



*John Willoughby*



*Fatima Badry*

## Higher Education Reform in the Gulf

*by John Willoughby and  
Fatima Badry*

*The uncertain consequences of  
globalized education*

**O**ver the past 20 years, citizens and long-term expatriates of the Gulf have witnessed an extraordinary transformation in higher education. Prior to the late 1990s, the only major tertiary educational institutions in the region were public universities (PUs) under the direction of national governments. Virtually all of the students were national citizens, and the curricula were both largely designed and run by expatriate Arab academics who borrowed heavily from Egyptian and Iraqi models. This PU system produced graduates with professional credentials who then went to work in the public sector. Supplementing this national educational system was a generous scholarship system for talented, well-connected and largely male students who pursued advanced graduate degrees

in the West.

Starting in the mid-1990s, the monopoly with which PUs had enjoyed began to crumble. New private higher education institutions rapidly emerged throughout the Gulf. In many cases, the language of instruction was English, and this led to the importation of more Western-trained academics and administrators. In addition, as the children of expatriate professional families entered these new private universities more national and non-national women enrolled in both public and private universities alike.

While the most publicized changes have been the establishment of elite international branch campuses (IBCs) in Abu Dhabi and Qatar, the large majority of new universities and colleges do not fit this model. Instead, state policymakers and business elites have established multi-disciplinary, liberal arts universities; business groups and individual entrepreneurs have created small, for-profit technical colleges and less elite branch campuses have been established in higher education free zones in Dubai. Most PUs have responded to this competitive pressure by Westernizing their curricula and adopting English-language instruction for certain course programs.

Gulf leaders have justified these radical, pro-Western reforms as a sensible response to the challenges and opportunities created by globalization. They stress the importance of creating “knowledge economies” that are based on a robust network of technologically advanced enterprises in which national citizens play a major role as both productive workers and entrepreneurs. PUs were seen as too bureaucratic and out of touch with global educational trends, and so the state engineered wide-ranging reforms.

A more hidden reason for reforms was to allow non-state institutions to emerge in order to provide tertiary education to the children of the rapidly growing number of expatriates. While this might not have been an explicit goal of Gulf rul-

ers, any expansion of educational capacity could only work if expatriates could participate. In one sense, higher educational reform was part of a larger process of normalizing the large expatriate presence in the Gulf for the indefinite future.

#### Issues with higher education reform

The success of educational reform rests on ensuring that it is sustainable. How and to what extent government regulatory agencies supervise and accredit universities and colleges will be crucial. As will be the ability of decentralized governance structures within the new colleges and universities to foster creative thought. Our study of the reform process has led to six important criticisms:

1. Although the drive to create a strong, non-state higher education sector has responded to real needs and produced more vibrant and creative colleges and universities, the reform process has been erratic and quite uneven.
2. National citizens are divided over their views of the higher educational reform process. Some have resisted the perceived takeover of higher education by Western professionals, while others see higher education quality as being dependent on English-language instruction and the intensive use of Western-trained academics.
3. Universities and colleges work best when faculty play some role in curricular design and governance. Yet the top-down reform process, the existence of many small, for-profit colleges and the inability of expatriate academics to establish stable roots in their communities prevents the emergence of healthy participatory governance structures.
4. Liberal arts curricula are primarily seen as necessary for the basic acquisition of skills rather than as a fundamental necessity for the creation of flexible, creative thinkers. This problem is exacerbated by the difficulty of teaching many Gulf students to think and communicate successfully in English.
5. Higher educational reform alone is insufficient

While the most publicized changes have been the establishment of elite international branch campuses (IBCs) in Abu Dhabi and Qatar, the large majority of new universities and colleges do not fit this model.

to change the basic labor market structures of the Gulf states, which funnels national citizens into well-paid public sector jobs and expatriates into the competitive private sector market.

6. Higher education itself cannot guarantee the increased participation of women in the labor force. Other changes in the wage and benefit systems need to be implemented as well.

#### Reform in perspective

Despite these problems, the emerging higher education system in the Gulf is mostly stable. The new universities and colleges are establishing close links with businesses, governments and residents that will be difficult to dismantle. The expansion of educational capacity in the Gulf now means that expatriate professionals can receive relatively high-quality training within the region. Clearly, the emergence of prestigious universities is drawing more non-nationals into the Gulf. Yet it is unlikely that higher education reform will be a means to national rejuvenation and empowerment. What's more, reform may further destabilize relations between Gulf citizens and the expatriates who form a large share of the region's population.

*Dr. John Willoughby is a professor of Economics at American University in Washington, DC. Dr. Fatima Badry is professor of linguistics and teaches in the department of English at the American University of Sharjah (AUS). They are the authors of Higher Education Revolutions in the Gulf (London: Routledge, 2015).*