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# The Reform of Qatar University

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# Summary

## Introduction

In August 2003, His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, appointed a new President, Sheikha Al Misnad, and other senior officers of Qatar University (QU), giving the new administration a broad mandate to reform and to strengthen the University. In October 2003, the Diwan Amiri[1] engaged the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute (RQPI) to assist the new QU leadership in designing and implementing a major reform of the University. This monograph recounts the motivation for the reform effort, describes the design of the reform agenda, and details the early stages of the implementation effort, with an eye toward identifying challenges yet to be met.

### The State of Qatar

Qatar is a small monarchy on the Arabian Peninsula approximately the size of the state of Connecticut, bordered only by Saudi Arabia, to the southwest. From 2004 to 2008, the population doubled from nearly 750,000 to some 1.5 million; however, only about 20 percent are Qatari nationals; the rest comprise expatriate workers and their families.

With the world's third largest natural gas reserves, Qatar is a prosperous country. Under the current Emir, Qatar has aggressively pursued modernization, including economic and social development. As part of these modernization efforts, major reforms of health care and education have been undertaken, the latter aimed, in part, at preparing

[1] The administrative office of the Emir.

Qataris to assume more of the professional positions formerly held by expatriates. "Qatarization" of professional jobs is a high priority.

### Education in Qatar

Recognizing the need for a better-prepared workforce, the Emir has made reform and strengthening of education in Qatar a high priority since the early years of his rule and directed a number of initiatives aimed at improving educational opportunities for young Qataris.

The first of these initiatives—chronologically—was the creation of an Education City in Doha. Both a physical campus and an administrative apparatus, Education City hosts a variety of educational, research, and cultural institutions, including branch campuses of leading foreign universities. In addition, though not formally a part of Education City, other branch campuses that offer technical training and vocationally oriented education have been set up in Doha.

The second major education initiative in Qatar was the establishment of a system of state-funded "Independent schools" serving students eligible for state-supported K–12 education aimed at providing autonomy, accountability, variety, and choice for parents and students in Qatar. The first 12 Independent schools opened in the fall of 2004. Additional Independent schools have opened in each succeeding year.

The Education City branch campuses cannot accommodate—and were never intended to accommodate—the large majority of Qatari secondary school graduates who sought academically oriented higher education but did not qualify for or chose not to attend foreign universities. For these graduates, Qatar University was the traditional and still most appropriate option. By 2003, the need to strengthen QU to meet the needs of a new generation of young Qataris was apparent. The principal piece missing from Qatar's overall education reform agenda was the reform of Qatar University.

### Qatar University

The institution that became Qatar University began in 1973 as a College of Education. The University was formally established by Emiri decree in 1977, and by 2003 had six colleges: Education; Humanities

and Social Sciences; Science; Sharia, Law, and Islamic Studies; Engineering; and Business and Economics.

QU is a state institution, and the state provides the bulk of the resources necessary for its operation. Although the Emiri decree that established the University guaranteed its autonomy, this autonomy had never been achieved in practice. The University's budget allocations had to be approved by the Ministry of Finance, and organization charts, staffing plans, and personnel actions had to be approved by the Ministry of Civil Service Affairs and Housing.

At the beginning of the reform effort, the University enrolled a total of about 8,600 students, about three-quarters of whom were women. The University provided separate campuses for men and for women, and all classes and extracurricular activities were gender-segregated.

Each college of the University awarded bachelor's degrees in its areas of specialization, and two of the colleges offered postgraduate degrees. The language of instruction in three of the University's colleges—Engineering, Science, and Business and Economics—was English. The remaining three colleges taught in Arabic.

Admissions standards were also set separately by each college of the University. In effect, students were accepted by and subsequently enrolled in a particular college rather than in the larger University.

When the reform effort began in 2003, QU had about 400 faculty members. Although the University had no formal system of granting tenure, Qatari faculty members were, in effect, appointed for life. Expatriate faculty were usually on renewable one-year contracts. There was no formal appraisal system. Expatriate faculty members were paid less than Qatari faculty, and, relative to other universities in the Gulf region, salaries were low for all faculty.

Before the reform, the University operated five research centers established to conduct applied research.[2] But these centers were not

[2] The centers were the Scientific Applied Research Center, the Sira and Sunna Research Center, the Educational Research Center, the Documentation and Humanities Research Center, and the National Center for Economic Research.

closely affiliated with University's colleges, and academic and research activities were not well coordinated.

## The Need for Reform

In its earlier years, Qatar University had been regarded by many observers—both inside and outside Qatar—as one of the better universities in the Middle East. By a number of measures, however, the University's performance had been deteriorating for several years before the reforms were launched. Among the most prominent problems were the lengthening time that students required to complete their degree programs and the growing fraction of graduating students who did so with very poor grades. Qualitative indicators of student engagement also suggested problems—particularly among male students. Anecdotal reports abounded of poor student class attendance, lackadaisical approaches to studies, and occasional hectoring of faculty by students or parents about grades. Few extracurricular activities were available to students. At the beginning of the reform effort, students, faculty, and administrators agreed that no University community existed in any meaningful sense.

By some objective measures, the quality of the faculty was also declining. Within a faculty of roughly constant size, the number of lecturers (as opposed to assistant professors and professors) was rising, and the number of full professors had fallen sharply in the years before the reform. More-qualitative measures also suggested problems with the faculty. Morale was widely reported to be low.

In the years leading up to the reform effort, the University's internal administration had become increasingly centralized. Faculty complained that the central administration was usurping authorities that had traditionally rested with the faculty and with academic departments. There was growing estrangement between the central administration and the faculty.

In 2003, the University had no written compilation of procedures documenting how important academic or administrative processes were to be conducted. Key aspects of University life were handled through

sometimes inconsistent improvisation or governed by long-standing but unwritten tradition.

The University was also facing financial difficulties. In the decade before the reforms began, University funding had not kept pace with the rising numbers of students.

Finally and most importantly, evidence was accumulating by 2003 that the University was failing to meet the needs of the larger Qatari society. Employers in Qatar—in both the public and private sectors—reported that few University graduates met required standards for employment.

By the summer of 2003, then, reforms of some key elements of Qatar's educational system were well under way. Action in other parts of the Qatari educational system served to make the absence of reform in the national university increasingly conspicuous—especially since both objective and perceptual indicators of University performance had been deteriorating for several years. It was against this backdrop that a major overhaul of Qatar University was launched in the fall of 2003.

### Designing the Reform Agenda

The fundamental principle guiding the reform effort was that QU itself—its leading faculty and administrators—had to initiate and lead the reform. The reasons were threefold: University faculty knew better than anyone else QU's strengths and weaknesses; successful reform depended on faculty and staff ownership of the effort; and a key objective was to imbue QU with the capacity for continuing self-assessment and adjustment. At the same time, the critical role of impartial outside experts was understood.

A Senior Reform Committee (SRC) comprising senior QU members and outside experts from top universities in the United States and United Kingdom served as a forum for discussion about QU's mission and helped shape reform proposals. A reform project staff composed of both QU and RQPI members served as secretariat to the SRC. The SRC set about articulating the objectives of the reform as well as the principal obstacles.

The SRC first defined the appropriate mission of QU. This mission included being the major post-secondary school option for qualified Qatari students, serving as the principal reservoir of knowledge and expertise for the developing state, setting standards for the nation's social development, recognizing intellectual expertise and achievement, promoting informed discussion of key issues facing the nation, and promoting understanding of these issues. The SRC also articulated the need for a core curriculum for all students in addition to the courses in their areas of specialization and emphasized that QU should remain primarily an undergraduate institution.

The SRC identified seven major impediments to the University fulfilling its mission: inadequate administrative infrastructure, excessive administrative centralization, failure of academic and administrative structures to keep pace with changing educational demands and trends, lack of systematic academic planning, lack of cohesion among the individual academic programs, inadequate faculty quality, and lack of faculty commitment to QU's mission.

In the first year, the SRC proposed to the Emir a set of reforms consisting of seven recommendations:

1. Establish autonomy by creating a Board of Regents that would oversee the University.
2. Decentralize the administrative arrangements.
3. Modify the academic structure by unifying the colleges and integrating research and academic activities.
4. Institute a core curriculum for all students.
5. Introduce university-wide academic planning.
6. Improve the management of faculty and staff by improving compensation, linking pay with performance, and introducing tenure and other reforms.
7. Foster and support student achievement by enforcing admission standards and expanding services for students.

The recommendations were presented to the Emir with a set of specific requests, which he approved. Implementation began immediately.

### Implementing the Reform Agenda

One of the biggest challenges to implementing the changes was the bureaucratic structure that was in place at the beginning of the reform. The first step in the reform effort was to restructure QU's administration to create university self-governance.

Noteworthy in the reform effort is the time frame in which most of the reforms were completed and the fact that each of the recommended reform initiatives has either been completed or is in progress. To assess further the success of the initiative, the SRC recommended developing and implementing a prospective evaluation system to track performance improvement.

### Reflections on the Reform Strategy

The reforms proposed for Qatar University were extensive, touching virtually every constituency in the University community. In retrospect, several factors or conditions made such sweeping reform possible:

- *Timing of the reform.* The effort took advantage of the momentum created by the social, economic, educational, and governmental transformation in process in the country.
- *Organization and sequencing of reform.* Organization of the effort into distinct phases allowed for modular completion of activities and created milestones for measurement of progress as well as opportunities for reflection.
- *Strong leadership.* The leadership of QU's president as well as the recruitment and retraining of strong college, department, and program directors was critical.
- *University as the primary actor.* Recognition of the need for QU to reform itself and the coordination of activities by the internal Office of Institutional Planning and Development were key to progress.
- *Support from outside experts.* Strong trusting relationships were formed with the external advisors and technical consultants, who acted as sounding boards.

Nevertheless, designing and implementing the reform agenda involved difficult choices:

- *Academic standards versus social norms.* Faced with preserving the status quo, in which a university education was available to all nationals, or upholding academic standards, the administration decided that QU would uphold its new standards and aim to serve average and above-average students, while expanding its preparatory Foundation Program.
- *Pragmatism versus ambition.* The SRC recommended that QU aspire to goals that could realistically be achieved in a few years while making provisions for more ambitious expansion later.
- *Well-established versus innovative academic structures.* Rather than attempting a more innovative academic structure that would involve combining the Colleges of Science and Engineering, the QU leadership chose the more traditional path of creating a College of Arts and Sciences, with responsibility for delivering the core curriculum as well as its own programs.
- *University service versus scholarly development.* Faced with the difficult decision of whether to assign a number of promising young faculty members to key administrative positions or to allow them to pursue and build their own academic careers, QU's president had little choice but to assign them to the leadership positions, with the hope that they might eventually be able to return to teaching and research.
- *Rapid versus gradual reform.* The rapid pace of reform had the advantage of creating a self-perpetuating momentum and leaving little time for opposition. However, the University paid a price for proceeding so rapidly, as the result was considerable confusion and some resistance to change.
- *Efficiency versus inclusiveness.* Likewise, faced with the choice of trying to bring the entire faculty along at once (some of whom resisted change) or enlisting a growing circle of respected faculty who were supportive of change, the President chose the latter alternative. Although her decision did not ensure unanimity of views

and had its costs (some faculty felt disenfranchised and some left QU), the QU leadership does not regret this choice.

### The Challenges Ahead

Since the launch of QU's reforms in 2003, the academic infrastructure, programs, and policies envisioned in the original reform agenda have already undergone some adjustment. However, these adjustments have originated from within the newly autonomous university without deferring to outside authorities or relying on outside assistance.

Several tests remain for the reformed university:

- At present, the most pressing academic challenge remains the completion of the core curriculum.
- The next major test for the reforms will occur when the current administration is replaced by the next generation of leaders.
- It remains possible that the university's autonomy may be tested by demands placed on it by the state, which provides the bulk of the financial resources on which the university depends.
- Finally, and more broadly, the university must complete the realignment of faculty and student attitudes, expectations, and behaviors that the reform has begun. This realignment is beginning to be felt in a new acceptance of accountability and recognition of individual responsibility, but it is something that must emerge over time and cannot be enforced from the top.

The QU reforms have brought changes in the structure and organization of the University. They have also prompted the beginnings of change in the less formal and less easily controlled spirit of the University. Completing these latter changes and making them enduring are the challenging tasks that QU must confront in the coming years.