

Event Summary

First Workshop Higher Education Issues in the Gulf: Cases of Iran and Qatar

Joint workshop organized by the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University, and the Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies at Waseda University

Qatar University, Doha-Qatar

8 February 2023

Introduction

The workshop series titled 'Higher Education Issues in the Gulf and Middle East' represents a collaborative endeavor between the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University and the Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies at Waseda University. This initiative aims to serve as a platform for in-depth dialogue and analysis of critical challenges, significant concerns, and common dilemmas encountered by higher education institutions throughout the region. It seeks not only to identify these issues but also to explore and formulate effective strategies for addressing them.

These workshops are designed to foster a synergetic environment by congregating esteemed researchers and practitioners. This congregation facilitates a comprehensive discussion of preliminary data and research findings, with the goal of enhancing the discourse and refining the potential policy options that may arise.

The inaugural workshop, which took place in February 2023, honed in on the specific national contexts of Iran and Qatar. It delved into critical concerns faced by the university systems in these nations, such as the challenges facing female students and faculty and the massification of the higher education in Iran, as well as the dynamics of hosting foreign universities and the state of graduate studies in Qatar.

Looking forward, the series will continue with its second and third workshops, slated for 2024 and 2025 respectively. These sessions will pivot to a broader spectrum of topics, addressing cross-cutting issues that are influential across university landscapes in the region.

This document offers a concise overview, presenting the abstracts of the scholarly papers discussed, thereby encapsulating the essence and key insights of the workshop series.

Dr. Luciano Zaccara, Qatar University
Prof. Keiko Sakurai, Waseda University

Program Schedule

8:30 am - 9:00 am: Arrivals and Opening Remarks

Prof. Mahjoob Zweiri, Director, Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University

Prof. Abdullah Baabood, Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies at Waseda University, Japan

Session 1: Issues on Higher Education in Iran		
Chair: Dr. Luciano Zaccara, Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University, Qatar		
	Participants	Presentations Titles
9:00 am to 11:00 am	Prof. Golnar Mehran Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Iran	The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran.
	Dr. Fariba Adli Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Iran	Portraying the lived experience of women faculty members in Iran.
	Dr. Somayeh Fereidouni Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, Iran	Iranian female students as significant winners; higher education expansion during the last two decades
	Prof. Keiko Sakurai School of International Liberal Studies, Waseda University, Japan	Understanding the consequence of higher education expansion in the Islamic Republic of Iran

11:00 am - 11:30 am: Coffee Break

Session 2: Issues on Higher Education in Qatar		
Chair: Prof. Abdullah Baabood, Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies at Waseda University, Japan		
	Participants	Presentations Titles
11:30 am to 1:30 pm	Dr. Mary Newsome Graduate Studies Office, Qatar University, Qatar	The Graduate Research Experience: The Case in Qatar
	Dr. Christine Schiweitz Georgetown University in Qatar, Qatar	An Inside Look at the Georgetown Branch Campus Experience in Qatar
	Mr. Alieu Manjang Gulf Studies Program, Qatar University, Qatar	Soft Power as a Policy Rationale for the Recruitment of International Students: The Challenges for Qatar University

1:30 pm - 2:00 pm: Closing Remarks and End of the Workshop

Prof. Keiko Sakurai
Dr. Luciano Zaccara

Presentation Summaries

Prof. Golnar Mehran,
Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Iran

The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran.



The educational experience of Iranian women has been marked by contradictions since the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, post-revolutionary educational policy is characterized by the banning of coeducation; compulsory veiling of female students beginning at age 6; explicit gender stereotyping in school textbooks; and guiding female students toward “feminine” specializations deemed appropriate for women. On the other hand, one witnesses a significant increase in female enrollment and completion rates at every educational level; a reduced gender gap in primary and secondary schooling; an increase in the rate of university acceptance and enrollment among women; and female enrollment in fields formerly occupied mostly by men. The coexistence of such seemingly contradictory elements reflects the paradox of tradition and modernity in post-revolutionary Iran and points to the dual role assigned to the New Muslim Woman, who is expected to be the “manager and master of the house” while being active in the social and political arena.

The purpose of this study is to a) provide insight into the paradox of tradition and modernity in female education, and b) illustrate how the modern aspirations of Iranian women have overcome the limitations of traditional measures imposed on their education. The first research question is what are the traditional measures undertaken by Iranian authorities to Islamize the educational system? Male-female segregation; compulsory veiling; changing the textbook content to portray a traditional division of labor in the family with women performing domestic tasks in the private sphere; and segregating the academic pursuits of women in accordance with the traditional understanding of their roles and responsibilities are among the measures undertaken by the Islamic Republic since 1979. The second research question is how have Iranian women responded to the traditional attempts at limiting them? Increased participation in the educational arena marked by increased acceptance, enrollment, and completion rates and entering “male-oriented” fields has characterized the Iranian women’s response to the limitations imposed on them. The phenomenon of unprecedented female participation in the education sector may be analyzed from three perspectives. First, it could be argued that the Islamization of education has opened school doors to the daughters of more conservative, pious families who find post-revolutionary education culturally acceptable. Second, the revolutionary nature of Iranian society has led to schools playing an important role in bringing about social justice, especially for the marginalized and most vulnerable, including girls. Third, female education has been yet another manifestation of modernization that has led to the increasingly visible role of women in public life. Women in modern occupations have indeed served as role models for young girls. The paradox can be understood only if one ceases to look at Iranian women as passive recipients of welfare measures and begins to analyze how they have made the best use of the opportunities created by the interplay of tradition and modernity to become active participants in educational endeavors.

Dr. Fariba Adli, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Alzahra University, Iran

Portraying the lived experience of women faculty members in Iran.



Higher rates of educational achievement, participation in the economic arena, increased social and political awareness and engagement are among the changes many Iranian women have experienced in the past decades. Nevertheless, women are still asked to perform certain formal roles and responsibilities, and most of them are far from decision-making positions. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to reflect the lived experience of female faculty members about their capabilities with the portrait method. With maximum variation sampling method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 51 women faculty members working in the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, based on empowerment dimensions, within a year. Based on the findings of the research, two portraits of women faculty members were drawn. Portrait A shows female faculty members who feel empowered while Portrait B shows women who talk about this subject with hesitation.

The first dimension is economic empowerment. Women's employment is one of men's rights. A woman can only have an economic activity with the permission of her husband. Major economic decisions at home are the responsibility of men, and increasing women's access to financial resources does not necessarily increase their control over these resources. The second dimension is political empowerment. The political participation of Iranian women with a historical approach shows the complex political asymmetry in terms of gender. The number of women in the Islamic Council from the first to the eleventh period was only about %5. There is no woman in the government. The 3rd dimension is Knowledge. The women of portrait A, in choosing their field of study, paid attention to their roles as women in society. But, Portrait B women, in choosing their field of study face with restrictions including quotas. Women still do not have the possibility to participate in many fields. Also, the findings of the research show that the share of women in university teaching positions remains low; Women have occupied only %20 of university faculty seats, and there is a gender gap among faculty members in universities as well. There is a significant gap between the number of women and men at the professorial level. Only %8 of women are members of the academic staff at the rank of professor. The 4th dimension is psychological empowerment. Women portrait A have high self-confidence. But the women in portrait B suffer from a lack of self-confidence. The research findings show that some educated women in Iran experience low self-esteem.

This shows how women's empowerment is affected by Iran's cultural context, a context where women with any level of education often remain on the sidelines. These findings show that it is necessary to pay attention to interactions beyond education and university. This issue contributed to the emergence of the concept of cultural empowerment. Of course, cultural empowerment does not easily happen mainly due to predominant patriarchy in our society's policy, rules and structure.

Dr. Somayeh Fereidouni, Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, Iran

Iranian female students as significant winners; higher education expansion during the last two decades



In line with global trends, the rate of Iranian female students' enrolment in higher education has increased, especially in the first decade of 21st century. The results of an empirical study showed that university has acted as a social institution in Iran and turned female students in to a social agent. The descriptive phenomenology study into the meaning of social agent a qualitative approach using unstructured in-depth interviews with 60 people who were Iranian female university students, faculty members and social activists from four provinces of Iran. The narrative responses were analyzed using content analysis and Colaizzi's method of data analysis.

The results of this study led to develop new cluster themes about social agency through Higher Education, including; 'changing beliefs', 'new life style for females', 'reducing the gender stereotypes', 'considering new identity for females through attending university' as well as 'feeling empowered'.

Females in Iran struggling hard to achieve the university opportunity in while there has been lot of problems for them. For example, there are some experts who consider these changes as threats and unsafety. They believe that education for girls, and increasing this opportunity through higher education expansion led to social corruption and family instability. They referred to females' veil and wearing more than other components. They believe that university has impact on the females wearing specially because of moving on some new students from other big cities to their contexts. In addition, some of other experts and several policy makers believe that educated females cause the difficulties for males in the society and job market. Whereas, the female employment statistics in Iran shows that females graduate have the lowest employment rate rather than males and global rates for 40 years ago.

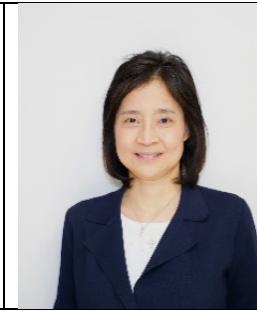
Higher education is beyond the grade for females in Iran. I wanted to confirm that although the university couldn't reach proper and acceptable academic statistics and ranking, it provides an opportunity for Iranian females to find social presence and female students have become significant winners in this position.

According to Bernan (2011) in Iran, university has a leading role in new social norms and helping people accept them. These new norms are so useful for girls and changing their position.

The university provides a new space based on awareness among people. It can turn girl in to social and cultural change agents. In spite of opposition with Iranian females, the university makes possible expectations for the better future for Iranian girls enriched with freedom and development.

Prof. Keiko Sakurai, School of International Liberal Studies, Waseda University, Japan

Understanding the consequence of higher education expansion in the Islamic Republic of Iran



This presentation analyzes the causes and consequences of the expansion of higher education in Iran over the past two decades, and the recent shift in higher education policy. From 2000 to 2015, higher education enrollment in Iran tripled. The gross enrollment ratio in higher education also jumped fourfold, reaching 75% in 2015, in line with North America and Western Europe. A quantitative expansion can be interpreted as an outstanding achievement. However, this surge was accompanied by several negative consequences that undermined the value of higher education for individuals and society.

The quantitative expansion can be attributed to multiple factors, including a rapidly growing young population; the need to expand higher education opportunities as an achievement of the 1979 Islamic Revolution; establishment of social justice, a motto of the revolution; and raising an educated generation in an Islamized environment.

The consequence of quantitative expansion is analyzed by focusing on the labor market, society, and people's perceptions. The advantages of being a graduate of university were short-lived, as, under the absolute shortage of jobs requiring higher levels of education, very few graduates could find a job that met their expectations. As more graduates flooded the labor market, the value of a university degree diminished. Higher education expansion failed to achieve its goal of social justice because the benefits of higher education were not evenly distributed to all regions of the country and to all classes of people, resulting in persistent regional and class gaps. Various admission quotas were introduced to promote equitable distribution of higher education. However, contrary to policy intentions, candidates and key educational administrators voiced their concerns about the unfairness of the system.

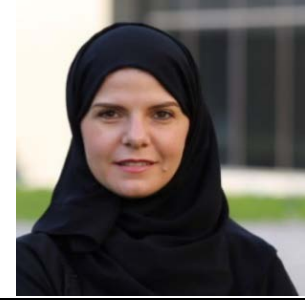
These events reveal that higher education expansion failed not only to produce the intended results, but it has also fostered an excessive orientation toward acquiring degrees for the purpose of "social respectability," reducing a university degree into a title of social prestige than indicator of the knowledge or skills acquired by an individual.

In summary, the shortage of job opportunities, continued social inequality, and a tendency to derive excessive social prestige from academic degrees have undermined the value of higher education. Owing to the negative consequences generated by a quantitative expansion, the government shifted its policy from expansion to contraction, and embarked on a policy to consolidate small colleges and institutions and reduce the capacity of each university.

Additionally, the proliferation of online classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reduced the appeal of university. The pandemic has further worsened the economy and made it impossible for more people to pay tuition fees. These factors have contributed to decreasing student enrollment and the higher education gross enrollment ratio after 2015.

Dr. Mary Newsome, Graduate Studies Office, Qatar University,
Qatar

The Graduate Research Experience: The Case in Qatar



The Arab Gulf States, particularly Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, have continued to gain international recognition as a dominant force in higher education. In just two short decades, the region has essentially transformed from a center of knowledge reception to a hub of knowledge production. With a majority youth population, an increasing number of women seeking higher education, and the demand to provide higher education to enormous expatriate populations living long-term in the Gulf, the region has witnessed significant growth in the number of higher education institutions including international branch campuses and foreign universities. Beyond mere expansion, the Gulf has invested heavily in graduate education with the development of world-class research facilities and in attracting renowned scholars. Despite significant expansion and investment, there are still barriers to a successful graduate student experience in the Gulf region, particularly regarding the research process. In the knowledge economy, the expertise and research potential of graduate students is an important contributor to a nation's knowledge production and its subsequent economic growth. However, global estimates suggest more than half of graduate students fail to complete their graduate degree citing anxiety about the research process as the primary cause. Little has been done to investigate this issue globally and even less in the context of the Gulf.

This presentation discusses the current landscape of graduate education in the region and highlights some of the major challenges to a successful graduate research experience. Specifically, the presentation details the following 7 challenges: (1) lack of systematic and reliable data on graduate education, (2) inadequate English academic writing skills among L2 graduate students, (3) lack of infrastructure to support the development of academic writing and research skills, (4) pre-determined paths to higher education, (5) the supervisor-supervisee relationship, (6) lack of mental health literacy, and (7) the absence of a thriving graduate environment. The presentation discusses important implications for policy and practice including a need for universities in the region to systematically gather and share data concerning graduate education apart from data relevant to higher education in general. Additionally, there is a need for enhanced collaboration among writing centers and academic faculty to integrate academic writing and research support into the graduate program curriculum. There is also a need to support the continuous development of thesis supervision through training programs and online resources such as handbooks and mentoring toolkits. Likewise, universities should take the lead in advocacy and early intervention concerning mental health and well-being among graduate students. This goes beyond counseling services and requires a collective effort at an institutional level. Similarly, universities should take a holistic approach to building graduate community and enhancing the graduate experience that is comprised of both academic and non-academic experiences. Finally, the presentation highlights the need for further investigations of the graduate research experience in the Gulf context. This work is relevant to higher education administrators, graduate faculty, graduate students, writing centers and other support staff working in graduate education.

Mr. Alieu Manjang, Gulf Studies Program, Qatar University, Qatar

Soft Power as a Policy Rationale for the Recruitment of International Students: The Challenges for Qatar University.



The former US Secretary of State Colin Powell said this in 2001: “I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here”. The projection of soft power has been in the center of recruiting international students in higher education, as a policy rationale. For this reason, Qatar’s biggest and first national University, Qatar University has also shown significant academic expansion to admit international students in its various academic programs as part of Qatar’s efforts to increase its soft power basis. Against this background, this attempts to describe some of the challenges that can undermine Qatar University’s efforts to optimize soft power gain from the recruitment of international students. To this end, the paper summarizes these challenges in the low interactions between the international students and the larger community; international students’ lack of sense of building to the society, and their reluctance to return to their countries after the graduation.

According to Joseph Nye, who defined soft power in the late 1980s as the ability to get what you desire through the means of attraction rather than coercion or payment, recruiting foreign students allows them to be drawn to the host country’s culture and ideas and to be admired by these cultures. However, he stipulated that for such admiration to occur, foreign students are expected to have higher social contact and interactions with the host community, which increases their exposure to the sources of the host country’s soft power; the students should also feel sense of belonging to the host community, which is necessary for their socialization with the society; and finally the students should return back to their countries after the graduation for them become remarkable reservoir of goodwill for the host country, especially when these students wind up in position where they can affect policy outcomes that are important to the host country .

Nonetheless, drawing on the experiences of international students in Qatar University revealed that the students have minimal interactions with the larger host community. Unlike in other developed countries, Qatar university’s dormitory and bus service from /to the university is exclusive to non-Qataris, and Qatar students spend limited time in the University campus due to work and family related reasons; this is true in the cases of the graduate students. These constitute reasons that limit interactions between the international students and the host society, which in turn undermine the hosting of foreign students for soft power purposes. Secondly, Qatar citizens are offered favorable and exceptional treatments at the university, hospitals, immigration department and other institutions that render service to Qataris and expatriate communities alike. This communicates the distinctiveness of Qataris relative to the expatriate including the international students, and this in turn minimizes international students’ sense of belonging to the society, and this has adverse effect on the socialization of the international students. Finally, the willingness to return home is largely unobserved among the international students. This is compounded by the absence of compulsory return policy after the graduation, and the attractiveness of Qatar labor market to the international students. Moreover, due to the fact that majority of Qatar University’s students are largely recruited from countries which are economically underdeveloped and politically unstable.

Thus, even though the recruitment of international students could have huge potential benefits to Qatar soft power. Qatar University should prepare its academic environment towards the achievement of soft power through recruitment of foreign students. The University should encourage both locals and international students to build social and intellectual relations that could expand beyond educational environments.

Dr. Christine Schiwietz, Georgetown University in Qatar, Qatar

An Inside Look at the Georgetown Branch Campus Experience in Qatar



Dr. Christine Schiwietz from Georgetown University provided an inside look at how the university launched its first branch campus in Education City, Qatar in 2005. She gave insights on Qatar Foundation's academic initiative in the cultivation of a knowledge-based economy, Georgetown University's flagship B.S.F.S. (Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service) program, as well as discussing global experiential learning and the new opportunities offered for both national and international students and a global faculty participating in the unique multiversity experience.