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Saudi universities to open doors to small businesses in R&D push

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Small businesses in Saudi Arabia are to be given access to the research facilities of local universities, under plans being developed by the country's Research and Development Office (RDO).

The initiative comes as the Kingdom looks for ways to encourage the growth of its SME sector and the country's R&D ecosystem, in line with the Vision 2030 economic transformation program.

"We're looking at how can we actually encourage universities to share their facilities with industry, specifically small and medium enterprises," Dr. Hisham Alhadlaq, the director general of the Ministry of Education's newly-created Research and Development Office (RDO), told reporters at a press event in London on Wednesday.

"When it comes to the big multinational companies they already have their own R&D centers but when it comes to SMEs usually they don't have that capacity, so we're working on encouraging universities to work with local industries so they can share their facilities."

Alhadlaq said that information technology was an obvious initial area of contribution between universities and SMEs, "but we're looking at expanding also in other areas that could be beneficial to them."

He made the comments during a visit to the UK by the RDO — a division of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education — to explore collaborations with British universities and research institutions.

"We have traveled here to understand how the more mature national R&D system of the UK was designed and how it has evolved over time," said Alhadlaq.

The RDO, established in March of this year, has been given a mandate to enhance the capability of Saudi public universities to conduct high quality research and development, as part of an official R&D program launched by the ministry last year.

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The new office has a mandate to enhance the R&D capabilities of universities within Saudi Arabia — in collaboration with the Saudi private sector and international institutions — with a specific focus on technology transfer and aiding the country's SME sector.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program, designed to transform the Kingdom's economy away from a reliance on oil revenues, aims to raise the contribution of SMEs to the economy to 35 percent by 2030 from around 20 percent in 2016.

The RDO has a projected budget of \$1.6 billion, of which \$75 million has been earmarked for international partnerships focusing on key areas such as in renewable energy, climate change, pollution management, efficient water usage, cybersecurity and Red Sea studies.

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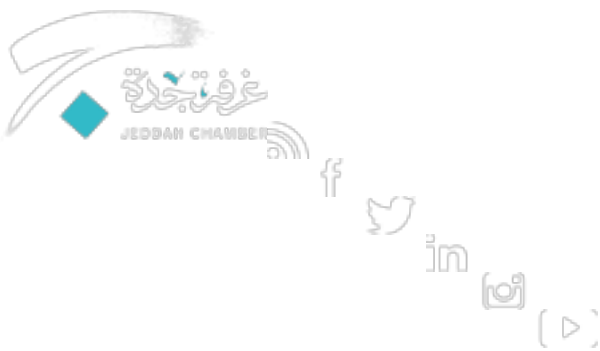
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