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Gulf universities widen the gates

Enrolment in GCC higher education is growing steadily, foreign universities are opening campuses, and governments are rewriting the investment rules. A shortage of qualified academics remains the sector's biggest constraint

By **Joseph George**

Enrolment in Gulf universities is rising steadily. The bigger change is in who is building campuses and under what rules. Foreign universities are opening in Riyadh, Dubai keeps adding international providers, and governments are setting the terms for investors. The open question is whether the region can hire enough academics to teach the students it is making room for.

Higher education already accounts for a large share of learners in the region. According to a 2025 report by Alpen Capital, the size of the higher education sector is estimated

to be about 2.4 million students, constituting about 16.7% of the total student population in the region. That is roughly one in six of all learners in the region, from school to university. "This segment has been growing steadily, and we expect this trend to continue," says Amjad AlOmari, Senior Director at Alpen Capital.

National figures point the same way. The UAE has 218,000 students across 103 higher education institutions, with 64,859 new enrolments in the past academic year, according to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In Oman, first-round study offers for 2026-27 rose 20% to 33,031, and available places grew 17% to 34,113.

Saudi Arabia & UAE lead

Saudi Arabia and the UAE hold more than 80% of the GCC's tertiary students, and they lead the region on both participation and growth.

"The two markets have estimated gross tertiary enrolment rates of 75% and 62%, respectively, while tertiary student numbers are projected to grow at CAGRs of 1.9% in Saudi Arabia and 2.2% in the UAE between 2024 and 2029," says AlOmari.

Government policy and household demand both drive that lead. AlOmari points to "strong government focus on education through national agendas, increased private-sector participation and rising demand for

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high-quality, internationally recognised education.” He adds that the region’s growing expatriate population is “a major reason for the expansion of the tertiary education segment,” and that “the sustained rise in GDP per capita is expected to further accelerate demand for premium educational offerings and globally affiliated higher education institutions.”

Branch campuses are also drawing students from beyond the Gulf. “National vision strategies have positioned education as a key pillar of economic transformation,” says AlOmari. “This is helping the GCC emerge as a higher education hub, attracting students from South Asia, the wider MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa.”

Dubai shows the effect most clearly. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the emirate’s education regulator, reports 11 new higher education institutions in the past three years and a 29% rise in sector enrolment over the same period.

Saudi Education Minister Yousef Al-Benyan says the ministry licensed two international universities in 2025 and 2026, and set up one international partnership with a local university. More campuses are on the way.

The 2026–27 academic year marks a turning point for international



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— Amjad AlOmari,
Senior Director, Alpen Capital

campuses. In Dubai, the American University of Beirut opens its campus in September, and Peking University HSBC Business School begins MBA and executive MBA programmes in January 2027. In Riyadh, the University of New Haven has become the first foreign branch campus to open under Saudi Arabia’s new licensing rules. The

University of Wollongong expects to offer undergraduate degrees in Riyadh from 2027.

Investment trends

AlOmari says the region is now writing the rules for foreign investment. “The clearest trend of the past year is that the Gulf has moved beyond discussions around opening its universities to foreign capital and is now actively defining the rules for investment,” he says. He points to the UAE’s Federal Decree-Law 31 of 2025, “which pulls free-zone universities under federal oversight and creates one national licensing regime.” He also cites Saudi Arabia’s offer of full foreign ownership and five-year renewable licences, “against a stated target of SAR50 billion of education investment and 25% private participation by 2030.”

Few deals have followed so far. “Though the GCC higher education remains a thin transaction market concentrated in a handful of platforms, most capital entering the sector this year came through greenfield campuses and government-backed expansion rather than sponsor-led buyouts,” says AlOmari.

Inside universities, digital tools and international partnerships are changing how teaching and research are done. “Universities across Saudi Arabia and the UAE are increasingly leveraging AI, VR, XR and data analytics to track student progress, provide academic support and create more personalised learning pathways,” says AlOmari. Governments are supporting this by setting up quality assurance authorities and encouraging “technology-driven education,” he says.

The talent squeeze

Faculty supply is the one constraint that money and regulation cannot quickly solve. The UAE alone employs more than 10,600 faculty members, and every new campus competes for the same limited pool of experienced academics.

“Demand for qualified and experienced educators continues to outpace supply, particularly as the higher education segment expands,” says AlOmari. Governments are responding with changes to visa and residency rules. “The UAE has expanded its Golden Visa programme to include teaching professionals, while Saudi Arabia has eased regulations to allow expatriate dependents to work in sectors such as education and healthcare.”

Universities are adding competitive pay and professional development, but AlOmari says hiring will set the pace of growth. “The key challenge remains the ability to expand the supply of qualified talent in line with the sector’s rapid growth.” ■



Gulf countries are moving beyond discussions on foreign investment to establishing frameworks for university investment