

# Higher Education in the Gulf States: Present and Future Overview

*by Ahmed Baghdady, Theme Editor*

Like health and social services, education in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region has undergone major developments over the past two decades. Revenues from oil and gas exports have enabled Gulf states to invest in both K-12 and higher education, as well as to improve the access to and quality of education on offer. Although this happened to varying degrees among the Gulf states—often depending on how wealthy each state is—there are a number of features common to all. The move toward quality and diversity in higher education provision, the establishment of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs and institutions and newfound support for research and innovation are prominent features of these improvement efforts.

While the financial crisis in 2008 and the sharp drop in oil prices that began in 2014 have hampered investment in several sectors, higher education has been minimally affected. Financial support for public universities, scholarship programs and international branch campuses (IBCs) have continued despite shrinking state budgets across the region.

The motives behind these reform efforts are twofold. First, GCC governments have realized that a carbon-based economy is unsustainable, particularly at a time of instability across the Middle East. The need to move toward a knowledge-based economy is understood to be critical, and can only be achieved by developing a well-educated population that can contribute effectively to the economy. Second, the globalization of higher education, advancements in knowledge transfers and increased mobility of scholars, students, programs and education providers across national borders has led to a re-envisioning of higher education in the Gulf. As such, there has been a tremendous increase in the number and diversity of institutions and programs available, the attention paid to accreditation and quality assurance and the partnerships between local and international universities.

That said, the outcome of higher education reform efforts have not yet met expectations. This is due to several factors including the lack of quality K-12 education that adequately prepares students for higher education, the societal resistance to some aspects of higher education internationalization and the lack of student motivation. Although some improvement efforts have yielded positive results—such as the establishment of private universities and IBCs—other initiatives have not been as successful.

The future of higher education in the Gulf is somewhat uncertain given the political and economic issues affecting the region. Key questions remain unanswered: (1) will higher education be affected if oil prices continue to drop in the next few years?; (2) are IBCs sustainable and can they survive without financial support from host governments?; (3) if real estate and infrastructure projects are put on hold, will the labor market need change?; (4) if instability takes hold in one or more Gulf states, how will this affect higher education? and (5) will more students enroll in TVET programs to meet the labor market's needs?

But however successful higher education reform in the Gulf is over the next decade or more, it is clear

that education will remain a core focus area of Gulf states. Although higher education improvement is led primarily by governments, societies will continue to play a major role in shaping the future of education in the Gulf. Also, the internationalization of higher education is expected to continue to impact local education systems and could prompt new advances in higher education. Leaders and policymakers must be prepared to deal with more pressures from their societies, changing labor market needs, scarcer financial resources, new requirements in adapting with the internationalization of education, and higher expectations from students.

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