

# **Knowledge key to economic diversity**

## ***Saudi research hub to play major global role***



Saudi Arabia's economy has been inextricably linked to its oil reserves. Oil accounts for more than 90% of exports and nearly 75% of government revenues in the country, thereby, facilitating the creation of a welfare state. However, during phases of low oil prices the Saudi Arabian government has faced its own share of challenges especially in terms of funding its welfare state. Hence, progressive thinkers and visionaries in the region have now realized that economic diversity is pivotal to sustainable long-term growth and that knowledge is the key towards achieving this diversity.

Against this backdrop and empowered by his own vision of creating a knowledge society based on cross-cultural understanding, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud established KAUST a world-class graduate-level research hub that was officially inaugurated on 23 September 2009.

Explaining the significance of KAUST for Saudi Arabia and its vision for the world, Ali Ibrahim Al Naimi, chairman, board of trustees, KAUST, and minister of petroleum and mineral resources, Saudi Arabia, said: "The KAUST global research and education network supports diverse talents both on its campus and at other premier universities and research institutions through collaborative research agreements, grants and student scholarship programmes. By doing so, this university envisages to engage some of the best minds in the world to leverage the diversified and rich natural resources of this country to find sustainable and innovative solutions to some of the

most pressing socio-economic problems of the world that include shortage of food, water and energy. For instance, the Red Sea contains many diverse habitats and unexplored deeper regions that provide unique opportunities for fundamental scientific and engineering research in biology, chemistry, geology and physics.”

Elaborating on upcoming research initiatives, Choon Fong Shih, president, KAUST, stated, “There is an abundance of sunlight in the Saudi Arabian region which can generate solar energy. We want to devise a new range of cost-effective and sophisticated technologies (through research) that can help easy conversion of this energy to usable forms. Similarly, we are focusing on research on water and water treatment technologies. ‘Desalination’ that will eventually augment the supply of drinking water is a core focus.”

Talking about emerging research trends in science and technology, Shih said, “Research in science and technology is becoming increasingly field-oriented and, hence, the growing number of industry-academia partnerships. Also, worldwide the challenges that have a relatively higher immediacy quotient are given priority in terms of research. Moreover, the approach is becoming more interdisciplinary and countries globally are realising the importance of mutual collaboration. They are also realising that integrated research programmes can help develop international relations.”

On its part, KAUST is organising interdisciplinary research teams across its three academic divisions namely, chemical and life sciences and engineering, mathematical and computer sciences and engineering and physical sciences and engineering (TOI, 5 October 2009).