



מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי
מركز عزري برای مطالعات ایران و خلیج پارس
The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



Higher Education is Westernizing in Gulf Cooperation

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Higher Education is Westernizing in Gulf Cooperation Council States

By Dr. Glen Segell, Fellow - The Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies

This Persian Gulf Observer presents a summary of a Paper Presented by Dr Glen Segell at “The Persian Gulf and the West: Between Dependency and Independence” Conference held on June 11th 2015, at the Ezri Center.

Higher education in the Arabian Peninsula dates back thousands of years. Mecca, Tarim in the Hadhramawt, and the island of Qeshm on the peninsula’s edge were all important centres of learning. In the modern era due to globalization the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are seeking to make a transformation as they have societies with potential water shortages bounded by sea and desert, immigrant labor issues, a rapidly developing urban infrastructure and classroom shortages for expatriate children in a society that has relied on expatriates for its rapid development.

To resolve these issues the GCC states have made major advances since the 1960s in widening access to post-secondary Western orientated secular education. At the same time within the past two decades Gulf States have actively been engaging in significant nation- building projects, in addition to steps to construct and concretize national identity amongst locals within their borders. These are aimed at transcending tribal/ familial, lifestyle, and class divisions, to create sentiments of citizenship and subject hood to the State. A likely outcome of heavy investments by GCC nations in higher education is a renaissance of Arab scholarship within the global academic community. However there are limitations noted below in a few cases.

In Saudi Arabia in 2003 there were eight Universities and now in 2015 there are over 100 universities and colleges. These are state operated where the annual budget is \$15 billion for 23 million inhabitants. The growth in the GCC states is not just state sponsored. For example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have permitted 40 Western universities to open branches in their countries. The implications of the rapid widening and deepening of Western higher education in the GCC are being debated in Qatar’s WISE (World Innovation Summit for Education) seeking to do for education what Davos does for economics. At the fore of the current debate in this forum are low primary and secondary school standards, a lack of a unified curriculum and too few years of compulsory education. These are the major causes why the goals in reality falling short of expectations. For example in a recent international student assessment with 64 participating nations, Qatar’s 15-year-olds ranked 62nd in math and science and 63rd in reading.

Another significant debate at WISE is about academic freedom given that its significant link to understanding broader political and economic processes of human development, public culture, and identity. The logic of such a debate is indispensable for understanding the underlying rationale of education in the GCC as these states continue to bolster existing national and private universities and seek out foreign academic institutions from Europe, the Middle East, and the US. Reading between the lines at the WISE forum sees that GCC policymakers consider training a local workforce an important goal to reduce dependence on expatriates. Hence the growth in higher education in the GCC is both intended as education as well as locales for meaning-making, social transformation, and global engagement.

A specific example of this is Saudi Arabia where the first university in the Arabian Peninsula, King Saud University, was founded in 1957. The Kingdom has experienced exponential increases in expenditure on education, and higher education in particular. The 2015 budget of \$229.3 billion budget includes expenditure in the education sector of \$57.9 billion, representing 25% of total appropriations for the year 2015, of which higher education, will receive \$3.28 billion. Such expenditure explains the growth since 2005 from 7 public universities to 28 public universities and 9 private universities, which now accommodate over 1.5 million students. Another 10 universities are expected to open within the next five years. These cannot meet the demand of the population so the total number of Saudi students currently studying abroad under government sponsorship is over 207,000 which accounts for around 85% of Saudi students studying at international universities. The challenge for Saudi Arabia's education sector expansion is to reconcile social change with the academic curriculum and economic needs of the state while retaining traditional culture, and not threatening Islamic heritage.

Such a conundrum was exacerbated by the establishment of a women's university, Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, uniting six women's colleges in 2011 and the changing aspirations of women in Saudi Arabia. The university is residential catering for women from across the Kingdom all of whom receive monthly allowances. In 2015 the number of female university entrants outnumbers male counterparts. Social change resulting from the widening of higher education may affect gendered power relations as a result, exemplified by the "Nitaqat (Zoning)" project that aims to increase the ratio of Saudi employees in private companies. The Saudi government has suggested that it would give advantages for companies that hire female workers when the program gets started.

Consistent with a global trend, young women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also attending college in record numbers. In 2013 the total number of students in higher education in the UAE was 118,560. Of this total, 67,226 (57%) were female and 51,334 (43%) were male. Not only are more females enrolled in higher education than males, the actual completion rate for females is even higher.

With the same intention are the international branch campuses in Qatar that extend the benefits of research and innovation in social sciences and humanities to the society. Education City in Doha is comprised of eight International Branch Campuses ('IBCs'), thematic

research institutes, a national research fund management institute, a medical centre and a number of social and community based organizations. A wide range of disciplines ranging from science, engineering, medicine, business management and social sciences and humanities are provided. The United Arab Emirates has also invested in attracting campuses of foreign universities.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia and Iran prefer to maintain tight control on their higher education systems and significantly restrict the operation of foreign universities within their territories. However, this does not necessarily mean that Iran and Saudi Arabia are indifferent in hosting overseas students. On the contrary, both countries are eager to invite overseas students to expand their cultural influence through graduates.

The Qatar IBCs receive a research funding in social sciences and humanities awarded by the Qatar government that has exceeded US\$25 million. Qatar sees that these could play an important role in building and sustaining knowledge-based societies as it aspires to transition from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. The benefits of research could be passed on to the society at large through technology transfer and commercialization of research. This depends on the readiness and willingness of the IBCs to extend the research of their faculty and other researchers to the broader society in Qatar rather than just publish in scholarly journals or books. Reciprocally society has to be willing and ready to accept and implement these compared to institutional priorities.

Similar to the relaxation of education restrictions for women in Saudi Arabia there is a women's student dormitory at Qatar University and a policy to increase the number of Qatari citizens in both the private and public sectors. However, Qatar University compared to the IBC is 'indigenous,' relegated to Qatari citizens who prefer a more traditional option. The dormitory serves scholarship and international students with a limited stipend but it is the primary location where international students are initiated into the national educational system.

Throughout the GCC states substantial growth in student numbers requires hiring qualified academics from different parts of the world in order to teach in these higher education institutions. Expatriate teachers form the majority of the faculty at most universities and colleges in GCC countries. This is evident in Oman that has many Academic Centres for Legal Consulting. Laws vary from country to country and hence the teaching of law by the expatriate teachers aims to develop the practical side of law rather than just the theoretical aspects. In addition these also grant free legal services for those with financial difficulties, provided by law students who are supervised by the law school's faculty members on condition that the centre is not legally responsible for any of these free consultations.

The above examples show how in addition to meeting domestic needs, Gulf countries have also invested in educational pursuits that strengthen their country's cultural soft power, especially by enhancing the international reputation of their higher education institutions. It is widely believed that having globally acknowledged universities that can attract foreign students is essential to

survival in a knowledge economy. The presence of such institutions is also believed to enhance national prestige.

However, despite the common reasons, causes and goals throughout the GCC states there are differing approaches exemplified by between Oman and Qatar and Saudi Arabia and Iran (who is not a GCC state but is a Gulf State) that originate from the historical relations between the state and 'ulama' of each country. Iran and Saudi Arabia are deemed as "religious states." The Iranian regime is known as "the government of Islamic jurist" (velayat-e faqih), and ensures the domination of high-ranking 'ulama over state affairs. In Saudi Arabia, monarchic rule heavily depends on the legitimacy provided by the support of the religious establishment.

Additionally, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have a long-standing history with Islamic higher education. Cities such as Isfahan, Mashhad, and Qom in Iran, and Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, have assumed importance as centres of Islamic learning. These centres have attracted scholars and students from throughout the world, and the existence of these centres ensured the 'ulama's strong influence over education affairs. Even though the 'ulama seem to have acknowledged Western universities' systems as a "global standard," they have questioned the universality of curriculum, classroom arrangement, and idea of academic freedom as presented in Western models. They are especially concerned that many aspects of Western university models are culturally irrelevant and believed these aspects must be amended to better align with Islamic norms. As a result, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have produced universities with locally relevant classroom arrangements and "Islamized" curriculum, even while adopting aspects of Western higher education systems that ensure these institutions issue internationally recognized academic degrees.

Besides this there is also concern whether a more educated workforce in the economy will improve the economic and political state of a country. For example, one of the biggest issues that policy makers have been facing in the UAE has to do with bridging the gap between high-schooling and the expectations of "world-class universities" hoping to admit students meeting the entrance requirements. Both educators and policy makers are having to question what is actually learned in the schools as many students, especially as those graduating from public schools in the UAE, are not equipped with adequate English language skills to pass entrance exams and gateway exams such as IELTS and TOEFL. Most universities are then forced to implement an Academic Bridge Program (Zayed University), Intensive English Program (American University of Sharjah) or Foundations Course (Higher Colleges of Technology) where students take non-credit bearing courses to achieve expected levels of English communication and understanding to allow them to enroll and then attempt to complete Undergraduate Programs.

In sum this preliminary analysis indicates that for students and parents in GCC states, the most important benefits of getting a college degree is to contribute to the development of the country, to make available more career opportunities, and to improve earning potential and developing leadership ability. Furthermore, the value of a higher education clearly goes beyond monetary and personal returns and encompasses the desire to contribute to the development of the

country showing a clear connection between education and citizenship. Government support in all GCC states of the higher education sector is likely to continue and to grow as it becomes more Western to cater for the needs of modern statehood.