

ARABIAN DREAMS: AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH AIMS FOR REGIONAL TOP SPOT

A conversation with **BJÖRN KJERFVE**, Chancellor, American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates



The American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates is based on the US style of higher education. The University, founded in 1997, provides English language undergraduate and postgraduate teaching to some 5,600 students — half of them in its College of Engineering. Located just 12 miles from Dubai's international airport, students come from around one hundred countries; the majority are from the Middle East, but there are also people from Asia and North America. Björn Kjerfve joined the university in 2014, having previously been the president of the World Maritime University in Malmö, Sweden.

How is the university changing?

In June 2018, we announced four new interdisciplinary PhD-granting research institutes: the Biosciences and Bioengineering Research Institute (BBRI); the Materials Science and Engineering Research Institute (MSERI); the Gulf Environments Research Institute (GERI); and the Smart Cities Research Institute (SCRI). To support these, we have also created three advanced research centres: the High-Performance Computing Center (HPCC), the Geospatial Analysis Center (GAC) and the Genomics Sequencing Research Center (GSRC). These institutes and centres, based in our existing 127-hectare site, will allow us to address critical global issues in health sciences, materials science, marine sciences, and city planning, and to explore the effects of climate change on the environment.

Why are you making these changes?

The American University of Sharjah, established just over 20 years ago, began life focused on providing American-style liberal arts education, and has built a good reputation in the region. We wanted to take this solid base and increase its reach into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), with

the aim to become the leading research university in the Arab world within five years.

We are competitive with other international universities, and provide American-accredited degrees. For the second year running, we topped the Times Higher Education international student list; international students comprise 83% of the student body, making us the most diverse university in the world. We recruit good students and have very high expectations of them at undergraduate level.

The knowledge that our undergraduates gain is a major driver for our local economy, and we would very much like to keep them in Sharjah rather than see them go on to US and European universities for further study. The first step towards this goal has been to create the new research institutes. We currently have 26 undergraduate, 14 Master degree programmes, and one PhD degree programme, we will go on to build several PhDs in STEM subjects to complement these.

When does the new programme start?

The American University of Sharjah has US\$500 million in funding in place for the five-year programme, including financing from the Government of Sharjah. The plans were approved in December 2017.

The university's first PhD,

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in Engineering Systems Management, was launched in March 2018. The new PhD programme will focus on delivering large-scale engineering projects, and the first students will start this autumn.

Further PhDs based around the four research institutes will be rolled out over the next few years. We expect to take on around 700 PhD candidates and 100-140 research-focused faculty to teach and lead research, plus additional post-doctoral researchers, once the programmes are fully up and running.

How will you attract PhD candidates?

By being home to cutting-edge facilities and high-quality research, we hope to be able to retain some of our existing undergraduates, as well as recruiting graduates globally.

The American University of Sharjah offers a number of graduate assistantships, which cover tuition fees and provide a monthly stipend. These also provide access

to mentoring, and the opportunity to acquire teaching experience and participate in international conferences.

The university has an international exchange office, which provides students, including PhD students, and faculty with exchange opportunities. Each of our PhD students will spend a semester working in a lab somewhere else in the world, providing them with new experience and additional networking opportunities.

One thing that makes us different is that cross-disciplinary interaction is very important to us. Each of our four new institutes will sit between our existing colleges, intentionally creating an inter-disciplinary environment for staff and students. As well as providing support for the four institutes, the three new centres will work with the rest of the university providing research support, putting students and staff in touch with one another. We also aim to build relationships with researchers at other universities.

I am very excited about our future. There will be lots of challenges to make it work and to attract faculty and students, but I believe that it will be very positive for us as a university and as a region.

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American University of Sharjah

American University of Sharjah, one of the Middle East's leading universities, has set itself an ambitious research agenda, pushing the limits of science and engineering and providing exciting opportunities for those seeking to realize the university's research goals.



LEADING A NEW ERA IN RESEARCH

Four new research institutes will drive this research agenda, focusing on real outcomes that will benefit communities in the Middle East and across the world. These research institutes are:

- Biosciences and Bioengineering Research Institute (BBRI)**
- Gulf Environments Research Institute (GERI)**
- Materials Science and Engineering Research Institute (MSERI)**
- Smart Cities Research Institute (SCRI)**

These institutes will be supported by three research centers:

- Genomics Sequencing Research Center (GSRC)**
- Geospatial Analysis Center (GAC)**
- High-Performance Computing Center (HPCC)**

To learn more about the AUS research agenda, and the opportunities available, visit:
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