



CITATION IMPACT

Saudi Universities Offer Cash In Exchange for Academic Prestige

Two Saudi institutions are aggressively acquiring the affiliations of overseas scientists with an eye to gaining visibility in research journals

At first glance, Robert Kirshner took the e-mail message for a scam. An astronomer at King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, was offering him a contract for an adjunct professorship that would pay \$72,000 a year. Kirshner, an astrophysicist at Harvard University, would be expected to supervise a research group at KAU and spend a week or two a year on KAU's campus, but that requirement was flexible, the person making the offer wrote in the e-mail. What Kirshner would be required to do, however, was add King Abdulaziz University as a second affiliation to his name on the Institute for Scientific Information's (ISI's) list of highly cited researchers.

"I thought it was a joke," says Kirshner, who forwarded the e-mail to his department chair, noting in jest that the money was a lot more attractive than the 2% annual raise professors typically get. Then he discovered that a highly cited colleague at another U.S. institution had accepted KAU's offer, adding KAU as a second affiliation on ISI's highly cited.com.

Kirshner's colleague is not alone. *Science* has learned of more than 60 top-ranked researchers from different scientific disciplines—all on ISI's highly cited list—who have recently signed a part-time employment arrangement with the university that is structured along the lines of what Kirshner was offered. Meanwhile, a bigger, more prominent Saudi institution—King Saud University in Riyadh—has climbed several hundred places in international rankings in the past

4 years largely through initiatives specifically targeted toward attaching KSU's name to research publications, regardless of whether the work involved any meaningful collaboration with KSU researchers.

Academics both inside and outside Saudi Arabia warn that such practices could detract from the genuine efforts that Saudi Arabia's universities are making to transform themselves into world-class research centers. For instance, the Saudi government has spent billions of dollars to build the new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Thuwal, which boasts state-of-the-art labs and dozens of prominent researchers as full-time faculty members (*Science*, 16 October 2009, p. 354).

But the initiatives at KSU and KAU are aimed at getting speedier results. "They are simply buying names," says Mohammed Al-Qunaibet, a professor of agricultural economics at KSU, who recently criticized the programs in an article he wrote for the leading Saudi newspaper, *Al Hayat*. Teddi Fishman, director of the Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University in South Carolina, says the programs deliberately create "a false impression that these universities are producing great research."

Academics who have accepted KAU's offer represent a wide variety of faculty from elite institutions in the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia. All are men. Some are emeritus professors who have recently retired from their home insti-

Shiny. King Abdulaziz University's steps to gain visibility are controversial.

tutions. All have changed their affiliation on ISI's highly cited list—as required by KAU's contract—and some have added KAU as an affiliation on research papers. Other requirements in the contract include devoting "the whole of your time, attention, skill and abilities to the performance of your duties" and doing "work equivalent to a total of 4 months per contract period."

Neil Robertson, a professor emeritus of mathematics at Ohio State University in Columbus who has signed on, says he has no concerns about the offer. "It's just capitalism," he says. "They have the capital and they want to build something out of it." Another KAU affiliate, astronomer Gerry Gilmore of the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, notes that "universities buy people's reputations all the time. In principle, this is no different from Harvard hiring a prominent researcher."

Officials at KAU did not respond to *Science*'s request for an interview. But Surender Jain, a retired mathematics professor from Ohio University in Athens who is an adviser to KAU and has helped recruit several of the adjuncts, provided a list of 61 academics who have signed contracts similar to the one sent to Kirshner. The financial arrangements in the contracts vary, Jain says: For instance, some adjuncts will receive their compensation not as salary but as part of a research grant provided by KAU.

Jain acknowledges that a primary goal of the program—funded by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Higher Education—is to "improve the visibility and ranking of King Abdulaziz University." But he says KAU also hopes the foreign academics will help it kick-start indigenous research programs. "We're not just giving away money," he says. Most recruits will be expected to visit for a total of 4 weeks in a year to "give crash courses"; they will also be expected to supervise dissertations and help KAU's full-time faculty members develop research proposals. Even the "shadows" of such eminent scholars would inspire local students and faculty members, he says.

The recruits *Science* spoke to say they have a genuine interest in promoting research at KAU, even though none of them knew how their individual research plans would match up with the interests and abilities of KAU's faculty members and students. Ray Carlberg, an astronomer at the University of Toronto in Canada who accepted the offer, says he had to Google the university after he received the e-mail. He admits that he was initially con-

cerned that KAU might be simply buying his name but became convinced that the university was sincere about tapping his expertise in doing research. Carlberg has submitted a proposal to KAU to fund a telescope that he wants to build on an island in the Canadian Arctic; if that proposal is accepted, he says, there would be opportunities to involve faculty members and students from KAU in the project.

“Yes, visibility is very important to them, but they also want to start a Ph.D. program in mathematics,” says Robertson, who says he hopes outside influence will help accelerate social reforms in the oil-rich kingdom. “I’m thinking this might be a breath of fresh air in a closed society.”

Jain says KAU has taken a cue from KSU, which launched a major drive 3 years ago to boost its international ranking. The man behind it was Abdullah Al-Othman, who earned a Ph.D. in nutritional sciences from the University of Arizona in 1992 and was an undersecretary in the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education before he was appointed president of KSU in 2008.

Al-Othman took over at a time when Saudi universities were being criticized in the Saudi media for their poor showing in international university rankings. Out of 3000 universities ranked by Webometrics in 2006, KSU ranked 2910th while KAU fared only slightly better at 2785th. King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), another leading Saudi institution, was ranked 1681. None of these universities was in the top 500 list published by the Shanghai-based Academic Ranking of World Universities in 2008.

Al-Othman launched two programs at KSU to turn things around. One was the Distinguished Scientist Fellowship Program (DSFP), whose Web site says it aims to “increase the number of highly cited researchers affiliated with KSU” and to “initiate joint research activities between International researcher [*sic*] who have the potential to publish in *Nature* and *Science* Journals.” The other initiative was a visiting professorship program, whose contract—a copy of which has been obtained by *Science*—stipulates that the visiting professor should publish five articles per year in ISI-indexed journals.

The contract also offers to pay the visiting professor an amount for every paper co-authored with KSU’s staff in an ISI-listed publication.

Al-Othman wanted quick results, and he got them. KSU soon signed on several top-ranked scientists from Europe, Asia, and the United States, who sent the number of KSU-affiliated publications zooming to 1211 in 2010, nearly three times the figure for 2008. Little of the work these articles describe was done at KSU, says Abdulqader Alhaider, a pharmacology professor at KSU. As a result, in 2010, KSU broke into the 300-to-400 bracket of universities in the Shanghai rankings; the September 2011 Shanghai rankings placed it in the 200-to-300 bracket. On Webometrics’s latest ranking, KSU is at 186th place—far ahead of where it was in 2006. (KFUPM—which has made a similar push for prestige—is now in the 300-to-400 bracket in the Shanghai rankings.)

In their criticisms of Al-Othman’s impact-raising strategy, Alhaider and Al-Qunaibet point to its effects on the publication record of Khaled Al-Rasheid, a zoologist who directs DSFP. Al-Rasheid started as a professor



Inviting. King Saud University has boosted rankings by overseas links.

at KSU in 1992 after completing a Ph.D. at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom on the effect of heavy metals on ciliates. For the next 15 years at the university, he averaged about four research publications a year, many of them in Middle Eastern journals.

Since 2008, however—when the university started DSFP under his leadership—Al-Rasheid has become amazingly prolific. He has been a co-author of

139 research papers, including 49 papers in 2010 and 36 to date this year. Most of these publications, co-authored with researchers around the world, acknowledge financial support from the Center of Excellence for Research in Biodiversity at KSU, which Al-Rasheid directs. Some of the papers have been co-authored with researchers hired by KSU under the distinguished scientist program. One paper, on the biochemistry of Venus flytraps—published in October in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*—listed seven co-authors in addition to Al-Rasheid, including Nobelist Erwin Neher of the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen and Rainer Hedrich of the University of Würzburg, both in Germany. Neher and Hedrich are both distinguished fellows at KSU.

Speaking to *Science*, Al-Rasheid acknowledged that the dramatic increase in his footprint in the scientific literature had come about as a result of money invested by KSU. But he denied that he had earned authorship on any paper by virtue of the university’s providing financial support or direct compensation to foreign researchers. He said he’d simply been working hard, noting that he was calling this reporter from his office at close to midnight in Saudi Arabia, “and it’s still early for me.” He also explained that in his field of taxonomy, “results are swift—even 70 to 80 papers a year is not unusual. I have been to so many conferences over the years. I have started so many collaborations. I am lucky that I could attract so many people to work with me.”

—YUDHIJIT BHATTACHARJEE

King Abdulaziz University

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6.2 You are required to amend your ISI highly cited contact and affiliation details at highlycited.com web site to include your employment with King Abdulaziz University at dates and times required by your Employer.

6.3 The address of King Abdulaziz University should be included in your contact details at the ISIhighlycited.com to improve the King Abdulaziz University world visibility.

6.4 You are required to inform the Employer if you ISI highly cited status is changed or modified.

6.5 You agree that you shall, whenever requested by the Employer and in any event on the termination of your employment, promptly return to the Employer all property belonging to the Employer in your possession. You acknowledge and agree that, on termination of your employment, you shall not be entitled to retain and shall not retain any property.

6.6 The Employer foresees that, during the course of your employment, you may create, originate, conceive, discover, design, develop and/or make works in or relating to which there may be intellectual property rights. All works in or relating to which there may be intellectual property rights in or relating to all or any works made during the course of your employment for work sponsored by King Abdulaziz University shall be the absolute property of both the Employer and Employee. If you publish any paper, article, book or section of a book based on such works you shall indicate the Employer as the joint or sole affiliating institution.

6.7 During the whole Contract period, the Employee shall do his best to publish six to ten papers in the ISI journal.