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Brunel bridges the gulf

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Conservative attitudes in Saudi Arabia restrict postgraduate opportunities for women, particularly if they want to travel overseas to study at Western universities.

However, a programme recently set up by Brunel University may go some way to addressing those restrictions by offering a PhD programme a short drive from the country's borders - in Bahrain.

The Brunel Business School course was heavily oversubscribed in this its first year, and the number of Saudi women applying for next year is higher still.

Zahir Irani, the head of the business school, said the attraction is a UK award provided to students on a full-time basis less than an hour's drive from home.

"Saudi Arabia is only a 50-minute bus ride over a causeway, and the university we work with (Ahlia University) has six or seven buses every morning that bring in Saudi students for undergraduate programmes."

Although the numbers are small at this stage - in the first year Brunel accepted 16 students out of 70 applicants - the indication is that there is a large and growing appetite for this form of course delivery.

Professor Irani said that Saudi Arabia had huge potential in terms of student population and, in future, could offer a stepping stone into Iran.

Bahrain has a newly thriving private higher education sector and is geographically well placed to attract students from across the Gulf region.

Professor Irani said he had been moved to set up the PhD programme in a bid to address the brain drain from the Gulf states and to help broach the problem of how the region's economy would survive when oil and gas reserves run out.

"It was also aimed at solving the problems that faced students from the Middle East post-9/11," he said. "There was the difficulty of obtaining a visa to come to the West, concerns about a possible backlash and women who wanted access to higher education who, for cultural and religious reasons, were unable to leave the region to get a higher degree.

"This is an opportunity to tap into a female community that quite frankly wouldn't otherwise be able to do doctorates."