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Gulf Affairs: What is the British Council’s mandate? In which areas has the Council recently been working on in the Gulf states?

Adrian Chadwick: One of the founding ideals of the British Council is: “to make the life and thought of the British People more widely known abroad; and to promote a mutual interchange of ‘knowledge and ideas’ with other peoples.”

The British Council has always focused its cultural relations activities on sharing some of the UK’s most attractive cultural assets. These include the English language, the arts, education and science. In recent years, interest in the British Council sharing UK values such as the rule of law, diversity and gender equality has grown. Our intent has always been to build long-term relationships based on shared agendas. In the context of the Gulf, we have been working on the ground for more than 60 years, and arguably there has never been more political will on both sides to collaborate. This can be seen through the 20,000 students from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states who are currently studying in the UK. And the doubling to more than 170,000 Gulf residents who are studying UK programs in GCC countries as of the 2014/15 academic year.

Another area which has seen positive growth is institutional and research links. In July 2016, the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), in collaboration with the British Council and

the Science Innovation Network (SIN), launched a call for joint research partnerships in water, energy, healthcare and cybersecurity. We received 172 applications. In the first funding round, a £2.4 million bilateral research grant will be awarded in early 2017. Through this joint initiative, we're supporting better research performance and capability in the GCC region. We have also stepped up our work in quality assurance, inclusive education and soft skills training programs.

These growing links are supported by English. Last year, 60,000 men and women studied across our GCC teaching centers, and we delivered 354,000 UK English-language, professional and university examinations. This work allows students in the Gulf to connect with educational and work opportunities worldwide, and to more easily contribute to and benefit from the global exchange of knowledge and ideas.

Gulf Affairs: What are some priority issues that GCC countries should focus on in improving their higher education sectors?

Chadwick: I feel that GCC countries have identified the right areas to prioritize, and I would highlight two in particular: core skills including languages across all faculties, and increasing research quality and output. I would add that there's a need for far more consistent use of data to measure performance in terms of student satisfaction, graduate employment and return on research investment.

In addition, bringing the voice of the labor market more into the higher education sector will be important in generating more applied research, including that which can be monetized. It will also support the governments' drive to embed core skills such as communication, teambuilding, resilience, entrepreneurial and critical thinking into curricula even further. These are the skills students need to be good citizens and to thrive in a globalized world. And yet, employers in this region have warned that graduates lack these soft skills, even though they often have good technical abilities. That's why, in partnership with HSBC, we piloted an innovative program for students in their final year called *Taqaddam* that develops key skills for study, life and work. We have seen positive results so far.

Gulf Affairs: In which areas do you feel the Gulf states have most improved in higher education over the past few years?

Chadwick: One should begin by acknowledging that Gulf states have invested heavily in higher education in recent years. The Saudi government alone has more than tripled the number of universities in their country. This includes the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, an international, post-graduate research university, as well as Princess Noura University, which significantly expands the range of subjects available to women in Saudi Arabia.

Research output in the Gulf has also risen four-fold from 4,000 publications to 18,000 between 2008 and 2014, according to Scopus. The Royal Society Atlas of Islamic World Science and Innovation Report—which the British Council co-authored—also detailed other areas of progress in the Gulf and wider MENA region. Gulf states have also invested heavily in scholarships, sending well over 150,000 young men and women overseas to study. On their return, these students will become an incredible resource of internationally-trained and connected professionals who will drive innovation. Many of these students will staff universities in their home countries.

Thanks to government policies, there has also been an increased focus on STEM subjects and quality assurance. This will strengthen the technology and innovation sectors' contributions to the economy, which

IV. Interviews

in turn will contribute to the labor market and the GCC's workforce nationalization goals.

Lastly, another positive development is increased access to higher education via e-learning. In addition to being the UK's highest growth area, it is also cheaper for the end user. The GCC region already has good overall access to technology, and this makes higher education far more accessible to everyone, including women.

Gulf Affairs: What has been done to facilitate cultural and academic exchanges between Britain and the GCC states? Do you see any new opportunities going forward?

Chadwick: At the cultural level, there is an enormous amount going on. UK/UAE 2017 is a year of collaboration and cultural exchange between the UK and the UAE, and it is being organized by the British Council. Throughout 2017, we will also collaborate with a wide range of British and Emirati partners to create a diverse program of more than 20 projects and events across the UAE that span the arts, literature, education, society, sport, science and trade. These initiatives follow recent cultural years in both Qatar and Bahrain. Last month, the UK government also provisionally agreed to a major three-year program of cultural and sport collaboration that will be jointly delivered by the British Council and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

In terms of education, many UK universities have identified the GCC as a priority area for partnerships in teaching, research and development and international student recruitment. The British Council, Universities UK and other UK organizations are actively supporting them in that regard.

In the future, we expect to see more demand for flexible partnerships, private education and open learning. GCC governments are looking to the UK to help deliver both higher education and tertiary education in a variety of ways. The innovative 2+2 program we brokered with the Saudi government allows diploma holders to enroll in Year 2 of UK degrees in various technical fields. This is an early example of what can be achieved, and about 600 men and women have already enrolled at 17 UK universities. Another example is the British College of Bahrain, a partnership between a Bahraini owner and Salford University, and which will offer undergraduate degrees in science and technology from a purpose-built campus.

All of these initiatives support better cultural understanding that leads to more trust and confidence in UK higher education, as well as greater investment into it in both the UK and the GCC region.

Gulf Affairs: How can British institutions assist with the development of research capacity at higher education institutions in GCC states?

Chadwick: Firstly, UK institutions need to understand the issues facing both countries and institutions in the GCC so that they can identify areas of mutual interest and benefit. It is also important to recognize that Gulf universities, like elsewhere, want to engage with international universities that are looking for long-term partnership and not merely short-term financial gain. Encouraging new and better linkages between researchers and innovators using a variety of funding mechanisms can support this goal.

The development of research capacity needs to happen at a number of different levels—from school right up to the post-doctoral level. This means working in partnership with institutions from the undergraduate level through to the doctoral level, as well as working to develop depth and quality within that partnership. It means encouraging exchanges in which UK researchers meet with their GCC counterparts to identify

and define projects of mutual benefit. The British Council's Researcher Links is a good example of this because it encourages international scientists to meet one another in order to develop research in mutual areas of interest.

Gulf Affairs: Have recent political and economic developments in the region affected the GCC states' efforts to improve higher education?

Chadwick: The GCC states have remained relatively stable and secure throughout the turbulent past five years. And in spite of the declining oil price and general economic tightening, government investment in education has remained relatively high.

What has been evident is the increased determination of GCC governments to invest in developing young people so they can in the future usher in the peaceful and successful transitions of Gulf economies and societies.

Paradoxically, tightening public expenditures may actually help higher education performance in GCC countries. It should force governments to focus more on return on investment in public education by improving data and performance metrics, learning and research outcomes and focusing on skills development and graduate employability.

Gulf Affairs: Are universities adequately preparing—in both quality and the availability of degrees—youth for the demands of the labor market? Any notable mismatches or in-need skillsets that are not currently on offer?

Chadwick: The issues of relevance and quality are being taken very seriously by universities in the GCC region. However, institutions perhaps tend to focus more on the quality of the academic offerings than on preparing students for the labor market.

There is a clear demand from both employers and young people themselves for more effective teaching of core skills, self-directed learning, languages and intercultural fluency. Governments are also investing in technology in education. They recognize the critical role that technology-enabled learning plays in developing the skills that prepare students for a more technical future and for jobs that have not yet been invented. Arguably, there is a continuing mismatch between the choice of subjects being taken at university and the needs of the labor market. Students on the whole still prefer to take humanities degrees. A related challenge for Gulf states—and many other countries including the UK—is to encourage more young people to opt for semi-skilled technical education that better prepares them for growth areas including creative industries and small to medium enterprises (SMEs).

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, a greater focus on STEM subjects, core skills and languages would better prepare students for the labor market. Creating entrepreneurship hubs for students who wish to begin working on start-ups while at university would also help. That being said, universities will need to involve employers in teaching and learning in more meaningful ways. For example, they could support greater engagement with their local communities by encouraging businesses to apply university research outputs. Universities could also allow their researchers to perform outreach work in local high schools. While this requires more flexibility and resources, it is essential for developing curricula that better meets the needs of the labor market and prepares young people for a successful education and fulfilling career.