

Student recruitment review

SUMS was asked to take a deep-dive into how the Division of Computer, Mathematical Science and Engineering (CEMSE) attracted and converted students, identifying recommendations on how to improve practice and process. They were specifically seeking practical, actionable advice that could make a difference in both the immediate and longer term. It was also essential to keep academics engaged in the student recruitment process – reducing their air miles and instead optimising the impact of time they invest in supporting this work at key points in the student journey.

King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) is a research-intensive specialist graduate university based in Saudi Arabia. Ranked highly by QS for citations per member of faculty and the top university under 20 by a³, the university has a reputation for the high quality of its academic staff. It has enjoyed modest but steady growth since being founded in 2009 and now has a student body of around 1,100 at its self-contained campus on the Red Sea, around 80% of whom are studying for PhDs. KAUST is an international university with more than 100 countries represented on campus.

The Division of Computer, Mathematical Science and Engineering (CEMSE) at KAUST commissioned SUMS Consulting to undertake a review of its approach to student recruitment with the primary objective of optimising its student recruitment efficiency and effectiveness using increased digitisation.

CEMSE's leaders outlined bold growth ambitions but recognised the need for modernisation to achieve these aims. They had identified that much of the student recruitment activity was being done by academic staff, with mixed returns for the time they invested. They recognised that there were individuals on whom too much relied. And while they sensed that more should be invested in digital marketing, their efforts in that space up to that point had limited impact.



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SUMS Consulting worked with the CEMSE Division to undertake a period of Discovery covering a wide range of probes. SUMS reviewed CEMSE's student recruitment strategies and plans, reviewing available documentation, with a particular focus on international recruitment. Our findings were used to inform our Discovery interviews and subsequent workshops with core members of the CEMSE team.

We analysed available data on the recruitment pipeline in total and by stage, focusing on application to enrolment, in order to help identify successes and understand weak areas, including offer turnaround times, and volumes and losses by department/level/programme.

We then took an in-depth assessment of attraction activity, including coordinated campaigns along with relevant performance data regarding cost per lead, cost per converted lead, etc. This was combined with a website/digital user experience (UX) and analytics review.

SUMS also carried out primary research in the shape of an external perceptions study, using purchased data of students from key markets actively considering doctoral-level studies in relevant fields. This work focused on prospects' responses to the KAUST and CEMSE value proposition and reputation.

We workshopped the learnings from the Discovery with the CEMSE leadership team along with a range of academic staff directly engaged in student recruitment activities in order to build buy-in to recommendations and proposals.



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Our findings highlighted that there are some unique strengths about the university and pockets of good practice both within and outside of the Division in terms of current working practice. There was an evident awareness and understanding of the university's core mission to recruit a diverse body of students and a general willingness to do more to support these efforts.

However, we also found several areas for improvement which range from high level strategy through to the more tactical operations and ways of working. In particular, we identified many opportunities to improve the digital user experience and to position CEMSE more effectively to an external audience.

Our approach

As the core output, SUMS put together an operating framework for KAUST colleagues to put into action, including:

- 1 an effective student recruitment strategy framework
- 2 key process improvements
- 3 recommendations for the most efficient way to organise marketing-focused people resources, both within the CEMSE division and in terms of its interactions with the KAUST central professional service functions
- 4 suggestions for digital design and systems optimisation



“Thank you so much for completing this review for us! The Division’s leadership really appreciated your assessment, and some of the recommendations that were low-hanging fruits are already being implemented, while the not-so-easy ones give a good direction for the future.”

Dr Aigars Ekers, Assistant Dean, CEMSE, KAUST

