

Gulf states 'need a more unified approach to R&D'

Improving scientific systems could strengthen the region's economies.

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[DOHA] A lack of shared research and development (R&D) strategies and clear procedures for funding scientific research are the main obstacles to the progress of scientific development in the Gulf countries, according to a study.

The study, 'Industrial Map for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States', published by the Gulf Organization for Industrial Consulting (GOIC) last month (1 July), showed that many Gulf countries are moving towards becoming knowledge-based economies.

But it also found that they first need to address key weaknesses in their scientific systems.

The study comes ahead of the meeting of GCC's foreign ministers in September, when member states will discuss turning the council into a more closely-knit 'Gulf Union' — a move that some think may boost the integration of national science strategies.

Laila Diab Shrair, GOIC's strategic planning consultant, told *SciDev.Net* that the study had analysed the state of scientific research in the GCC states by looking at development indicators such as government spending on R&D, and the number of patents produced.

It found that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are well on the path to achieving knowledge-based economies by 2020. In contrast, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman will need significantly more time and effort to develop research centres and improve the state of scientific research.

Qatar tops the funding table; since 2009, 2.8 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) has been invested into scientific research, surpassing even developed countries' average allocation of 2.5 per cent.

"Qatar is [...] becoming an international hub for research and development, as it is an attractive place for internationally recognised researchers, and is helping to reverse the drain of intellectual talent from the region," Faisal Mohammed Al-Suwaidi, president of R&D at the Qatar Foundation, told *SciDev.Net*.

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"Cooperation with other researchers in the Arab World, particularly within the Gulf, is an important part of the Qatar Foundation's research agenda," Al-Suwaidi added.

Even high performing countries need to improve regional collaborations, and to address other challenges — such as the lack of a link between research outcomes and economic development — to develop knowledge-based economies, according to Diab Shrair.

The proposed Gulf Union aims to build closer political, military and economic coordination between the six Gulf states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE — modelled on the European Union.

"[Moving] the Gulf states from the cooperation stage towards becoming a union would positively promote scientific R&D," Zaki Almustafa, a researcher at the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, told *SciDev.Net*.

He added that a union would help to build effective strategic partnerships between national research centres and to unify research efforts, to prevent research duplication, and to support development of more effective joint research projects.

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Unified science may help development of knowledge economies in the Gulf