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Aligning Post-Secondary Educational Choices to Societal Needs

A New Scholarship System for Qatar

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Prepared for the Supreme Education Council
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Since 1995, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, has led the country on a course of significant economic and social development. This development demands that Qatar’s population acquire specialized technical skills, competency in English and other languages, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, leadership experience, and the capability to operate in an international environment. Post-secondary study is an essential means to acquiring these skills and, in turn, to producing a highly skilled labor force.

Pursuant to a scholarship law issued in the 1970s, Qatar has supported study abroad in undergraduate and graduate programs not available locally. Although the law has not been updated since the 1970s, the country has undergone major societal shifts since then. Workforce needs have evolved, and there are increasing demands for Qatars in the labor force. Recently, Qatar has made substantial investments in primary- and secondary-education reforms and in the expansion of in-country post-secondary options. Several highly selective post-secondary institutions have established branch campuses in the capital city of Doha, and Qatar University has undergone major reform. A scholarship system that includes post-secondary counseling, comprehensive recipient support, and widespread data collection and analysis would allow Qatar to capitalize on these educational reforms while developing the human capital it needs to support its economic and social development.

In 2003, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) of Qatar requested that RAND provide recommendations for improving the country’s scholarship programs. Leaders of the country wanted to ensure that the scholarship system and the laws supporting it were aligned to the new workforce and post-secondary contexts. They also wanted suggestions on how to ensure that their investments in the scholarship programs generated returns in terms of students attending high-quality post-secondary institutions. In particular, they wanted to ensure that students who were studying abroad were enrolling in institutions of higher quality than those available in the country. The SEC asked us to consider all aspects of the system, including its purpose and outcomes, as well as processes (e.g., financing and contracting with students) and policies (e.g., student and institutional eligibility).

To understand the strengths and weaknesses of the then-current system, we conducted more than 50 interviews with stakeholders, including SEC members, scholarship sponsors, students, graduates, college officials, cultural attaché staff, and other student-support providers. RAND collected data on scholarship recipients, examining rankings of the colleges and universities they attended, and reviewed the original (1976) and proposed (2003) scholarship

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1 Although most employers interviewed for this study specified a desire for English-speaking employees, a few argued that they also needed their employees to speak French.
laws. In addition, RAND reviewed selected scholarship programs around the world, focusing on countries similar to Qatar with respect to size, wealth, and internal post-secondary infrastructure. To learn firsthand about an advanced government-sponsored scholarship system, members of the RAND team met with a variety of employers and government officials in Singapore, a similar country in terms of size, wealth, post-secondary infrastructure, and its desire to augment in-country options with targeted study-abroad opportunities.

Our analysis demonstrated that Qatar’s then-current scholarship system had a number of weaknesses:

- No single organization coordinated and administered the three main scholarship programs operating in Qatar.
- Policies and procedures within and across individual scholarship programs were not coherently designed or consistently executed, and systematic information was nonexistent.
- Prior to college, students were not receiving guidance or preparation to attend high-quality institutions.
- The system provided few incentives to attend high-quality institutions.
- Support services for recipients were inadequate.
- Choices about resource allocation and post-secondary education were impeded by a lack of data and analysis on Qatari participation in post-secondary education.

The purpose of our study was to provide recommendations to remedy these weaknesses. We proposed a new system to improve decisionmaking at multiple levels about higher education, from students’ enrollment decisions to the country’s decisions on investing in post-secondary learning. The proposed system was designed to meet goals that were elicited from our interviews of more than 50 country leaders and other stakeholders of the scholarship system. The goals included meeting workforce needs; developing language, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; preparing future leaders; providing international exposure and establishing ties to other countries; and meeting civic and cultural needs. Our recommendations were further guided by principles of quality, accountability, efficiency, flexibility, and support. These principles are based on those of prestigious scholarship programs around the world, and Qataris confirmed that they were important during our interviews.

We argued that, if scholarships are to play a critical role in the larger education system, a major reform of the prior scholarship system would be required. Scholarship reform can be effective only within the context of broader measures that

- assist secondary-school students in making decisions about post-secondary study that benefit themselves, employers, and the state
- establish incentives for secondary students to excel, gain admission to high-quality post-secondary institutions, and achieve at those institutions
- track and evaluate recipient performance
- improve investment in human resources by conducting comprehensive data collection and analysis on all Qataris engaged in post-secondary study
- assess the quality of all institutions attended by Qataris—at home and abroad.
Proposed Scholarship Programs

RAND proposed a scholarship system centered on three programs for undergraduate and graduate study, in Education City and abroad. Receipt of a scholarship would be conditional on acceptance to an eligible post-secondary institution. All Qatari citizens of any age who have completed secondary school would be eligible to apply to these three programs. Qatari non-citizen residents would be eligible for the loan-based program, and we recommended that employers decide whether to sponsor noncitizen residents. Domestic options, including Qatar University and the colleges in Education City, would be prioritized through multiple mechanisms.

**Prestigious Scholarship Program.** A prestigious scholarship program would introduce flexibility as an incentive and would reward exceptional performance at the secondary level. A select number of recipients would have the choice to enroll in any major or degree program worldwide and would have very limited postgraduation obligations if admitted to a highly selective college or university. Eligible institutions could include Education City universities, the top 50 U.S. universities, the top 10 UK universities, and the top five universities in other countries.

**Employer-Sponsored Program.** An employer-sponsored program would meet Qatar’s workforce needs. Employer-sponsored participants would be required to gain acceptance to a college or university that is of higher quality than Qatar University. For degree programs offered in Qatar, applicants would need to first apply to, and be rejected by, institutions in Education City before winning a scholarship to study abroad.

**Loan-Based Program.** A loan-based program would provide an additional option for students who prefer not to study under contract with an employer or who are not accepted to the prestigious scholarship or employer-sponsored programs. Loans would be awarded after an applicant is admitted to a university or college that is of higher quality than Qatar University. An incentive in the form of subsidized interest rates could be granted for study at Education City universities or for courses of study deemed national priorities.

Based on pass rates on the secondary-school exit exam, approximately two-thirds of Qatari secondary-school students are prepared to enter college immediately after secondary school and, if accepted to an eligible institution, would receive a scholarship upon graduation. Because other prospective scholarship applicants may not be adequately prepared for study at a highly competitive institution, we proposed a precollege grant for language or other academic preparation. Grants would be allocated for study at the Qatar Foundation’s Academic Bridge Program and other domestic developmental programs, as well as foundation and language programs abroad, with preference given to students who choose domestic programs. Grant awards would cover only the cost of the tuition, not travel or living allowances, to encourage enrollment in domestic programs.

Because our recommendations prioritized domestic universities, it is possible that the number of Qatari students completing degree programs abroad would decline upon implementation of this new system. Given that international exposure is an important goal of this proposed scholarship system, students would be able to apply for grants for tuition and living allowances to study abroad for a short period.

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1 At the time of this study, Qatar University had an open admission policy, and all Qatari citizens could attend free of charge.
Considering the stringent proposed criteria for scholarship awards, it is also possible that the number of scholarship recipients would decline in the short run. Students not eligible for a scholarship would have three options for subsidized post-secondary study: enrolling in Qatar University, applying for a study-abroad grant in conjunction with enrolling at Qatar University, or applying for a precollege grant as a means of advancing toward eligibility for a scholarship in subsequent years. Elevating award criteria is critical to system success in the long run, because it would ultimately motivate applicants to excel in secondary school and gain admission to high-quality institutions.

**Proposed Organizational Structure**

Establishing this ambitious system would require a new infrastructure. We recommended establishing a post-secondary education institute that would, in collaboration with the SEC, set direction and vision for policies and research related to post-secondary education in Qatar. This institute would do more than manage scholarships in Qatar—it would also plan for and monitor post-secondary education in Qatar. This institute would provide counseling so that Qataris could make educational choices that both match their interests and meet Qatar’s needs. The institute would also house competitive, incentive-based scholarship programs to motivate secondary-school students to excel and, in turn, gain admission to high-quality institutions. Highly skilled graduates studying at these institutions would contribute to Qatar’s social and economic development.

Figure S.1 presents the proposed structure for the new institute. We recommended that the Post-Secondary Education Institute (PEI) house an institutional standards office, a scholarship office, and a student resource center. This independent PEI would be subordinate to the SEC. It would not have any formal relationship with the Ministry of Education, and, thus, the Ministry of Education would no longer be involved in Qatar’s scholarship system except as an employer.

We recommended that an institutional standards office evaluate in-country post-secondary institutions against their foreign counterparts and provide authorization and licensing for col-
leges to operate in Qatar. This office would strive to assess the educational quality of institutions and degree programs around the world and qualify institutions for each of the scholarship programs. Staff members would rely primarily on existing measures of institutional and degree-program quality, drawing on a body of secondary ranking sources.

A scholarship office would perform all functions related to the scholarship programs. Members of this office would propose policies, procedures, and scholarship guidelines that would, in turn, be approved by the director of the PEI and by the SEC. The guidelines would address qualifications for scholarship eligibility, English-language training options, and eligible countries, institutions, programs, and fields of study, including distance-learning options. Staff in this office would also design recipient contracts and financial packages, ensure that recipients fulfill all the obligations of their contracts—including meeting performance requirements—and interact with employers regarding labor-market needs. This office would be the point of contact for all scholarship recipients and alumni. Staff members would be responsible for assisting with visa applications and processing, hosting orientation events, providing ongoing support for students while they are in school, and reviewing requests for transfers and extensions.

While the scholarship office would support students who received scholarships, a student resource center would provide guidance to all Qataris interested in pursuing post-secondary education. A state-of-the-art student resource center could improve the quality of educational decisionmaking by ensuring that Qataris are studying at the best institutions for their abilities and for the country’s needs. The center would assist Qataris of all ages with college preparation, applications, and degree-program and institution choice. Staff members could also conduct extensive outreach to secondary schools to provide academic and career counseling.

The SEC accepted these recommendations and, in September 2004, established the Higher Education Institute (HEI), with a similar organizational structure to the proposed PEI. The HEI critically assessed and adopted the goals and principles suggested in this report, along with many of our recommendations on scholarship programs. It has, in addition, transformed our ideas and suggestions in establishing an institute that is well suited to serve the country’s needs. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to conduct this study, which has helped to launch what has become a prominent and important institute in Qatar.3

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3 Further information about the HEI and its current operations can be found in SEC (2008).