



E-universities are proliferating in the Gulf States with a number of new projects aimed at improved technology transfer, narrowing the digital divide and facilitating access to knowledge.

Saudi Arabia has unveiled plans to set up an electronic university in partnership with internationally renowned distance learning institutions, in a bid to create an environment that is favourable to e-learning.

Muhammad Al-Ouhali, the Saudi Deputy Minister for Education Affairs, outlined the plan to journalists during an [international conference](#) on electronic and distance education in Riyadh in February.

"Distance education is not a better choice for all students. However, it serves people who cannot avail of regular education facilities for reasons such as geographical distance, job circumstances and age differences," Al-Ouhali said.

Centres will be established in different parts of Saudi Arabia for students joining the electronic university to study at bachelor and masters levels.

Despite serious infrastructural issues, a lack of Arabic language learning materials and technological illiteracy in the Middle East and North Africa, web-based learning is effective specifically in the areas of increasing student motivation, according to a 2010 report from [eLearning AP 2010: The Seventh International Conference on e-Learning for Knowledge-Based Society](#).

Recently, this effective web-based conference has promoted the development of other virtual universities including Bahrain's first Asian e-University, the United Arab Emirates-based Hamdan Bin Mohamed e-University, and the Kuwait-based Arab Open University.

Managed by the Open University Malaysia, the Asian e-University (AeU) will set up two branch campuses, one in Singapore and one in Saudi Arabia.

AeU aims to be a leading innovator of e-learning in the Asia Pacific region and plans to set up national e-learning initiatives in an effort to build human capacity, bridge the digital divide, promote technical-cooperation, increase access to higher education and spearhead e-education in the 31 member states of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue.

The AeU will offer undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees in information technology, science, health and engineering.

Hamdan Bin Mohamed e-University was officially launched as the first online institution to be licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the United Arab Emirates.

It offers a wide range of programmes to meet the needs of learners in all sectors of the economy including business, education, e-learning, healthcare and the environment through open access to short courses, executive development programmes, and certificate and diploma courses leading to accredited undergraduate and graduate degree programmes.

Currently the Arab Open University, a UNESCO-sponsored institution, is the main Arab-language open university. It has degree-granting branches in Arab gulf states as well as in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

Finally, the Arab Gulf Virtual University was proposed to act as regional hub of excellence for education, training and learning resources, to allow universities in the gulf region to share resources, knowledge, course content and expertise.

Mohammed Kuchari, an associate professor of microbiology at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, welcomed the moves towards setting up virtual universities in the Gulf States.

"This is vital step for enhancing access to higher education and producing graduates with skills needed for the labour market," Kuchari told *University World News*.

"However, a strategic alliance among these national virtual universities in Arab Gulf states must be set up in the form of a regional network for virtual universities to assist in promoting scientific research and teaching, as well as knowledge and technology transfer," Kuchari said.

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