Flow of Ideas a Priority: Al-Naimi

Academics and Researchers Discuss Ways to Overcome Challenges Facing the Kingdom’s Future Prosperity at KAUST Convention

Roger Harrison Arab News

JEDDAH — A two-day convention to formalize the Global Research Partnership that forms the underpinning intellectual structure of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) opened yesterday.

Academics and researchers from leading universities across the globe attended the event and toured the university’s site that is currently under construction. Proceedings began with a keynote speech delivered by Ali Al-Naimi, minister of petroleum and mineral resources and chairman of KAUST’s board of trustees.

“An astonishing group of the best researchers, scientists and engineers has been brought together not only by their shared scientific passion and pursuit of discovery, but also by their enthusiasm and commitment to realize KAUST’s vision,” Al-Naimi said.

He added that the university would rapidly develop, and be successfully launched and sustained “at the highest standards of academic excellence.”

Al-Naimi said that KAUST would play a key role in the Kingdom’s overall economic development and would address challenges facing the Kingdom’s future prosperity, which includes a high dependency on oil and a high proportion of people below 18. The latter fact, he said, posed a challenge to employment and job creation, and necessitated the development of educational systems, training opportunities and social networks to provide skills for individuals to participate in a diverse and technologically advanced economy.

He added that knowledge and research were no longer simply campus-based, but both global and mobile, and that Stanford, Caltech, UC Berkeley and Silicon Valley had made huge contributions to the Californian and US economies.

“That success critically depends on their ability to draw knowledge, ideas, talent and capital through a global network of research and development, and commercial and educational relationships,” he said, adding that these institutions had managed to attract highly skilled human capital, which was the primary driver of economic growth in a knowledge economy.

Al-Naimi said the new university is a research institution, the first of the 21st century, and had some unusual aspects, particularly its dual role in the execution and funding of research. The latter role has a unique potential to attract the resources and talent of top universities around the world with investments that could create the assets most needed by the Kingdom. To succeed, national systems capable of delivering such activity need to exist. These include attracting research and development activities of mature multinational businesses, “and perhaps, more importantly, the easy flow of ideas and people into and out of the region,” he said.

Professor Choon Fong Shih, president designate of KAUST, said the aims of the university were to “advance science and technology, to diversify the Kingdom’s economy and to be a catalyst for transforming people’s lives in a significant way.” He identified three drivers behind what he described as “our extraordinary mission”: Enabling resources in a supportive environment, a critical mass of inventive minds, and an innovative strategy of alliances and networks transcending continents, communities and cultures.

“KAUST represents a paradigm shift — an intellectual, organizational innovation — to conduct high impact research unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries, to create a new ecosystem for research unfettered by organizational strictures,” he said.

Professor Mark Yudof, president designate of the University of California, described KAUST as “a thoughtful strategy to allow Saudi Arabia to join the world’s research community in an efficient and expedient manner.” Yudof was at pains to emphasize that vital as economic development was as a function of a research university, it was only one of its functions. He said that the commitment to free and open inquiry established a protected marketplace of ideas and concepts, and encouraged innovation “through which our country has prospered mightily.”

The convention concludes today with a series of individual presentations by delegates in their specialist fields.