

Postcolonial Directions in Education

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Postcolonial Directions in Education

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Postcolonial Directions in Education is a peer reviewed open access journal produced twice a year. It is a scholarly journal intended to foster further understanding, advancement and reshaping of the field of postcolonial education. We welcome articles that contribute to advancing the field. As indicated in the Editorial for the inaugural issue, the purview of this journal is broad enough to encompass a variety of disciplinary approaches, including but not confined to the following: sociological, anthropological, historical and social psychological approaches. The areas embraced include anti-racist education, decolonizing education, critical multiculturalism, critical racism theory, direct colonial experiences in education and their legacies for present day educational structures and practice, educational experiences reflecting the culture and 'imagination' of empire, the impact of neoliberalism/globalisation/structural adjustment programmes on education, colonial curricula and subaltern alternatives, education and liberation movements, challenging hegemonic languages, the promotion of local literacies and linguistic diversity, neo-colonial education and identity construction, colonialism and the construction of patriarchy, canon and canonicity, Indigenous knowledges, supranational bodies and their educational frameworks, north-south and east-west relations in education, the politics of representation, unlearning colonial stereotypes, internal colonialism and education, cultural hybridity and learning in postcolonial contexts, education and the politics of dislocation, biographies / autobiographies reflecting the above themes, deconstruction of colonial narratives of civilization within educational contexts. Once again, the field cannot be exhausted.

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“No Politics Zone”: Critical Approaches to Education Research in the Arab Gulf States

Ibrahim Alhouti
Sara J. Musaifer
Esraa Al-Muftah

This special issue emerged from a virtual panel hosted by the Centre for Culture, Identity, and Education at the University of British Columbia 2021. The focus of the panel came about through discussions the three editors had in relation to their area of study – education policy in three different Arab Gulf states – Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. While International Development Organizations (IDOs) have marketed policy reform as a way for “developing countries” to “catch up” with the developed world, often, these policies ignore the political context in which they unfold. This special issue argues that even amid all the reforms adopted across the Arab Gulf States (AGS), there have been things impossible to change, red lines impossible to cross, and also exceptional cases of change in what is deemed impossible contexts. This issue seeks to expose what remains undiscussed in this drive for reform in these postcolonial contexts and the inherited political and social structures that the policies overlook. Hence, this issue attempts to capture the contextual changes and continuities in each context where “injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” continues manifesting in our educational spaces (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p.1).

Within each context addressed by the authors in this issue, different factors mitigate the possibility for meaningful change, but also, in these different contexts, the red lines are revealed. The acceptance or resistance to change is mitigated by a) actors involved in the process of designing reform plans, b) actors that try to implement the reform plans, and c) societies that both sets of actors try sometimes to challenge and many other times adapt to. Depending on who is developing the policy, who is implementing it, and when and where this is taking place, the outcomes are drastically different, emphasizing once again how social structures, geographical locations, and political encounters play a significant role in our lived experiences and are grounds of our social and political struggles.

Overall, articles in this issue offer comparative and international case studies that critically pinpoint “the broader societal dynamics in which the local is inextricably enmeshed” (Mazawi & Sultana, 2010, p. 5). To do that, the articles draw on various methods, including ethnography, qualitative comparative approach, genealogy, case-study method, and critical discourse analysis.

Focusing on 20th century colonial Bahrain, Musaifer traces the gendered historical production of the modern school. Reading multi-source archival writings relationally, her analysis demonstrates how the modern school becomes a productive site from which to interrogate nationalist origin myths. Al-Muftah similarly ‘looks back,’ using the institutional archives of Qatar

University, to examine what the postcolonial connections of the past could mean for the future of internationalization on the campus. Alhouti, using a comparative lens, questions the sociopolitical and economic impact of instability in the K-12 education system in the region amid the constant drive to reform. Specifically, he argues that successful reform in the region requires a paradigm shift in the reform approach and breaking free from dependency on foreign consultants reminiscent of colonial advisors in the region. Making a similar observation, AlKhateeb examines how consent is manufactured among higher-education faculty in AGS. Her analysis scrutinizes how faculties are subject to various types of propaganda that manufacture consent for political, economic, and social agendas at both the local and global levels. Overall, it is evident from the contributions in this issue that there is a need to understand AGS schools and universities as historical institutions entangled within a transnational web of social, political, and economic forces. The issue includes a review of one of the recent books that discussed education in the Arab world from a political economy angle. With her long experience and close work in the education field in the region, Almoaibed managed to provide an insightful review of “The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World,” edited by Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg.

Bringing the issue together, the studies presented reflect on what can be done to ensure educational reform in the region moves in the direction of social justice, enabling the design of reforms from “less-privileged epistemic zones of being” that pay

attention to the “‘geometries of power’ that enact and constitute the Arab region” (Shahjahan & Morgan 2015, p. 95; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010, p. 10)

This special issue offers a nuanced analysis of educational reform in the AGS, where emerging scholars from the region write about their first-hand experiences, frustrations, and hopes for educational reforms being implemented in the AGS. The issue provides a new angle for analyzing and studying the Gulf region's education reform. The insights offered here are essential to researchers, academics, policy-makers, and practitioners working in the education and development arena in the region. While the cases presented are context-specific, they collectively echo a common concern that the politics of education policy should be discussed more in the literature. Hence, this issue is part of a broader conversation that we – as researchers and academics – should have in the Global South as we attempt to ground our educational reforms in our lived experiences, our ever-forming and transforming sociopolitical contexts, and our dreams for more just futures for peoples residing in the region.

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PEDAGOGIES OF NATION-BUILDING: CONTESTING MODERNITIES AND MODERNIZING SCHOOLS IN (POST)COLONIAL BAHRAIN

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to trace the gendered historical production of the modern school—a key political institution of nation-building. Focusing on 20th century colonial Bahrain, I use Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine archival data collected over 18 months in 2018-2020. I argue that the rise of modern education makes visible deep fissures within a dominant imaginary of the nation as a consolidated formation. My analysis illustrates how the imagined nation emerges in colonial Bahrain as multiple, contested, and fragmented. Modern education becomes a productive site for interrogating nationalist masculinist origin myths. I offer “pedagogies of nation-building” as a conceptual contribution that aims to capture the complexity and serendipity of sociopolitical forces enfolding and unfolding within the modern school. I end by reflecting on the implications of my conceptual arguments on education reform initiatives and pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Postcolonial Bahrain, pedagogies of nation-building, Foucauldian discourse analysis, modern education

Introduction

I landed at the Bahrain International Airport in Muharraq on an unremarkable Wednesday evening in early fall 2018, following a twenty-four-hour flight across skies, seas, lands, and time-zones. Relieved to have finally reached my destination, I eagerly walked through the fluorescent-lit air-conditioned concourse, embellished with colorful advertisement posters and large welcome signs in English and Arabic, marking my designated path towards the terminal lobby. At the lobby, I made my way up to the “Bahrain Nationals and GCC Citizens” queue through a swift security clearance process before collecting my luggage at the carousel. I found my parents waiting patiently in the arrival hall. My father leaned on a new walking cane I had not seen before. Standing by him was my mother, who held onto his arm. Her once pitch-black hair seemed slightly dull, giving way to new shiny silver streaks that framed her face. Like the little girl I once was, I ran towards their open arms, planting a soft kiss on their forehead. We slowly made our way outside to the parking lot. I remember smiling as I walked into the tight embrace of the still and musty air, thick with ḥar and lezaq¹. “I’m home,” I thought to myself.

We hopped into the car, my parents up front while I snuggled in the back. We chatted for a bit before I gave in to the gentle swaying of the car. I looked out the window, noticing the patches of the world that it arbitrarily framed—a series of animated photographic

¹ A popular Bahraini phrase used to describe the intense heat and humidity familiar to the islands. The phrase, “ḥar and lezaq” literally translates to “heat and stickiness”.

shots of the mundane, brought into focus within fleeting moments. Tall skyscrapers overlooking extravagant 3D billboard signs, traffic lights choreographing a perfectly timed dance between pedestrians and vehicles, and decorated streetlights and palm trees neatly assembled in a median strip rolled out in the middle of a divided highway, splitting it in half.

The posters that hung on the streetlights that night marked a key national milestone in Bahrain, “100 years of formal education”. Bahrain’s Ministry of Education (MOE) declared the school year the state’s centennial celebration of establishing the first modern school in Bahrain and the larger Gulf region, al-Hedaya al-Khalifiya Boys School. These state choreographed celebrations entailed the launching of a new commemorative logo for the year in a nationally broadcasted event held at Bahrain’s National Charter Monument. It also included organizing an international conference to commemorate this educational milestone, under the patronage of the MOE, in partnership with United Nations Children's Fund, and with the blessings of the Islamic World Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (Bahrain News Agency, 2019).

As part of the state’s celebrations, government, and private schools in Bahrain organized student-led extracurricular activities, from photography exhibitions to gardening competitions and art galleries. This was true at al-Kinar School². The declaration was

² Al-Kinar School is a pseudonym for my dissertation research site, during the 2018-2019 academic year. Al-Kinar is the name of an apple-like fruit, native to the islands of Bahrain.

announced during an inaugural speech by al-Kinar school administrators on the first morning assembly of the 2018-2019 school year. However, the story began in 1899, curating a different set and sequence of events that led to the inception of the first school in Bahrain and the larger Gulf region. According to this narration, the American Evangelical mission to Bahrain takes credit for the establishment of the modern school on the islands—an open-air school serving two female students on the veranda of a poorly ventilated humble Mission House tucked in the busy Old Souk of al-Manama (Zwemer, 1900).

The discrepancy between the two storylines left me curious about the competing histories of the modern school in Bahrain, an episode of what Foucault (1984) might describe as a “battle for ‘truth’ or at least ‘around truth’” (p. 74). Exploring this puzzle becomes the subject of this essay as I examine the gendered historical production of the modern school—as a discourse and development project. Contrary to the prevailing assumption of a consolidated imagination of a singular nation, which is then nurtured through the modern school, I argue that the story of the modern school in colonial Bahrain invites us to take account of the imagined nation(s) as multiple, contested, and fragmented. My analysis finds that historical records on the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain are pregnant with tensions and silences around the heterogeneity of the modern school. The dominant storylines circulating are an effect of shifting constellations of power relations, elevating and negating actions and actors at particular historical moments to fulfill particular political ends.

Thus, the relationship between schooling and nation-building in (post)colonial Bahrain is tenuous and ambiguous. To gain a fuller understanding of the purpose of the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain, a careful historical and political contextualization of the institution and its advocates is indispensable.

This essay begins with a contemporary ethnographic encounter, an entry point for my historical analysis of the present. I introduce three key concepts that underpin my analytical and methodological approaches: a) the nation and the nation-state; b) schooling and nation-building; c) palimpsest time and transnational space. Next, I tell the story of the modern school in 20th century colonial Bahrain—to illustrate what I conceptualize as “pedagogies of nation-building”. Pedagogies of nation-building aim to capture the complexity and serendipity of sociopolitical forces enfolding and unfolding within the modern school. Reading across competing political projects: Pan-Islamic, American Missionary, and Pan-Arabism taking shape in 19th century colonial Bahrain, I trace the imaginaries of modernity that produce distinct articulations of the school as its vehicle. My analysis shows that modern education becomes a productive site for interrogating nationalist masculinist origin myths. The essay concludes with an invitation to consider the potential implications of my conceptual argument on the education reform policies and educational pedagogies on the islands.

Reviewing the literature, tracing theoretical terrains

Central to this essay's premise is the concept of the nation and the nation-state. My understanding of the nation is grounded in feminist postcolonial traditions. I am interested in considering the nation as a discursive and material construct. Bhabha (1991) conceptualizes the nation as an "agency of ambivalent narration" (p. 3), which destabilizes one's imagination of the nation as a homogenous political community (Anderson, 1983). The discursive construction of the nation as one people, Bhabha (1991) tells us, rests upon "a double narrative movement" (p. 297). This movement entails two simultaneous and contradictory discursive strategies: a) a pedagogical strategy that constructs 'the people' historically, where individuals are told who the nation was, and b) a performative strategy that constructs 'the people' contemporaneously, where individuals are interpellated as members of the nation through repetitive performances in the everyday (Bhabha, 1991, p. 297). He goes on to argue that "this tension between the pedagogical and the performative... turns the reference to a 'people'—from whatever political or cultural position—into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of modern social authority" (Bhabha, 1991, p. 297).

The works of Jeganathan and Ismail (1995) and Ismail (2000) expand on Bhabha's (1991) theory of nation, critiquing his underdeveloped conceptualization of the nation as merely discursive, benevolent, and ambivalent. Instead, Ismail (2000) argues that nationalism as an ideology "must have presumed a community

that one cannot but understand as nation” (p. 236). The slippage that Bhabha (1991) falls into, Ismail (2000) further argues, is rooted in confusion between nation and state. The problematic, then, is not that nations are produced as an effect of nationalism since the nation was already gaining traction globally as the single most recognizable and legitimate form of political community (Anderson, 1983). Rather, the problematic is *how* nationalism, as an ideology, labors to “justify the entitlement of a particular nation to a state” (Ismail, 2000, p. 237, emphasis in original). Returning to Bhabha’s (1991) theorization of the problematic of nationalism, it is not the reference to a ‘people’ that haunts the modern social authority. Instead, linking a ‘particular people’ to the state to establish, legitimize, and stabilize the nation-state makes nationalism an inherently oppressive and exclusionary project (Jeganathan & Ismail, 1995; Khatibi, 1983/2019).

Spivak (2009) adds another layer to the problematic of nationalism by underscoring the intimate entanglement of women in this temporal imagination of the nation. Ismail (2000) argues that “nationalism relies fundamentally in maintaining the possibility of restoring, if not resurrecting, an ideal from the past” (pp. 279-280). Similarly, Spivak (2009) shares Ismail’s (2000) concern for time. She suggests that since it is women-as-mothers “who seem to bring us into temporization, by giving birth, our temporizing often marks that particular intuition of origin by coding and re-coding the mother, by computing possible futures through investing or manipulating womanspace” (p. 87). This means that in the inherently reproductive and heteronormative nation, the constant

regulation of the spaces that women-as-mothers inhabit is of critical significance. The significance of womanspace stems not only from a concern for the (re)production of a past but also from a concern for the future preservation of social order. A social order to which a particular nation is entitled, and a particular configuration of power-relations are sedimented. Hence, within this framework of nation and nation-building, the modern school becomes a key Foucauldian technology of government that labors to regulate and manipulate womanspace (Abu el-Haj, 2015, Adely, 2012, Khoja-Moolji, 2018). For example, focusing on Muslim-majority communities in the Global South, Khoja-Moolji's (2018) cross-cutting research interrogates the ongoing convergence on the figure of the ideal girl in contemporary international development policy, paying attention to the discursive construction of the "educated Muslim girl" category in the context of colonial India and Pakistan. There, she finds that discourses on the education of the girl/woman are sites for constructing not only gender but also class relations, religion, and the nation. Similarly, focusing on the context of (post)colonial Bahrain, this essay traces how the modern school—as a set of discourses, practices, and structures—mutates and operates to advance particular truth(s) of the ideal nation, the ideal girl, and the ideal school.

Before I move on to my empirical analysis, a note on how this essay reconsiders the conceptual parameters of modern time and space is in order. Breaking away from allegations of spatial and temporal boundedness fixated through a "presentist frame" (Coleman & Collins, 2006, p. 9), my understanding of time follows Jacqui

Alexander's (2005) and Ella Shohat's (2001) conceptualization of time not as linear horizontal telos, but as "a scrambled and palimpsestic time [...] with the premodern, the modern, the postmodern and the paramodern coexisting globally" (Alexander, 2005, p. 190). Reconceptualizing time as palimpsest enables analytical leaps across temporality and geography, such that an analysis of the "here and there" and "then and now" becomes not only legible but also indispensable for a deeper understanding of the histories of schooling and the politics of girlhood in Bahrain (Alexander, 2005). In other words, examining historical and contemporary records through a lens of palimpsest time allows us to trace how ideas travel between and across different historical junctures and geographical locations (Alexander, 2005; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, Ismail, 2000; Nagar, 1995). This shift in temporal and spatial analysis becomes especially relevant to my study on the politics of schooling in Bahrain, where much of the anthropological, sociological, and historical writings have been dominated by "methodological nationalism", a framework that "[privileges] the national space as the vantage point from which to interpret social phenomena" (Hanieh, 2015, p. 62). Consequently, such dominant writings often fail to account for how flows of peoples, ideas, and goods have "altered cultural practices, produced new subjects and identities, and fostered ties to multiple places" (Kim-Puri, 2005, p. 140).

A note on methodology and sources

I assembled a range of texts to guide my exploration of dominant discourses articulating the purpose of the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain. I reviewed English and Arabic data sources. These included colonial records, missionary newsletters, regional cultural magazines, and local newspapers³. I employed genealogy as a methodological approach to examine this archive and discourse analysis as a method. Genealogy is a Foucauldian methodology of tracing (dis)continuities in discourses, i.e., social practices that do the work of producing or eliminating particular subject-positions at particular historical moments (Khoja-Moolji, 2018; Lowe, 2015; Paik, 2014; Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). In the Foucauldian tradition, discourse analysis does not seek to uncover an origin or a singular truth about the texts or their authors. Rather, this method prompts my inquiry into the present history, much like the curiosity about the centennial celebrations of the modern school in contemporary Bahrain that I describe in my introduction. Through discourse analysis, I “probe social and cultural attitudes” towards the school and the girl “as reflected in the historiography of this subject” (Abou-Bakr, 2012, p. 202).

³ a) The Records of Bahrain (1820-1960), an archival collection of original British government documents discussing Bahrain’s internal and external affairs—focusing on those related to formal education; b) The Arabian mission Field Reports Quarterly Letters Neglected Arabia: Arabia calling (1892-1962), an archival collection of original newsletters authored by American Protestant missionaries in the Gulf and Iraq reporting to their counterparts in the United States; c) al-‘Arabi magazine (1958-2010), a popular monthly magazine funded by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information, and founded by Egyptian and Levantine Pan-Arabist literary critics, in support of Arab culture, literature, and natural sciences; d) şada al-esbū‘ magazine (1969-2004), a weekly magazine established in Bahrain with a distinct Pan-Arabist orientation, in the aftermath of the painful defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the 1967 Six-days War; and e) State-authored textbooks (2014-2018), specifically looking at social studies and national education curricula assigned for grades seven through twelve.

Conceptualized as such, texts—like ethnographic sites—become generative “kaleidoscopic social sites” contingent on multiple entry points conditioned differently by differently situated audiences (Nagar, 1995). In other words, texts are not merely documents but monuments of a particular discursive constellation, made possible by a particular regime of truth, emerging at a particular intersection of time, place, and peoples (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Bsheer, 2020).

Picking up on a rising tradition of critical educational scholarship, I ask: how do we know what we know about the modern school and its articulated purposes? How is the girl constituted as an object of intervention? What strategies are authorized because of this object? If the modern school is the remedy, what is the social malady that it remedies? And how does this knowledge reproduce itself? (Arnot & Mac an Ghail, 2006; Huaman and Martin, 2020; Shirazi, 2011; Vavrus, 2002).

Contesting modernities and modernizing schools in colonial Bahrain

Bahrain is a small archipelago (760 km²) consisting of thirty-two islands. The islands sit at the heart of the Gulf⁴, approximately 121nm east of King Abdul Aziz Port in Saudi Arabia, 183nm west of Bandar Taheri in Iran, 363nm to Port of Khawr al-Amaya in Iraq, and 50nm northeast of Port of Ras Laffan in Qatar (Seaports: Info,

⁴ The naming of the Gulf is a political question. For the remainder of this essay, I will reference this geographical local as merely “the Gulf”.

marketplace, 2018). It is home to an estimated 1.4 million people, almost half of whom are Bahraini citizens (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). In 1861, the rulers of Bahrain signed a protection agreement with colonial Britain (AlShehabi, 2019), transforming the islands into a British protectorate and designating it part of “Britain’s imperial frontier” until its official independence in August 1971 (Onley, 2007). Compared to its neighboring Arab Gulf sheikhdoms, Bahrain was often hailed as a beacon of modernization in the Gulf. Many historical writings attributed colonial Bahrain’s rapid development to the rise of the nation-state and the (trans)formation of bureaucratic institutions—like the modern school-- at the turn of the 20th century (AlShehabi, 2019).

In this section, I expand on the historical legibility of the school in Bahrain by situating the institution of the school within a constellation of irregular forces that interplay to advance competing imaginaries of “modernity”. Given that defining modernity is likely to be a futile endeavor, what I will attempt to do in this section is to “track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made” (Rabinow, as cited in Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 7). The claims attached to the establishment of the modern school are of concern to me. To do this, I situate the narratives of modernity and the modern school in particular “historically and regionally specific situations” (Abu Lughod, 1998) from within which they draw meaning.

Pan-Islamic modernism, anti-colonialism, and schooling

At the turn of the twentieth century, “the migration of people and the internationalization of capitals... impinged on the spread of print culture and general education emphasized by nation-builders” (Mignolo, 2012, p. 237). New appetites for dates that emerged in the United States and a renewed desire for pearl fashion that submerged elite salons across Europe and the Americas stimulated the markets in colonial Bahrain (Hopper, 2015). An unprecedented accumulation of wealth in the region triggered the migration of workers along the eastern littoral of the Arabian Peninsula, southern Iraq, coastal Persia, Baluchistan, and East Africa (Bishara et al., 2018). Coupled with the movement of peoples and capitals was the rise of new transport and printing press technologies, transforming imaginations of time and space, self and other (AlShehabi, 2019; Anderson, 1983). Together, these transformations had a significant bearing on education for different social groups occupying the social hierarchy in colonial Bahrain.

In tandem with trade and scholarly travels, several notable families donated funds and lands to establish a different school model in late 19th century colonial Bahrain. Free of charge but welcoming of community donations, these privately funded schools remained closely affiliated with the local masjid. The new school model found its inspiration in heated intellectual debates among Al-Nahda renaissance figures in the Arabian Peninsula, Greater Syria,

Egypt, and the Indian subcontinent⁵ (Bsheer, 2020; Kassab, 2010). According to this discourse, modernization in Muslim societies was to serve two objectives: a) liberation from European imperial dominance; and b) the elimination of wide-spread corruption among the powerful. Consequently, the reformed school was discursively weaved into a yearning desire for modernization. It became an institution of political socialization and scientific reasoning, designed to instill a sense of unity among the young members of a new imagined nation—one that elevated a shared Islamic religion and accentuated the reverence for a shared Arabic language. However, the transformations unleashed by this project manifested unevenly on the ground.

Indeed, social formations in 19th century colonial Bahrain were deeply heterogeneous. Yet, the conditions that produced ethnoreligious enclaves translated to establishing schools that effectively served specific student bodies. Given the entanglement of local schools with local masjids, boys and girls had to travel long distances to attend schools beyond the boundaries of their immediate communities. This was when the only means of transportation between towns and villages were donkeys, mules, and horses, often accessible exclusively to middle class or upper-

⁵ Like their Muslim and Arab comrades elsewhere, the rising educated class in Bahrain were inspired by the writings of prominent anti-colonial and Islamic modernist scholars. Two influential scholars of their time were Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Mohammad ‘Abduh, whose writings were published on the pages of key periodicals such as “al-Urwatu al-Wuthqa” in Paris, magazines such as “al-Muqtataf, al-Hilal”, and “al-Manar” in Egypt, and newspapers such as “Ḥabl al-Matīn” in Iran at the turn of the 20th century (AlShehabi, 2019; Bsheer, 2020; Stephenson, 2019). Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh openly critiqued the colonial dominance of imperial Europe, as well as corruption among political and religious leaders of Muslim societies. To overcome these sociopolitical maladies, they called for reforming and modernizing Muslim communities—a project that rested on two pillars: Pan-Islamic solidarity among Muslim peoples, based on a shared faith, a shared language, and science (Kassab, 2010).

class families. Hence, youth traveling unattended—particularly those from working class families, especially girls—had little to no access to outside schools. Also, teachers were educated in distinct schools of jurisprudence, Fiqh, within the Sunni and Shi'a denominations. Many received training from Islamic education hubs in Egypt, Greater Syria, Iraq, Persia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arabian Peninsula. This meant that parents would have likely found the teaching of Fiqh outside their schools of jurisprudence irrelevant. Further, languages of instruction could have imposed restrictions on students from different ethnic backgrounds. This would have likely been the case for non-Arabic speaking communities on the islands, such as the Balouchis and the 'Ajam. The discursive coupling of ethnicity and religion was further reinforced by a British colonial racial order in a society that operated according to “systems which hinged on racial separatism” (Nagar, 1996, p. 64). What emerged then was a social order organized according to neatly compartmentalized ethnoreligious categories—an effect of multiple dynamic social forces of gender, class, migration, and colonialism. Of particular interest to this essay are the American missionaries in Bahrain, who were deeply invested in establishing a modern school.

American missionaries, schoolwork, and the girl/woman burden

“Schoolwork” occupied a critical role as a preparatory enterprise for the evangelizing mission of America towards the “nations”⁶

⁶ Reincarnating a particular civilizing rhetoric that developed in earlier encounters with Indigenous nations of North America and Hawaii, the mission of saving the “nations” was understood as America’s divine destiny and God’s chosen instrument for advancing His providence (Hutchison,

(Moerdyk, 1907). As an institution, the school became an instrument of progress and modernization insofar as it provided the conditions under which the Arab/Muslim⁷ “with no existing civilization” was civilized (Hutchison, 1987). When examining early reports on the mission school, it becomes apparent that the nonmodern woman/girl is key to rationalizing “schoolwork” in colonial Bahrain⁸. Under the supervision of missionary women, the mission school was reported to be serving two students: a Christian convert girl refugee from the Basra vilayet and a “poor” local woman fleeing domestic abuse (Zwemer, 1900). Drawing on a familiar colonial trope of “saving the brown woman from the brown man” (Spivak, 1988, p. 297), the rhetoric of liberal feminism was discursively co-opted to justify the American missionaries’ interventions. The girl and woman identified were read as necessary victims of their oppressor, the Arab/Muslim man, producing a “logic of causality” (Mignolo, 2020) that rationalized

1987). Consequently, Evangelical missions assumed two roles, “conversion and modernization” (Jayawardena, 2014, p. 22).

⁷ For American missionaries in 19th century colonial Bahrain, the coupling of ethnicity (Arab) and religion (Muslim) coincided with a racialized imagination of the self/other that shaped the social and political landscape in the United States. The Naturalization Act of 1790 is an important example of how the “Arab” subject was racially coded. Introduced and passed in the United States Congress, the Naturalization Act of 1790 set into motion the first uniform rules for the granting of United States citizenship by naturalization. The law limited naturalization to “free white person[s] ... of good character”, thereby excluding all non-white individuals from the right to citizenship (Gualtieri, 2001, p. 29). According to this legislation, non-white individuals included all non-European immigrants, along with African Americans and Native Americans. Gualtieri (2001) writes that Arabs from Greater Syria, who constituted the majority of immigrant Arabs to the United States in the 19th century, petitioned for naturalization. The argument was as follows: given that Arabs from Greater Syria are white and Christian, they are no different than Europeans and therefore must be eligible for naturalization in the United States (Gualtieri, 2001). These rulings solidified the racial/religious coupling as the norm in the United States; meaning that the Arab ethnicity and Muslim religion were not only racialized but also imagined to be interchangeable. Arabs became Muslims and Muslims became Arabs until proven otherwise.

⁸ Early missionary writings describe 19th century colonial Bahrain as an ideal location for establishing a stable presence in Arabia. As part of “Britain’s imperial frontier” (Onley, 2007), colonial Bahrain became a haven far from the reach of ideological and sectarian competitors stationed in neighboring Basra: Ottoman Turks and the American Jesuits (Zwemer, 1899).

and necessitated the intervention of the white (wo)man savior. On this discursive tactic, Ahmed (1992) argues that “whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to justify the attack on native societies morally and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe” (p. 154). We find in American missionary records some of the earliest articulations of this discursive labor of valorizing the Western woman among local communities in colonial Bahrain:

New Bait to Catch Fish: Although our dispensary is an attraction to the sick and the poor, and we have no trouble to reach the women because of Mrs. Zwemer’s attractive powers, yet we have long felt the need of some kind of bait for the men who were strong and well (...) During the past months we have (...) tried the magic lantern (...) Views of the cathedrals and churches give a good text on the subject of Christian worship, and Queen Victoria’s portrait is a good one on the subject, “The position of women in Christian lands” (Zwemer, 1899, p. 7-8).

Similarly, American women missionaries in colonial Bahrain, knowingly or unknowingly, deployed a rhetoric of liberal feminism that reproduced Western supremacy—a complacency connected to their “social and economic ties to a ruling, colonial class” (Naghibi, 2007, p. 2). Another powerful example of this binary representation is found in a document authored by Marion Wells Thoms, an American missionary woman stationed in 20th century colonial Bahrain. Pleading for “[the] need for women workers among the women of Arabia”, Thoms (1903) writes: “Ignorance, superstition, and sensuality are the characteristics which impress

themselves most strongly at first upon one who visits the Arab harem” (p.21). To unlearn these “characteristics”, Thoms (1903) declares it necessary to “teach... [and create] a desire for better things... [among] these neglected, degraded sisters—but sisters still through Him who ‘hath made of one blood all nations’” (p. 21). The sisterhood discourse deployed here hinges on a “hierarchical, pedagogical relationship between those sisters who know and those who passively await enlightenment” (Naghibi, 2007, p. xxv). This hierarchical model of sisterhood discursively constructed the Muslim and/or Arab woman in Bahrain as an antithetical Other—passive, primitive, and oppressed, in need of her white savior. In contrast, the American woman missionary was represented as the “intellectual and political vanguard at the forefront of history” (Felski, 1995, p. 149). The articulated formula identifies schoolwork as necessary to “create a desire” for enlightenment, modernization, and salvation for the Evangelical Christian nation. This becomes the discursive relationship between modernity, schooling, and nation-building according to the American colonial missionary imaginary.

The cul-de-sac of ethno-nationalism(s) and schooling

While American Evangelical missionaries extolled the virtues of the mission school to advance its proselytizing work, privately funded schools in 20th century colonial Bahrain continued to grow and transform. An important marker of this growth was the steady uncoupling of ethnicity and religion as anti-colonial ethno-nationalist struggles gained momentum in Bahrain and the region.

Privately funded schools that were once attached to local mosques separated, transforming into stand-alone institutions. This separation, figuratively and literally, stood as a bold gesture to separate religion from secular education, rendering religion a private matter (Chatterjee, 1991). Simultaneously, educators were recruited from newly birthed nation-states emerging from the rubbles of crumbling empires: Ottoman and Qajar. Local transformations and transnational migrations produced a “consciousness of connectedness” rooted in an awareness of ethnolinguistic identities (Anderson, 1983, p. 56-57).

Two important examples of ethnonationalist schools in Bahrain are the al-Hedaya al-Khalifiyah School and the ‘Ajam School of Bahrain. Al-Hedaya was established in 1919 by the Knowledge Council, a local committee of fourteen members from upper class notable families of Muharraq⁹, including a ruling family member (Al-Khalifa, 1999). Financially, al-Hedaya relied on donations from Arab Sunni and Huwalah wealthy merchants, in addition to nominal contributions from community members¹⁰. To educate the youngest members of the imagined Pan-Arab nation, educators were recruited from Hejaz, Greater Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, triggering drastic changes in the school curricula (Al-Qouz, 1969). More weight was given to the Arabic language, Arabic literature, mathematics, and history, while religion studies became a

⁹ Several members of the committee had previously founded and privately funded schools in the Arab Sunni and Huwalah communities.

¹⁰ While the rulers of Bahrain tended to be minimally involved in formal education, opting instead to educate their heirs among elders in royal salons, al-Hedaya School marked a turn in this attitude (Al-Misnad, 1985, p. 1). With the support of Sh. ‘Abdullah, the Knowledge Council received the blessing of the ruling family, who donated the land on which the school was built (al-Khalifa, 1999).

secondary subject that was “ecumenical in form” (AlShehabi, 2019). Eventually, this critical curricular shift severed ethnoreligious ties linking the Arab Muslims of Bahrain to Turkish coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire, Persian coreligionists in the Qajar Empire, and Indian coreligionists in colonial India. Instead, new ethnolinguistic ties were forged with Pan-Arab nation-states. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) became the marker of educated nationalists, Bahrain’s new middle class. AlShehabi (2019) writes that “al-Hedaya School was the institutionalized form in which this al-Nahda quest for knowledge manifested itself in Bahrain” (p. 105). In 1931, the government of colonial Bahrain imposed significant reforms to the formal education system. Community education committees were dissolved, and the newly created centralized *Wizārat al-m’aāref*¹¹, the Ministry of Knowledges, took over all education affairs on the islands (Al-Misnad, 1985). In so doing, the Pan-Arabist ethnonationalist project was contained, and the nation-state-territory was consolidated. Al-Hedaya was transformed from an anti-colonial project to a project of the colonial nation-state.

The second example of the ethnonationalist school in Bahrain is the ‘Ajam School, officially named *Mubārakeh ye Iṣlāḥ* (Blessings of reform). The ‘Ajam School was established in 1913, following urgent calls from ‘Ajam migrant merchants in 20th century colonial Bahrain (Stephenson, 2019). The vision was inspired by intimate connections with schools in southern Iran, particularly the

¹¹ The new ministry needed to neutralize the influence of the elites so new positions were created within the ministry to absorb some of them.

Sa'adat School¹² in Bushehr. Teachers from Bushehr were actively recruited to serve working class 'Ajam students at the newly founded school in Manama¹³ (al-Khalifa, 1999; Stephenson, 2019). The curricula included lessons in Persian language, poetry, history, science, mathematics, geography, astronomy, English language, and functional Arabic language (al-Khalifa, 1999). Interestingly, in 1923, the 'Ajam School appeared in official records of Iran's Ministry of Education's Southern Port District as a newly established education institution (Stephenson, 2019). This reclassification transformed the 'Ajam School from a community education institution to a nationalist project, discursively erasing the localized labors of 'Ajam communities in Bahrain. In other words, the reclassification of the 'Ajam School signaled a critical ideological reorientation towards an emerging Iranian nationalist fervor¹⁴ (Stephenson, 2019). Indeed, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed a growing public display of loyalty to Iran and the charismatic Shah¹⁵. In 1931, the school changed its name to *Ittiḥād e Mellī* (the National Unity School), and the Iranian government became its sole source of funding (al-Khalifa, 1999; Fuccaro, 2005; Stephenson, 2019). Together, these transformations were read by Pan-Arab nationalists, local rulers, and the Resident Political Agent of colonial Britain as malicious

¹² Sa'adat was well regarded, so much that it was proclaimed as the "mother of all schools in [south] Iran" (Dashti, 2006, as cited in Stephenson, 2019, para 22).

¹³ In fact, the 'Ajam educators claimed that they "were on a mission to change the *uslūb* (method) of education so that the children would not be like their bad bakht (unfortunate) fathers" (Habl al-Matīn, 1914, as cited in Stephenson, 2019, para 24).

¹⁴ This discursive erasure coincided with key transformations in the Persian state—namely the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi to power as prime minister in 1923, two years following the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty.

¹⁵ Students pledged allegiance to the Shah in morning drills, dressed in standardized uniforms that included the "Pahlavi hat" (Chehabi, 1993, p. 212), and participated in public marches to Iranian nationalist music while raising the Iranian flag (Fuccaro, 2005).

attempts by Iran to place its political claims over the islands. Yet, in ways similar to al-Hedaya al-Khalifiya, *Ittiḥād e Mellī* can be read as the institutionalized form of Iranian nationalism, promising liberty and dignity for all members of the Iranian nation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to (re)situate and (re)narrate entangled histories of the modern school in 19th and 20th century colonial Bahrain. Reading historical records relationally, my analysis demonstrated how texts are pregnant with synergies, tensions, and silences on the question of the modern school and its intended sociopolitical purposes. Specifically, I find a plurality of contesting and converging political imaginaries anchored in multiple imaginations of modernity, nations, and schooling as a political institution of nation-building. Analyzing the story of Arab nationalism and the formal school in the context of (post)colonial Kuwait, Al-Rashoud (2017) makes a compelling argument that I find resonating. There, he writes, “[t]op-down, grassroots, and indirect processes...were intricately connected and mutually reinforcing, demonstrating the necessity of a nuanced and holistic approach to explaining the role of education in forging political identity” (Al-Rashoud, 2017 p. 339). The story of the modern school in (post)colonial Bahrain follows a similar trend. The story I tell offers further evidence in support of a “nuanced and holistic approach” when studying the relationship between political identities and the rise of the modern school(s) in (post)colonial Bahrain. Rather than departing from an assumption of a

consolidated imagination of a clearly demarcated nation—be it colonial European, missionary American, or postcolonial ethnonationalist—the story of modern education in Bahrain illustrates the plurality of imagined nations, advanced by complex, contradicting, and contesting pedagogies. These pedagogies of nation-building were deeply entangled with global movements of peoples, ideas, and capital. They seeped into the official curricula taught in the classroom, the teachers’ educational journeys, and the political commitments of community members near and far. I argue that tracing pedagogies of nation-building makes visible how multiple nationalist projects emerge, merge, and diverge at particular historical, political, and geographic junctures. More importantly, I show how such projects are then serendipitously and creatively woven into the very social fabric of everyday life, taking on a life of their own.

The conceptual argument I offer has important implications for prevailing assumptions of modern education. If education reform initiatives aim to boost academic success, then how we understand academic success is critical to formulating and evaluating education reform. Tracing and situating pedagogies of nation-building, historically and geographically, demonstrates that dominant articulations of the ideal school and the ideal girl are not banal. Rather, as my analysis shows, such ideals are entangled in ever-shifting gendered historical production, set in motion by competing imaginaries of modernity and nationalism, manifesting in and through modern education. Engaging with contemporary education reform formulations as such invites us to

move beyond surface level quantitative calculations seeking to arrive at presumably objective academic targets of gender parity. For critical educational researchers, the question to ask is not merely: In what ways can the education system better support male and female students to score higher grades in national and international tests? Instead, reading education reform as pedagogies of nation-building inverts the gaze of critique away from students. The questions to ask then are: How do geopolitical histories and gendered processes produce contemporary formulations of academic success? How are dominant storylines of the ideal school and the ideal girl (re)produced accordingly? What alternative gender ideals are teeming with otherwise possibilities just below the surface level, dwelling in the margins, and whispering through the cracks?

These questions are also relevant to education practice, particularly for K-12 social studies teachers. In the context of Bahrain, much of the social studies curricula depart from an epistemological perception of history as temporally linear and spatially contained within naturalized geographic borders. This epistemological erasure seeps into academic and popular discourses about the Gulf, which then get solidified through policies, protocols, and pedagogies unfolding in institutions like the school. For example, in my informal conversations at al-Kinar School, many students found it common-sensical to explain the erasure of Bahrain from their world history curriculum as a testament to Bahrain's irrelevance in global politics. "Nothing interesting happened here; there's no history in Bahrain," they

noted as a matter of fact. Rather, engagements with Bahrain's histories were confined to state-mandated social studies or national education classrooms taught in Arabic. This categorization reinforced the peripheralization of Bahrain in relation to what the girls at the school understood as "important countries, like the United States, Europe, Russia, and China", whose histories were taught in the English language. However, conceiving time as palimpsest and space as transnational disrupts false temporal and spatial binaries. In other words, palimpsest time and transnational space make it necessary for us to read and teach local and global historical and contemporary records *relationally* and with a degree of suspicion. Translated to practice, this approach can open new avenues for collaboration among different subject matter teachers: national history, world history, English literature, and Arabic literature. Doing so not only emphasizes the intimate entanglements between state-authorized and school authorized truths of self/other, but it can also create opportunities for students to intervene and inject official histories with equally valid oral histories and communal knowledge. Such epistemological and pedagogical shifts carry the possibilities of enhancing student-centered classrooms, where students feel seen, heard, and challenged.

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LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD: INTERNATIONALIZATION AT QATAR UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Calls to “re-think” and “re-define” internationalization of higher education (IoHE) have been increasingly noted in the literature (Heleta & Chasi, 2022). This article takes the institutional archives of Qatar University to look back and consider what the past could mean for the future of internationalization on the campus. I highlight the importance of studying the context of Qatar University in which internationalization unfolds, including its institutional history and geopolitical surroundings. By examining the historical, cultural, and social contexts/networks in which QU is embedded, I argue that QU has been portrayed as an international project from the onset, although one motivated by Third-Worldist, Islamic, and Arab notions of solidarity and, equally importantly, one critical of Western hegemony. While I am cautious of romanticizing the past, I discuss how looking backward helps IoHE scholars think less of internationalization as a fixed phenomenon and moves the goal toward offering a more plural understanding of what internationalization can mean in different contexts. Through this case study of QU, I contribute to efforts within this critical strand of research to recenter IoHE conversations from “Euro-American-centric internationalisation definitions, strategies, policies, approaches, and practices” to other parts of the world (Heleta & Chasi, 2022, p. 2).

Keywords: Internationalization, Qatar University, higher education, institutional archives

Introduction

In this article, I focus on the internationalization of higher education (IoHE) policy from the perspective of a university in the global South. I briefly describe the higher education landscape in Qatar and focus on the history of Qatar University (QU) as the first higher education institution in the recently independent state of Qatar. I adopt a critical lens, informed by critical internationalization studies (CIS), to understand internationalization policy as a more multilayered phenomenon than that contained in neat definitions. The data presented challenges the depoliticization of IoHE policies and instead “critically assess[es] and reimagine[s] the current orientation of mainstream internationalization” by shedding light on the “configurations of power and policy that converge within a particular context, and the political and theoretical investments of those involved” (Critical Internationalization Studies Network, n.d., para. 3). Internationalization of higher education goals differ across contexts “ranging from educating global citizens, building capacity for research, to generating income from international student tuition fees and the quest to enhance institutional prestige” (IAU, 2012, p. 2). This article contributes to discussions about how internationalization is defined and guided by the geopolitical contexts in which they emerge.

This history of QU is rife in connections between how QU was envisioned within the broader national educational and post-colonial political projects and the conditions of the wider region in

1977. I analyze documents related to a critical moment in QU's history: the inauguration of its permanent campus in 1985. I chose this focus because, as this article will demonstrate, opening the permanent campus was considered a time of realization for the institution. It had already built a reputation since its establishment in 1973/77. Focusing on the inauguration of the campus allows us to analyze how the physical fixed space acted as a crucible through which particular international networks and visions moved and flowed. By reviewing the architectural layouts, speeches, panels, the attendees, and their affiliations, I show the physical and social networks the university was embedded in during its founding phase, demonstrating epistemic diversity through connections not limited to the Global North.

Overall, the documents reveal a project that, from its very inception, was simultaneously part of a nation-building effort and part of an international vision of an Arab, Islamic, Third-Worldist, and anti-colonial drive. This further connects to the way internationality, as it was defined at the time, was present on campus. From early vision to realized daily life, the campus was shaped by ideas and people of different international and diverse epistemic backgrounds. It was not limited to how internationalization is expressed today, where benchmarking and borrowing expertise from universities in the West is the norm. Instead, internationality was connected to wider solidarity networks and collaboration between academics, research institutions, and nations. If anything, one can read through these documents a strong position in opposition to Western hegemony

and an insistence on building something rooted in the context: “locally situated with a global outlook” (Kazem, 1986, p. 12).

Critical studies of internationalization of higher education and academic mobility

Internationalization scholars in education have been warning since the beginning of the current century that IoHE can further inequalities if institutions do not consciously attempt to adopt a “socially responsible approach” (de Wit, 2018, p. 4). Altbach and Knight (2007), for example, note that the economic, competitive lens under which internationalization is being implanted and for which it is instrumentalized tends to favor “well-developed education systems” (p. 3), exacerbating inequalities globally. Even though academic and student mobility means knowledge is circulating globally, “the North largely controls the process” (p. 4). This has intensified with the rise of for-profit and commercialized forms of higher education providers and assessors (including ranking agencies). This commercialization yields further inequalities by cementing long-standing cultural and economic power stands in contrast to the actual essence of internationalization according to scholars of IoHE. To them, the essence should be enhancing the quality of education by incorporating an intercultural and global dimension to make a meaningful contribution to society worldwide (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2017). While it is important to highlight how the “economic and status competition... driven by the emergence of the global knowledge economy and world university rankings” (Saito,

2018, p. 174) reflect the dark side of IoHE, it is also important to caution that such sweeping grand critiques may prevent scholars from seeing how internationalization is redefined and taken up in localities by agentive academics. They may produce modes of internationalization that may not be contained and captured by neat definitions (Larsen, 2016).

Building on these criticisms of the dominant internationalization literature, CIS shifted toward historicizing and contextualizing IoHE socially, politically, and economically to highlight inequalities. Specifically, CIS became “an area of study that problematizes the overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to internationalization in higher education” (Stein, 2019, p. 1771). By adopting such an approach, CIS invites “people to make their own critically informed, contextually relevant, and socially accountable decisions as they encounter multiple, contradictory perspectives” (Stein & McCartney, 2021, p. 7). Some refreshing studies focus on the historical and social context, offering alternative complex understandings of internationalization. For example, Unkule (2019) takes on internationalization from the perspective of spiritual learning. She historicizes and contextualizes border crossing for the purpose of education, reminding us of comprehensive examples of what is now called international education, such as monks who traveled to China or India to find Buddhist texts. She states that the purpose of this process is to demonstrate that internationalization is not unique to the West, but at the same time, she warns,

Of course, this is not about nostalgia, and, you know, the answers are not in nostalgia. The answers are in looking at historical experience; [in] seeing what is the diversity of models that is really out there and trying to make the most of them by interpreting how they are relevant to the present. (Unkule, 2020, 13:53)

Like Unkule (2019), Anderson and Bristowe (2020) take issue with how internationalization is enacted. Examining the case of New Zealand, they also find that internationalization is rooted in “market concerns and the ongoing legacy of white settler colonialism” (p. 417). They begin the study in search of other forms of internationalization. This desire to find other forms of internationalization invites us to think of it as a plural rather than a fixed policy or single phenomenon associated exclusively with the Global North. The authors offer us a way of exploring internationalization from an Indigenous learning approach, refraining from presenting it as universally applicable. They draw on Māori epistemological traditions to emphasize place in a policy often associated with de-territorializing the academic space. One of the Māori concepts they highlight is “Manaakitanga,” which is “grounded in genealogical understandings that valorise relationships, between people, between generations, and between the human and non-human world” (p. 421). In both these studies, there is a clear desire to problematize current models of internationalization that come under the guise of quality assurance or profit-driven agendas, putting forward forms that are place-based instead.

In this article, I aim to contribute to this growing body of literature that allows us to imagine “internationalization otherwise,” away from grand scripts that have dominated the literature so far. To do that, I not only take one case of IoHE but also one aspect which is understudied in internationalization efforts: academic mobility. I map academic mobility to understand the networks that gave birth to QU as an institution. This is partly due to my position in the academic space and my desire, like Unkule (2019) and Anderson and Bristowe (2020), to find an alternative to the dominant, performance-obsessed internationalization patterns. Because transnational movement is an important aspect of the study, I take up the term *internationalization* to signal the way it has reconfigured the academic space more than as a set of policies. I will employ the definition used by Larsen (2016): “Internationalization is the expansion of the spatiality of the university beyond borders through mobilities of students, scholars, knowledge, programs, and providers” (p. 178). I use this definition because it provides a theoretical opening emphasizing the university in spatial terms and highlights another essential part of this study: the academic mobility necessary to realize internationalization. It also offers more opportunities to imagine “internationalization otherwise” than the technical definitions often employed in university strategies. Within the same field of critical internationalization, “internationalization otherwise” has been introduced. The purpose of it is not to offer “a predetermined approach to internationalization but an ongoing process of unlearning dominant modes of knowing, being, and relating;

experimenting ethically with efforts to know, be, and relate otherwise” (Stein & McCartney, 2021, p. 5).

Methodological note

The data presented in this study draw from a qualitative case study of Qatar University that I conducted for my doctoral research between November 2019 and July 2021. I used ethnographic methods, including occasional participatory observation, qualitative interviews, document analysis, and archival research, to dig deeper into the institution’s history and inner workings. In this essay, I only present part of the findings from the archival research. Initially, I had planned to collect archival material related to QU’s reform effort and internationalization process for the purpose of triangulation. What was not anticipated was that much of my fieldwork would be in the university archives, searching different locations for material that was lost or erased from the university records. Luckily the writing of the professors I was researching—including founding QU president Dr. Mohammad Ibrahim Kazem and Dr. Abdulla Al-Kubaisi, the second president, discusses the importance of memory and time. This helped shape the way I went about collecting the material and connecting it. My father was a librarian, and his professional instincts had impelled him to save documents from discarded material at his workplace over the years. This trove included publications from QU and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States, which I use in this article.

Dr. Al-Kubaisi also allowed me to borrow from his personal library when the COVID-19 pandemic meant I was no longer able to access the library's basement because of enforced access restrictions. He offered guidance and his fieldwork insights, pushing me to reflect on my methods and obsessions (as he would refer to my methods of tracking material). I used Evernote to collect, scan, and photograph much of the material, and I kept field notes while going through papers on campus. I then used MAXQDA¹ software to code them.

Overall, I relied primarily on archival research that aims to connect what seems disconnected to offer a version of the institution's past and a snapshot of what the institution looked like, no matter how incomplete the picture is (Rhee, 2021). Prioritizing the importance of the material aspects of the university—the tangible ways knowledge was created, embodied, and recorded, and where this knowledge work occurred—I review documents relating to the founding of the university, including speeches, books, and architectural making time and space central to understanding the social relations through which the university was founded, and the ways knowledge generation and international relations were envisioned and practiced. How did the university position itself as a national and international institution? With whom did it affiliate, and to what purpose? As Kazem, the founding president of Qatar University, notes, in relation to higher education studies,

¹ MAXQDA was especially useful due to its compatibility with Arabic. I used it to preserve Arabic archival material as images, but I was also able to insert my interview transcripts into the program, so that all the data was in one software.

The dimension of time and the sense of history are central to the concept of a university. A university as a system, and as an instrument of education, is very closely related to a deep complex concept of time. A modern university obviously exists in the present, but it has roots in the past, and aspirations for the future. (Kazem, 1981, p. 5)

Setting: Qatar and QU brief history - 1970's to early 2000

Qatar is located on the western shores of the Arabian Peninsula overlooking the Gulf. It has been under the rule of the Al-Thani family since at least 1869 (Zahlan, 1979). Following the second world war, a centralized modernized state bureaucracy took shape, built around the Emir as an absolute ruler with colonial Britain's backing and buoyed by the oil revenues that went directly to the ruler. As part of the modernization program, institutional state schools opened for the first time, starting with two in 1952 and increasing to six schools by 1956, including the first girls' school established by Amna Mahmoud Al-Jaidah, a pioneer of women's education in Qatar (Al-Kubaisi, 1979; Al-Ammari, 2017). A steady increase in oil revenues and the growth in the state apparatus paved the way for Qatar's gradual move toward independence in 1971, followed by the coup of 1972². The rapid growth of oil revenues during the oil boom of the 1970s saw unprecedented growth: hundreds of thousands of migrants moved to the Gulf. By 1976 the population had reached 173,716 (The World Bank, 2022). There were 59 schools and a teacher training institute that

² The coup of 1972 was the second change in rule in Qatar, following the change of rule in 1949.

opened in 1962 (Al-Kubaisi, 1979). In 1973, the state of Qatar invited UNESCO to assist in establishing the first higher education institution in Qatar – two teacher’s colleges, one for males and one for females. By 1977 the colleges were transformed into a university by law no. 2 for that year, which officially established Qatar University.

In 1995 the then-heir apparent Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani initiated a coup against his father and took over the helm. The low oil prices during the 1980s and 1990s gave way to increasing exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) as prices rose once again in the 2000s. Qatar became the second largest exporter of LNG globally and came to boast the highest GDP per capita in the world³. Over the same time, the population of Qatar more than quadrupled from approximately half a million to over two million souls, more than 85% of whom were non-citizen migrants (The World Bank, 2022; De Bel-Air, 2014)⁴. The ruler and his wife, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Misnad, initiated several new strategies and policies at the state level throughout the 2000s, including in education. The most notable was Qatar Foundation, which hosted and paid for the American branch campuses. RAND Corporation, an American think tank, was also invited to consult across sectors, and their mark on education was especially notable. I return to this phase in the conclusion.

³ From 1995 to 2013, Qatar’s GDP “increased by more than 24 folds, and per capita GDP by about six folds” (Amiri Diwan, 2022, para. 1)

⁴ Qatar does not publish exact figures of its nationals’ population.

Qatar University's 1985 building as a symbol of international development

I begin with the story of the inauguration of Qatar University's flagship campus in 1985, eight years following the establishment of the university, as a physical representation to understand better how international ideas, institutions, and individuals congregated in a fixed space that came to embody Qatar University. The campus's design, implementation, and opening made it a crucible that can shed light on how Qatar University unfolded as a national knowledge-producing project within an international setting. In this section, I will examine the ideas behind it, the philosophy that guided it, and the political and social forces that influenced it.

The day chosen to inaugurate the Qatar University (QU) building in 1985 was February 23rd, the same day on which the university establishment was announced in 1973. This inauguration was carefully orchestrated to overlap with state festivities celebrating the anniversary of Sheikh Khalifa's rise to rule on February 22nd—an emphasis on the university as a hallmark of the ruler's reign and his aspirations for the state. The inauguration entailed a series of talks and lectures given and attended by a plethora of Arab and international dignitaries. Their focus was on higher education's problems, roles, and aspirations in the Arab, Muslim, and developing world. In a speech delivered at the inauguration, the Emir outlined his view of the university's role as one dedicated

to help form creative minds, providing them with ample education, and promoting virtues of morality and conscientiousness in the individual. We have been keenly supporting the assiduous and invaluable efforts of the University in this direction, which are inspired by the principles of our sublime Islamic religion and genuine Arab traditions, and are based on wise scientific planning. (Al-Thani, 1986, p. 9)

The role of the university articulated here touches on what the Emir identifies as the three spheres of belongings constituting the space of education and learning—a theme he outlines in a speech delivered on the occasion of QU’s first graduating class in 1977. Specifically, when determining the purpose of Qatar’s educational and teaching policy, the Emir explains that it is one that “seeks to solidify belief in the correct belongings of the human being in the state of Qatar” (Al-Thani, 1977, p. 9). According to this declaration, “the correct belongings” are to a) “Islam” and the Muslim Ummah; b) “the ancient Arab nation”; and c) “humanity” (Al-Thani, 1977, p. 9). Consequently, these multi-layered belongings animated the geographic spread of representatives from the different countries and organizations attending the series of inauguration events—indicative of the international bonds the university had developed in the eleven years since its establishment⁵. Further, the

⁵ Most guests were university presidents or ministers of education, except for the eminence grise of modern Arab poetry, Abdulla Al-Baradoni from Yemen. The country from which most guests came was neighboring Saudi Arabia (12), followed by Egypt (8), Iraq (6), and Sudan (6). The guests stretched geographically from the U.S. (1) to Japan (2). They included academics that served on Qatar University’s board of regents, such as Prof. Dr. Adnan G. Iskandar (Chair, Dept of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut), leading thinker Prof. Dr. Constantine K. Zurayk (Distinguished Professor Emeritus, AUB, and one of the luminaries of Pan-Arabism), Prof. Dr. Bakr Abdulla Bakr (Rector, University of Petroleum and Minerals in Saudi Arabia), Prof. Dr. Sir Frank Hartley (Former Vice-Chancellor Univ. of London), Prof. Dr. Michel Alliot (Director, legal anthropology laboratory at University of Paris I), and Prof. Dr. Abdellatif Ben Abdeljalil (Pres.,

multinational board of regents was considered another aspect of internationalizing the campus. This is because the appointed scholars brought with them their own connections and visions for the university, drawing on different epistemic backgrounds. More importantly, the regional makeup of the board members shows that this internationalization took the form of Third-Worldist cooperation. This cooperation also extended to established centers of learning in the Global North (QU Cultural Affairs Department, 1986).

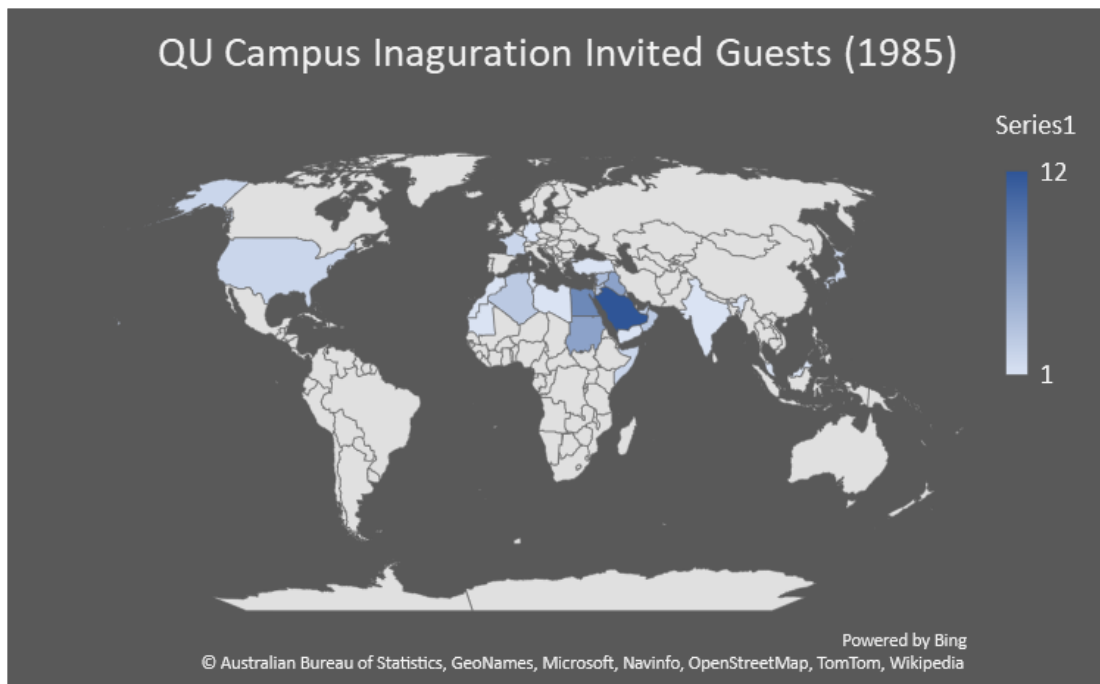


Figure 1: Geographic Spread of QU's Inauguration Attendees. Source: QU Cultural Affairs Department (1986)

QU's overwhelming direction toward pan-Islamist, pan-Arab, and pan-Gulf associations is evident, as well as the notable presence

Mohammed V University). It is of course notable that all the attendees that are listed are men and there is not a single woman represented either in the attendees list or panels.

of Pan-African institutions. According to Al-Kubaisi, the university's reputation rose via its membership in these international associations, primarily due to the connections Dr. Kazem secured⁶ (Al-Kubaisi, 1997). In the University Council minutes, much attention is paid to membership in these associations, attending their conferences, and incorporating their recommendations within QU⁷. As a young university, getting recognition from such bodies was akin to accreditation and allowed Qatar University students to get admission abroad (Interview with Al-Kubaisi). Unsurprisingly, however, UNESCO featured prominently as the most represented international organization at the inauguration. Thus, QU was an international project from its inception. Yet, the internationalism of this era was undoubtedly particular. This was notable in the speeches of Amadou Mahtar M'bow, the president of UNESCO at the time of the inauguration.

⁶ Dr. Kazem also had leadership roles in many of them, including board membership at the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and the newly established Gulf University's board in Bahrain.

⁷ For example, in the "decisions of the university council" volumes, in the second session of the academic year 1980/81, subject 21 reads: "Informing the council [...] of the decision of the council of association of Arab universities, which took place in the University of Tunis between 16-19/1/1405 Hijri. Bringing attention to what's mentioned in the second paragraph of the memo from the Islamic university of al-Madina al-Munawara, to Arab universities, to work on incorporating it based on their internal systems." (Decisions of University Council, 1980/81, p. 8)



Figure 2: M'Bow with Kazem in the background at the inauguration symposium Higher Education and International Co-operation. Source: QU Digital Hub

M'Bow's speech at the inauguration picks up on similar themes as iterated by the Emir, focusing on mobility and continuity in knowledge generation. M'Bow began by outlining the role of mobility in knowledge-seeking anchored in the foundations of Islam and, by extension, the role Islamic and Arabic universities played in this endeavor. When talking about universities "in Cordoba, Fez or Tunis, in Cairo, in Damascus, in Baghdad or Tombouctou," he would note, "these universities brought together numerous scholars who (...) maintained constant contacts with one another despite the constraints of distance and difficulty of communication" (M'bow, 1986, p. 41-42). The forging of trans-spatial connections was coupled with a forging of trans-temporal connections, as intellectual curiosity led to an engagement with the work of remote predecessors, including Greeks, Byzantines, Indians, and Chinese (M'bow, 1986). Although these scholars

worked in solitude, “they fashioned firm bonds of mutual cooperation” and built a community that shared the same faith and ideals of solidarity of the *umma* (M’bow, 1986, p. 42). Thus, “over the centuries, the Islamic universities functioned (...) as active centers for new discoveries and new inventions,” creating the conditions necessary for the emergence of “a vast network of intellectual exchanges (...), which inspired a religious, philosophical, and scientific movement whose influence extended beyond the Islamic Arab world” (M’bow, 1986, p. 42).

Turning to the twentieth century, M’bow invites his audience to consider the political upheavals that subsequently shook the Arab and Islamic world, including “the repeated assaults to which that world was subject”, leaving it deeply divided in “the form of a number of separate entities which were often isolated from one another,” M’bow continued (1986 p. 42-43). He specified that the situation began to change rapidly in the post-World War era. The handful of modern universities in the Arab world sprouted to more than a hundred, with the university community exceeding a million souls and doubling every eight years, a phenomenon similar to that in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, M’bow said (1986 p. 43).

Throughout his speech, M’bow emphasized the primacy of international cooperation in all fields, facilitated by communication born from scientific and technological progress. Of particular interest to him was international cooperation for intellectual activities. Such cooperation, he declared, enables a

university to “contribute to general progress and to the strengthening of solidarity among nations, without calling into question what goes to make up the *raison d’être* of each people, namely its own distinctiveness, its sense of independence and its liberty” (1986 p. 44). This approach to cooperation, M’bow stresses, was the purpose of establishing the United Nations system after the Second World War. Especially in developing countries that face rapid change, “it is in this connection that the universities have a decisive role to play, by strengthening the cultural personality of each nation and also by increasing co-operation between all nations” (1986 p. 44).

Research that advances such culturally strengthening knowledge can “be stimulated by the free and widespread exchange of ideas and by comparing and contrasting different experiences and methods, or in other terms, by providing contacts between researchers and teachers on as constant a basis as possible” (M’bow, 1986, p. 45). Inter-university cooperation and interdisciplinary approaches in such a spirit may make it possible for each university to “diversify its activities” and even complement the activities of institutions working in related fields. Thus, for M’bow, strengthening international cooperation among intellectuals across geographic boundaries and in conversation with communities experiencing similar struggles encourages solidarity. Many of the panels in the inauguration would speak from this vantage point, and much of the cooperation the UNESCO offered QU would be couched in similar terms.

El-Kafrawi: The Campus as a symbol of Kazem's vision



Figure 3: Kazem (left) and El-Kafrawi (right) at the inauguration (QU Digital Hub).

These themes of strengthening cooperation and openness to society were taken up by the campus architect Kamal El-Kafrawi in his speech⁸. Specifically, at the inauguration of the building in 1985, El-Kafrawi (1986) explained the general philosophy of spatial design, one that is at once inward facing and outward facing. He declared:

The originality of the university form is that it creates a new image in the eyes of the country without disguising the past. It makes reference both subtly and openly to traditional building forms, providing a sense of cultural continuity for all those involved with it. (p. 74)

⁸ El-Kafrawi was a graduate of the College of Fine Arts in Cairo; he worked as a teaching assistant there following his graduation. His other significant project had been his contribution to restoring old Warsaw in Poland. In 1961, he settled in Paris and obtained a diploma from the Ecole des Beaux Arts, where he then taught from 1969–1975 (Taylor, 1984). In 1975 he became a UNESCO consultant in Cultural and Educational Facilities (El-Kafrawi, 1990). He would move to Qatar early 1981 as part of his research process and eventually settle there until the completion of the campus project in 1985 (Architects' Records, n.d.).

This balance of cultural continuity with modernization was a constant theme in his talks and writings about the building. His speeches illustrate a deep discomfort with the way Western architecture, and more broadly Western ways of understanding knowledge and its purpose were being adopted readily and uncritically in the Arab and developing world. His speech for the opening of the new building began thus:

The absurdity of imposing Western architecture on traditional societies has reached great heights in the Arabic Islamic societies in general and the Gulf States in particular. An architectural heritage that has survived centuries, because of geometric, technical and constructive principles that work for the society, is being sadly distorted under the guise of modernisation. Traditional buildings are being abandoned as it is believed that they reflect underdevelopment and poverty. (...)The main reason for the failure of these modern buildings is that they are not defined in advance with the Islamic Arab conceptions of space and order. (El-Kafrawi, 1986, p. 74)

Thus, El-Kafrawi's reconceptualization of modern architecture as an intentional creative and political labor of incorporating modern technology without estranging communities can be read as a call for an otherwise modernization. His insistence on cultural continuity, preserving the past, and foregrounding Islamic heritage in interactions with the West overlap with Dr. Kazem's vision for modern education. At almost every occasion, Kazem invites his audience to (re)imagine an expansive modern way of living that is not necessarily Western but in line with local traditions and values. An otherwise modern way of living where we do not become

“strangers to our lives” (El-Kafrawi, 1986, p. 7-8). For Kazem, modern life, and by extension modern education, must stem from the cultural experiences and localized standpoints rooted in the society they are intended for.

Like El-Kafrawi, the intimate connection between architecture and knowledge creation is a thread that runs through Kazem’s writings. Kazem speaks with the warmth of a biodynamic flow from the university buildings through the activities that occur there—and ties the concept of this flow to local and international flows of ideas:

This is the true substance of this celebration, that gained, from the diversity of thought of people attending and their backgrounds, means to bring together the authentic, and contemporary, and the local, and international, at the same time. (Kazem, 1986, p. 12)

For Kazem, the key was to be open to the West but to use local identity and historical depth as a launching pad for local-international conversations. Here we can continue to link Kazem’s ideology with El-Kafrawi’s application. Kazem’s insistence on the university as open to its society is also reflected in the design of the campus. El-Kafrawi explains, “The building orientation is essentially inward-looking, following Islamic tradition, and responds to the strong heat and the winds common to the area” (El-Kafrawi, 1986, p. 77). At the same time, there is a circular road around the campus to allow access to visitors, by vehicles, which is separated from the pedestrian inward campus for students and faculty (El-Kafrawi, 1986). In other words, the design makes

physical and explicit this simultaneous inward and outward focus that Kazem defines as modernization with respect for tradition.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the QU has been portrayed as an international project from the onset, although one motivated by Third-Worldist, Islamic, and Arab notions of solidarity and, equally importantly, one critical of Western hegemony. Reviewing the four opening speeches at the inauguration of QU's permanent buildings in 1986 offers a view of how QU was defined by the different parties involved and their vision for building cooperation and international relations with other institutions. For UNESCO under M'bow's leadership, QU was a project of education and knowledge-building based on Third-Worldist ideals; for the Emir, it was a state-building project with a pan-Arabist outlook; for El-Kafrawi and Dr. Kazem, it was a revisioning of Islamic and Arabic models and a realigning of them with the modern world. Kazem, M'bow, and El-Kafrawi had a shared vision for QU as a Third-Worldist national university with strong ties with other Arab, Islamic, and developing world institutions, which was backed by the Emir's state-building vision. Thus, the story of Qatar University offers a more plural understanding of what internationalization can mean in different contexts.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, there was almost no visible trace of such visions of "internationality" at the university. After spending a decade at the helm of the University,

President Sheikha Al-Misnad (in office from 2003–2015) would reflect in 2013, “When I got my position as president in 2003...The university was very traditional, like a typical Arab university, treated as [a] government department...We started actually from zero, it would [have] been easier if we [were] asked to build a new university, rather change one which does exist, so it was really very difficult to have to start from zero” (Dalhousie University, 2013, 00:32:38-00:33:21). The international visions that shaped the founding of the university not only disappeared, but were actively erased and replaced with new ones, although—as the quote hints—their memory and aftereffects could not be destroyed. They continued to linger and haunt the university to this day. As for QU’s flagship building, it would become engulfed by new post-modernist glass buildings scattered across the campus as the university continued to expand.

As part of this reform effort, the change in the language of instruction and the removal of all the Arabic journal publications created an immense epistemic break. It is a clean sweep on a level of what de Sousa Santos (2014) refers to as epistemicide—“the murder of knowledge” (p. 92). Under these conditions, the new, more competitive IoHE began. But amid such an erasure, the past is erased, and so is the ability to imagine a future. Ferreday and Kuntsman (2011) explain that “the future may be both haunted and haunting: whether through how the past casts a shadow over (im)possible futures; or through horrors that are imagined as ‘inevitable’; or through our hopes and dreams for difference, for change” (p. 4). It is not simply an erasure that killed knowledge,

but it also meant that for researchers and policy makers writing from or on QU, there was a void. However, the scattered archives and fragments of images that are alternately vague and vivid reveal how internationalization was pictured⁹, enabling us to envision a different and more inclusive form of internationalization than the one practiced today.

⁹ Gordon (2008) describes haunting as “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over and done with comes alive and when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (cited in Rhee, p. 15–16).

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THE UNCOMPLETED REFORMS: THE POLITICAL MECHANISMS OF REFORMING EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN THE ARAB GULF STATES

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Abstract

During the past two decades, the Arab Gulf states (AGS) have invested heavily in reforming both the K-12 and higher education systems in the belief that this might improve the human capital and enable the region to shift toward a knowledge economy instead of relying on hydrocarbon as the primary source of state income. Yet, after this long period, these systems are still underperforming, and the region continues to struggle with providing quality educational practices that enable its citizens to contribute to the “knowledge economy” specifically or to the future of their states more generally. Many international consultants have been involved in these reforms to develop the so-called ‘neoliberal’ education reform agenda; many projects have been launched and implemented. While sporadic changes have been observed, the situation remains largely unchanged. The question is why these states have not achieved their goal: a highly-skilled nation capable of competing globally. Critical scholars have placed significant emphasis on the political mechanisms and the social circumstances in the process of education reform and its implementation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Heck, 2004; Nitta, 2012; Portnoi, 2016; Taylor et al., 1997; Williams & Cummings, 2005). In a similar vein, this article approaches the question of education reform in the AGS by looking at it critically from a contextual and political perspective, which is considered a new approach to studying these reforms. In doing so, the paper highlights that this drive for change avoided certain political and socio-economic matters, which may account for the low achievement and

consistent underperformance of these reform initiatives in the education and development arenas. This article applies a qualitative comparative approach to examine education reform in the region by analysing key policy documents and relevant literature that studied the reform. My argument is twofold: First, the extensive involvement of the ruling establishment and the top-down policy process remain unchanged. Secondly, over the past 60 years, the region has relied heavily on foreign consultants, which indicates a lack of confidence in the local expertise to handle the reforms. Also, the 'street-level bureaucrats' such as school leaders and teachers remain neglected in the policy process. Finally, the political and bureaucratic contexts remain undiscussed in reforming the education system. Matters such as the instability of the leadership and the bureaucratic structures impact the low calibre of employees in the Ministry of Education but are not considered in the reform process; they seem to be a redline for the ruling establishment. Contextual changes are a crucial factor in achieving successful and sustained educational reforms, but the AGS is unwilling to risk making these changes. For policymakers and education reformers in the region, this article offers an invitation to seriously consider the contextual and political dimensions and boundaries when imagining, articulating, and implementing future education reform initiatives.

Keywords: Reforms, education systems, Arab Gulf States, knowledge economy

Introduction

Education reforms have been the main topic in most governments' agendas, especially after the new global movement toward UN Sustainable Development Goals, of which quality of education is the fourth goal that governments must accomplish by 2030. Yet, the aim has now shifted from simply making education accessible for all to also ensuring the quality of this education. This shift has changed both the content of required reforms and the political challenges they pose (Bruns, Macdonald, & Schneider, 2019) because expanding access to schools is a totally different story from ensuring the quality of the learning process at these schools. This is why education reform is not an easy task (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves, 2005; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Harris & Jones, 2018; Sahlberg, 2006).

Politicians worldwide have become very interested in reforming the education system, looking at it as a vehicle for achieving social, political, and economic development. Moreover, with the rise of global economic competition, many large-scale education reforms have been justified to achieve the highest level of competitiveness (Sahlberg, 2006). As a result, a new Global Educational Reform Movement emerged, with states competing against each other to reform their education systems while at the same time copying one another's reforms (Almoaibed, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2018; Mohamed & Morris, 2019; Sahlberg, 2016). This makes education reforms worldwide look similar to some extent (Sahlberg, 2012).

Sahlberg (2012) argued that this movement must stop because it puts a great deal of pressure on children and schooling to achieve goals that may not even be achievable; most of these education reform movements are unlikely to bring about the expected improvements (Sahlberg, 2006). It is difficult for the reforms to deliver any change because they are poorly conceptualised and happening faster than educators and others can cope with; finally, key staff such as teachers and school leaders are not committed to the reforms (Hargreaves, 2005). As a result, reforms are not well-implemented.

Some politicians see no harm in reforming the education system with less effective implementation. Zhao (2018) argued that some educational practices are similar to medicines in that while they might treat the patient, they also have side effects that need to be acknowledged. To minimise these side effects, the patient must follow the instructions about when and how to take this treatment. From Zhao's point of view, education reform is no different; it must be designed and implemented carefully to avoid harmful side effects. Just as some patients might become addicted to drugs and end up overdosing, some politicians might become addicted to reforms and end with an overdose that harms the entire education system.

As in other developing countries, education reforms in the Arab Gulf States (AGS) have been presented as the main vehicle to achieve the development needed. The AGS – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar – make

up one of the wealthiest regions in the world due to the proportion of global oil reserves and natural gas that they hold (Alshehabi, 2018).

Over the past three decades, the AGS has conducted massive, comprehensive reforms (economic, political, and educational) to diversify their economies by shifting the national income from one relying primarily on oil revenues to one depending on a knowledge economy. Each of the six countries has launched a long-term national vision prepared primarily by Western consultants (Ulrichsen, 2016a), and several of these studies assume that a knowledge-based economy can be achieved only through education (El-Kogali, Quota, & Sekkarie, 2017; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Wiseman, Alromi, & Alshumrani, 2014). As a result, improving the quality and efficacy of the national education systems has become central to these national visions (Nolan, 2012). For the first time, the AGS began to link economic and labour market issues solely to the education (Kirk, 2013). It is important to note that the concept of a knowledge-based economy was not generated by local scholars or by any national assessment of the economic situation to determine what works within the region; instead, it was proposed by international organisations and Western consultants. The feasibility of establishing knowledge-based economies in the AGS is still in question.

Despite the heavy investment in reforming their K-12 education systems, these systems are still “underperforming” according to global education indications, and the region continues to struggle

with providing quality educational practices that enable its citizens to contribute to the “knowledge economy” specifically. Many international consultants have been involved in developing the so-called ‘neoliberal’ education reform agenda; many projects have been launched and implemented. However, while sporadic changes have been observed, the situation remains largely unchanged.

Throughout the past two decades, education systems in the AGS have not rested; they have changed often, and I fear that we will become what Merrow (2017) described as ‘addicted to reform’. Yet we still face the same challenges; our education outcomes are low, students are not prepared well for global competitive markets, and most importantly, the region relies very heavily on oil revenues and has not come close to a knowledge-based economy. Borrowing from Kassab’s (2010) concerns about political oppression causing a culture crisis; I ask: Has political domination been the cause of our education crisis? Why have we not established a strong education system, and why can we modernise our education system without becoming westernised and losing our souls?

This paper seeks to understand the unrest in our education system and the failure to reform it. The paper aims to highlight the political matters avoided in this drive for change, which I argue might help explain these reform initiatives’ low achievement and consistent underperformance in the education and development arenas.

The context of reforming the education system in the Arab Gulf States

First, it is necessary to contextualise the educational reforms in the AGS to understand why the region is putting enormous efforts into reforming the education system, what its purposes are in the first place, and who benefits from these reforms.

Formal education in the region was established only recently; However, several informal practices were launched earlier, and the state took full responsibility for funding and leading the education system only after beginning to export oil. In Kuwait, for example, this was in the late 1930s, and in Qatar the early 1950s, when the newly established modern states started using oil revenues to expand the education system by building as many schools as possible and bringing teachers from other Arab states (Cammett, Diwan, Richards, & Waterbury, 2015; Ridge, 2014). The AGS quickly managed to make education accessible to most of the population. At that time, since most citizens were illiterate and incapable of helping in the development phase, the main aim was to educate these citizens so they could help build the new modern states and institutions (Cammett et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, given the sizable spending on education since the region's formal education systems were established, its quality was low (Akkary & Rizk, 2014; World Bank, 2008). One explanation was that the rulers at that time focused more on quantity than the quality of education. They focused on the number rather than the

quality of teachers; they were concerned with building more schools but not with what exactly the schools needed to teach (Al-Sulayti, 1999; Barber, Mourshed, & Whelan, 2007).

What makes the situation more urgent now is that the region's challenges have changed significantly over the last two decades, from the 1940s and 1950s when the education system was first established. Nowadays, the six AGS face massive challenges, mainly in terms of over-reliance on hydrocarbon revenue, the low calibre of employees, and overstaffing in the public sector.

Since the discovery of oil in the AGS, economic and political structures have changed. Hydrocarbon revenue became the sole income of the states, and they relied heavily on it to fund budgets and projects. They built schools and universities and provided free education, free housing, free health care, and generous social subsidies without taxing their citizens in return (Alshehabi, 2017b; Davidson, 2011), in a model rarely observed these days outside the AGS.

All these free services look pleasing, but they need to be more sustainable. The over-reliance on hydrocarbon has adverse effects on the political and economic situations, as well as on the quality of institutions, and such an economy is not considered sustainable (Alshehabi, 2017a; Hertog, 2010; Luciani, 1990; Ulrichsen, 2016b). The governments are no longer capable of funding all these free services for the next generations due to 1) the high population growth and 2) the fluctuations in the hydrocarbon market, which affect the amount of income the government receives. The AGS has

little control over hydrocarbon prices, as they depend on demand; also, the global movement towards clean energy marks a significant threat to the region, which is the largest and cheapest supplier of hydrocarbons in the market. Therefore, diversifying the regional economy is even more urgent today than two decades ago (Ayubi, 2009).

Furthermore, one of the opposing sides of the hydrocarbon revenue is that the state used this revenue to create public sector jobs, with generous salaries and benefits, for its citizens. This was to encourage them to take part in building and developing the state, as well as to distribute part of the wealth. In time, job creation became a purpose in itself, regardless of whether these jobs were needed, and as discussed previously, this created an overstaffed sector. The problem is that with the increasing number of young university graduates, the state can no longer offer them all jobs; at the same time, the private sector cannot compete with the benefits of the public sector to attract those young people, who also are not trained well enough to participate in the private sector. The education system is blamed for this lack of preparation, as its aim and structure have remained the same since it was first established. An education structure from the 1940s can hardly be expected to be capable of preparing the youth for twenty-first-century needs.

Consequently, reforming the education system was presented as a solution for the ongoing challenges facing the Gulf region, and diversification of the economy toward a knowledge-based economy

was the central theme of this reform. The region needs to find a more stable and sustainable alternative to reduce its reliance on hydrocarbon revenue. Also, the education system can take the lead in preparing the younger generation to be more capable of joining the private sector and the global market.

Although this was the main narrative discussed in most of the literature that studied education reform in the Gulf region, we should not forget that when the rulers met in Doha in 2002 to discuss education and its reforms (Secretariat General, 2003), it was soon after the 9/11 incident. The US and the rest of the world have criticised the AGS, blaming their education systems for educating the youth to be extremist (Aldaghishy, 2019). Education reform was required and demanded, and RAND's report clearly stated that the US must push hard for this and must provide full support, including curricula, instructors, and institutions (Rabasa et al., 2004). It is difficult to confirm whether this was the main aim of reforming the education system in the region, and this article does not attempt to discuss this narrative or whether the education system bears any blame for 9/11. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight this here, for it might help us understand the reform differently. Undoubtedly, the 9/11 incident may have accelerated the reforms and created the social and political environment in which to conduct them.

Educational reform as a political and economic movement

As discussed earlier, education reform has been a main topic in education literature in the past three decades. Scholars are working hard to study it from different perspectives, trying to understand the best approach to the successful reform of the education system; using comparative outlooks, they highlight the differences in such reforms and the reasons why something works in some places and not in others (Bruns et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2005; Harris & Jones, 2018).

Education reforms are a priority on government agendas worldwide because of the belief that education is a primary solution to many social and economic problems (Heck, 2004). In many countries, education reforms have been justified as promoting economic development and growth (Sahlberg, 2006); this justification is due to the massive role and interference of many institutions—such as the OECD, the World Bank, and IMF—on education policies and education reforms (Ball, 2012). The narrative put forward by these organisations is that developing human capital can help achieve economic growth by increasing labour productivity (Harris & Jones, 2018; Sahlberg, 2006). These institutions and other consulting firms convinced the AGS rulers of this narrative, and most reforms were based on this idea (Mohamed, 2019). However, Postman (1996) suggested that the assumption that ‘education and productivity go hand in hand’ is overdrawn (p. 30). Similarly, Wolf (2002) argued that the link between education and economic growth is a myth; he stated that

the one-way relationship in the mindsets of politicians, as in ‘education spending in, economic growth out – simply doesn’t exist’ (Wolf, 2002, loc. 204). The situation in the AGS might be a good example of Wolf’s statement, as their education expenditures are considered some of the highest in the world; however, the return on economic growth is low (El-Kogali et al., 2017). There is more than one narrative regarding the purposes of education; hence, reforming the education system should begin by determining exactly what the state needs from education.

Education is not a standalone concept; it is influenced by social, political, and economic change (Freire, 1985). Education reform, accordingly, entails the reform of all other related concepts. Davies (1999) contended that ‘education change and reform require parallel and complementary changes and reform in other arenas’ (p. 3); this argument encapsulates the thesis of this article, which is that focusing solely on reforming the education system while maintaining the status quo in related matters, does not lead to successful implementation. In their work, Harris and Jones (2018) found that what matters most in education reform is not the design or the selection of the projects but instead the ‘contextually appropriate approaches to educational policy’ and that more attention needs to be paid to the context when implementing reforms. Therefore, announcing and implementing the reforms without first preparing the required context might not help achieve the intended outcomes.

Looking at the reforms from a political perspective is important because ‘questions about power and level of decision-making are central’ (Davies, 1999, p. 7). In that sense, Moe and Wiborg (2017) argued that ‘any serious effort to understand the world’s education systems needs to study, for any given nation, how power is structured within the politics of education—who wields political power, how they wield it’ (p. 4). Therefore, examining the education reforms in the AGS from a political perspective is crucial, highlighting the political matters that were avoided during these reforms because this perspective has been neglected (Mazawi, 2008).

Scholars have emphasised the political mechanisms and social circumstances in the process of education reform and its implementation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Heck, 2004; Nitta, 2012; Portnoi, 2016; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997; Williams & Cummings, 2005). Education reforms in the AGS, as in other regions, have been especially perceived to be political projects (Mazawi & Sultana, 2010), and as Davies (1999) argued, education reform is a political and technical process. As such, the ruling establishments were involved directly, providing the momentum necessary to overcome internal resistance (Nolan, 2012). Nonetheless, the literature about the reforms in the region has typically focused more on technical issues than political ones (see, for example, Alsaleh, 2019; Barnowe-Meyer, 2013; Haslam, 2011, 2013; Kirk, 2014; Male & Al-Bazzaz, 2015; Weber, 2014).

Most of these reforms were driven by political agendas detached from schools' priorities and needs (Abi-Mershed, 2010; Bashshur, 2005; Mazawi, 2010). Abdel-Moneim (2016) concluded that most reforms – including educational reforms – aimed to gain legitimacy for the regimes and help them survive. Mazawi (2010) stated that some ‘consider these reforms as seeking primarily to “de-Islamize” and “Americanize” Arab education by minimizing, if not entirely avoiding, references to Islamic culture and texts’ (p. 214), while others found that the reforms were used as state branding (Alkhater, 2016; Mohamed, 2019). This might explain why Abdel-Moneim (2016) and Mazawi (2010) concluded that most educational reforms were unsustainable and failed to improve the education practice or successfully build a knowledge society.

A more in-depth look at the AGS educational reforms illustrates that they were mainly triggered and supported by international and Western agencies that criticised the local education arena (Akkary, 2010; Akkary & Rizk, 2014; Kirk, 2015; Mazawi, 2010; Mohamed, 2019). The response to these criticisms was to involve these agencies in the policymaking process, and the easiest way to do so was to borrow the reforms from them. Accordingly, policy borrowing, which has become a global phenomenon, became the main approach to reforming the education system in the region. Although several scholars have criticised it (Auld & Morris, 2014; Halpin & Troyna, 1995; Harris & Jones, 2018; Morris, 2012; Sahlberg, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2014), the region is sticking to this approach. Most of the educational reform agendas were produced and packaged by outsiders and then delivered to

the region to be followed as a means of solving their educational problems (Alfadala, 2015; Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Mohamed, 2019; Rohde & Alayan, 2012).

Mohamed (2019) studied this approach in depth and concluded that what happened in the region was far from the borrowing policies of other countries around the world; this was more about buying these practices from more advanced educational systems and adopting them wholesale, despite the huge variations in the context. In other words, it was a trading process between the AGS and the consultant agencies, making the reforms more replication than true innovation (Kirk, 2015). Moreover, when these borrowed policies are implemented, they have already become outdated in the places where they originated (Donn & Al Manthri, 2013). Also, this approach neglected the epistemological conflicts between the region and the borrowed practices (Romanowski, Alkhateeb, & Nasser, 2018), thus creating massive implementation issues (Alfadala, 2015). Furthermore, Alhashem and Alhouti (2021) argued that this lack of implementation was due to the lower calibres of Ministry of Education (MOE) officials and their inability to understand and implement the reforms as designed.

Davies (1999) argued that 'planning for educational reforms should be done only in relation to the social, political and economic realities of that time and place, and must be done to gain the interest and support of the relevant national and local leaders' (p. 3). Also, Mazawi (2010) warned that because so many reforms in the region were led by international and Western consultant

agencies, there was an increased 'dependency on practices and technologies developed elsewhere and imported into the Arab region as part of free trade agreements, [and] as consumer-ready packages under the banner of promoting a knowledge society' (p. 212). This uncritical adoption of Western educational practices, and whether they improved education, is questionable.

The literature on education reform in the region illustrates that these reforms still need to achieve their goals, and it definitely illustrates shortcomings in both policymaking processes and policy implementation. This paper attempts to study the reforms from a political angle, a perspective that needs to be addressed in the literature in this area. Studying these reforms from a holistic point of view and looking at the political mechanism might help explain why reforms are not successfully achieving their goals. One way to do this is by looking at untouchable matters and considering redlines in reforming the education system.

A note on methodology and research

Researching the educational reforms in the Gulf region, the huge investment in these projects, and their limited success attracted my attention. They caused me to ask why this is the case in the Gulf region. Why are we spending a lot and achieving little, and what went wrong with the reforms? This paper does not claim to answer these questions fully. Still, it provides part of the story by looking at the reform from a political perspective and identifying the matters that were never changed while reforming these

education systems. To develop this research, I found the question-driven approach developed by Punch and Oancea (2014) to be the most suitable; this starts with a research question that needs an answer instead of starting with a paradigm. Accordingly, this paper raised the following question:

Which matters were considered redlines in reforming the education system in the Arab Gulf States, and did that affect the success of the reforms?

This paper applied the qualitative comparative approach, which allowed me to look at several cases in the region to find similarities in how they approached and designed education reform. This comparison identified the untouchable areas that were considered redlines to those leading the reforms.

This research adopted the case-oriented approach established by Ragin (2014), which is centrally concerned with making sense of a relatively small number of cases. In this type of methodology, ‘cases are singular entities selected for their significance, and they are studied intensively and contextually’ (Ragin, 1994, p. 302). This comparative approach allowed me to focus on each country in depth and provide answers through a few detailed, intensive observations. Furthermore, the AGS share many commonalities – in terms of history, politics, economy, and other contexts – so this comparative approach is well-suited for this study because focusing on countries in one specific region effectively controls for those features that are common to them (Landman & Carvalho,

2017). Specifically, this paper focused on Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait only due to size limitations.

The sources of data for this research included policy documents and grey literature, or literature that is not formally published as an academic source like books or journal articles (Lefebvre, Manheimer and Glanville, 2008); grey literature includes government reports, consultant reports, theses, commercial documents, and other official documents (Grey Literature Report, 1999). Thus, a range of policy documents and reports related to Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait were reviewed and analysed carefully to ascertain untouchable matters. Lin (2016) argued that ‘secondary documents can foster your understanding of contextual characteristics and causal relationships leading to background meaning to support the analysis, interpretation, and audits of data’ (p. 171). Accordingly, document analysis and document interrogation were adopted in this research to manage and analyse the data, as these two methods are commonly used in educational and comparative research (Cortazzi, 2002; Male, 2016; Landman & Carvalho, 2017).

The redlines in reforming the education system in the Arab Gulf States

While studying the education reforms in the AGS, I recognised that some matters appeared untouchable. Although policymakers seemed interested in reforming the education system, some issues in the political mechanisms still needed to be addressed, despite

being crucial for reforming the education system successfully. In other words, which political matters did the policymakers not tolerate delving into when designing education reform initiatives? Avoiding these matters and not changing the approach to reforming the education system might explain why reform processes were less successful and why the region remained in reform status for so long. This short article cannot highlight all these matters, so I will illustrate and discuss those that I believe to be most important, such as the extensive involvement of the ruling establishment, the over-reliance on international and foreign consultants, and the failure to tackle political and bureaucratic challenges.

The extensive involvement of the ruling establishment

The political systems in this region are some of the most centralised in the world; due to the regional political structures, the ruling establishments hold the ultimate power to formulate and implement all policies (Alnaqeeb, 2006; Herb, 1999; Khalaf & Luciani, 2006; Nonneman, 2006). When it came to reforming their education systems, the rulers were extensively involved in the process, making these reforms closely associated with them.

The extensive involvement of the ruler in all matters in the state was totally understandable when it was considered a clan state; however, after the shift to a modern state and the establishment of its institutions, this should no longer be the situation. For example, when Kuwait's merchants decided to open the first formal school in 1911, they sought the blessing and support of the

ruler's son, Shaikh Nasser bin Mubarak. Also, when Kuwait established its first educational institution, *Dairat Almaaraf* (Education Council), in 1936, Shaikh Abdullah Aljaber Alsabah took the lead in this institution. This extensive involvement in education remains sacrosanct; to this day, the AGS ruling establishments are heavily involved in reforming the education system, and their involvement constitutes a redline in the reform mechanism, meaning that the education sector cannot launch any comprehensive reform without their involvement.

We saw this very clearly in the cases of Bahrain and Qatar, whose Crown Princes led the reform initiatives directly. In Bahrain, HRH Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa launched the reform and kept himself too close to the decision-making (Mohamed, 2019). In Qatar, HRH Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and his mother, the First Lady, HRH Moza bint Nasser Al-Missned, co-led the Supreme Education Council (SEC), and RAND – the consultant firm working in the reform – even took the Palace as a workplace (Brewer et al., 2007). What was interesting in Qatar was that in 1997, before the Education for a New Era (EFNE) initiative, the MOE had proposed a similar reform plan. Still, no action was taken on their proposal (Alkhater, 2016).

The involvement of the ruling establishment indeed provides the political support needed to implement the reforms; it encourages the main stakeholders and the rest of the citizens to buy into the reform and makes it a national matter. However, this extensive involvement has consequences.

One of these consequences is that it shields the reform projects from any criticism. The reform initiatives become associated with His Royal Highness, so any critique of the reform means a critique of His Royal Highness. In the AGS context, it is very hard, and sometimes impossible, to criticise the ruling establishment or its actions; some states even have laws banning any criticism of the ruling establishment's actions and decisions.

This might explain why when Bahrain's Crown Prince decided to abolish the College of Education and establish a new teacher college, no one in Bahrain criticised this decision; today, that newly established college is struggling and not performing as expected. Also, when Qatar decided to adopt the American charter school system, no one criticised this decision even though the consultant had not fully disclosed the weakness of this model in the US (Alkhater, 2016). I believe these decisions might have been more functional if educators had been given the space to voice their opinions in the first place, in which case there would definitely have been other options suggested for solving the weakness of the education system.

Secondly, the circle of the ruling establishment is too closed, with no one else involved in the decision-making; therefore, educational stakeholders such as school leaders, teachers, and parents were never involved in the decision-making process. The advantage of involving stakeholders and interest groups at the outset of policy formation is that their engagement may make the implementation

much easier and the policy more acceptable to those who must implement it (Taylor et al., 1997). For example, when Kuwait's MOE decided to reform the curriculum and introduce a competency-based curriculum, teachers were not asked whether they were ready to deliver this type of reform or not, and even the education colleges were not invited to discuss whether they could incorporate this type of curriculum in their teacher training (Alhashem & Alhouti, 2021; Winokur, 2014). In Qatar as well, the SEC – the leading body of the reform – included several stakeholders (Brewer et al., 2007) but none of them represented the main educational stakeholders.

More than 70 years after establishing the education system, the ruling establishments still could not accept the idea of allowing these stakeholders (school leaders, teachers, and parents) a formal role and considering them vital players in the decision-making process. Generally, teachers in the region should be addressed and allowed to establish unions. In Kuwait, considered the most democratic regime in the region, the Kuwait Teachers Society is not considered a union and is not permitted to undertake any political role. In Qatar, teaching is not considered a profession governed by law; hence, teachers cannot have a professional society. Given this background, it is unsurprising that stakeholders will not buy into the reforms and smooth their implementation path (Weber, 2014) because they feel they need to be part of this reform. If policymakers are really interested in successfully implementing educational reforms, these

stakeholders need to participate in the decision-making process, and the ruling establishment must recognise their role.

The over-reliance on international and foreign consultants

Whenever an education reform is announced in the region, we educators ask who the consultant is this time because the number of Western consultants involved in education reform in the AGS is uncountable. In Bahrain, there were four different consultants from three countries: England, Scotland, and Singapore (EDB, 2006), while in Qatar, nine consultants—from the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Germany—worked on several projects (Brewer et al., 2007). In Kuwait, the consultants included McKinsey & Company, Tony Blair Associates, the British Council, Singapore's NIE, and finally the World Bank (Alhashem & Alhouti, 2021; Blair, 2009; British Council, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2007; National Institute of Education, 2013). How can we expect coherent reforms if all these different firms from different backgrounds take the lead in designing them?

Over the past 20 years, the region has come to rely heavily on foreign consultants. These consulting firms – mostly Western – are granted unrestricted access to all educational institutions, including those of higher education, and the ruling establishment provides them access to statistics and policy reports, reinforcing them with the political support to implement their evaluations. In contrast, native educators and scholars are often denied this kind

of access and support, which indicates a lack of confidence in the local expertise to handle the reforms.

It was understandable to rely on foreign consultants when first establishing the education system in the 1940s and 1950s, when most AGS borrowed their education systems from Egypt and other Arab states (Alfadala, 2015; Ridge, 2014), for the state did not yet have the appropriate human capital and national expertise. However, after more than 60 years, the state should have enough well-educated and well-educated national educators to handle the reform instead of foreign consultants—especially given the international scholarship programmes that many AGS governments provide to citizens in the educational field. Despite dozens of research studies arguing against this reliance on foreign consultants and demonstrating the invalidity of the policy borrowing approach(see, for example: Alkhater, 2016; Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Kirk, 2014, 2015; Mohamed & Morris, 2019; Romanowski et al., 2018), the ruling establishments continue to rely on them, and they consider this issue a redline. Whenever we struggle with our education system, we go directly to seek help from these consultants, asking them to diagnose our problems and provide the solutions – regardless of their lack of understanding of the context; in some cases, the consultants are even asked to evaluate their work, as was the case with RAND in Qatar.

The state leaders justify this reliance on foreign consultants as a transitional step towards building the national capital and transferring the knowledge and expertise into the local context.

But the reality is much different; the foreign consultants are engaged in all matters, even acting as shadows to the Ministers of Education (Mohamed, 2019). Instead of being discussed with local educational experts, the policy solutions are produced and packaged by these foreign consultants and provided to the region to be followed as a means of solving its educational problems (Alfadala, 2015; Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Rohde & Alayan, 2012). Most of the borrowed solutions are not contextualised to fit the region and therefore do not work well here because they were designed to solve a problem in its original context, not to be transferred wholesale to solve others' problems.

As mentioned above, these consultants were given the liberty to redesign the education systems based on their own understanding of education rather than on what the AGS and their citizens require. They attempted to fix the problems that they thought needed solutions, not those that needed to be solved. Therefore, the firms drew from reform projects that had succeeded elsewhere in the world and applied them in the region, regardless of their applicability to local circumstances. The problem with this approach is that it presumes that best practices can be standardised and exported to countries with diverse socio-economic and political systems; however, the literature shows that this is not possible (Donn & Al Manthri, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2018; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2014). To be realistic, there is nothing wrong with seeking help from experts with knowledge and experience in reforming and developing education practices; the problem is giving them the right to make decisions instead of local

experts. One way to make this approach more successful would be to bring the foreign consultants and the local expertise to sit together at the same table to think about, discuss, and negotiate what is best for the region regarding education reform.

The neglect of political and bureaucratic challenges

As discussed above, the political arena inevitably has an influence on any education reforms. Such reforms became a political matter not only in the AGS but around the world, yet when we come to the AGS, we recognise that the political context needed to be taken into consideration. When the ruling establishments decided to reform their education systems, they confined the scope of the reform to the education system only. From their point of view, political matters were not related to the reform, and this was illustrated by the way they handled it.

For example, in Kuwait, the high turnover among Ministers of Education should have been considered when reforming the education system. From the time Kuwait announced its education reform and started its collaboration with the World Bank, there were around eight different ministers in charge of the MOE (Council of Ministers General Secretariat, 2019); this created instability in the body leading the reform and definitely affected its implementation. The problem was not only that eight different ministers led the reform over nine years, but that this also meant eight different sets of interrupted visions, processes, and practices. This huge turnover at the ministerial level was due to the political

dilemma that Kuwait has faced since it gained independence and established its constitution in 1961 (Alnajjar, 2000; Alnajjar & Selvik, 2016; Ghabra, 1994).

The World Bank (2014) highlighted this issue very clearly in their achievement report, stating, “[we] saw six different administrations take office during a 4-year period. The constant transition made decision-making at the most senior level difficult, stalling decisions at key moments in the program’s trajectory” (p. 22). Yet the ruling establishment did nothing to solve this issue and to ensure the stability of the administration leading the reform.

Here I argue that the political issue in Kuwait is considered a redline by the ruling establishment and was not considered when reforming the education system, even though it was affecting the implementation of the reforms. As discussed earlier, system-wide reforms are a long-term process, taking years if not decades, to achieve results (Bruns et al., 2019). Therefore, ensuring the stability of leadership is crucial in reforming the education system.

Likewise, the regional bureaucratic context was also ignored. The civil service in general, and the ministries of education in particular, are weak in terms of performance and policy implementation; the system has been described as dysfunctional due to a range of issues such as overstaffing, low-skilled personnel, low productivity, red tape, and a lack of innovation (Ayubi, 1990; Jabbra & Jabbra, 2005; Jreisat, 2012). The ruling establishments are, of course, aware of this situation. Still, instead

of tackling these problems, they established parallel governmental bodies that allowed for 'bureaucratic manoeuvring' to overcome the rigidities of the traditional bureaucratic institutions (Abdel-Moneim, 2016). In Bahrain and Qatar, for example, the MOE did not lead the reform; instead, the SEC in Qatar and the Education Reform Board (ERB) in Bahrain took the lead (Brewer et al., 2007; EDB, 2006).

Several scholars have argued that the capacity of technocrats to carry out the reform may have an impact on the way policies are designed and implemented (Akiba, 2013; Alhashem & Alhouti, 2021; Bruns et al., 2019; Harris & Jones, 2018), but reforming the bureaucratic structure seems to be a redline for the AGS ruling establishments. Although the states established these new parallel institutions to design and plan the reforms, the MOE would still be in charge of their implementation. Because the state had not reformed the MOEs or developed their low-calibre staff to be more capable of implementing the reform initiatives the way the parallel governmental bodies had designed them, these initiatives were lacking in implementation due to the huge gap between the designers of the reform and its implementers.

What was surprising was that while the consultants did raise these issues, they still needed to propose solutions or push for them to be resolved. My interpretation as to why these two issues were ignored is that the consultants knew in advance that these issues were not only redlined for the ruling establishments but were also very hard to solve. Therefore, they did not push to include them in

the reform as a priority; instead, they proposed alternatives that they could be sure to deliver. Reforming the MOEs is a complex and long-term task, as RAND argued in their report (Brewer et al., 2007); thus, the consultants chose the easiest and fastest approach, even if it was not the best approach for delivering the reform.

Conclusion

Over the last decades, the AGS has been making significant efforts, spending millions of dollars, and consulting with an enormous number of consultants on school reforms, to develop their human capital to diversify the economy, by building a knowledge economy to ensure the sustainability of the welfare system. However, since we entered this millennium, these education systems have been moving from one reform to another, while partial changes are observed which need to reflect the amount of effort. This article concludes that it is insufficient to set up a reform plan for the education system while keeping other, closely related matters unreformed.

As Davies (1999) argued, successful reform of the education system requires parallel and complementary reform in other areas as well. This article illustrates that the AGS failed to fulfil this requirement in that some matters that are closely related to education reform were not reformed or even touched. This has affected the success of reforms and kept the education system in reform status for a long time.

The involvement of the ruling establishment in the reform process is highly appreciated as it provides the needed political support. However, their extensive involvement in every matter related to the reform is not doing any good because it keeps the reforms isolated from the educators, who cannot interact with the project or provide their criticism of some of its initiatives. The over-reliance on foreign consultants needs to be reconsidered, for they are looking at their interests rather than fixing our education systems. Looking at solutions from around the world will not develop the education system in the region. Instead, putting faith in local experts to think about the solutions that would work well in the AGS context might be the way out of our educational crisis.

Literature on education reforms makes it very clear that contextual change is crucial in achieving successful and sustained educational reforms. Therefore, more effort must be made to reform the context and prepare the appropriate bureaucratic and political infrastructure to help the reform succeed. Reforming the education system requires a paradigm shift in the reform approach and a breaking free from any boundaries. With this shift, it is easier to reform and develop the education system in the region. We have tried the old approach several times, and it has not worked, so it is clear that repeating the same approach will not bring any different results. This paper calls on policymakers and educators to seriously consider the contextual and political dimensions and boundaries when imagining, articulating, and implementing future education reform initiatives.

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MANUFACTURING CONSENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL REGION

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM), this study examines how consent is manufactured among higher-education faculties in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region—a political union comprising six Arab states: Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Specifically, it studies the relevance of the five filters that comprise the Propaganda Model (i.e., *ownership, dependence on revenue, information sourcing, flak, and convergence in the dominant ideology*) to how GCC-based higher-education faculties engage in behaviors that filter reality to promote and shield the interests of policy makers in the region. The aim is to scrutinize how GCC faculties are subject to various types of propaganda that manufacture consent for political, economic, and social agendas at both the local and global levels.

Keywords: Propaganda model, higher education, faculty, Gulf Cooperation Council Region

Introduction

In their book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky proposed the Propaganda Model (PM), which they defined as ‘an analytical framework that attempts to explain the performance of the US media in terms of the basic institutional structures and relationships within which they operate’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. xi). Herman and Chomsky argue that ‘Among their other functions, the [American] media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them’ (p. xi). They point out that one role of the American media is to manufacture consent among journalists by leveraging propaganda to mobilize bias in favor of corporate and political elites. Consequently, most news content journalists report is oriented toward social reproduction—namely, the continuation of the capitalist system and its economic orthodoxies. Herman and Chomsky identified five editorial components or ‘filters’ that manufacture journalist consent: ownership, *dependence on revenue*, *information sourcing*, *flak*, and *convergence in the dominant ideology*. Although Chomsky (2002) suggests that the PM ‘is one of the best-confirmed theses in the social sciences’ (p. 18), Herring and Robinson (2003) argue that the model is sidelined in academia, asserting that while the sphere itself ‘is very strongly disciplined by the operation of the filters outlined in the propaganda model’ (p. 562), these filters operate differently (Pedro, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the current study examines the relevance of the five filters inherent in the PM to the higher-education context. In particular, it relates these filters to higher education institutions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region — a political union of six Arab states: Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The aim is to examine how consent for political, economic, and social agendas is manufactured among higher-education faculties in the GCC.

This study is structured as follows. I first provide a brief note on how the PM is leveraged to manufacture consent in media while touching upon the relevant literature. Next, I briefly discuss the relevance of the PM to the context of academia before examining how consent is manufactured among GCC-based higher-education faculties. Next, I highlight spaces for divergence and dissidence and argue that these filters are not omnipotent. Finally, I provide concluding remarks.

A Note on the propaganda model in Media

As mentioned earlier, Herman and Chomsky first introduced the PM in 1988 to explain the American media's performance patterns about news production. They identified five filters through which news must pass before emerging into the mainstream: *ownership, dependence on revenue, information sourcing, flak, and convergence in the dominant ideology*. These filters are spelled out in further detail in the coming section.

Herman and Chomsky argue that globalisation and privatisation have transformed the American media, leading to the creation of the first filter of the PM—namely, *ownership*. Big corporations—many of which are part of even bigger conglomerates—began to own the media, often quite literally. By virtue of this ownership, these corporations can determine the political–economic climate in the news: favourable representation, for example, can be given to political and economic parties that serve the owners’ interests (Smith, 2017), and media owners will be less likely to criticise policies that benefit them directly (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The owners’ end game is profit, so it is in their interests to push for whatever will guarantee that profit. Indeed, as Smith (2017) points out, truth is valuable only to the extent it sells more newspapers. Such forms of ownership lead to a *dependency on profits*, the second filter of the PM. Smith (2017) argues that ‘Advertising is the prevalent source of profit made by media organisations, and thus, media must endeavour to maintain a favourable marketing platform for advertisers by serving their interests’ (p. 150). In being unwilling to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’, media organisations ensure that their news content does not hinder the sales of their advertisers. Concomitantly, media organisations rely on government, corporations, political actors, police departments, and corporations as information sources when formulating their news content. This leads to the third filter of the PM—namely, *sourcing*. These aforementioned sources feed the media organisations with a continuous supply of information deemed newsworthy (e.g., official accounts, interviews with experts, etc.). Such authorised and sanctioned information features heavily in

the news, while other sources of information are marginalised (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). When journalists attempt to challenge the power structure and stray away from the consensus, they receive *flak*—the fourth filter of the PM. Flak is the outcome when journalists introduce news that challenges the dominant discourse, and it takes the form of complaints, lawsuits, petitions, and threats, among other punishments. Finally, to manufacture consent among journalists and corral public opinion, media organisations seek to identify an enemy—a ‘bogyman’—to fear. This leads to the creation of the fifth filter of the PM—namely, *convergence in the dominant ideology*. In the American media context, this enemy has taken the form of communism, terrorists, and immigrants, Islamism, among others.

According to Herman and Chomsky (1988), these filters are the most decisive factors in determining what constitutes ‘news’ in the American media. Eventually, such ‘filtered’ news serves elite interests by creating propaganda oriented towards social reproduction—that is, the continuation of capitalist society and the capitalist economy. Consequently, these filters restrict journalists from being free and independent. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the PM does not attempt to conjecture or theorise on the actual effects on, or the reception of, various audiences.

Herman and Chomsky predicted back in 1988 that their model would not gain traction in academic spheres; this prediction was, and still is, accurate. Mullen (2010) notes the presence of the PM,

however subtle, in European and North American scholarship (i.e., journals, textbooks, conferences). Even when it does appear, there needs to be more engagement and discussion with regard to its presence (Jo & Pedro, 2011). For critics, the PM connotes a conspiratorial perspective that seems to dramatize the power of the elites (Brahm, 2006) and underestimate widespread opposition to elites' interests (Lang & Lang, 2004). Critics see the PM as politically deterministic, functionalist, simplistic, and a 'blunt tool' for scientific analysis. Still, for advocates, the PM is an anti-elitist model that would be widely accepted and applied if it did not represent an attack on elite interests (Jo & Pedro, 2011). Scholars have made attempts to strengthen (Klaehn, 2003), update (Smith, 2017), expand (Boyd-Barrett, 2004), validate (Mullen, 2010) the PM, and apply it to the higher-education context (e.g., Jo & Phelan, 2005).

The propaganda model in academia

Kavanagh (2012) notes that '... the idea of the university is perhaps best understood through analysing its relationship with other institutions over time' (p. 101). For him, the evolution of universities' role throughout history and across cultures is comparable to the fool's role in the medieval royal court. He argues that the fool has used masquerades to function as a storyteller addressing audiences. Universities as foolish institutions mean that, historically, they have been reconstructing their role constantly to serve one of the main five sovereign societal agencies: The State, the Church, the Nation, the Professions, and the

Corporation (Kavanagh, 2012). In this sense, the role of academics in sustaining the dominant ideology at the expense of *truth* has been flagged and criticised by anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian thinkers alike (e.g., Chomsky, 1967; Bourdieu, 1984; Said, 1996; Collini, 2012; Kavanagh, 2012; among others). It has been argued that higher-education institutions, like the media, are subject to filtering processes (Herring & Robinson, 2003). For Chomsky and Otero (2003), 'The whole education system involves a good deal of filtering... and it's a kind of filtering toward submissiveness and obedience' (p. 392). Herring and Robinson (2003) argue that the PM is side-lined in academia, as the sphere itself 'is very strongly disciplined by the operation of the filters outlined in the propaganda model' (p. 562); these filters do operate differently, however (Pedro, 2011). In such cases, Edward Said (1996) urges academics not to consolidate authority but to understand, interpret, and question it. He writes, 'the intellectual is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense' (p. 23). That is a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas or ready-made clichés or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly but actively willing to say so in public. For Said (1996), this is not always a matter of being a critic of official policies, but rather of 'thinking of the intellectual vocation as needing to maintain constant vigilance, and to be perpetually willing not to let half-truths or received ideas steer individuals along' (p. 23). This assertion is precisely the focus of the coming sections.

Manufacturing consent in GCC Higher Education through a propaganda model

In this section, I relate the five filters that comprise the PM to the ways through which GCC-based higher education faculties, consciously and willingly or otherwise, engage in behaviors that filter reality to promote and shield the interests of the elites in the region. I do so by discussing the filters that constitute the PM in terms of the contemporary sociopolitical and economic circumstances of the GCC region. My analysis is informed by three main sources: (1) theoretical explanations and empirical data—when relevant and available, (2) institutional reports, plans, and websites, and (3) my *professional voice* as a GCC-based higher education faculty. I argue that all of these sources are of equal importance. I am cautious not to fall into the trap of generalisation. Instead, I seek to engage in what Mignolo (2013) refers to as ‘border thinking,’ which entails ‘the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside’ (p.3). The aim is to emerge from the silence and bear witness to the ‘scarcity-thinking’ concerning the various types of propaganda in GCC higher education that seeks to manufacture consent for political, economic, and social agendas among faculties.

Table (1) presents a general overview of the primary filters discussed in the coming sections, along with their dimensions and implications. The ellipses indicate the possibility of adding other dimensions for each filter that would further contribute to the

development of the PM in the GCC higher education context and perhaps elsewhere.

Table 1: *GCC universities' filters of manufacturing consent among faculty and their implications*

Primary Filter	Dimensions in GCC universities	Implications
Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privatisation • Competition • Internationalisation • 	Faculty alienation.
Dependence on revenue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketisation • Commodification • 	Manufacturing faculty who are <i>homo economics</i> .
Information sourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The agenda of <i>development</i> • 	Manufacturing faculty who are working from within self-defeating development discourse.
Flak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior threat mechanism: Strategic planning. • Neutralisation mechanism: Evaluation systems. • 	Manufacturing faculty who are <i>governable objects</i> and <i>good zombies</i> .
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellence 	

Convergence in the dominant ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality assurance • Ranking • Accreditation • 	<p>Manufacturing <i>research men</i>, who are engaged in conscious or unconscious gamesmanship as well as blind or disguised conformity.</p>
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Filters

Filter 1: Ownership

The *ownership* aspect in GCC higher education is a crucial factor in explaining how consent is manufactured among faculty. In the modern sense, the higher education system in the GCC region is relatively new. It was developed in the 1960s and 1970s, soon after the GCC states attained their independence. The early results of the region's higher education systems were notable (UNESCO, 2018): universities not only provided the high-level skills necessary for local labor markets but also empowered domestic constituencies in building societal institutions, increased social capital, and promoted social cohesion. Until the 1980s, the GCC governments had invested heavily in free higher education with reasonably good results (UNESCO, 2018).

Despite this relative success, starting in the 1990s, certain criticisms have been leveled against GCC universities, mainly by international organizations and think tank agencies. Higher

education systems in the region were described as lacking quality, with outdated and traditional methods of instruction (UNESCO, 2018). Deficiencies in the management, effectiveness, and efficiency of the system were described (World Bank, 2017). It has been argued that basic learning takes place in the mother tongue; however, ‘the modern world also requires relative mastery of at least one secondary language, either French or English, especially ... for the labor market that tends to be more and more international’ (UNESCO, 2018, p. 12). Allegedly, ‘the quality of the faculty was also declining’ (RAND, 2009, p. xx), and ‘morale was widely reported to be low’ among them (RAND, 2009, p. xx). In short, higher education in the GCC region was seen as the *Achilles heel* of development, which necessitated radical reform (UNDP, 2002, p. 54).

In tandem with these criticisms, the region witnessed rapid population growth in the 2000s, with new local generations as well as enormous expatriate communities living long-term in the region all seeking enrolment for their children in higher education institutions. GCC governments found themselves challenged to address criticisms through existing institutions (Coffman, 2003). Eventually, these governments responded to educational reform calls to improve the quality of higher education and announced ambitious visions of building knowledge-based economies. However, with tight and stringent government budgets resulting from the drop in oil prices, higher education institutions were challenged to expand their financial bases. Universities, which once were controlled and funded by the state, began to open up to

private involvement, aiming to expand in the education market and make a profit. GCC universities needed to take a governance turn through decentralizing and depoliticizing higher education planning. They also needed to adopt a *glonacal* approach through ‘effectively observe international markets and consider the shaping roles they have on higher education institutions, operating across national boundaries, and yet [performing according to] national and local polities, economies, and professional conditions’ (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002, p. 305).

In a short span of time, the GCC higher education system has witnessed a significant transformation characterized by an exponential growth in the number of private universities, following a heavy dependence on the private sector to provide higher education (Coffman, 2003). During the last few decades, GCC states have all seen their first private universities open, and their national universities reformed, with strong praise from the local governments. Some private universities are purely local institutions funded by investors, while others are either joint ventures with foreign universities or satellite branch campuses of the latter (Coffman, 2003). In the United Arab Emirates, for instance, there are 102 universities, with 109,942 students enrolled. 99 of these universities are operated by private, profit-seeking businesses (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015). Many of these universities are located in the Academic Zone, which was established ‘to attract and support qualified educational institutions and service providers committed to delivering market-driven, educational, training and professional

development services that benefit the UAE and the broader Gulf region' (Academic Zone website). The focus of these universities is on 'the number of students enrolled and tuition revenues. Hence, courses are offered and cancelled at the students' requests' (The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015, p. 23).

This trend of *privatization* has produced a trend of *competing*, winning, and losing. As Coffman (2003) noted, the prevailing notion is that higher education institutions in the region compete with each other to meet the market's needs, thereby guaranteeing courses of study of international standards that lead to employment. To gain a competitive edge, GCC universities started vying to become 'world-class' (University of Bahrain, p. 9), 'smarter, better and faster' (University of Bahrain, p. 7), 'internationally' (Sultan Qaboos University, p. ix) and 'regionally' (Qatar University, p. 3) recognised.

As a 'competitive cooperation' (Merton, 1973) tendency has evolved, GCC universities need to be embedded in collaborative structures, which has intensified the work goal toward *internationalisation*. Today, most of the GCC policy makers are promoting internationalisation, with efforts to integrate the national and local perspectives, creating the *glonacal* determinants (Vardhan, 2015). This is despite the dearth of studies addressing internationalisation, mainly limited to 'comparative data, case studies, or institutional experiments has been conducted in the region' (Vardhan, 2015, p. 2). In addition, the dark corners of global collaboration and competition, which involve issues of

power relations, have been neglected (Ulnicane, 2015). Concretely, most of the time, more powerful global collaborators in higher education tend to adopt hegemonic narratives and thereby attempt to enforce a universal knowledge that ignores less powerful local collaborators' bodies of knowledge and expertise (Ulnicane, 2015).

While the trends of *privatisation*, *competition* and *internationalisation* are not exclusive to the GCC higher education system, working towards achieving them has had some unique consequences, one of which is the tendency to outsource management, programs, and curricular models from the *advanced* Global North. As Coffman (2003) notes, the most remarkable characteristic of the rapidly evolving GCC higher education sector is the wholesale adoption of the American university model as the sole standard. 'While the British and Australians have set up a number of degree programs and even campuses in the Gulf, they still operate in the shadow of the American behemoth that has already gained preeminence throughout the region' (Coffman, 2003, p.18). With no exceptions, educational governance has become a top-down process imposed on local faculty by governments and private investors and implemented by outsourced experts unfamiliar with the region (Willoughby, 2018). Today, conflicts between policy makers and local faculty are common in many GCC universities (Willoughby, 2018). In such cases, policy makers can impose their will on faculty whose fallback (the next-best alternative source of employment) is not attractive (Willoughby, 2018).

Hence, in the GCC context, privatisation, competition, and internationalisation challenges are exacerbated by authoritarian political systems that tend to assume dissent in any event (Willoughby, 2018). This has been challenging the agency of faculty, who are caught at the intersection of conflicting tensions, including tremendous pressure to satisfy the state's agenda, to serve market interests, to conform to international expectations, to acquire and implement new ways of thinking and doing, and to contribute to establishing a profitable business that can pay off the investments of owners in a short period of time. Amidst this, it has become difficult for GCC faculty to have an influential voice. Drawing on empirical studies, Badry and Willoughby (2016) argue that the new orthodoxies of ownership in GCC higher education excluded most national faculties. It also 'impacted the [remaining] national faculties by limiting their participation in the leadership and decision-making process of their national educational system' (p. 48). They noted, 'On the one hand, no [other] region in the world has grown more rapidly over the past several decades. On the other hand, this growth has been accompanied by unprecedented isolation of the national population from direct participation in and management of the educational system' (p. 49).

In this sense, the new orthodoxies of *ownership* in GCC higher education have been manufacturing *alienated labour* in the Marxist sense. An 'Alienated labour produces things for exchange; its use-value is not material; it is only its exchange-value that counts' (Harley, 2017, p. 2). As exchange-value creates relationships between things/commodities and not people, GCC

faculty are alienated from each other and their students. Their professional relations are shaped by clock-time and exchange-value, and they consider each other as competitors and their students as customers. Moreover, faculty are alienated from themselves. The new orthodoxies of *ownership* may drive them away from the creative and joyous *doing* (i.e., teaching and researching), which is an intrinsic part of themselves, towards a mechanical mode of production. More importantly, faculty are alienated from their labour (i.e., their scholarly work), as it has become the possession of another (i.e., the market) and is, therefore, out of their control. In short, the filter of *ownership*, with its various interrelated dimensions, contributes to faculty alienation, which can be thought of as ‘a surrender of control through separation from an essential attribute of the self’ (Horowitz, 2011, p.1) and, in this context, the separation of the faculty from the conditions of meaningful agency.

Filter 2: Dependence on revenue

This second filter is closely related to the first, as the forces of *privatisation*, *competition*, and *internationalisation* have driven the adoption of various market mechanisms at GCC universities. When competing as economic actors, GCC universities ‘took their wares’ to the market. As such, they became evermore engaged in variety of economic, industrial, and commercial activities, such as segmenting, targeting, positioning, branding, pricing, promoting, and commodifying. All activities targeted the sequestration of funds in response to the drastic decrease of governmental funding.

GCC universities started to *commodify* and *marketise* curricula and research.

Curricula became industry focused. Hence, they are reconstructed as production markets for skillful workers having the necessary dispositions to compete in local and global markets. This entailed the recalibration of curricula alongside the needs of capital and led to forming of ongoing local and global partnerships with corporates. Banks began providing input on financial programs, and oil companies demanded course contents, especially regarding the medium of instructions. Governmental bodies impose roadmaps on colleges, encouraging them to achieve economic and social priorities. The curricula recalibration process involved implementing frequent standardized testing (i.e., checkpoints) with the purported aim of ‘achieving standards.’ This served to keep GCC faculties focused on the business of being accountable for producing human capital. Essentially, curricula have been subjected to technocratic reductionist approaches to education that pay far more allegiance to market needs than genuine and deep interests in applying educational research to educational policy. Curricula review became a central process that is directed by employers’ input. Corporates, in turn, provide endowments to fund academic activities and initiatives, build facilities, and recruit graduates. Indeed, all the talk about curricula changes being globally researched and evidence-driven, is similar to what Braverman (1974) terms ‘management masquerading in the trappings of science’ (p. 86).

Research also provides access to additional funding resources. The fruits of research are no longer integral to the general quest for knowledge (Kezar, 2004). Instead, they are seen as intellectual capital linked to national priorities, that should be sold on the open market. Research produced at GCC universities must be transformed into industrial processes or products that are marketable. This phenomenon is matched by a de-emphasis on research activities that serve general knowledge or the local public good. The precise goal of research simply tends to maximise revenue generation. Therefore, research is not valued in terms of how useful the knowledge it contains is/can be. Rather, it relies on the exchange value, constantly refined by market needs.

Effectively, these discretionary sources of funds became the golden handcuffs that alter GCC faculty behaviors by typifying them in a corporate climate and, hence, may straightforwardly manufacture *homo economics*. GCC faculties, as *homo economics*, primarily pursue their self-interests. When given options, they choose alternatives having the highest expected utility. Certain products count more for them. For example, an article written in English and published in a high-impact journal counts more than a study reported in Arabic and published for national audiences. A research grant counts more than an outreach to local communities. Research partnerships with industrial stakeholders count more than peer-to-peer research collaborations. Postgraduate students are more valuable than undergraduate ones, and so on. In summary, as *homo economics*, GCC faculties

can be seen as consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents, pursuing their subjectively defined ends optimally.

Filter 3: Information Sourcing

As mentioned earlier, several IOs and think tank institutions took it upon themselves to situate the GCC universities globally and put forward ‘international evidence, policy lessons and practical examples to guide these countries’ future graduates’ skills development’ (OECD, 2015, p. 3). In an engagement note, the World Bank (2017) promotes itself to the GCC policy makers as ‘a producer of knowledge, [that] can assess, diagnose, and recommend strategies to address the most complex policy question decision makers face’ (p.8) in GCC educational systems. This claim is based on the World Bank’s ‘decades of experience operating in the GCC’, which allegedly makes the World Bank ‘a strategic partner to support efforts that will propel quality education for all in the respective GCC countries’ (p.8). Think tank institutions also played a similar role. RAND, for example, worked with some GCC universities ‘to identify a handful of foreign experts in higher education’ who joined with policy makers from these universities to form senior reform committees that advised universities on reform matters (RAND, 2009, p. iv). These matters included financial investments, allocating teaching resources and facilities, and the design of curricula and medium of instruction, among others.

Hence, there is a process of interconnection between the elite actors in GCC higher education. That is, IOs agencies and think tank institutions formed alliances with GCC policy makers to ensure the achievement of a *development* agenda. A brief overview of the GCC universities' strategic plans, published online, reveals the abundant use of the word *development*. Throughout their strategic plans, GCC universities show strong urges to enter new phases of *development* (Sultan Qaboos University, p. ix), to keep up with the latest *developments* (Qatar University, p. 5), to uphold their role in *development* (Kuwait University, p.1) and eventually to *develop* education (Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, p. v).¹

Esteva (2010) argued that *development* can be a loaded word. In tracing the political coinage of the word, Esteva points to American politicians at the end of World War II when they wanted to consolidate their hegemony and make it permanent. Specifically, when President Truman took office on 20th January 1949, he maintained that Americans 'must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of the scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'. He stressed that 'the old imperialism, exploitation for foreign profit, has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concepts of

¹ Strategic plans for universities in the Global North read differently and tend to lack *development* as their main goal. Instead, strategizing in these universities sets out 'a framework of priorities for the university' (Oxford University, 2018-23, p. 2) with the key aim to 'generate and communicate knowledge derived from research' (Lund University, 2017-2026, p. 2) and 'serve as a global base for knowledge collaboration that can contribute to 21st century global society' (Tokyo University, Vision 2020).

democratic fair dealing’ (cited in Esteva, 2010, p. 2). At that point, an era of development was launched to serve the *other*. Hence, the associated idea of *underdevelopment* began. Around two-thirds of the global population was declared underdeveloped and ceased to be what they really were in all their diversity; these communities were transmogrified into an inversion of developed reality or ‘a mirror that belittles them and sends them off to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority’ (Esteva, 2010, p. 2).

In the GCC higher education context, IOs agencies and think tank institutions assumed the role of the *beacon on the hill*. Partnering with policy makers, they launched a *development* agenda, which became the main source of information on how GCC universities should follow the footsteps of the *advanced* universities. The question then becomes how this agenda, which was put forward by the elite alliance, could possibly manufacture consent among faculty in GCC higher education. An answer can be found in the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which discusses ‘the capacity of an actor to define or influence issues on the public agenda by selecting issues seen as important or relevant or by shaping the way these issues are framed, discussed, and interpreted’ (Bacevic & Nokkala, 2020, p. 3). The agenda-setting theory was developed to argue against positivist paradigms, which consider policies as technical solutions to objectively existing problems. Rather, the agenda-setting theory offers critical approaches that emphasize the constructed, contingent, and

processual nature of policies. This involves the role of differently positioned actors in bringing specific issues to the fore (Fischer, 2003).

In this sense, agenda setting, as opposed to agenda building, has developed a Western perception of reality, which is very rarely questioned. This reality manipulates GCC faculty by instilling what they should think about instead of what they actually think. Faculty habitually rely on the development agenda, in their research and teaching, as the sole source of information and direction. This is because of its perceived authority, credibility, and legitimacy. They do so also to escape the presumed undignified conditions of *underdevelopment*. In such cases, any intellectual intervention from the *other* is to be sanctified in the name of a higher goal, *development*. This has created a *self-defeating development discourse* among the GCC faculty, as they perform from within a catch-up situation. Precious little has been written to support this claim or to expose some of the unconscious structures created by the development agenda that reinforce the Occidental worldview or its impact on limiting the GCC faculty's senses of agency and confidence. This is mainly because perspectives that go against this agenda, originating from marginal local actors, receive very little attention and are treated with scepticism.

To conclude, this filter has two different, yet interrelated, dimensions. One is the capacity of the elite alliance to set the agenda and assume the role of the sole source of information in

GCC higher education and their self-interest in doing so. The other is the way in which the GCC faculty often accept, implement, and praise this agenda and thus allow it to guide their ways. Because GCC faculty often accept the prevailing *development* discourse in GCC higher education, they not only wear merely tinted but tainted glasses as well.

Filter 4: Flak

Coercive legal measures, such as prosecutions, wrongful imprisonments, and restrictions on academic travel, are deployed by state authorities in some GCC countries (Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, 2020). Likewise, GCC universities penalize faculty members for serious misconduct such as criticizing or blaming the government by any means through the local or global media (Saudi Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics, n.d., Article 13), or minor misconduct such as ‘using any musical instruments or engaging in music in the classroom’ (Prince Mohammed Bin Fahd University, 2016, p. 25). In GCC universities, it is anticipated that ‘every [faculty] member must align his/her actions with his/her words, and the words must be consistent with the university’s policies’ (Qatar University Professional Conduct Policy, 2015, p. 4) and that all faculty members ‘at all times act in the best interests of the university ... obeying all applicable laws and prescribed policies’ (Qatar University Professional Conduct Policy, 2015, p. 4). Failure to follow these guidelines leads to verbal warning, written censure, withholding of promotion, loss of annual salary increase, removal

of rolling contract status, deprivation of end of service gratuity, and dismissal from employment at the university (Qatar University Professional Conduct Policy, 2015).

Before reaching these extreme measures, GCC universities use prior covert countermeasures to mitigate any *unnecessary* conflict or distribution of punitive measures. These include *prior threat mechanisms* (i.e., before conflict manifests itself), and *neutralization mechanisms* (i.e., so conflict can be prevented). *Strategic planning* serves as the former while *faculty evaluation* facilitates the latter, as further explained in the following sections.

Relying on the developed *other*, GCC universities invest a tremendous amount of time, effort and money into constructing their *strategic plans*. They hire ‘professionals and international consulting firms’ (Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, p. 7), carry out ‘substantial analysis of international and regional trends’ (Qatar University, p. 9), and study ‘commissioned papers from distinguished international experts’ (Sultan Qaboos University, p. ix). Once finished, there is great publicity; ambitious goals are announced in highly visible places on websites. Then, events are organized to discuss plans and stages of implementation. This lengthy process facilitates reconstructing identities and reclaiming subjectivities through several means. Chief among them is the *technologization* of the strategic planning discourse, a term coined by Fairclough (1992), who was influenced by Foucault’s ideas about the synthesis of power, knowledge (technology) and discourse. Technologization is a mathematical concept that

involves using a reproducible chain of elements and a recurrent algorithm until a desired outcome is achieved (Smirnova, 2011). The concept kept its original mathematical meaning and function when it was introduced into philosophy and linguistics. Fairclough (1992) defines technologization as a ‘calculated intervention to shift discursive practices as part of the engineering of social change’ (p. 140) by way of ‘exercising power and influence over people’s lives and opinions through certain linguistic tools’ (Smirnova, 2011, p. 38). Some aspects of ‘technologization’ are evident in GCC universities’ strategic planning discourse. For example, there is an extensive duplication of signs that can be claimed to be linear transformations of the same idea. Let us examine the following two examples, where *italic* words manifest the same idea in different guises. Qatar University’s strategic plan states, ‘[The] University’s model of transformative education ... is a *systematic, state of the art, and innovative* approach ... [that] aims at *developing* existing issues in [the] QU education system, *bridging* current gaps, and holistically *transforming* QU education to elite global standards’ (p. 17). Another example can be found in the University of Bahrain’s strategic plan, which states that the university ‘must be exceptional and that can only be achieved by [staff’s] *collective efforts, focus and determination*’ (p. 5). The discursive technologies in both examples create magnified suggestive effects, multiplying faculty responsibility for achieving the declared strategic goals. In effect, faculty members may internalise the dominant discourse and practice what Herman and Chomsky and Otero (2003) refer to as ‘auto-censorship’. That is, faculty members stop constituting themselves through their own

thoughts and ideas. Instead, their thoughts are constituted by means of discursive technologies that are used to impose a certain frame of mind. If a member of faculty considers deviating from the predominant discourse, he/she will need to think twice before having to deal with a well-organized and powerful system of countermeasures.

Next comes the *faculty evaluation* as a *neutralization mechanism*. Just as their counterparts around the world are, GCC faculty are evaluated annually. This evaluation consists of the submission of activity reports that include concrete evidence of performance in teaching, research, and participation in committees, among other activities. The declared aim of faculty evaluation is to ‘develop highly professional, stable, and competent faculty’ (King Fahed University website). Still, as Foucault (1977) taught us, the process of evaluation can be seen as a social practice that has been galvanized throughout history for the surveillance of individuals. This is clearly manifested in Qatar University’s evaluation system, which was built on the five stages of ‘DMAIC’: Define, Measure, Analyse, Improve, and *Control* (Qatar University website).

Many forms of faculty evaluation in GCC universities are preordained, as opposed to communicative, which cancels plurality and diversity by subsuming participants’ views within evaluators’ perspectives. Hence, university administrators, through evaluation processes, harvest a *forced consensus* among faculty, not only in the process of data gathering and the subjection to evaluators, but also in the act of writing evaluation

reports, which privilege the voice of the evaluator as the interpreter of the social world. Additionally, almost inevitably, faculty themselves could become ‘agent[s] of the authorities – mostly through feeding the decision-making processes, sometimes by naming the unexpected, the anomalous or the heterodox – since, by naming these heterogenous cases, one also opens them to regulation and normalization’ (Kemmis, 1993, p. 38). In this sense, faculty evaluation in GCC universities represents the emergence of a particular rationale of educational governance in a neoliberal era, in which the management of faculty becomes more important than the management of the university per se. That is, educational governing becomes redirected towards making faculty potentially more ‘docile’ and ‘productive’ (Foucault, 2000).

To conclude, GCC higher education depends on *strategic planning* and *faculty evaluation* as prior covert countermeasures to mitigate any distribution of punitive measures. Both processes have been manufacturing GCC faculties that are, at best, ‘governable objects’ (Foucault, 1982) and, at worst, ‘good zombies’ (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009).

Filter 5: Convergence in the main ideologies

The bogeyman that makes all the previous filters operate so vigorously is the pursuit of *excellence*, which is a major goal of the

GCC universities, that shapes their educational activities and institutional identities. In an almost identical language, GCC universities proclaim themselves as, variously, ‘a centre for innovation with an international reputation for excellence’ (Kuwait University website), ‘a beacon of academic and research excellence in the region’, ‘the leading university in the region for excellence in educational innovation, research, and student leadership development’ (Zayed University website) and ‘[aiming] to excel in teaching and learning, research and community service’ (Sultan Qaboos University website). This ‘Excellence R Us’ rhetoric is turned into a reality through centres and programmes of excellence. Although the term *excellence* is presented as unproblematic in GCC universities, the pursuit of *excellence* has become a self-perpetuating and self-congratulating hydra, possessing three heads: *quality assurance*, *accreditation* and *ranking*.

Quality assurance involves ‘the systematic review of educational provision to maintain and improve its quality, equity and efficiency’ (European Commission, n.d.). In the GCC higher education, quality assurance involves adopting international standards that determines what constitutes academic quality, including expectations of faculty, curriculum, program structure, course design, instructional methodology and assessment. GCC higher education is saturated with this ‘international standards’ discourse. To illustrate, Zayed University’s programs are designed to ‘fulfil the highest international academic standards’ (Zayed University Catalog, 2020–21, p. 2). Underpinning Qatar

University's commitment to providing high-quality education 'is the goal to align its colleges, programs, and courses with established international standards' (Qatar University website). Arguably, the overall aim is to improve students' satisfaction, increase effectiveness and gain competitive advantages. Still, most often, the international standards followed to assure quality are detached from the reality of the local educational context. For instance, Bachelor of Education in English programs offered in GCC universities are aligned to TESOL standards. This choice points to the obliviousness of decision makers to the actual students' needs and the appropriateness of the standards to the reality of the English language in the GCC. Even if it is assigned the status of a second language, English cannot be considered as such because the status of English as a second or foreign language is determined by the amount of exposure to and opportunities for language use outside the formal instructional context (school/classroom). Among GCC locals, this usage and exposure cannot be elevated to the level of native-speaker experience required by TESOL standards. Regardless, faculty must comply with these standards, irrespective of whether they believe the content and practices stipulated in and predetermined by the standards are appropriate to their educational context, their students' needs and expectations and their own educational philosophies and teaching styles. In such situations, GCC faculty may engage in counterproductive *conscious and unconscious gamesmanship*, mainly because they need to submit proof of achieving standards and demonstrate their practices' conformity

to these standards to a third party, a certification or accreditation agency.

Accreditation is seen as the preferred quality assurance mechanism in GCC higher education (Romanowski, 2021) and as a means for the attainment of international recognition and world-class status. Within the accreditation process, accountability is the watchword: 'To call for accountability is to assert a political right – to demand that a particular individual or institution assume some responsibility and demonstrate it in a certain form' (Smith & Fey, 2000, p. 335). Such imposing model seeks to compel rather than invite change or improvement (Romanowski, 2021). That is, accreditation forces faculty to replace their existing educational values and goals with the accreditation values and orthodoxies. In the GCC higher education context, this 'ideological bullying' (Romanowski, 2021) led to *blind conformity*, where faculty adhere passively to new principles and theories, or to *disguised conformity*, where they are required to show evidence that may be false. Both the *blind and disguised conformity* were proved by empirical research. Romanowski and Alkhateeb (2020) argued that accreditation in the GCC is a McDonaldised system in which faculty practices are modified passively and mechanically in order to meet the standards of accreditors, hence embracing *blind conformity*. In a similar vein, Alkhateeb and Romanowski (2021) demonstrated how GCC faculty may appear to cooperate with the accrediting agenda despite harbouring negative opinions about accreditation, thus practicing *disguised conformity*. Regardless, higher education policymakers in the GCC cling to accreditation

for its perceived ability to grant international recognition, which is an inch forward towards a higher ranking.

In the GCC region, as it is the case worldwide, *university rankings* are used to determine the status of higher education institutions, assess their quality and performance, and measure their global competitiveness. The quest for ranking influences several university operations but the most important are the policies related to research (Hazelkorn, 2015). GCC universities have become research-oriented; more importance is given to research in specified fields. Research groups are set up to maximize research outputs. Research centers are established, and new research grants are offered. Resources are increasingly directed towards research areas or higher education institutions that are likely to be more productive and have faculty who are more likely to positively affect publication or citation factors. An important factor in decisions about faculty retention is research output. Being aware of the impact of ranking on faculty recruitment and retention, faculty direct most of their efforts to research. GCC universities put pressure on and push their faculty to publish, creating an environment where universities become factories for publication. Faculty are no longer researching for the cultivation of erudition, where the focus is on the quality of research. Rather they are researching for *hiking ranks*, where the focus is on quantity of the products and research outputs. In this competitive atmosphere, as Heidegger (1938) far earlier than others anticipated, ‘the scholar disappears’ (p. 64), and replaced by the ‘research man’ (p.64). Heidegger (1938) wrote, ‘The research man

no longer needs a library at home. Moreover, he is constantly on the move. He negotiates at meetings and collect information at congresses. He contracts for commission with publishers. The latter now determine along with him which books must be written' (p. 64).

To conclude this filter, the *pursuit of excellence* in the GCC higher education has manufactured a *research man* who works in a hyper-competitive context, practising either *blind and disguised conformity*, and being ready to engage in counterproductive conscious or unconscious gamesmanship.

A space for resilience

The constrictions of the PM filters are not omnipotent. In the light of this study, there are spaces of autonomy that make it possible for faculty to negotiate and challenge the dominant discourses serving the political, economic, social, and ideological interests of the elites. Some faculty members may participate in macro and micro processes of negotiation, which, depending on the faculty's persistence and relative power, produce different results. Nevertheless, I argue that the fact that this space exists, and that some faculty members can subscribe to it, does not mean that the barriers constituted by the filters are not extremely high or that GCC higher education does not perform a propagandistic role.

Concluding remarks

This study examined how GCC faculty are subject to various types of propaganda that manufacture their consent for political, economic, and social policies. In effect, this orchestrated propaganda produces faculty who are alienated, turned into governable objects and good zombies, and shaped as hypercompetitive economic actors. They operate from within a Western perception of reality and are ready to engage in counterproductive, conscious, or unconscious gamesmanship as well as to practice blind or disguised conformity. I conclude by referring to two issues. First, the use of the PM as a theoretical framework was not intended to generalise or generate a universal truth. Rather, I argue that the model helps expose the power structure in GCC higher education and reveals how this structure maintains its superiority through the creation of propaganda. Second, it is worth noting that the manufacturing of consent, as presented in this study, is not peculiar to GCC higher education. The filter dimensions discussed in this study are trends characterising global higher education. However, what distinguishes GCC higher education is that these filters operate within neo-colonialist spaces and under authoritarian regimes.

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Book Review

Hicham Alaoui and Robert Springborg, eds. *The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World*, ISBN: 978-1-62637-935-0, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 297 pages

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This edited volume on education in the Arab World sets out by questioning the need for yet another book on education in the region, despite the general consensus that more indigenous research on education within the region is essential. The volume highlights many critical education challenges as well as opportunities of and for education in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. The book refers to the countries in question as 'limited access orders', highlighting the lack of participation in the process of education planning and delivery. It consists of eleven chapters and is divided into two parts, the first on case studies and the second on comparative perspectives.

The volume raises several points that are central to any discussion on the political economy of education in the MENA, beginning with the recurring challenge of data scarcity and inaccuracy. Within the context described as limited-access, statistical data often does a

disservice to lived experiences, which are fascinating and uncovered through empirical qualitative research. The chapters by Diwan and Benstead provide examples where new empirical data were used to ask further questions. The lack of reliable data in the region makes it difficult to evaluate the context rigorously. Available data paints a dire picture but remains opaque enough to leave many questions unasked and unanswered.

The degree of inquiry within these states is questioned through the presentation of case studies. Limited access orders, as referred to, means involving stakeholders is scarce, complicated, and in the opinion of the contributors, remains the biggest obstacle to reform. The degree to which it is welcome is also questionable but worth exploring in more depth. The case studies present empirical data illuminating how stakeholder voices were incorporated into curriculum and policy. These contributions span the Arab World, with a chapter from Meijer on citizenship in textbooks in Egypt, Tunis, and Morocco, a chapter by Kohstall on university reforms, one by Springborg on education in Egypt under Sisi, and one by Davidson on the US campuses in the Gulf.

From a comparative point of view, the authors highlight the vast differences between contexts within the region and the spectrum of political systems. The differences allow for many valuable cross-contextual comparative studies both within the Arab States and internationally. Jones' chapter on lessons from Asia as well as Grindle's on lessons from Latin America, illustrate this. Hamaizia and Leber's chapter comparing scholarship programmes in Saudi

and Algeria also demonstrates that despite different contexts, highlighting similarities allows insight into where particular political agendas converge.

Perhaps most importantly, the book illustrates that, despite the constant attempts of many management consultants, no one size fits all, and context is paramount. When considering the political economy of education, we are at the outset thinking about the returns on the investment of education in the form of more productive populations. While successful education systems are measured in some contexts through how engaged, innovative, or entrepreneurial citizens are, the book highlights how for much of the Arab World, it is estimated through how compliant citizens are at fulfilling agendas set at the top. The price of excluding stakeholders from the education agendas is a grave one. As the authors present, we have seen Arab spring uprisings as well as the lack of specialisations and expertise. The response to these tensions has led to some reform. Still, the initiatives continue to be conceived by actors that are contextually removed, often based on successful experiences in very different contexts. As Grindle rightly points out, the actors must lead the change, but other stakeholders can illuminate many obstacles; their voices should be included in the change process.

Several researchers highlight the focus on the ‘knowledge economy’ rhetoric. Diwan reminds us that there are potential socio-political returns in the form of freedoms and values beyond economic returns– but these values are not produced through education

systems in the Arab World. Other chapters highlight the hegemonic potential of education and focus on its role in establishing nationalism and obedience and how education can be used for clientelism and soft power.

The reluctance to change structures that stifle these ideals stems from nightmares of the past – revolutions in one of two directions – more freedoms or more religion. This is a tricky balance, and without a profound understanding of educational actors, systems, and spaces, recommendations for changes in the education system will be limited, if not regressive.

This leads to another question related to the role of international actors in setting policy. Whether from the World Bank or management consultancies, they tend to gloss over how power politics of the past continue to haunt the potential to move forward. Assumptions about why education endeavours are successful in some contexts can and do lead to adopting the wrong blueprints without input from education experts. There are many examples throughout the book where these attempts have either fallen short or have yet to prove successful.

The scholarship project in Saudi Arabia and Algeria highlights the value placed on learning from experts outside the Arab World. Hamaizia and Leber discuss this in-depth, but it is important to highlight an area where the scholarship programme in Saudi can begin to move away from reliance on external expertise. The policymaking context within Saudi Arabia, a country abundant in

resources, is much less siloed for those returning from abroad today and, therefore, provides an opportunity to seek systematic reforms and push against management consultants who need to be more attuned to values and context. Despite the residual patronage politics, the authors discuss, other more technical scholarship approval conditions create bigger obstacles to accessing these, such as a narrow list of approved specialisations, acceptance only in top universities, and strict minimum grade point averages.

Furthermore, the emphasis on performance is a similarly wicked problem. Benstead highlights how this plays out in patronage politics in Tunisia, for instance. Prioritising successful performance is guided by an obsession with enhancing test performance to overcome deficiencies – further contributing to a very narrow definition of educational success. Increasing reliance on international standardised tests such as PISA and the like will increase unequal access to quality education. Classroom organisation and pedagogy often mirror (exclusionary) social and institutional structures, meaning that the best performance is often a result of privileged opportunities and upbringing. Even with the eye on meritocracy in selection for scholarships or university acceptance, those most privileged will outperform others and replicate this across communities. This raises questions about structure and agency. The relative social position of a person at the beginning of their career trajectory is not only the outcome of their individual educational attainment but also of the organisational structure in which credentials have been awarded.

Therefore, it is imperative that we explore transitions between different educational levels to really establish the kinds of opportunities that are created or constricted.

The emphasis on credentials has led to a focus on tertiary education improvement. However, the much more complex change would need to happen earlier in the process, or else states continue to kick the can down the road. Unintended consequences include the modularisation of qualifications, leading to poorer quality education and less specialisation. Even if STEM subjects are increasingly prioritised as essential for advancement, the bite-size stem will not create the knowledge necessary to excel economically. Similarly, soft skills are also absent from fast-track training that could circumvent longer bureaucratic credentialing processes. The focus on technology in terms of specialisations and delivery continues to gain momentum as a lucrative solution.

And finally, a quick note on ed-tech. As rightly pointed out in the book's conclusion, ed-tech is not a solution alone. While it has allowed students to continue schooling amidst a pandemic, which in fact, bolstered its legitimacy, it has also highlighted mass levels of digital exclusion. Challenges that have long-blighted education systems globally are persistent and will remain even with the introduction of tech. Focusing on digital skills problematises individuals and makes them more responsible for their societal position, ignoring bigger structural issues. The content on edtech platforms is still produced through the same exclusionary mechanisms, with even less control from stakeholders on the

frontlines that understand the challenges of delivering education. It can further perpetuate the imbalance of power structures (with now even more input from the profit-driven ed-tech industry) that define what education means and a focus on infrastructure and access rather than quality and reform. Education technology can be harnessed for good. A narrowing digital divide means a conversation about global citizenship values online, which can bridge local values with global ones, for instance.

Globally, this has been a period where populism is on the rise, and the value of science is in decline. Regionally, the recent changes to social and economic governing structures have raised the level of awareness about shortcomings. This book provides an opportunity to engage more critically with these themes. It highlights the need for more empirical evidence to understand the region's education opportunities better. Above all, it showcases how imperative it is that the scope of education research and focus is broadened beyond that which international organisations produce to address the challenges effectively. More scholars from the region need to be involved in these conversations.