Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
K n o w l e d g e   f o r   A l l

Workshop 7

Higher Education in the GCC:
Linkages and Independence

Workshop Directors:

Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Anthropology
Georgetown University-Qatar Campus
Qatar
Email: Rma57@georgetown.edu

Dale F. Eickelman Ph.D.
Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of
Anthropology & Human Relations
Dartmouth College
United States of America
Email: Dale.f.eickelman@dartmouth.edu

Abstract

The GCC states have made major advances over the last half century in widening access to post-secondary education. For example, eight universities were operating in Saudi Arabia in 2003. Since then at least 100 additional universities and colleges have opened, and the country's annual budget for higher education has reached $15 billion, for 23 million inhabitants. In addition, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have authorized 40 foreign branches of Western universities, most of which date only from the last decade. This workshop explores the implications of this massive and rapid expansion of higher education for the GCC states, and how initiatives such as Qatar's WISE (the World Innovation Summit for Education) seek to do for education what Davos does for economics, using "soft" power to project Qatar's global and regional influence. The workshop also assesses how other regions of the Middle East and North Africa, in addition to institutions in North America, Europe, and elsewhere, can learn from GCC initiatives and experience, and engage in meaningful and sustained cooperation.

Description and Rationale

In other regions of the world, higher education as a field of analysis has attracted considerable attention from historians, psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists. However, institutions of post-secondary education in the GCC states have only recently started to garner similar interest. Higher education in the Arabian Peninsula dates back thousands of years – Mecca, Tarim in the Hadhramawt, and the island of Qeshm on the peninsula's edge were all important centers of learning – but modern-style universities emerged only in the 1960s.

Studies of how universities in the GCC region work are necessarily at an early stage. At a policy level, the term "knowledge-based economies" is foregrounded, although reality often falls short of expectations due to such factors as low primary and secondary school standards. In faculty and administrative recruitment, terms such as "world-class university" indicate high aspirations, but politics and the economics of high educational demand cause institutions to fall short. The considerable expenditure on the education sector as a whole and the concomitant debates on reforming otherwise underperforming educational systems has been important for wider debates on innovation and sustainability. Moreover, the growing numbers of foreign institutions establishing branches in the Gulf, providing a ready-made shortcut to international accreditation, has led to important debates among many scholars concerning academic freedom. In addition, higher education is significant to understanding broader political and economic processes of human development, public culture, and identity. Critical inquiry into these processes is indispensable for understanding the underlying logic of education in the GCC as these states continue to bolster existing national and private universities and seek out foreign academic institutions from Europe, the Middle East, and the US. Policymakers consider training a local workforce an important goal to reduce dependence on expatriates. Nationalization is now a clearly stated policy where job advertisements are meant exclusively for Gulf nationals. Yet "world class" higher education necessarily transcends national and regional boundaries.

Scholars who study in schools and universities recognize that they are more than institutions seeking to impart knowledge. They also are locales for meaning-making, social transformation, and global engagement. This workshop seeks to identify research questions to contribute theoretically and empirically to the field. We seek to explore the ways in which higher education in the GCC states can help in the rapid processes of social change; what are the major convergences and divergences across GCC as to their vision and investment in higher education; the ways that higher education is still considered a threat to "heritage," and varying approaches to these questions within the GCC and in its regional and global relations. The workshop aims to expand knowledge on these questions and to map out key processes and patterns. It will focus on the

perceptions, ideas, and strategies around cultural and political symbolism and the geopolitical environment in which decisions about higher education are carried out.

Anticipated Participants

We expect to invite papers from scholars who work on the following areas:

(1) Higher education, identity formation, and the links between education and citizenship
(2) Debates on educational reform, both within states and with cooperating states
(3) The rise of higher education in the GCC and the multiple implications of the emergence of a highly educated Gulf citizenry
(4) Higher education as "soft" power, and the prospects for enhanced linkages among GCC states and enhanced ties with institutions throughout the region and elsewhere
(5) What is actually learned in schools through both formal curricula and peer learning, including the significance of language use, both Arabic and English
(6) Higher education and gender, especially the generally higher standards of performance by women
(7) Higher education, globalization, and intercultural communication
(8) Higher education and "branding"; nationalism and transnationalism

Workshop Director Profiles

Dale F. Eickelman is Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations at Dartmouth College. His publications include *Public Islam and the Common Good*, co-edited with Armando Salvatore (Brill, 2004); *Muslim Politics*, co-authored with James Piscatori (Princeton University Press, new edition, 2004); *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach* (Prentice Hall, 4th edition, 2002); *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Indiana University Press, 2nd edition, 2003); *Moroccan Islam* (University of Texas Press, 1976); and *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* (Princeton University Press, 1985). A former President of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Professor Eickelman currently serves as senior advisor to Kuwait's first private liberal arts university, the American University of Kuwait. In 2009 he was named a Carnegie Scholar for a project entitled "Mainstreaming Islam: Taking Charge of the Faith," and in 2011 he received the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Middle East Section of the American

Anthropological Association. In January 2013 he was elected President of the Tangier American Legation Institute for Moroccan Studies (TALIM).

Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Edmund Walsh School for Foreign Service, Georgetown University-Qatar. She is the author of *Wanderings: Sudanese Migrants and Exiles in North America* (Cornell University Press, 2002); *Female Circumcision*: *Multicultural Perspectives* (edited, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); *Transforming Displaced Women in Sudan* (University of Chicago Press, 2009); editor of *What is Left of the Left* (edited, Duke University Press, 2011); and *Gender Justice: the Predicament and the Promise* (Brill, 2011). In addition to multiple chapters in refereed university presses, articles, and reviews, she is currently completing a book manuscript tentatively titled *Darfur Allegory*, which engages discussions on Darfur mediation in Qatar. She also authored a paper on "Qatar Mobility and Migration" (forthcoming) and is involved in ethnographic research on Qatari myths, folklore, and ethnomusicology.

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