

Bringing the American College Model to the Arabian Gulf: New Challenges for Intercultural Education

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Abstract

1. The Arabian Gulf education sector appears to be eager to emulate the American model of higher education in pursuit of the observed success of Knowledge economies. American institutions of higher education have been producing employable graduates, successful businessmen and entrepreneurs, and competent professionals, teachers, and researchers who are the productive force behind the massive amounts of highly sophisticated research, publications, and creative works.

2. For successful implementation of the American model in non-American environment, educators and higher-education authorities need to be clear about the salient features of existing local systems of education, the salient features of American higher education, where the gaps and differences are and how they impact the outcomes.

3. Some of the major aspects of American higher education are not being replicated in the Arabian Gulf institutions aiming to emulate the American college

model. Educators need to explore the value and applicability of specific institutional frameworks and academic and pedagogical approaches practiced by American colleges and universities in achieving the desired outcomes in a different cultural and social context.

4. The dynamics of knowledge production invite a search for the best strategies to achieve a balance between the flexibility and diversity of the American college curricula, international standards of quality assurance, and the responsiveness of new universities to the local needs.

5. The Arabian Gulf region has been profoundly influenced by the British model of higher education which preceded the introduction of the American model. The American universities historically differed from the European system which divided educational and research tasks among select universities, professional institutes, and Academies of Sciences.

6. The aspiration of the Gulf states to quickly develop knowledge-based economies brings into question the role assigned to the institutions and practitioners of higher education in achieving this goal. American higher education is distinguished by co-existence of Liberal Arts colleges alongside the large research universities. Liberal Arts colleges are noted for putting the scholar-teacher in the classroom and for producing a disproportionately high share of graduate students and advanced-degree holders in non-Liberal Arts fields.

7. Numerous studies have demonstrated the career-building potential of Liberal-Arts education among American and international leaders of the industry, business, and governments. However, the race for developing the national professional classes leads to importation of selected professional programs from distinguished American universities rather than building integrated colleges of Arts & Sciences.

8. The rapid changes in economies, communication, and societies brought about by globalization and progress in information technology lead us away from educating narrowly-trained graduates to broad-based general education, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary teaching, and to integration of academic knowledge with applied skills. These needs require great flexibility and autonomy of educational institutions in determining its choices of curricula, syllabi, and faculty than those the new institutions of higher learning currently face in the Arabian Gulf region.

The Arabian Gulf education sector appears to be eager to emulate the American model of higher education in pursuit of the observed success of “knowledge economies.” American institutions of higher education have been producing employable graduates, successful businessmen and entrepreneurs, and competent professionals, teachers, and researchers who are the productive force behind the massive amounts of highly sophisticated research, publications, and creative works. Historically, the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were dominated by European-style educational systems. Considerable efforts by national governments to bring education to the citizens and to raise the level of the national workforce have not been completely successful despite considerable resource commitment within the framework of established schools and post-secondary institutions. American education is seen as the answer to the continuing and expanding need for producing highly-trained, employable and flexible national graduates with life-long learning skills and good work attitude. Professional grounding and broad inter-disciplinary undergraduate underpinnings typical of US college curricula are valued by employers as highly as communication skills and team-work training. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of proliferation of American-model universities in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and on some particular issues arising in the process of transplanting the American model to the Gulf.

Established American colleges and universities in the Middle East like American University of Beirut and American University of Cairo for decades were a popular destination for college students from the Gulf who could not or did not choose to go to

the West for their post-secondary education. However, the demographics of GCC countries, with their quickly expanding college-age population on the one hand and the political and socio-economic considerations related to the development of the national work force for the 21st century, have combined to promote the new approaches to higher-education policies, sometimes in tandem with reforms of primary and secondary school education.

Several developments in particular merit notice:

- Private colleges and universities are being licensed to reduce pressure on national (state-supported) institutions;
- Private universities in the Gulf are required or expected to have a foreign (usually Western) partner institution of higher learning as a guarantor of academic quality and integrity. American partners are expected of American-model local institutions.
- Private universities are required to obtain local accreditation and encouraged, even pressured by government authorities to seek international accreditation for their institutions and programs.
- American universities, especially highly-ranked ones, are being invited to open branch campuses in the GCC countries. Qatar's Education City¹ is the most prominent example of a US branch campus experiment. A cluster of distinguished US universities bringing their (mostly applied, professional) programs to Doha is one alternative to sending a limited number of Qatari high-school graduates to the United States at government expense.
- GCC countries vary in their approaches to American partnerships – while Qatar provides national funding (via Qatar Foundation) to a mix of mostly private American universities, Kuwait favors creation of locally-owned private universities and colleges whose boards or investors choose their American or other international partners. Several US public universities recently announced their plans for opening branches in the Gulf (e.g., Michigan State University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Texas at Austin). Besides American and American-partnered institution, post-secondary English-language instruction is provided by British,

Australian, Canadian and most recently, Indian universities, colleges, and institutes.

For successful implementation of the American model in non-American environment, educators and higher-education authorities need to be clear about the salient features of existing local systems of education, the salient features of American higher education, where the gaps and differences are and how they impact the outcomes. In addition to awareness, there must be a broad agreement as to the desirability of the American model and the understanding of what factors to lead to the success of that model in the United States: both within the system and in the particular environment of the United States. The value of the American college degree is acknowledged to be high, both in terms of the education and training received and in the intangible benefits it confers, such as the prestige of certain American universities, the frequently life-forming student-life experience of the American campus, and the perception of the transfer of American work-ethic qualities to the Gulf environment when graduates return to their home countries with an American degree.

Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that some of the major aspects of American higher education are not being replicated in the Arabian Gulf institutions aiming to emulate the American college model. Educators need to explore the value and applicability of specific institutional frameworks and academic and pedagogical approaches practiced by American colleges and universities in achieving the desired outcomes in a different cultural and social context. The GCC countries have a relatively recent national history, relatively young national education systems, and an approximately similar history of educational philosophies and of post-WWII (for Saudi Arabia) or post-independence (for the rest of GCC countries), oil-fueled national investment in educational structures and education engineering.

In recent years, motivated by the UN, UNESCO, and World Bank reports revealing the inadequacies of historical policies for the 21st century, many MENA countries have embarked on campaigns of educational reform. In GCC, this has been the case of Qatar and Kuwait, in particular. Nevertheless, despite this relatively homogeneous historical background vis-a-vis the West, the GCC countries are not of a

mind when it comes to the American college model. While the regulatory factors seem to apply to all foreign-model institutions of higher learning alike, some other aspects of the regional policies and practices need to be looked at in light of their impact on the adoption of the American college model in the Gulf.

- U.S. institutions are encouraged or invited to bring to the Gulf business, professional or pre-professional programs (with few exceptions, these are undergraduate).
- Local institutions, while almost invariably calling themselves universities, do not seek to develop full arts-and-sciences curricula with majors in the traditional disciplines typical of the American liberal-arts college model. Rather, they build programs with emphases on business and technical programs (including ICT), with English being the dominant humanities discipline.
- One aspect of the early success of new American-model institutions in the Gulf is the public demand for American-style education without the need to send the students to the United States where they might face the post-2001 atmosphere of student visa regulations and reporting requirements as well as the perceived cultural tensions.
- The post-2001 cultural atmosphere in the region has been ambivalent vis-à-vis the United States. Politically, the goodwill created in the 1991 Gulf War fought by the United States-led coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraq has been damaged by the United States current involvement in Iraq and the US administration's position on the Palestinian and Lebanese issues. Culturally, conservative religious attitudes are on the rise in some circles in the Gulf, advocating caution toward the imported foreign models of education and blaming foreign influences for irresponsible or inappropriate behavior of Arab youths. In the media environment saturated with American movies, television broadcasts, CDs and DVDs, "foreign" often implies American for the general public. By extension, the families who choose an American-style university for their children may be ambivalent despite their choice: they want the prestige and quality of American education, but wish to limit the social and intellectual impact of "foreign" qualities associated with critical thinking, secular attitudes or coeducational practices.

- The liberal-arts college model presents a special challenge. The concept of liberal-arts education is truly foreign in the region, being poorly understood, frequently misinterpreted, and virtually untranslatable as a term standing for a certain philosophy of university education. Even such a basic systemic aspect of liberal education as putting a scholar-teacher in the classroom is not readily understood abroad. Commitment to liberal-arts education is routinely perceived as concomitant with disregard for research among the faculty and lack of serious professional preparation for students. Currently, the only institution in the Gulf expressly committed to the liberal-arts mission of college education is American University of Kuwait. A private, Kuwaiti-owned university, AUK integrates the liberal-arts curriculum in all its degree programs, including the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, and Bachelor of Business Administration.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the career-building potential of Liberal-Arts education among American and international leaders of the industry, business, and governments. However, the race for developing the national professional classes leads to importation of selected professional programs from distinguished American universities rather than building integrated colleges of Arts and Sciences. Moreover, the aspiration of the Gulf states to quickly develop knowledge-based economies brings into question the role assigned to the institutions and practitioners of higher education in achieving this goal.

Several recent studies have demonstrated a lack of local post-graduate, especially advanced-degree study opportunities for GCC students. American higher education is distinguished by co-existence of liberal arts colleges alongside the large research universities. It is not widely known that liberal arts colleges are noted for producing a disproportionately high share of graduate students and advanced-degree holders in professional and non-liberal-arts fields. It is therefore particularly striking that the Rand Corporation study of post-secondary education in Qatar specifically recommended the opening of a liberal-arts university-level entity in cooperation with a top-flight American liberal-arts college. The message is that such a college would round out (and bring together) the various professional programs in Education City as

well as add to the opportunities of pursuing liberal-arts majors in a high-quality program as well as developing research and writing skills required of quality graduate-degree programs. [Stasz a.o., pp. 94-95].

In general, it appears that the Gulf public and even educational authorities admire the American product without fully appreciating what enables American higher education to succeed. Wholesale importation of American curricula is not enough to recreate the “American model.” Two major aspects of American higher education that are not being replicated in the Gulf are (1) the wonderful diversity of American colleges and universities and the academic and pedagogical approaches they follow, and (2) the academic freedom and faculty governance in curricular, academic, and policy decision-making.

Private American-style institutions in the Gulf are expected to produce educational results similar to those in the US, but they are being assessed against the existing state-education structures and controlled by state authorities more tightly than public universities in the United States. American colleges are free to choose their mission and goals, and to change them in accordance with their own priorities. The diversity and flexibility of the American college curriculum, so thoroughly imbedded in the U.S. academic practice that it is rarely questioned, must be preserved in the non-American environment to assure the responsiveness of new universities to the local needs, international standards, and dynamics of knowledge production. In fact, autonomy, variety, and choice constitute three out of four model design principles chosen for the Independent School model developed in Qatar (the fourth being accountability). [*Education for a New Era*, p. 58].

The recently publicized agreements between high-ranked American Universities and GCC governments, in cases such as the creation of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) that emphasize the preservation of American values in creating a co-educational university with guarantees of academic freedom have been met with some skepticism from the educators familiar with the region, cultural policies, and government control over local and foreign, public and private educational institutions.

There is some justification for such skepticism. The strict enforcement of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is well known, it goes well beyond the educational process, where students' interaction with faculty and staff are widely affected. Generally, gender segregation is commonly practiced in the public educational institutions in the Gulf. Public schools are segregated throughout the region while private schools may be segregated or coeducational. The UAE Higher Colleges of Technology have separate campuses for male and female students in each of the seven emirates. Kuwait University, previously coeducational, introduced segregation in 1996 and is now building twin campuses with separate facilities for men and women. Kuwaiti law on private universities (Law no. 34 of 2000 on the "Establishment of Private Universities in the State of Kuwait," Article 6) requires Kuwaiti private universities and colleges as well as branches of foreign universities in Kuwait "to operate their facilities to ensure gender segregation in all departments, disciplines, and student activities" and "to observe Islamic values and time-honored traditions in relation to students' costumes and activities." While American educators and accreditors balk at such restrictions, an Australian vocational college recently opened a women-only branch in Kuwait.

Finally, the Gulf educational environment is being affected by the changes in other parts of the word, and especially in systemic developments in countries participating in building the Gulf "education industry." In particular, the current reform of European higher education under the Bologna protocol and the Lisbon Convention aims to produce a uniform pattern of degree programs and transferable coursework. The trend is progressing on the Continent and in the post-Soviet space, but the question remains whether the British model of undergraduate degree (much replicated in the Gulf and the Middle East) is going to be fully compatible with the Bologna-sponsored template of the Bachelor and Master's degrees. US educators have been left out of this conversation, and no changes are likely to result in the US Bachelor degree template.

However, American-model colleges *abroad* need to be more aware of these developments because of the likely impact of Quality Assurance standards and methods emanating from the UK and being developed for the Bologna protocol



signatories. They are being embraced by educational authorities in the Gulf, as well as in Asia and Africa, in expectation of providing universal measures of quality assurance.

To conclude, the dynamics of knowledge production in the new environment invite an active, purposeful search for the best strategies to achieve a balance between the flexibility and diversity of the American college curricula, international standards of quality assurance, and the responsiveness of new universities to the local needs.

References:

¹ Five US universities have branch campuses at Education City. They are: [Virginia Commonwealth University](#), Cornell University, [Texas A&M University](#), [Carnegie Mellon University](#), and Georgetown University, to be soon joined by [Northwestern University](#).

[Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar \(VCUQ\)](#), established in 1998, offers a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in communication design, fashion design or interior design. [Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar \(WCMC-Q\)](#), established in 2001, offers a two-year Pre-medical Program followed by the four-year Medical Program leading to a Doctor of Medicine degree. [Texas A&M University at Qatar \(TAMUQ\)](#) was established in 2003 and offers undergraduate degrees in chemical, electrical, mechanical and petroleum engineering. In 2007, TAMUQ added masters programs in engineering and science. [Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar \(CMU-Q\)](#). CMU-Q, opened in 2004, has offered undergraduate degrees in business, computer science programs; as of 2007 it added an undergraduate degree in information systems. [Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar \(SFS-Qatar\)](#), established in 2005, offers a bachelor's degree in foreign service. [Northwestern University](#) plans to open Schools of Journalism and Communication at Education City in Fall 2008. Qatar Foundation is the major source of funding for Education City programs. Recently, Qatar Foundation also opened an Islamic Studies Faculty with separate facilities; the faculty has begun implementation of several planned Master's-level programs aimed at international graduate students.

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