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Short-term success versus long-term viability?

The preceding chapters have shown how, in a relatively short period of time, GCC governments were able to build a national system of public higher education alongside a variety of private institutions that have made higher education more accessible to those seeking it. This accessibility has been particularly beneficial to women who now can study at home compared to the past when few parents allowed their daughters to pursue higher education abroad. In addition, the children of expatriate workers, both males and females, who have grown up in the GCC no longer have to leave the region in order to receive a college degree. In addition to accessibility, the introduction of private universities has also forced public universities to become more accountable and has led to reforms in their curricula, delivery methods, admission requirements and administration. The competition resulting from these changes has also introduced quality assurance measures and processes throughout the educational landscape. A less impressive change resulting from the educational revolution has been in the area of research production although the recent emphasis on developing research centers and the establishment of think-tanks is creating open spaces that are supposed to encourage critical discussions and participation in global research networks.

At the same time, these revolutionary educational reforms are not without controversy. Their embrace of the new predominantly utilitarian mission of the university is problematic for a coherent evolution of Gulf societies based on their present realities and their own visions for the future. The revolutions which have swept the GCC higher education raise two key questions:

1 Can the type of educational reforms adopted in the GCC accomplish the overarching goals of modernizing and joining the global world while maintaining and preserving cultural and linguistic identities of the GCC societies?
2 Can changes at the level of higher education work in isolation from transformative changes at other educational and socio-political levels?

We have attempted to show in this book that the high expectations placed on education to revolutionize GCC societies are not likely to be realized, if other
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policies and practices outside the higher educational system do not support the desired changes. While education is a major means for development, it must be supported by changes at other levels of social, economic, and political structures and processes. If it is to succeed, it must provide citizens with fair “opportunities for education, employment, civic participation, and social and cultural fulfillment as human beings, in the context of a fair distribution of the society’s resources among all its citizenry” (Boulding and Parker, 2005: 179).

This chapter assesses the degree of alignment of educational practices at the level of their content, delivery and administration with GCC nations’ constitutions and their declared early twenty-first century visions. In our analysis, we rely on data from published official declarations and documents as well as mission statements, goals and curricular trends of major universities in the region. These sources are complemented with interviews of university executives when possible. Our analysis is based on the findings described in the previous chapters of this book and draws on our personal experiences as academics and administrators in UAE higher education.

National visions and the role of educational reforms

The five GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE) focused in this book, not only share a common past but they also have a common vision for their future. A reading of the GCC constitutions and the various visions promulgated in the last two decades shows that they share important aspirations. All five nations aspire to become knowledge societies, attain great economic development and become leaders rather than followers in the globalized world. In their constitutions, they also affirm their belonging to the Arab nation and declare Arabic as their official language. The early articles of the constitutions of the five GCC countries all make it clear that the modern states are part of the Arab nation, linked to its history and cultural heritage through language and religion. This commitment to the Arab identity is also confirmed in strategic developments that are outlined in visions and goals for the next decades. For example, Sheikh Mohammad, the ruler of Dubai, prime minister of the UAE and one of the leading actors in Dubai’s fast-paced development, stated in his book, My Vision: Challenges in the Race for Excellence (Al Maktoum, 2006) that in order for the UAE to join the developed world, it needs to acclimate itself to the rapid changing reality of the world, embrace change and transform its thinking from the past to the future to become a leading nation in the twenty-first century. He also stressed that the UAE must preserve its identity as a member of the Arab nation1 and be guided by its core values, convictions and principles derived from belonging to the Arab civilization. The important role given to Arabic as the national language is also reaffirmed in the UAE vision for 2021 which asserts that “Arabic will re-emerge as a dynamic and vibrant language, expressed everywhere in speech and writing as a living symbol of the nation’s progressive Arab-Islamic values” (Cabinet releases, 2010; Youssef, 2010). Projecting into 2021, which will mark the nation’s jubilee, the vision identifies several goals. The
following are some of the themes relevant to this study as articulated by the UAE government in its vision 2021:

1.4 Vibrant culture: The UAE’s distinct culture will remain founded on progressive and moderate Islamic values and endowed with a rich Arabic language, to proudly celebrate Emirati traditions and heritage while reinforcing national identity.

2.2 We want the nation to draw strength from its traditions of openness, peaceful coexistence and understanding. In this way Emiratis will always resist the value-flattening effects of globalisation, and will always be enriched rather than threatened by their nation’s openness to the world.

3.1 The UAE will harness the full potential of its National human capital by maximising the participation of Emiratis, encouraging entrepreneurship, and nurturing home-grown public and private sector leaders while attracting and retaining the best talent.

(Cabinet releases, 2010)

The same aspirations and challenges are identified by all GCC countries in their visions. They all recognize human and social development as prerequisites for economic development. The Qatar National Vision (QNV2030) promulgated in 2008, for example, states that, “Despite rapid economic and social gains, as well as political change, Qatar has maintained its cultural and traditional values as an Arab and Islamic nation that considers the family to be the main pillar of society.” It recognizes that one of the major challenges to achieve its long-term goals is to modernize while preserving its traditions under globalization pressures (Qatar National Vision, 2030). The Kuwaiti 2031 vision states as one of its aims: “Providing [a] climate for balanced human development, safeguarding social values and national identity, preserving the community’s values and its Arab and Islamic identity.” Similarly, the Bahraini vision 2030 (also decreed in 2008) focuses on economic development, and stresses “The Kingdom of Bahrain’s interaction with the human civilization and its Arab belonging to satisfy the requirements of continuous development that conforms with the international standards, as stated in the Kingdom’s constitution” (Kingdom of Bahrain).

Oman’s 2020 vision focuses on diversification of the Omani economy which can be achieved by promoting:

a Higher Education system that: a) keeps pace with developments and changes in today’s world; b) meets the requirements of sustainable development in the Knowledge Era, while preserving the cultural identity of Omani society; and, c) contributes to the progress and development of humankind.

(Ministry of Higher Education-Oman)

To achieve these stated visions, education is expected to be both the engine of the desired transformations and the keeper of traditional values and Arab culture.
This has led all GCC countries to implement a series of educational reforms which are discussed in the next sections.

**Educational reforms**

Both in terms of their goals and the means used to implement them, educational reforms adopted throughout the GCC are strikingly similar in both their underlying assumptions and implementations. They share the following underlying assumptions:

1. improving education quality can be achieved through the transplantation of the Western university model;
2. adopting English as the medium of instruction is the most efficient shortcut;
3. presuming that educational reforms do not negatively affect the Arab-Islamic identity of the region;
4. achieving economic development and nationalization of the labor force through education can be isolated from other important policies that govern employment and social practices.

These assumed transformative powers of education are consistent with those discussed in various international governmental organizations and reiterated by successive Arab Human Development Reports (UNDP, 2002, 2004, 2005). Higher education reform is envisaged to play the key role in transforming GCC societies both economically and socially. It is expected that tribal affiliations will become less important; a greater number of more empowered women will enter the labor market; and the countries’ reliance on professional expatriate labor will be reduced. It is also assumed that all these fundamental shifts in social and economic practices will occur while preserving and strengthening Arab and Muslim heritage, culture and traditions and protecting the Arabic language in the face of English dominance.

**Improving education quality by transplanting the Western university model**

As discussed in Chapter 3, the transplantation of the Western university model is part of the globalization of education all over the world. This trend, which has been accelerated by the globalization of the economy and, more particularly, by the generalization of information technologies, has facilitated global interconnectedness and encouraged the homogenization of higher education. Institutions in the periphery tend to adopt Western curricula, Western produced textbooks and materials, and patterns of organization and standardization (Spring, 2009). There is also homogeneity in the way these institutions submit themselves to American and British systems of accreditation agencies to improve their institutions’ and programs’ rankings on the global stage. However, transplanted models are also affected by local forces and are born out of political decisions decreed
by local governments that impose their own specific regulations. Naturally, governmental interventions shape the actual functioning of the imported institutions and as such cannot lead to mirror images of the Western institutions which they copy. Local influences have manifested themselves in governance issues, adjusting to students’ competencies, teaching conditions and encouragement of research across the GCC.

In addition to the transplantation of the Western university structure and curriculum which are widespread worldwide, Westernization in GCC higher education has gone further by relying on Western faculty and administrators to implement and lead their reforms. This dependence on Westerners started with private universities and spread to public institutions at all levels. For example, most reforms of the primary and secondary educational system were developed and supervised by external partnerships and Western consultants. At the university level, Arab top executives were replaced by Western administrators in many public universities especially in the UAE, and the reforms to revamp educational programs in most GCC countries were also led by Western experts and organizations (Mills, 2008a).

There are many assumptions that can explain governments’ decisions to rely on Western experts to reform education. It is believed that importing Western curricula is the most expedient way to respond to globalization’s fast-paced need for wide-ranging economic transformations. Policy-makers consider that they are in a race against time to join the globalized world and that the fastest way to reach development is to import the knowledge and expertise available in the developed West. According to a higher education adviser in the UAE, 4 given the priority of professional education and the constraints of time to accomplish such training, it is not realistic to expect university education to accomplish everything in four or five years. This view was shared by other university provosts who stated that the main objective of university education is to provide professional training to young nationals so that they can serve their country. A former Zayed University provost pointed out that the university was exploring ways to “align and link everything ZU does with national needs,” in order to “support the business community and economic development of the country” (personal communication, March 2009). In another interview with New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) Abu Dhabi dean, it was emphasized that the goal of NYIT is to provide professional education that trains students “for a clear career orientation.” The dean did concede that the issue of contextualizing the curriculum had to be resolved in the future. For example, courses on federal taxation required by NYIT in New York are irrelevant for business students in the region where there are no taxes. The same priorities of preparing graduates for the labor market were stressed in interviews in Kuwait with university administrators.

The second reason often cited to justify the adoption of the Western educational model in the region is linked to the serious criticisms leveled against the Arab educational system in the entire Arab world (Mazawi and Sultana, 2010). Drzeniek-Hanouz and Yousef (2007: 8) point out that one of the reasons the UAE did not have a better standing among the 40 most competitive economies
in the world was due to “low rankings on indicators related to health and education when benchmarked against the group of advanced economies.” They pointed out that “aside from quantitative targets, the quality of outcomes in tertiary schooling needs to be enhanced to reverse the low valuation of educational credentials by the private sector.” The World Bank report on education in the MENA region levels similar criticisms. Arabic education has become synonymous with rote learning, outdated teaching methods and a teacher-centered approach (Boyle, 2006; World Bank, 2009). Its failures are usually attributed to its being out of sync with the skills requirements of the modern job market because of a curriculum and pedagogy that do not develop the necessary skills of flexibility, critical thinking and analysis, and lifelong learning. Since these skills are considered to be the hallmark of the Western educational system and the reason for the advancement of Western societies, transplanting the Western/American educational models and importing top executives to lead the reforms of the educational system are seen as the solution to what is ailing the Arab educational system and a shortcut to producing Arab graduates with the required qualifications to spearhead the development of their countries (Drzeniek-Hanouz and Yousef, 2007; UNDP, 2003; Mazawi, 2007). It is expected that recruiting international consultants, mainly from the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, to direct both public and private institutions will remedy Arab education failings and raise the quality of Arab university graduates’ modest output as researchers, innovators and producers of knowledge (Bollag, 2006; Mills, 2008a, 2008b).

The nature of the reforms and the short-term failure to change labor market outcomes has led many academics and parents alike to question their effectiveness. They point to the relatively high unemployment rates among national graduates and what they consider as young generations’ weakening ties to Arabic culture and Arabic proficiency. Mounting criticisms of the direction of earlier reforms, particularly in the UAE and Qatar where the reforms were the most aggressive, has resulted in the reversal of some of their components such as a partial return to Arabic as a medium of instruction in the humanities and social sciences and the nomination of national administrators to lead public and even some private universities. By April of 2013 sweeping changes in the administration of UAE public universities were carried out by the new minister of higher education. Qatar University also reversed its policy of English medium instruction by reinstating Arabic in all but hard science colleges (see Chapter 5). These abrupt shifts serve to highlight key problems with the reform process: the exclusion and lack of participation of important national stakeholders in the planning stages of educational reforms opened the door to criticisms of the reforms. In some cases governments reacted by decreeing reversals of parts of the policies in unpredictable and unplanned ways, thus creating further instability in the educational system and resulting in new problems of their own.
Adopting English as the medium of instruction is a pragmatic solution

As discussed in Chapter 8, there has been relatively little attention in official discourses about the implications of a language policy that stresses the need for English proficiency rather than a dual language proficiency in both Arabic and English (Al Baik, 2008; Al Najami, 2007; Nahyan, 2009). The emphasis on English as the language of modern education reflects an acceptance of the developed/developing binary division of the world and stems from the belief that it is possible to catch up to the developed countries by using English to access the knowledge available in it (Tikly, 2004; Drummond, 2010; Lewis, 2010; Swan and Lewis, 2010). There seems to be little concern about the impact that using English to educate may have on the maintenance, let alone the development, of Arabic as a language of knowledge in the future, as aspired to in the vision statements discussed above. The contradiction between the adoption of English as the language of instruction and the declared goals of developing Arabic to become the language of twenty-first-century knowledge seems to be set aside for more pressing pragmatic considerations. Interviewed university executives concede that more attention should be given to Arabic culture and language in university education. However, they stressed that the priorities in education today are to prepare university graduates for a labor market that requires English. They shared the opinion that, today, there is a clear emphasis in the Middle East on professional education and that to prepare graduates for the knowledge society they need to master English, the language of science, research, business and technology and develop the skills required in the labor market. In effect, this association between English and “useful education” helps “standardize Western measures of skill technology, innovation and productivity in ways that are quickly recalibrating regional economic and political relationships” (Tikly, 2004: 16). Setting the priorities from this perspective impacts not only the neglect of the mother tongue but it also means that students must devote more time to learning English and professional skills with very little space in the curriculum reserved for the acquisition of local knowledge to ground them in their culture and history.

The consequences of these implemented educational policies are all the more important given the demographic makeup of the society and family structure. The need to import a large labor force and a reliance on the expatriate experts to build infrastructure and lead economic development have seriously impacted GCC societies’ communication patterns and channels, although to varying degrees. The influx of expatriates has given rise to globalized urban centers where Western culture and the English language have become ubiquitous and their influence inescapable inside and outside the home. From a very early age, children watch American programs on TV and are spoken to in English by their parents or their foreign nannies at home. Outside the home, English functions as the lingua franca in communication between expatriates from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and with nationals. Western cultural messages dominate the social landscape in
shopping malls, restaurants, movie theaters and hospitals. Nationals must know some English to obtain even the most basic services in their own countries.\textsuperscript{8} In some cities such as Dubai or Doha public spaces, local culture and language have become confined to souks and heritage villages that have been developed to represent culture not only for tourists but also for young generations of nationals (Khalaf, 2002, 2005).

Although the impact of globalization is not uniform across the region and seems to depend on the degree of integration with the global market and dependence on imported skilled manpower, the infiltration of English into life patterns of young generations seems to be similar across the GCC, particularly in urban centers. Several studies conducted among university and high school students in the GCC reveal that young Gulf nationals and Arabs residing in the UAE, Qatar and Oman feel the real impact not only in terms of their linguistic practices where English dominates their diverse interactions but also in their thought patterns. The reliance on English for almost everything in their lives has aroused concerns and made university students themselves ambivalent about their mother tongue (Al- Issa and Dahan, 2011). Such linguistic practices are clearly misaligned with GCC vision statements emphasizing Arabic language and culture as an integral part of their identities.

\textit{Reforms’ impact on the construction of national identity}

Mission statements of GCC public universities and the different types of private or branch institutions are similar in their visions and goals although they may highlight different aspects having to do with reducing the “flattening effect of globalization” on national identity. For example, the more ambitious semi-private universities do recognize the need to combine the global with the Islamic/historical/cultural/local knowledge in their educational outcomes, unlike branch and public universities that tend to emphasize preparing students for careers in a globalized world. The larger semi-private institutions also acknowledge the value of a liberal arts education model which is generally one of the important features of the American-style university education. However, the focus on professional education remains dominant in most universities in the region. In defense of this professional focus in higher education, one of our interviewees stated that “Arabs need to adapt to the global context and not allow [their] history to prejudice their outlook on the present environment.”

He went on to explain that in order for universities to provide the desired local knowledge, students would have to spend more years in university study given their initial low competencies in English and other study skills.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, in response to a question on how the university is ensuring that students receive a liberal arts education when the focus is on professional training, the dean of the school of humanities at AUK suggested that their approach is to blend acquisition of liberal arts education, local knowledge and professional training throughout the curriculum. She went on to explain that this blending is accomplished by offering a professional education and targeting problem solving skills
to find solutions to local market problems. Such a perspective seems to suggest that localizing university education means focusing on professional training and providing the skill set in demand by the local labor market.

Other administrators acknowledged that there is a problem with the way university education is presently handling its grounding in the local Arab culture and environment. A university provost stated:

Our students have told us they don’t know much about their own history and we are trying to respond to that. The question is what minimum level of knowledge students should have about their own country and culture [emphasis added] and to build that into the general education curriculum so that, that level of awareness is assured. Even beyond that, communicating in Arabic is something that even our students who have grown up here are not able to do effectively in some cases. Increasing the level of sophistication and knowledge in the use of communicating in Arabic is an important part of what we are trying to accomplish.

(Personal communication, March 2009)

The concerns about how university education can balance between its two goals of grounding itself in local culture and preparing students to participate in the global economy of their countries was expressed over and over again by university professionals (faculty and administrators) interviewed in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. The pressure to graduate students who can directly enter the job market is too great to allow for the allocation of time to a more liberal arts curriculum. This is particularly problematic given the low skill sets that entering students bring with them from high schools (see Chapter 5).

Two further elaborations are in order here. First, what exactly does one mean by liberal arts education and, second, what does one mean by grounding in local culture? In its definition of the purpose of general education offered in a liberal arts approach to education, the Harvard Task Force Report (Harvard University College of Arts and Sciences, 2007: 1) states that it should prepare citizens to “[E]ngage with forces of change—cultural, religious, political, demographic, technological, [and] planetary.” This is generally accomplished by having students take general courses in humanities, social sciences, mathematics, composition and natural science disciplines, before moving on to specialize in their particular field (Latzer, 2004). However, in the GCC context, the benefits of such program of study are constrained by the relatively low academic English proficiency of freshmen. Depending on their TOEFL scores, students may have to spend a year or more in pre-college courses of instruction in order to prepare them for the four-year collegiate course of study. Thus, the normal four-year course of study for students in the West can often be extended to five, or even six, years. The result is that less time is spent on the type of courses that can provide students with “the tools to face [the cultural, religious, political, demographic, technological and planetary] challenges in an informed and thoughtful way” (Harvard Task Force, 2007: 1). As a result, general education has to devote
more time to developing linguistic proficiency in English to access professional level training rather than a more humanistic education.

UNESCO defines humanistic education as one that promotes critical thinking about one’s own society, culture and historical traditions to prepare citizens to be active defenders of human rights, equitable societies and the environment (Spring, 2009). Offering an education that does challenge the traditional status quo is understandably a sensitive route that universities must carefully negotiate, and doing it in Arabic might be even more difficult. But preparing graduates to make appropriate choices and be critically engaged in the development of their societies requires it. In addition, the fact that the majority of faculty are expatriates, with no real job security, often makes them avoid discussing “sensitive issues” for fear of being negatively labeled as not respecting local cultures and traditions.11

The GCC states are relatively young nations that have witnessed phenomenal transformations during their short history. They are faced with a multitude of existential questions which have been further intensified by recent regional upheavals. Since the 9/11 events, the region has come under world scrutiny and such questions are being debated within prevalent competing paradigms ranging from liberal, progressive, conservative to Islamist ideologies. Dominant conservative and liberal perspectives are often at odds over how to reconcile Western values and lifestyles brought in by globalization with an understanding of “progressive and moderate Islamic values [that are] endowed with a rich Arabic language, to proudly celebrate … [national] traditions and heritage while reinforcing national identity” (Cabinet releases, 2010: Theme 1.4). The debates touch on issues relating to all aspects of social and political life ranging from environmental and gender issues, morality, cultural affiliation, religious practices, Islamic and Western banking systems to political alignments. All of these questions are regular topics of discussions on TV programs and newspapers in the region (e.g., Mathew, 2008; Al Jazeera TV, 2009; Al Arabiya TV, 2009; BBC Arabic, 2014). While university education cannot provide a magic solution to these issues, it should offer students skills and knowledge to participate in this debate and reflect on competing discourses. The evidence from the general education curriculum of both private and public universities shows little evidence that this discourse is taking place. A liberal arts education that makes students acquire knowledge of their national history, cultural heritage and society could enable students “to think and act critically and reflectively outside the channels of a career or profession” (Muller, 2000: 41). So far, higher education reform has missed the opportunity to use general education to create a new generation of critical thinkers who can productively construct their own national identities and civic engagements.

Defining knowledge in the new mission of the university

In describing what they called the “Education Gospel” Grubb and Lazerson (2006) point to the similarities across many parts of the world, from the United
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States to China, passing through Europe, sharing a common discourse about education. This discourse “first stresses the failures of schools and universities and then proceeds to reform them with more economic and utilitarian goals” (295). There is a widespread acceptance of this gospel by all stakeholders in the education process. This doctrine rests on the belief that in light of the “knowledge revolution” that has taken place in the last decades, work qualifications have also changed with the labor market demanding “higher order skills” which can only be obtained through higher education if individuals want to participate in the knowledge economy. The framing of the value of education in terms of its “economic production function” is widespread worldwide and is attributed to the corporatization of higher education (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Spring, 2009).

Nedeva (2008: 86) observes that the “rhetoric about repositioning universities as global players in the ‘knowledge society’ and major contributors to ‘economic competitiveness’ and ‘wealth creation’ is widespread both horizontally and vertically.” Horizontally, across nations, university education missions stress their role as knowledge producers and the same discourse is held vertically at all levels within each nation. IGOs such as the World Bank and the OECD and national governments expect HEIs to offer citizens and societies a competitive advantage on the global stage. These expectations have affected not only the type of skills being targeted but also the mission of the institution itself. The emphasis on efficiency, accountability and competitiveness are gradually transforming university education into marketable services and subjecting it to the capitalist laws of the market. Such changes are leading many education researchers to question HEI’s new role (see, e.g., Epstein, 2008; Dale, 2008; Naidoo, 2008; Ursin, 2008). For example, Etzkowitz (1998, cited in Nedeva, 2008: 88) argues that the growing commercialization of higher education is creating an “entrepreneurial university,” which integrates economic development into the university as an academic function along with teaching and research. It is this “capitalization of knowledge” that is at the heart of a new mission for the university, linking universities to users of knowledge more tightly and establishing the university as an economic actor in its own right.

While criticisms of the reframing of the university’s mission to serve this “third mission” to respond to corporate funding demands are beginning to be heard in the West (Nedeva, 2008; Brown et al., 2008), the rest of the world has embraced the university’s new mission and its commercialization as the sacred gospel to be duplicated. Universities in the Arabian Gulf and elsewhere have approached reforming education from an either-or perspective. The binary alternatives of either importing Western curricula and language to close “the knowledge gap separating the Arab and Islamic nations from the advancement of contemporary global civilization” (Abdallah S. Jum’ah, quoted in Verde, 2010) or lagging behind is a false dilemma.

Developing countries’ education may be better reformed if it seriously considers the concerns raised about the corporatization of universities to avoid its pitfalls. In addition, an educational system that worked in the West with different social and historical configurations may not necessarily yield the same outcomes
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in a different socio-historical context and a rapidly changing and diversified global landscape.

The fast-paced and dynamic changes of increasingly global economic and social structures and knowledge capital require that higher education pay more attention to lifelong learning critical thinking skills. For example the World Bank (2003) suggests that the new type of learning should “emphasize creating, applying, analyzing, and synthesizing knowledge and engaging in collaborative learning across the lifespan” (World Bank, 2003: xvii–xviii cited in Farrell and Fenwick, 2007: 15). While this may be true, the debate remains about how to define a type of knowledge that has local relevance. According to Muller (2000), there are two orientations regarding the categories of knowledge. He argues against:

accepted dichotomies between an education for knowledge and an education for skills, a curriculum of the past and one of the future, the emphasis on understanding or memorization because they tend to “portray the world en route from one to the other [and] will certainly not aid our understanding of what knowledge and skills our millennial citizen will find most worthwhile.”

(Muller 2000, 54)

The problems of governance and sustainability

The need to develop a university and college system that addresses local needs while providing students with the technical and intellectual means to make their way in a rapidly globalizing economy requires us to look at the governance of higher education institutions. One cannot develop the humanities and social scientific academic infrastructure to creatively engage students in exploring important social and cultural issues without creating an administrative system that can unleash the creative scholarly energy of the faculty.

As we noted in Chapter 6, many of the new private institutions that have been created over the past two decades suffer from what we might call a participatory governance deficit. In extreme cases, faculty members are employed to teach a large number of courses whose syllabi and methods of assessment are predetermined. Sometimes, accreditation demands inadvertently exacerbate this problem by insisting on the quantification of educational outcomes. This leads to the adoption of standardized tests and limits the ability of institutions to provide engaging courses of study. This problem is especially severe for the small institutions that primarily provide business and information technology degrees. It is likely that the very competitive environment that these for-profit institutions face make it much more unlikely that their owners will encourage the empowerment of their key workers.

While it is not uncommon for faculty to assist in the management of degree programs as well as to evaluate the educational accomplishments of their students, it is less common for academic workers in most of the GCC institutions to contribute to important decisions on efforts to reform the curricula. More often
than not, these decisions come from above in unpredictable ways. This is particularly the case in public institutions that are run directly by ministries of higher education or councils under these ministries. Very few universities and colleges in the GCC have functioning Faculty Senates. This is partly a result of the hierarchical political systems of the Gulf, but it is noteworthy that the newer higher educational institutions often have a more disempowered expatriate faculty than the older public institutions.

The elite branch campuses face a series of different issues that call into question their long-term ability to integrate the study of local social issues into their curricula. In some cases, the campus is required to provide an identical curriculum to that offered by the home campus. This can obviously limit the ability of the campus to creatively respond to local student needs. On the other hand, the prestigious nature of these institutions allow the campus administrators to limit teaching loads and encourage research, and some of these institutions have developed impressive research output in the few years of their existence.

The larger issue these campuses face revolves around efforts to maintain their legitimacy as most were created through decisions of a very small group of elites. On the GCC side, the ruler must commit to providing a high level of subsidies even though most of the students are not national citizens. On the university side, the university president is often responsible for the decision to create a branch campus even though the faculty of the home institution might be unenthusiastic. It is not at all difficult to imagine a change in university leadership leading to a reassessment of a home country’s overseas commitments. Nor is it hard to foresee a new ruler in a GCC country re-evaluating the commitment of subsidies to an elite university that services a very small number of its own national citizens. The isolation of GCC citizens from the educational reform process is particularly noteworthy in these cases.

**Can education reform alone achieve the nationalization of the labor market?**

One of the major challenges of the GCC planning authorities has been the effort to encourage the nationalization of the workforce. Despite heavy investments in education and the various qualitative reforms we have documented, there remains an almost total reliance on expatriates in most private sectors of the economy. As we have seen, the causes of this mismatch are often blamed on the quality of education and the orientation of students in humanities and non-scientific degrees that are considered not to be aligned with the required skill sets and qualifications demanded by the private sector. The evidence, however, points to a different conclusion: in the absence of a strong coordination between education, labor and economic policies, this mismatch is likely to continue.

Most GCC nationals graduating from university seek management positions and are unwilling to accept positions that they do not consider prestigious due to real social pressure on them. Nationals are expected to be rich and owners of businesses rather than mid or low level employees (this is especially true for
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Kuwaiti, Qatari and UAE nationals). Such attitudes perpetuate the dependence on expatriates to occupy these positions, particularly in the private sector. In fact, an important outcome of higher education reform is that it has provided educational opportunity for expatriate youth and promoted their employment in the private sector at lower wages than nationals are willing to accept. Current labor laws and regulations end up not encouraging nationals to join the private sector who prefer public sector employment because it offers higher pay scales, shorter working hours, longer holidays, and retirement benefits. From businesses’ perspective, there is reluctance to employ nationals because of regulations making it difficult to fire them and the perceptions that nationals either lack the needed skills or, just as importantly, the motivation to be productive workers. This has often led to the employment of shadow (or phantom) workers doing the job of the national in sectors of the economy where the states have imposed hiring quotas such as banking in the UAE, Qatar or Kuwait. Hertog reports that these hiring quotas have been difficult to monitor, have led to evasion and in some cases corruption between businesses and labor administrations. Various forms of “phantom employment” of nationals are widespread across the region, and quotas have probably increased the informal employment of foreigners.

(Hertog, 2014: 7)

The lesson drawn from this unsuccessful experience has been that quotas have failed because nationals do not have the appropriate skills to function effectively in a global economy or do not have incentives to do so. Quotas alone cannot force businesses to really use labor services of national citizens. Neither can expansion of higher education alone make national students seek private sector employment.

The embrace of higher education across the GCC where in some countries close to 90 percent of high school graduates apply for tertiary education has led some cynics to see in this step a strategy to delay youths from entry into the job market and disguise the potential high unemployment rates among the youths. In some cases, such as in Oman, the current labor market is unable to absorb all tertiary education graduates and the prediction is that a brain drain is underway where Omanis are looking for careers in neighboring countries. Recently, however, education policies are encouraging vocational training colleges and institutes as an alternative to university education, particularly in countries such as Oman and Bahrain. The indication is that government policy-makers do want increasing numbers of GCC citizens to find private sector employment, but so far, national citizens continue to disproportionately work in the public sector for relatively high wages, while the private sector largely employs a disproportionate number of expatriate workers at lower wages.13

In the richer countries (Qatar and the UAE), more than 90 percent of the private sector labor force is expatriate, while more than 80 percent of employed nationals work in the public sector. National workers in the three lower income
countries of the GCC (Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain) are more likely to work in the private sector, but only Oman has over the past decade successfully reduced the relative presence of expatriates in the private sector and the relative number of nationals who work in the public sector (Kuwait may also be meeting these goals). The inability and unwillingness of nationals to enter the private sector has particularly affected well-educated women who desire to work and less well-educated national men. Unemployment rates for female nationals have climbed as larger numbers of young adult women improve their educational attainment. In the UAE, for example, the percentage of women in the labor force who cannot find work is 28 percent. In Saudi Arabia, this female unemployment rate is 35 percent (IMF, 2013).

What accounts for the seeming inability of higher educational reforms to transform the labor market? Part of the explanation is linked to recent and transitory trends. In the wake of the recent period of high oil prices, many of the GCC states are implementing large physical infrastructure projects that require the importation of vast numbers of low-wage workers from South Asia. More fundamentally, however, is the continuation of an incentive structure that favors relatively low wage expatriate employment in the private sector and high wage employment for nationals in the public sector.

Given these realities, education reforms alone cannot achieve the goal of attracting more nationals to the productive sectors of the economy without policy interventions to reform the patterns of job creation in the GCC. There is a need for the creation of higher-skilled mid-level job opportunities for the thousands of national university, college and vocational training graduates who expect more attractive wages than the private sector is presently paying to expatriates. A portfolio of coherent government interventions to address short-term employment constraints could include the introduction of a tax and subsidy program that can induce an increase in the relative share of nationals employed in the private sector. Such steps must be accompanied by changes in public sector wage-setting practices and private sector employment management policies so that wage differentials between the private and public sectors decrease. These measures should be coupled with what is referred to as “labor market active programs” such as the UAE’s TANMIA.14 If these reforms are implemented, then the higher education reforms we have documented are much more likely to succeed in increasing nationals’ participation in the private sector of the economy toward achieving GCC nationalization goals.

Opening the doors to women: a chance for equality?

GCC governments across the region have entrusted education with social development and the empowerment of women. But unlike the limited impact that education has had in the area of nationalization of the labor force discussed above, a major achievement of higher education in the GCC is that it has laid the basis for women’s emancipation. Across the GCC the percentage of women enrolled in HEIs is equal if not superior to men. This has been possible thanks to
the availability of HE education at home as families are much more reluctant to send their daughters to study abroad. Literacy rates among females above the age of 15 are around 84 percent, and in 2009 more than 60 percent of graduates in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE were women (Al Masah Capital Limited, 2012).

The personal and social benefits of women’s education are undeniable. Worldwide research shows a clear correlation between women’s education and health benefits for both females and their children. Increased education of women leads to a decrease in child mortality and fertility rates, increase in life expectancy and an increase in potential income (Adely, 2009). For most countries of the GCC, the rapid increase in the number of educated women has resulted in gender role imbalances as the percentage of women university graduates is greater than men’s. Women’s empowerment seems at times to have outpaced the often paternalistic traditions and expectations which still prevail in society (Al-Nasr, 2011).

Despite these advances, women’s educational successes have not been paralleled by corresponding participation in the labor market. Indeed, women’s participation in the labor sector remains well below what one would expect. Despite governments’ steps to encourage women to participate in their societies’ labor market, out of the 10.2 million literate women above the age of 15 only 3.3 million are recorded as employed, bringing their participation in the GCC labor market to 26.9 percent, compared to 84 percent for males (Al Masah Capital Limited, 2012). IGOs have tended to explain this mismatch by invoking the role of cultural values and family traditions as a major cause. The questions often asked are: how important are Arab cultural and family values in explaining this mismatch? What is the role of economy planning and labor policies in women’s low participation in the labor market? And, can other reforms in higher education reverse this reality?

There is no agreement as to the role played by culture, family and tradition. It is widely presumed that women’s freedom to work outside the home is restrained by Arab traditional values in male-dominated societies. These traditions are often reinforced by laws that severely limit women’s rights under the guise of religion. For example, in most Arab countries, laws still favor men over women in inheritance and their ability to make their own decisions relating to marriage, divorce and freedom of movement.

As restrictive as this reality is, Arab women’s legal rights have progressed in the last decades. Women’s equal rights to men have been formally recognized in most GCC constitutions such as “in Qatar, Kuwait (Kuwait Constitution Article 29), UAE (UAE Constitution Article 25), Bahrain (Bahrain Constitution Article 4), Oman (Oman Basic Law Article 17), [and] the Saudi Arabian Constitution guarantees ‘human rights in accordance with Shari’ah’ (Article 26)” (Al-Nasr, 2011: 44). GCC women have also gained some political rights, including voting and running for parliament in some countries. There are women ministers and municipality representatives in Kuwait and the UAE. Within higher education, Sheikha Moza al Misnad of Qatar, the mother of the present-day ruler, is the head of the Qatar Foundation, which supervises Doha’s Education City. In
Kuwait, Sheikha Dana al Sabah is the founder and head of the Board of Trustees of the American University of Kuwait. In the UAE, Sheikha Fatma, the wife of the late UAE president Sheikh Zayed, and four women holding ministerial posts, are all role models that send powerful messages to GCC women and men.

GCC women have also made great strides in business. Like in the rest of the world they have become entrepreneurs, albeit at much slower rates depending on the specific country. Zeidan and Bahrami (2011: 102) report that “Saudi, Bahrain and the UAE seem to be at the forefront, while the women of Kuwait, Qatar and Oman have not been as active.” According to the authors, women’s participation in business activities still face several challenges including access to capital and relevant information, and cumbersome and sometimes gender-discriminatory regulations, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Other barriers have to do with a lack of self-confidence and, more importantly, women’s prioritization of their family responsibilities and desires to establish a family and work balance. It is clear that such factors limiting labor force participation of women are not unique to Arab women but can be found everywhere across cultures (Adely, 2009).

In an ethnographic study conducted by Adely on Jordanian women and their perceptions of paid work outside the home, participants articulated a wide variety of reasons for their participation in higher education. For some it was seen in economic/financial terms as opening doors for better employment opportunities, while for others, the reasons were more personal such as improving their prospects for a better marriage. Adely (2009) suggested that there are many factors that influence women’s decisions regarding education and work that go beyond the neo-liberal explanations and stereotypical conceptions of “a pathological” representation of the “Arab family,” “Arab culture” and “Arab men and women” prevalent in IGO reports such as the 2005 Arab Human Development Report, which tend to perpetuate such discourse on Arab women’s status. Adely concludes that such stereotypical representations ignore the rapid changes that are taking place not only at the level of the economy but also at the level of cultural beliefs. She writes that:

The AHDR 2005, despite making important contributions to the conceptualization of development challenges in the Arab world, fails to account for the range of factors that shape decisions about education, waged labor, marriage and family. It oversimplifies the significance of global economic and political forces tied to contemporary development projects like formal education, and despite giving credence to the importance of developing human capabilities to make informed choices, it continues to rely on assumptions shaped by economic determinants and a liberal ideal of progress about what constitutes progress and quality of life. Thus the reader is unable to imagine alternate outcomes or desires. (Adely, 2009: 117)

It is clear that transformative changes taking place in Arab societies are also leading to changes in “Arab family” values, albeit at different rates. While some
values, such as parents’ role to decide for their children, both males and females, what to study, who to marry and where to work are still current practices, many others are in transition. Nonetheless, Arab attitudes toward the value of girls’ education have dramatically changed. Across the Arab world, families are willing to make great sacrifices to send their daughters to school and university when it is accessible to them and they can afford it.

When it comes to work, there are many other factors that affect women’s choices of employment. In a study of women’s perceptions of work, Khalifeh (2011) found that interviewed Qatari women felt that both their society and their government encouraged them to enter the workforce. They expressed preferences as to which sectors are better working environments for them based on their need to balance work and family. They consider working in the public sector safer even though they recognize that work in the private sector leads to better pay and better opportunities for career advancement. For them the priority is to find a job that allows them to balance between family and work responsibilities, a balance that is possible in careers such as in education.

One of the accepted economic benefits of women’s paid employment outside the home, worldwide, is the liberating force of being financially independent which empowers them to be more assertive. In the GCC, there are possible explanations as to why employment may not necessarily be perceived as that financially liberating force. GCC women can be financially independent without having to work. The welfare system in the wealthy GCC states subsidizes basic living for all its citizens, making employment for financial needs less of a necessity. It should be noted here that Islam grants wives the right to control their own financial resources and makes men alone responsible for household expenditures and family support. In addition, many national women can claim unemployment to receive supplementary government unemployment insurance. As a result many women may choose not to work if the family constraints on their freedom of movement are not too onerous.

The changes described above are not uniform throughout Arab societies or the GCC. It is true that there are still family/cultural constraints that do limit possibilities for those women who do want to work. Parents of unmarried young women do not favor their daughters moving away from home in search of employment unless they are in dire need of that extra income. In the GCC, as elsewhere, this constraint on women’s mobility is exacerbated by job creation spatial patterns. Both government and private industry employment availabilities tend to be concentrated in the larger cities such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Kuwait City, Manama or Muscat. Educated women living outside of these centers are less likely to find work (specifically in the private sector) close to home unless they are willing to commute. There are also still cultural restrictions on the type of work acceptable for women. For example, women engineers are unlikely to be offered or themselves seek work that requires night shifts in manufacturing industry, construction sites or offshore oil rigs.

Socially, prevailing beliefs that male and female spaces should be segregated in societies that are male-dominated also limit women’s opportunities to partake
in their own development and the development of their societies. Separate educational institutions have made it possible for parents to send their daughters to school in an environment that otherwise would have kept them at home. At the same time segregated schools have perpetuated the mentality that women do not belong in public spaces controlled by men. In some contexts such as Saudi Arabia, gender segregation has also negatively affected the quality of education being delivered and received by women. On the job market, women are encouraged to work in domains where there is little interaction with males, such as teaching, thus limiting their opportunities for work. Social discourses about women’s education tie the benefits of education to their role in the private space of the home and family as good mothers and wives rather than direct participants in the economic development of their societies. It is often said that by raising good citizens, educated mothers are in fact participating in the evolution of their societies. In short, through their education women are expected to be enablers and supporters of men to carry out their responsibilities. We should be mindful, though, that constraints on women are not necessarily unique to the “Arab family” or the GCC societies but can be found in all cultures and civilizations.

Nonetheless, the impressive participation of women in universities and colleges throughout the GCC signals a significant shift in the social practices throughout the region. Arab/Islamic culture is not static or inherently hostile to female empowerment. Most young women and their parents are now firmly committed to attaining high levels of formal education. The fact that significant increases in education have not yet resulted in sharp rises in labor force participation is partly due to the cultural barriers we have outlined in previous paragraphs. But we should also give due weight to economic factors that have limited both the ability and desire of young women to become professional workers. The incentive system that channels national workers into the public sector also negatively affects national women’s desire to seek work in the private sector. The lack of government employment opportunities combined with lower wages in the corporate business world and a welfare system that encourages women to stay within the household economy are also responsible for low female labor force participation. Higher education attainment is one important factor promoting the increased autonomy and equality of women, but educational reforms by themselves cannot be expected to shift the subaltern status of GCC women.

**Conclusion**

There is little doubt that the road taken by educational policies in the GCC has revolutionized the education system in terms of its quantity and quality. There are however many questions about where this road is leading to. The determination of GCC leaders to transform their sheikhdoms into modern societies is impressive. They have bet on educational reforms to help them achieve their goals of becoming part of the twenty-first-century knowledge societies but in following education commodification trends prevalent in contemporary Western higher education, they run the risk of missing their goals of becoming leaders
rather than followers. Even the embrace of a professional education to enable students to enter the entrepreneurial global economy seems to be questionable when measured by the actual participation and productivity of national graduates in the new knowledge economy of their respective countries. Such shortcoming may be the result of a turnkey approach to education that is not rooted in its local socio-cultural, historical and economic context. The reforms have considered education as “a key site of cultural reproduction” (Phillipson, 2000: 99) where authentic individual development is generally secondary. In his critique of this perspective, Sing observes that it “is narrowly economic and instrumental and often means little more than short term retraining and adaptation. Most governments are concerned more with national competitiveness and economic growth than individual development” (Sing, cited in Spring, 2009: 67). GCC educational reforms are inscribed in this deeply flawed instrumental view of education that too often associates tradition with inertia and “modernity” with progress. As Ramadan (2009) points out, all traditions are constructed through movement; and modernity is a present tradition that deals with the challenges of contemporary times.

It is the obligation of any national education policy to guarantee its citizens the right to their past so that students can learn to critically evaluate their heritage and participate in their own social evolution. Rulers expect their universities and colleges to nurture citizens’ sense of pride and appreciation of their cultural heritage. Their effort to construct a contemporary national identity, however, is frustrated by the importation of educational systems, curricula and academic workers. This can clearly limit the opportunities for students to study their own culture and society. A global university should engage students in a truly global culture to build a future society that starts with knowledge about its own traditions, social dynamics and environmental issues. This knowledge is just as essential and urgent as technological and scientific knowledge and can provide the tools necessary to “resist the flattening and homogenizing effects of globalization” expressed in the UAE charter. In this respect, using Arabic as one of the languages of instruction is essential because “when the written language becomes a means of representing and problematizing the issues facing the community … [then it serves] as a tool for linking [students’] uses of language to their concerns within the local community” (Holmes, 2008: 363).

To pose the challenge of development as either following the Western model or remaining underdeveloped creates a false and unproductive dilemma. The universities and colleges of the GCC can offer their students all that is good about Western education while at the same time teach them about themselves and their environment. Given their wealth, they can afford to do it. It is fitting to close this chapter and book with one of the great leaders of the GCC and the founder of the UAE when he stated:

I believe that he who does not know his past will not understand the present, nor will he be able to prepare himself for the future.

(Sheikh Zayed)\textsuperscript{16}
Notes

1 Arab nation refers to the imagined community of all Arab states forming one nation as Arabic has two terms for nation, one referring to the nation state, “qutr’ or “dawla,” and the other with a more Pan-Arab conceptualization with religious overtones, “Umma.” Umma is linked to the past Arab/Islamic empires and later to attempts by nationalists such as Jamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and the Baathist movements to unify the Arab world.


4 Interview with the higher education advisor to the Ruler of Sharjah, April 10, 2008.

5 Fears regarding the loss of Arabic among future generations in the Arab world is a constant topic of debate in Arab media.

6 We interviewed provosts and deans from the following universities, American University of Kuwait, Kuwait University, Qatar University, University of Sharjah, Zayed University, New York Institute of Technology, Abu Dhabi. We also gathered information from colleagues in Texas A&M Qatar, University of Bahrain, the Gulf University for Science and Technology, and Georgetown University Qatar.

7 The five countries could be placed on a continuum with the UAE being the most impacted and Oman the least.

8 See Badry (2011) for a discussion of the impact of global English and globalization on UAE identity.

9 Higher education advisor to a UAE ruler, personal communication, April 10, 2008.

10 When students matriculate into their major after the foundation year, they generally have to complete around 12 credits in English composition alone, which limits the number of courses they are required to take in their general education component.

11 Discussions on local politics and religion tend to be taboo subjects in class discussions.

12 There are, however, exceptions to this observation. In some semi-private universities such as AUS, faculty serve on curriculum committees to make recommendations to higher administration for changes or additions to their courses and programs. AUS also moved to develop a Faculty Senate and Faculty handbook that provides the faculty with many avenues for participating in the governance of the institution.

13 The data analysis in this paragraph heavily relies on a recent report on GCC labor markets prepared for the Gulf Cooperation Council by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2013).

14 TANMIA is an effort by the government of the UAE to provide job training that can match the needs of the labor market with the skills of potential national citizen workers. TANMIA is supposed to supplement and improve on the high level skills that national citizens should be obtaining through the higher education system. Other countries have similar programs, but some more heavily rely on quotas and administrative diktats.

15 Such imbalance is sometimes blamed on higher rates of divorce as educated women tend to be less submissive. Education of women has also led to profound social changes. Young couples are less likely to live in extended family arrangements.


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