the reform was granting universities "greater authority in managing their financial and academic affairs" while increasing institutional resources through private-sector partnerships and research investment.

At the same time, the findings revealed uneven experiences regarding the implementation of the Universities Law. Participants from large or strategically selected universities described visible institutional transformation, while participants from peripheral or emerging institutions expressed uncertainty regarding the actual extent of reform implementation. Participant (P4) clarified that "we have not yet felt a real substantial change," suggesting that the reform had not been experienced equally across all universities. Similarly, participant (P19) argued that it was still "too early to measure the impact" of the reform because many universities were still learning how to interpret and apply the new regulations.

Moreover, several participants stressed that implementation remained limited to selected universities. Participant (P15) explained that the new system was initially applied only to a few institutions, including King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, and Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University. Participant (P22) also noted that "the experiment is still limited to a number of universities," making it difficult to fully evaluate long-term outcomes.

Participant (P1) emphasized that one of the most significant transformations introduced by the Universities Law involved changing universities from highly centralized governmental entities into more strategically autonomous institutions capable of making faster academic and administrative decisions. The participant explained that the previous system often delayed institutional responsiveness because universities were heavily dependent on centralized approvals and regulations. According to the participant, the reform encouraged universities to become "more flexible and more capable of strategic movement in response to labor market and societal needs." This finding reinforces participants' broader perception that institutional autonomy is increasingly viewed not merely as administrative decentralization, but as a strategic mechanism for enhancing institutional competitiveness and adaptability within Vision 2030 reforms. Such findings correspond with Alsharari (2018), who argued that governance reform within Saudi higher education increasingly aims to strengthen institutional agility and strategic responsiveness.

Overall, the findings suggest that participants perceived the Universities Law of 2019 as a foundational mechanism for restructuring Saudi higher education. The reform was associated with institutional autonomy, reduced bureaucracy, increased competitiveness, and alignment with Vision 2030. However, participants simultaneously highlighted implementation disparities, institutional readiness challenges, and the gradual nature of systemic transformation. These findings support previous studies arguing that higher education reforms within Saudi Arabia remain in a transitional phase characterized by both ambitious national aspirations and uneven institutional capacities (Alghamdi & Tight, 2022; Alsharari, 2018).

B. Modernization of Saudi Higher Education

Participants consistently described Saudi higher education as being in a period of accelerated modernization. However, modernization was not discussed solely in technological terms; rather, participants associated it with comprehensive institutional, curricular, organizational, and cultural transformation.

One of the most frequently discussed dimensions of modernization was curriculum reform. Participants explained that Saudi universities have increasingly shifted toward dynamic and continuously updated curricula that align with labor market demands and emerging global trends. Participant (P15) noted that universities now possess "greater awareness of updating and developing curricula," explaining that most academic departments have established specialized committees dedicated to program development and curriculum review.

Participant (P24) similarly emphasized that curriculum modernization increasingly depends on examining labor market requirements, global educational practices, and previous institutional experiences. The participant stated that "By examining labor market requirements, global practices, and previous experiences… universities are able to update their curricula." This finding demonstrates that curriculum reform within Saudi universities is becoming increasingly evidence-based and externally informed rather than internally isolated. Participants perceived modernization as requiring continuous environmental scanning, benchmarking, and responsiveness to international trends. This corresponds with literature emphasizing that modern higher education systems increasingly rely on adaptability and global benchmarking to maintain competitiveness (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007).

Similarly, participant (P16) described curriculum modernization as a response to market needs and technological transformation, explaining that universities have begun introducing artificial intelligence, programming, data analytics, and interdisciplinary learning into academic programs. The participant further stated that "most engineering, management, and even science students now study programming, artificial intelligence, and data analysis because these have become essential fields touching all disciplines." This finding reflects a broader shift toward future-oriented competencies and interdisciplinary learning models. It also aligns with literature emphasizing that Saudi universities are increasingly restructuring curricula to support digital transformation and knowledge economy objectives under Vision 2030 (Hilal et al., 2023).

Another major theme involved the growing emphasis on employability skills and labor market alignment. Participant (P15) acknowledged that previous curricula were "far behind labor market requirements," especially regarding technology, soft skills, and leadership competencies. Likewise, participant (P20) argued that universities are redesigning programs "to align with labor market needs and current societal transformations," especially amid rapid technological change.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that modernization required moving beyond theoretical education toward practical and applied learning. Participant (P16) explained that universities had redesigned senior projects to become interdisciplinary and problem-based, allowing students from different disciplines to collaboratively solve real-world problems similar to those encountered in professional environments. The participant explained "In the workplace, engineers and administrators do not face purely specialized problems; they face interdisciplinary problems, so universities are trying to prepare students for this reality." This finding corresponds with international scholarship emphasizing that modern universities increasingly prioritize interdisciplinary competencies, innovation, and transferable skills as essential components of twenty-first-century higher education (Marginson, 2016).

Modernization was also associated with digital transformation and educational flexibility. Participant (P22) highlighted recent developments in electronic and blended learning regulations, noting that Saudi universities now receive greater support for online learning, hybrid programs, and distance education qualifications. According to the participant, these reforms have enabled universities to "launch more flexible and innovative programs" while maintaining educational quality standards.

Participant (P25) also emphasized the growing importance of benchmarking and advisory councils in curriculum modernization. The participant explained that academic programs are no longer approved without benchmarking against international universities offering similar programs. Furthermore, employers and labor market representatives are increasingly involved in curriculum development through advisory councils within colleges and departments.

Additionally, several participants discussed the emergence of interdisciplinary degrees, double majors, executive education, and professional certificates as evidence of modernization. Participant (P16) described the introduction of "certificate pathways" allowing students to obtain specialized competencies without pursuing full additional degrees. Participant (P22) similarly referred to the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and dual-degree programs, describing them as strong indicators of institutional transformation.

Research and innovation were also central to participants' understanding of modernization. Participant (P18) emphasized that universities are increasingly redesigning programs and research agendas according to societal and economic needs, particularly within entrepreneurship and innovation sectors.

Likewise, participant (P9) stressed the importance of linking university research and patents to private sector investment, warning that many innovations previously remained unused because researchers lacked meaningful connections with industry. The participant explained "There are hundreds, even thousands, of patents that were never utilized because researchers had no connection with the private sector."

Participant (P25) similarly highlighted that Saudi universities are increasingly investing in advanced research institutes and aligning research agendas with labor market requirements and national priorities. The participant also noted that universities now seek international rankings while simultaneously emphasizing quality assurance and academic accreditation standards. This reflects a growing national orientation toward applied research, commercialization, entrepreneurship, and university-industry partnerships, which are all core pillars of Saudi Vision 2030's knowledge economy agenda (Alotaibi, 2020).

Despite these developments, participants also acknowledged ongoing challenges. Several interviewees argued that many faculty members still struggle to balance academic specialization with market-oriented teaching approaches. Participant (P16) explained that some faculty members "were trained only in specialized theoretical knowledge" and therefore face difficulties making curricula more relevant to industry needs. Similarly, participant (P19) argued that many curriculum reforms remain "individual institutional efforts lacking sufficient professionalism," particularly because universities still need stronger expertise in curriculum design and labor market forecasting. Participant (P24) additionally acknowledged that some universities continue to face challenges in keeping pace with modernization because of shortages in faculty members, limited resources, and uneven institutional capacities.

Participant (P10) described modernization as involving a cultural transformation in teaching and learning approaches rather than merely technological change. The participant explained that universities are increasingly moving away from teacher-centered instructional models toward student-centered and interactive learning environments that emphasize participation, problem-solving, and innovation. According to the participant, educational modernization now requires faculty members to redesign learning experiences in ways that encourage creativity, engagement, and independent learning. This finding demonstrates that participants conceptualized modernization not only as institutional reform but also as pedagogical transformation affecting classroom practices, instructional philosophies, and student learning experiences. Such findings correspond with international scholarship emphasizing that successful higher education modernization depends on transforming teaching and learning cultures alongside structural reform (Marginson, 2016).

Participant (P17) highlighted the growing role of engineering, technological innovation, and applied scientific research in supporting Saudi Arabia's economic transformation under Vision 2030. The participant explained that universities are increasingly expected to produce applied research capable of contributing directly to industrial development, technological advancement, and national competitiveness. According to the participant, the value of university research is increasingly judged by its practical impact and capacity to solve real societal and industrial problems. This finding reinforces participants' broader perception that Saudi higher education is gradually shifting from traditional academic production toward application-oriented knowledge generation and innovation ecosystems. Similar observations have been identified within knowledge-economy literature emphasizing universities' expanding role in innovation-driven national development (Etzkowitz, 2008; Alotaibi, 2020).

Overall, the findings indicate that modernization within Saudi higher education is being experienced as a multidimensional transformation involving curriculum redesign, digital transformation, interdisciplinary education, labor market alignment, research commercialization, and institutional flexibility. Participants largely perceived these changes positively and viewed them as necessary for achieving Vision 2030 objectives. However, they also acknowledged the persistence of implementation challenges, faculty readiness issues, and institutional disparities.

C. Role of Saudi Accreditation in Modernizing Saudi Higher Education

Participants consistently viewed accreditation as one of the most influential mechanisms driving institutional transformation within Saudi higher education. Accreditation was not perceived merely as a technical or procedural quality assurance requirement; rather, participants described it as a comprehensive framework that reshaped institutional culture around accountability, assessment, evidence-based planning, and continuous improvement.

Several participants emphasized that accreditation introduced a performance-oriented governance culture into universities. Participant (P8) explained this transformation directly by stating that "work has become based on indicators." This statement reflects the growing dominance of KPI-driven institutional management, where academic performance, program effectiveness, and institutional success are increasingly measured through quantifiable indicators and benchmarking systems. Participants repeatedly referred to performance metrics, annual assessment cycles, program reviews, and evidence documentation as central features of contemporary university operations. This shift toward measurable performance aligns with broader international trends associated with managerialism and quality assurance in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2015; Dill, 2007). Similar findings have been identified in previous studies discussing how accreditation systems reshape university governance by emphasizing accountability, assessment, and measurable outcomes (Deem et al., 2008).

Participants also highlighted the influence of accreditation on research culture and faculty priorities. Participant (P8) noted that "Faculty members have become more focused on research and publishing in journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus." This finding suggests that accreditation and ranking systems have significantly influenced academic evaluation standards and institutional prestige. Research productivity, citation impact, and international publication visibility were repeatedly associated with institutional competitiveness and global positioning. Such findings correspond with literature emphasizing that global ranking systems increasingly shape academic behavior and institutional priorities within higher education systems worldwide (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2022).

At the same time, accreditation was not universally perceived as restrictive or bureaucratic. Several participants described accreditation as developmental and transformative. One participant explained "I am grateful for accreditation because it helped us modernize our academic programs and teaching practices." This explanation demonstrates that accreditation was viewed by many participants as a catalyst for curricular innovation, instructional improvement, and institutional learning. Participants frequently linked accreditation processes with curriculum redesign, enhanced learning outcomes assessment, improved teaching quality, and stronger alignment with labor market needs.

Participant (P24) similarly emphasized the importance of accreditation bodies in directing universities toward unified quality standards and institutional goals. The participant explained "When accreditation bodies exist… they help direct institutions toward clear goals that universities seek to achieve." The participant further argued that accreditation bodies contribute to aligning universities around shared standards rather than allowing institutions to function according to isolated or inconsistent approaches.

Similarly, participant (P22) argued that accreditation standards have become "a strong driver for universities to continuously improve and update their programs." The participant further explained that accreditation requirements encouraged universities to discontinue weak programs, revise outdated curricula, and align programs with international standards and Vision 2030 objectives.

Participant (P25) also emphasized that accreditation agencies have played "a major role in improving the educational process" by evaluating university programs according to international standards and encouraging universities to improve educational quality and global competitiveness. According to the participant, accreditation efforts strongly align with Vision 2030's emphasis on educational excellence and international positioning.

Participants additionally stressed the role of national accreditation agencies in creating a culture of quality assurance and competitiveness. Participant (P22) emphasized that the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (NCAAA) and other regulatory bodies have contributed to strengthening educational quality through standardized criteria, periodic reviews, and institutional accountability. According to the participant, accreditation has become closely tied to institutional legitimacy, program continuity, and graduate employability.

Another recurring theme involved international competitiveness. Participants argued that accreditation increasingly supports universities in producing "global graduates" capable of competing internationally. Participant (P22) explained "We now aspire to graduate students who can work anywhere globally." This reflects how accreditation is becoming intertwined with broader goals of internationalization and global competitiveness. Such findings correspond with literature emphasizing that Saudi universities are increasingly positioning themselves within global higher education systems through quality assurance, international partnerships, and benchmarking practices (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2021).

Nevertheless, participants also acknowledged challenges associated with accreditation processes. Some participants noted that accreditation has increased administrative workloads and intensified pressure on faculty members to produce measurable outcomes. Others expressed concerns regarding excessive focus on metrics and documentation at the expense of deeper educational goals. Despite these concerns, most participants ultimately viewed accreditation as an essential mechanism supporting modernization, competitiveness, and institutional transformation.

Overall, the findings suggest that accreditation has become deeply embedded within the modernization agenda of Saudi higher education. Accreditation processes appear to have contributed not only to improving academic quality, but also to reshaping institutional culture, governance practices, faculty priorities, and universities' global aspirations.

D. Drive of Saudi Universities to Become Financially Self-Sufficient

Financial self-sufficiency emerged as one of the most transformative and controversial dimensions of the Universities Law of 2019. Participants consistently described Saudi universities as transitioning from complete dependence on government funding toward more entrepreneurial and diversified financial models.

Participant (P16) captured the intensity of this transformation by stating that "this system mobilized universities." The participant's use of the word "mobilized" reflects the urgency and institutional pressure associated with financial reform. Universities were described as being compelled to rethink how they generate revenue, utilize institutional resources, commercialize expertise, and establish alternative funding mechanisms.

Participants identified multiple strategies being adopted to diversify university income sources. These included paid graduate programs, executive education, consulting services, research commercialization, investment companies, continuing education centers, professional training initiatives, and partnerships with industry.

Participant (P16) explained that "research and consulting centers… and master's programs have become paid programs." Similarly, participant (P22) noted that universities have increasingly established "investment arms" and university-owned companies designed to generate sustainable institutional revenue. Examples such as "Wadi Jeddah," "Wadi Makkah," and "Wadi Riyadh" were mentioned as emerging investment-oriented structures supporting university sustainability.

Participant (P24) additionally highlighted private-sector sponsorships and corporate partnerships as emerging mechanisms for reducing universities' dependence on state funding. The participant explained "Some companies may support research centers or colleges so that they become associated with the university." The participant further compared this model to Western universities where donors and corporations financially support colleges and research initiatives, sometimes resulting in colleges being named after sponsoring individuals or organizations.

Participant (P25) similarly emphasized that Saudi universities are increasingly attempting to reduce pressure on the national budget through scientific research, innovation, endowments, executive education, parallel education programs, and short professional courses offered inside and outside universities. The participant specifically identified King Abdulaziz University, King Saud University, King Abdullah University, and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals as examples of institutions that have become increasingly successful in generating alternative revenue sources.

Participants also discussed the growing importance of continuing education and professional development programs. Participant (P11) explained that “universities began establishing continuing education centers and consulting institutes.” This finding suggests that universities are increasingly positioning themselves not only as teaching institutions but also as providers of professional expertise, training, and specialized services. Such developments align with global trends associated with entrepreneurial universities and knowledge economy models (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz, 2008).

Several participants additionally emphasized the growing role of university-industry collaboration in generating financial sustainability. Participant (P9) argued that universities are increasingly attempting to connect research and innovation with private sector investment opportunities. According to the participant, many patents and innovations previously remained unused because researchers lacked effective partnerships with industry stakeholders.

Participants also highlighted the emergence of self-funded postgraduate education as an important source of revenue generation. Participant (P22) explained that executive and professional graduate programs are increasingly becoming tuition-based due to their specialized nature and operational costs. This reflects a significant cultural and financial shift within Saudi public universities, where tuition-free education historically dominated institutional models.

Despite optimism regarding diversification efforts, participants acknowledged that the transition toward financial self-sufficiency has created institutional tensions and uncertainty. Participant (P11) reflected on the early stages of reform by stating that “faculty members were initially quite dissatisfied.”

Participants linked this dissatisfaction to organizational restructuring, expenditure controls, changing employment conditions, uncertainty regarding future funding models, and concerns about faculty contracts and benefits. Similarly, participant (P16) questioned whether universities could realistically achieve full financial independence in the near future, arguing that many institutions would still require substantial governmental support during transitional phases. The participant described the need for a “hybrid model” in which universities gradually reduce dependency while still receiving strategic state support.

Participant (P24) also emphasized that universities face challenges convincing corporations and donors to provide financial support unless institutions clearly demonstrate competitive distinction and institutional excellence. According to the participant, universities must strongly “prove their excellence” in order to attract sponsors and external supporters.

Differences also emerged between public and private universities. Participants from private institutions generally described the transition as less disruptive because their universities had historically relied on tuition and independent funding structures. In contrast, participants from public universities described deeper structural and cultural adjustments resulting from the reform.

Participant (P5) highlighted the growing expectation that universities should diversify their institutional functions beyond traditional teaching roles. The participant explained that universities are increasingly expected to provide consulting, executive education, entrepreneurship initiatives, and professional services that contribute directly to institutional sustainability and community engagement. According to the participant, universities are gradually becoming “knowledge and service hubs” that interact continuously with society and industry rather than functioning as isolated academic institutions. This finding reflects a broader conceptual transformation in the identity of Saudi universities, where financial sustainability is increasingly linked to societal engagement, innovation, and service-oriented academic models. These findings align with Clark’s (1998) conception of entrepreneurial universities, where institutional survival and competitiveness increasingly depend on diversified revenue streams and external partnerships.

Overall, the findings suggest that financial self-sufficiency within Saudi higher education represents more than an economic reform. Rather, it reflects a broader transformation in institutional identity, governance, and organizational culture. Universities are increasingly expected to function as entrepreneurial, competitive, and financially adaptive institutions while simultaneously maintaining their educational and national development responsibilities.

E. Saudi Universities Are Bridging the Gap Between Graduates and Labor Market Needs

Participants strongly emphasized that aligning higher education with labor market needs has become one of the central priorities of Saudi higher education reform under Vision 2030. Universities were described as moving away from traditional academic models toward more market-responsive systems focused on employability, practical skills, innovation, and economic relevance.

Participant (P12) explained that the reforms created "an opportunity to link the outcomes of these independent universities to the labor market." This statement reflects how employability and workforce readiness have become embedded within institutional planning, curriculum development, and program evaluation processes.

Participants repeatedly discussed curriculum restructuring as part of this alignment process. Participant (P13) explained that universities are now engaged in "stopping programs that have no demand or no real need in the market, and creating new programs that align with the Vision." This quotation illustrates how labor market logic increasingly shapes academic decision-making. Program continuation is no longer determined solely by disciplinary tradition or institutional history; rather, employability indicators, economic demand, and national development priorities are becoming central determinants of program viability. These findings align with prior research emphasizing that Saudi higher education institutions are increasingly redesigning programs to support workforce localization, economic diversification, and national development goals (Nurunnabi, 2017; Al-Youbi et al., 2020).

Participant (P24) reinforced this point by stressing that universities must understand labor market changes and adjust accordingly. He explained that universities have "a major role" in understanding the labor market and that once a university knows market needs, "it must keep pace with and adapt to the changes occurring in the labor market" so that its graduates "actually have a place in the labor market." This quotation strengthens the finding that labor-market alignment is not limited to adding new programs; rather, it requires continuous institutional responsiveness and systematic monitoring of economic and professional shifts.

Participants also highlighted the growing importance of employer partnerships and industry engagement. Several interviewees described universities as actively establishing advisory boards, conducting employer consultations, organizing industry forums, and expanding internships and professional training opportunities. Participant (P15) explained that universities now rely heavily on advisory councils composed of labor market representatives who review and approve program learning outcomes and curriculum structures. Similarly, participant (P23) emphasized that universities increasingly collaborate with external companies and organizations to provide internships, case studies, and practical learning opportunities for students.

Participant (P25) also emphasized the formal involvement of employers in curriculum development, explaining that universities have "introduced labor market employers into curriculum-building requirements" and established advisory councils in departments and colleges to ensure that programs respond to actual market needs. This reflects a shift from occasional consultation toward more institutionalized employer participation in academic planning. Such findings are consistent with literature highlighting the importance of university–industry collaboration in strengthening graduate employability and supporting knowledge-economy transformation (Etzkowitz, 2008; Al-Youbi et al., 2020).

Participants additionally emphasized the growing role of cooperative training, internships, and practical experiences in preparing students for employment. Participant (P20) argued that cooperative training programs provide students with opportunities to identify weaknesses, strengthen skills, and better understand labor market expectations before graduation. Participant (P24) further suggested that short-term employability gaps can be addressed through "professional certificates and developmental courses," which may enhance graduates' opportunities to enter the labor market, while longer-term alignment requires updating specializations, course content, and academic programs in response to market needs. This finding indicates that participants no longer perceive traditional degree programs alone as sufficient for workforce readiness; rather, employability increasingly depends on flexible skills pathways, professional certifications, and continuous learning opportunities.

Participant (P25) similarly linked labor-market alignment to practical training and specialized academic preparation. He explained that Vision 2030 requires university education to support labor market needs by "qualifying students for jobs needed by the labor market through specialized programs and academic training courses." This supports the interpretation that universities are increasingly expected to produce graduates who are not only academically prepared but also professionally ready for specific sectors of national development.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that keeping pace with labor market transformation remains challenging. Participant (P14) observed that "change has become very fast." Rapid technological advancement, digital transformation, and emerging industries were repeatedly described as major challenges for universities attempting to maintain curricular relevance. Participants stressed that static curricula and infrequent revision cycles are no longer sufficient within rapidly evolving economic environments.

Participant (P23) similarly argued that the gap between graduates and labor market needs is "a global issue, not only a Saudi issue," emphasizing that universities worldwide struggle to adapt quickly enough to changing workforce demands. The participant further noted that outdated curricula, insufficient industry partnerships, and overly theoretical research contribute significantly to this gap. This finding aligns with Teichler's (2017) argument that employability challenges are not confined to one national system but are part of broader global transformations in higher education, work, and skills formation.

Several participants also highlighted the importance of soft skills, leadership skills, technological literacy, and interdisciplinary competencies. Participant (P15) explained that previous educational models focused heavily on theoretical knowledge while neglecting practical and transferable skills needed in modern workplaces. Participant (P24) echoed this view by noting that the labor market is increasingly less focused on the title of the academic major and more focused on graduates' "skills, cognitive abilities, practical abilities, and professional competencies." This quotation is analytically significant because it shows a shift from degree-centered employability to competency-centered employability, where graduates' adaptability and applied capabilities become central to their labor market value.

Participant (P25) also identified a continuing gap between some graduate specializations and labor market needs, particularly in theoretical disciplines. He explained that one existing gap relates to "the weakness between graduates' specializations and the labor market, especially with regard to theoretical studies." This finding adds nuance to the analysis by showing that although universities are making progress, alignment remains uneven across disciplines. Applied, technical, and professional programs appear better positioned for labor-market responsiveness, whereas some theoretical programs may require deeper restructuring to strengthen employability outcomes.

Participant (P6) emphasized that labor-market alignment should not be interpreted narrowly in terms of technical employment skills alone. Instead, the participant argued that universities must also prepare graduates psychologically, socially, and professionally for changing work environments. The participant stressed the importance of communication skills, adaptability, teamwork, and critical thinking, particularly within rapidly evolving educational and professional contexts. According to the participant, employers increasingly seek graduates who possess "flexibility, communication abilities, and the capacity to adapt to changing environments," rather than relying solely on disciplinary knowledge. This finding adds analytical depth to participants' broader discussions regarding employability by highlighting that labor-market readiness increasingly depends on transferable and interpersonal competencies in addition to technical specialization. Similar observations were highlighted by Teichler (2017), who emphasized that modern employability frameworks increasingly prioritize adaptable competencies and lifelong learning capacities.

Overall, the findings suggest that Saudi universities are increasingly positioning themselves as active contributors to workforce development, human capability development, and economic transformation rather than solely institutions for knowledge transmission. Universities are progressively adopting more flexible, industry-oriented, and skills-based educational models aligned with Vision 2030 objectives. However, participants also emphasized that maintaining alignment with rapidly evolving labor market demands remains an ongoing and complex challenge. The evidence indicates that bridging the gap

requires continuous curriculum renewal, employer participation, professional certification pathways, practical training, labor-market intelligence, and stronger attention to transferable skills across all disciplines.

F. The Role of Technical and Vocational Pathways in Realizing Vision 2030

Participants emphasized that Vision 2030 cannot be realized through universities alone. Although universities remain central to research, knowledge production, and advanced professional preparation, the findings show that technical colleges, applied colleges, vocational training, cooperative education, and short professional diplomas are also essential to preparing the workforce required for economic diversification. This supports previous research showing that Saudi higher education has faced persistent challenges in aligning educational outputs with labor-market needs, particularly in relation to practical skills, employability, and private-sector requirements (Al Otaiba, 2010; Al Maskhim, 2016; Al Mulatham & Al-Basari, 2016; Damanhouri, 2013). It also aligns with studies emphasizing the role of community colleges, applied pathways, and shorter labor-market-oriented programs in addressing workforce needs in Saudi Arabia (Al-Khlewi, 2020; Almannie, 2015).

Participant (P1) positioned vocational education as a strategic pathway for national workforce development, stating, "I believe that vocational education has a very important role." For this participant, vocational education is directly linked to Vision 2030's emphasis on private-sector expansion and economic diversification. As Participant (P1) explained, "Achieving Vision 2030 depends on moving toward supporting and expanding the private sector." This view frames vocational education not as a secondary option, but as a necessary mechanism for preparing Saudis for practical, middle-skill, and private-sector occupations. Participant (P1) further emphasized that this transformation "requires a very important role from vocational education in developing programs and diplomas that meet the needs of the private sector." This interpretation is consistent with studies arguing that Saudi graduates need stronger practical, technical, and workplace-ready skills to meet private-sector expectations (Albahsin, 2006; Aref et al., 2018; Badri, 2017).

Participant (P2) similarly emphasized the distinctive contribution of technical colleges, noting that "vocational training… exists in technical colleges." This participant linked technical education to concrete economic sectors, explaining that technical colleges "contribute significantly to developing students' training skills in areas such as tourism and mechanics." Importantly, Participant (P2) challenged the perception that technical education is less valuable than university education, describing technical college training as "excellent" and "not academically less than what is taught at the university." This finding supports earlier calls for stronger recognition of technical and community colleges as institutions capable of responding directly to labor-market needs through applied and occupation-specific programs (Al Ahmadi & Al-Jabiri, 2016; Al-Khlewi, 2020; Almannie, 2015).

Participant (P3) extended this argument by focusing on applied colleges within universities. According to Participant (P3), applied colleges are built around "professional diplomas, professional certificates, and these short programs." These programs, the participant argued, are expected to be "aligned with the labor market and operate through agreements with the private sector." This suggests that technical and vocational education is increasingly being integrated into the university system itself. Applied colleges therefore represent a more flexible post-secondary model that can respond more quickly to labor-market demand. At the same time, Participant (P3) noted that applied colleges are sometimes "somewhat slow," indicating that their effectiveness depends on speed, flexibility, and stronger employer engagement. This supports previous studies recommending more flexible higher education structures and closer university-employer collaboration (Aref et al., 2018; Badri, 2017; Al-Khlewi, 2020).

Participant (P4) highlighted cooperative training as another bridge between education and employment. As Participant (P4) explained, "Programs are now required to include cooperative training alongside academic programs," and graduates may complete workplace training that "extends for six months." This type of training allows employers to observe students' skills before hiring them and helps students move more smoothly into employment. This finding reinforces prior research emphasizing internships, employer

engagement, and work-integrated learning as essential mechanisms for improving graduate employability (Al Harbi, 2022; Aref et al., 2018; Badri, 2017).

Participant (P5) provided one of the clearest labor-market arguments for technical education, explaining that "every engineer usually needs ten technicians." This statement captures a key workforce reality: Vision 2030 requires a balanced labor force, not only graduates in high-status professional fields. Participant (P5) added, "Previously, everyone graduated as engineers, but where were the technicians? They had to bring them from abroad." This view strongly links technical education to Saudization, workforce localization, and reduced dependence on foreign labor. It is consistent with previous research showing that labor-market mismatch contributes to unemployment, skills gaps, and continued reliance on expatriate workers in some sectors (Al Maskhim, 2016; Al Mulatham & Al-Basari, 2016; Asiri, 2018).

Participant (P6) framed the issue more broadly, stating that "university and vocational education… have a very strong role in diversifying the economy." This participant did not present universities and vocational institutions as competing pathways, but as complementary parts of the same national development system. Universities prepare specialized knowledge workers, while vocational and applied programs prepare graduates with practical and technical skills needed by emerging industries. This interpretation aligns with literature positioning education as a central driver of human capability development, knowledge-based growth, and economic diversification under Vision 2030 (Al Otaiba & Al Shadi, 2020; Al-Youbi et al., 2020; Al-Yami, 2018).

Participant (P7) further emphasized that employability depends on experience, not classroom learning alone. The participant asked, "If you sit in the classroom for the whole four years… how will you develop?" and added, "The more you are exposed to experience, the more you develop." This highlights the importance of practical exposure, problem-solving, and workplace interaction. Participant (P8) similarly pointed to the value of "fast programs that do not exceed two years, such as specializations in applied colleges," suggesting that short applied pathways can provide targeted responses to urgent labor-market needs.

Taken together, these findings show that Saudi higher education reform is not only about producing more university graduates, improving rankings, or increasing research output. It is also about building a diversified post-secondary ecosystem in which universities, applied colleges, technical colleges, cooperative training, and professional diplomas all contribute to national development. The originality of this theme lies in showing how faculty members understand technical and vocational pathways as central, not peripheral, to Vision 2030. The findings also point to a continuing challenge: these pathways require stronger social recognition, faster institutional responsiveness, and deeper partnerships with employers if they are to fully support economic diversification, Saudization, and workforce transformation.

VI. Conclusions and Implications

The findings reported above constitute, to the authors' knowledge, the first systematic qualitative exploration of how Saudi higher education is experiencing and implementing the transformation advanced by Vision 2030 and the Universities Law of 2019, as described by faculty members working within the system. Overall, the findings indicate that these reforms have generated meaningful changes in the institutional culture, strategic direction, and operational practices of Saudi higher education. These changes are evident in governance reform, curriculum modernization, accreditation processes, hiring practices, revenue diversification, and stronger engagement with the labor market.

At the same time, the findings show that transformation is not occurring evenly across the system. Leading urban universities appear to be progressing more rapidly, while peripheral and emerging institutions continue to face greater structural, geographic, and resource-related challenges. This variation highlights an important policy implication: the next phase of reform should include targeted support to ensure that excellence and competitiveness are not concentrated in a limited number of institutions, but extended across the wider Saudi higher education system.

Accreditation also emerged as a major driver of reform. Rather than serving only as a compliance requirement, national accreditation appears to have encouraged universities to formalize quality

processes, modernize curricula, strengthen evidence-based planning, and align programs more closely with national priorities.

The findings further suggest that graduate-labor market alignment has improved, but remains complex. Because labor markets change faster than curriculum revision cycles, universities need more adaptive program design, stronger employer partnerships, work-integrated learning opportunities, and continued support for institutions with limited access to industry partners.

A further implication concerns the role of technical colleges, applied colleges, vocational training, and short professional pathways. Vision 2030 cannot be realized through universities alone. Saudi Arabia requires a broader post-secondary ecosystem in which universities contribute to research and advanced professional preparation, while technical and vocational pathways prepare graduates with applied skills, workplace readiness, and practical competencies needed by the private sector and emerging industries. Strengthening these pathways will be essential for economic diversification, Saudization, and reducing reliance on expatriate labor in technical and middle-skill occupations.

Finally, this study offers an original but necessarily partial account of a rapidly evolving transformation. Future research should include the perspectives of university leaders, students, Ministry of Education officials, employers, technical and vocational education leaders, and private sector partners. These voices would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Saudi higher education reform is unfolding and how it can be strengthened in the next phase.

Declaration

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The authors confirm that ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Scientific Research Center at Dar Al-Hekma University. All procedures performed in the research complied with the requirements and guidelines set forth by the center.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights and provided informed consent to participate.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

Randa Hariri (RH) collected the data by interviewing all participants, transcribed the interviews verbatim, participated in the analysis of the results, and contributed to drafting the manuscript. Joseph Jabbra (JJ) conceived and designed the study, participated in the analysis of the results, and conducted the literature review. Both authors critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, reviewed each other's work, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgment

This research/project was funded by the Division of Graduate Studies, Research and Business (GRB) at Dar Al-Hekma University, Jeddah, under grant no. (RFC/24-25/02). The author, therefore, acknowledges the technical and financial support of the GRB with thanks.

AI related Acknowledgment

The authors declare that ChatGPT, an AI-based language model developed by OpenAI, was used only for language refinement of selected sections of the manuscript, including improvements to grammar, wording, coherence, and readability. The authors retained full intellectual responsibility for the content of the manuscript. No AI tool was used in the collection of data, analysis of data, development of results, interpretation of findings, or formulation of conclusions. All empirical work, analytical decisions, findings, and scholarly interpretations were conducted entirely by the authors.

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Endnotes: