



DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT



**FORCES OF REFORM AND
EDUCATION SYSTEMS OF
GCC COUNTRIES**

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FORCES OF REFORM AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS OF GCC COUNTRIES

Abstract

Social change and transformation in the GCC countries is only possible with the active internal involvement of citizens in political and social dialogue, leading to a coordinated and gradual “change from within”. However, having been led by autocratic rulers for centuries, the region’s citizens lack the resources and understanding of political mobilisation and responsibility. An educational system that delivers real outcomes can broaden the economic and social opportunities of its citizens, empowering and preparing them to assume their role as “agents of change” while reinforcing their social and intellectual development. Although the GCC countries have come a long way in enhancing enrolment and literacy rates, the region’s educational systems still suffer from low quality, misaligned incentives, lack of public accountability, inability to provide the skills needed in the market, and equipping pupils with critical thinking capacities. The EU has to take a more active role in providing assistance and sharing its know-how, instead of narrowly focusing on venues of cooperation in higher education, typically oriented for industrialised nations.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FORCES FOR REFORM	3
2	EDUCATION AND THE REFORM PROCESS	3
2.1	Educational attainment and quality	3
2.2	Educational methodology and curriculum	3
2.3	Access to education	3
2.4	Outcomes of education	3
3	EU-GCC COOPERATION IN EDUCATION	3
4	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite their sizeable economic resources, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have failed to provide matching political freedoms and have failed to fill the “democratic deficit”. Reforms packages introduced by the ruling powers have often been incomplete, put forward to secure their own power or to appease foreign powers. Foreign pressure alone has not worked, perceived in the region as excessive external influence or downright arrogance. Therefore, social change and transformation in the GCC countries is only possible with the active involvement of citizens in political and social dialogue, leading to a coordinated and gradual “change from within”.

There are clear reasons why such a “bottom-up” drive for change has failed to materialise so far. Being led by autocratic rulers for centuries, the region’s citizens lack the resources and understanding of political mobilisation. The region’s citizens do not see themselves as “agents” of change but merely as “patients”, which have to be taken care for by an authority. If the GCC region is to come to grips with the idea of change from within, citizens must be able to engage fully in political and social dialogue and organisation.

The needed transformation highlights the importance and role of education in the region. An educational system that delivers real outcomes can broaden the economic and social opportunities of its citizens, empowering and preparing them to assume their role as “agents of change”. Education also reinforces the social and intellectual development of individuals. In particular, good educational methodologies reinforce critical thinking and increase the potential for positive political dialogue. Care has to be given to ensure that high-quality educational opportunities are available for all and not just for the select few.

An analysis of the educational systems of the region reveals that the systems have come a long way over the last two decades, with both literacy rates and years of schooling reaching reasonable levels. Despite high attainment rates, secondary student test scores show that there are glaring deficiencies in all of the GCC countries in terms of quality of education. The region’s education systems also fail to deliver economic outcomes. The share of youth in total unemployment is very high in some of the region’s economies, notably the Saudi Arabia. Across the region, there is an inherent mismatch of skills sought in the labour market and those that are taught in school. In particular, there is a shortage of majors and graduates in science and technology fields as well as technical professionals. These issues are only going to become more challenging in the upcoming decades as the “youth bulge” matures and women participate more in economic life.

An analysis of the details of the systems reveals that a general absence of performance-based incentives for teachers and the lack of public accountability are among the main contributors for these shortcomings. Access remains open to the otherwise vulnerable groups, such as women, but there is concern that the predominance of private schools, especially in basic education, may lead to inequalities. Another factor is the outdated pedagogy applied in primary and secondary education, which fail to invite free dialogue or scientific reasoning. The predominance of religious education over other subjects may also be leading to less attention given to scientific and technical fields. There is also clear need for the development of vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities, which tend to be under-supplied.

Although it is soon to reach a definitive conclusion, Qatar’s recent educational reforms promise to be a successful way of responding to these challenges, potentially serving as a model for the entire region. In terms of cooperation venues with the EU, most of the multilateral agreements address university-level and post-graduate opportunities in learning and research. Certain bilateral cooperation programmes have addressed the demand from GCC countries on modernising pedagogy and providing skills and leadership guidance for teachers and staff. There is a need to expand on these individual experiences to provide training, mobility opportunities and technical assistance in performance-measurement, public accountability, and methodology reform.

1 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FORCES FOR REFORM

Despite their economic well-being, reflected by their impressive fed by their oil exports, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries suffer from a serious “democratic deficit”, (UNDP, 2002Ch. 8). After several years of optimism, the drive for reform in the Arab world has been showing clear signs of fatigue in recent years. The movement had gained some momentum in the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks and the US policy rethink, especially towards Saudi Arabia, long viewed as a reliable ally, where most of the hijackers came from. The Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda” for the Middle East was meant to address the political and social conditions that were thought to have contributed to the growth of terrorism. Some of the region’s autocratic governments have responded by taking steps towards political reform. The top-down reform process has stalled with limited success and has not led to a substantive redistribution of power and openness in most of the GCC countries.

Table 1.1. Economic and political conditions in GCC countries

	Population, thousands: 2008	GDP per capita, PPP US\$: 2008	UNDP Human Development Index rank: 2009	Freedom House, Freedom in the World rating: 2010	Freedom House, Freedom of the Press rank: 2009	World Bank, Voice & Accountability rank: 2009	
<i>Bahrain</i>	791	34,955*		39	Not free	156	159
<i>Kuwait</i>	2,845	25,303*		31	Partly free	115	146
<i>Oman</i>	2,795	48,363		56	Not free	156	178
<i>Qatar</i>	25,391	65,205		70	Not free	143	164
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	1,409	23,428**		59	Not free	176	204
<i>UAE</i>	4,599	57,826		35	Not free	153	162

Source: UNDP; Freedom House; World Bank

Notes: * 2007 figures; ** 2006 figure.

As in other parts of the world, three distinct set of actors are responsible for reform in the GCC states. First, governments and political leaders may take the initiative by launching reform packages. Second, external powers may initiate reforms by applying pressure on governments or by mobilising social actors. Third, transformation process can also be bottom-up, the result of a home-grown political and social mobilisation initiated by political opposition parties, civil society organisations, business organisations, or by citizens through elections.

Among these three possibilities, the evolution of bottom-up demand for transformation at the grassroots level is the most promising but—for the moment - means for change are absent in the GCC region. There are several reasons for why such a “reform from within” is likely to be more successful in achieving for meaningful and sustainable change, (UNDP, 2009, p. 76).

Taking the first fundamental force identified above, there is clear evidence that reforms single-handedly introduced by Arab leaders are in many cases—but not always—“cosmetic” at best, driven by a desire to maintain control or to try to appeal to external influence, (Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso, 2008). Notwithstanding recent improvements, the region’s political systems operate under an extraordinary concentration of power lodged in the hands of a single person or a family—the monarch and its family—for life and by hereditary right. The recent establishment of legislative assemblies that are only partly elected and appointed by the monarch, as is the case in all GCC countries except Kuwait, are clear examples of such incomplete initiatives for reform, (Table 1.2). By

having almost exclusive control over the executive and legislative arms (which are by and large “consultative”), the region’s monarchies have ensured that their supremacy in the political structure remains unchallenged and persistent, often at the expense of meaningful social reform and dialogue. There is little chance that these conditions will change due solely to the willingness of the leaders. The involvement of complementary forces and actors are also needed to spearhead change in the region.

Table 1.2. Governments in GCC countries

	Government type	Elections	Executive branch	Legislative branch	Political parties
<i>Bahrain</i>	Constitutional monarchy	Universal since 2002	Monarch; appointed cabinet and local officials	Two houses; upper-body appointed	Prohibited
<i>Kuwait</i>	Constitutional emirate	Universal since 2005	Monarch; appointed cabinet and local officials	Single house; all elected	Prohibited
<i>Oman</i>	Monarchy	Universal since 2003	Monarch; appointed cabinet and local officials	Two houses; upper-body appointed	None
<i>Qatar</i>	Emirate	Universal since 1998	Monarch; appointed cabinet; elected municipal officials	Single house; all appointed since 1970	None
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	Monarchy	Adult males only	Monarch; appointed cabinet; elected municipal officials	Single house; all appointed	None
<i>UAE</i>	Federated emirates	Electoral colleges; all members appointed	Monarch; appointed cabinet and local officials	Single house; half of body appointed	Prohibited

Source: CIA World Factbook, 2010; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE)

Recent experience and the region’s relative standing vis-à-vis the developed countries suggest that external-led pressures are also likely to prove fruitless, at least in the long-term. The advanced countries often have little assertiveness in applying pressure on the GCC countries, mostly owing to the region’s vast accumulated wealth. Dependence on oil further damages the “leverage” of foreign powers on any issue that may be interpreted as intrusive, such as calls for improvements on human, social and political rights. The region’s need for regional security—the glue holding the GCC together—allows the US to have some traction in this manner; however, recent US efforts to push for democratic reform have been stalled, at least for the moment. In the GCC countries, much like in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, perceptions of foreign influence has often given rise to negative sentiments about the West, at times fuelling the rise of undemocratic and fundamentalist movements, (UNDP, 2009, pp. 75-76). Indeed, although not objecting to the content and necessity of reform, many experts and intellectuals in the region reacted with indignation and resistance to the US-led efforts in recent years, (Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso, 2008).

With external pressure and government-led reforms less likely to be influential, bottom-up demands for reform are the key drivers for the potential for reform. However, the region’s political systems are marred with limitations. Political parties are unavailable, if not banned, in all GCC countries, (Table 1.2). To the extent that they can voice their own will, the electorate remains relatively powerless. A substantial proportion of the legislative is appointed directly by the monarchs and not subject to election. Civil society organisations, whenever present, are often not free to voice their opinions, often subject to harassment and close monitoring by the authorities. In short, the GCC countries rank very low on a variety of indices on political development and voice, with only Kuwait ranking partly free (Table 1.1).

A particularly pressing issue is the role of women in political life. Accounting for half of the population, women can be important agents in achieving sustainable social change and transformation, (Sen, 1999, Ch. 8). Although there are some signs of change, the region has been relatively late in instating equal rights. Most notably, women are still not allowed to vote or stand for election in the region's most populous state, Saudi Arabia. In other GCC members, women have obtained voting rights only in recent years, such as in Qatar (1998), Bahrain (2002), Oman (2003) and Kuwait (2005). Comparing the number of seats held by women in the parliaments, it is easy to see that women's role remains relatively limited in Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, (Table 1.3). In Bahrain, Oman and the UAE, on the other hand, the monarchies' leaders have appointed female legislature members, putting the share of women in the parliaments more or less in line with the advanced country averages. Whether these appointments can be considered as true female representation is open to question since they appear to be a response to voter apathy in electing women candidates.

Table 1.3. Seats in parliament held by women, as % of total seats, as of Jul. 2010

	<i>Lower or single house</i>	<i>Upper house or senate</i>
Bahrain	2.5	25*
Kuwait	7.7	..
Oman	0.0	19.4*
Qatar	0.0	..
Saudi Arabia	0.0	..
United Arab Emirates	22.5*	..
<i>Americas</i>	22.5	22.6
<i>Arab States</i>	11.1	8.1
<i>Asia</i>	18.7	17.0
<i>Europe</i>	22.0	19.4
<i>Pacific</i>	13.2	32.6
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	19.0	20.9

Source: Freedom House and Inter-Parliamentary Union

Note: * Figures represent direct appointments and not elected candidates.

With limited and unequally distributed political rights, how likely is a bottom-up process of transformation in the GCC region? A pessimist answer is that it is "very unlikely". The monarchies' aim of remaining in power, unchallenged and unobstructed, has led them to curtail political rights. There are some seeds of change; however these are too limited to give rise to substantial change. Even when it can be assertive, the power of foreign persuasion, especially when it is conceived as arrogant and disrespectful external influence, is likely to be limited and may even back-fire if it serves to add more zeal to the fundamentalists' causes.

More realistically, bottom-up pressures will prove crucial, if not indispensable, in determining the success of social transformation. Historically speaking, reforms are often responses to pressures within the society. Provided that the region's governments remain committed to providing more freedoms for their citizens, either independently or under pressure from foreign countries, there is reason for hope that political and social pressures will materialise into more inclusive societies. It is only under such a setting that the GCC states can secure their own and regional stability, even after the depletion of the oil reserves.

One of the challenges that the region faces, in terms of its potential for change, is the lack of organisation or understanding of political mobilisation. Those who live in authoritarian regimes have, almost by definition, little or no experience with political mobilisation and grassroots movements. Governments are seen as the only forms of governance, a source of all problems and solutions, (Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso, 2008). Authority is not perceived as a malleable construct but as a rigid entity, provoking quasi-religious sentiments of subordination and selflessness. In Sen's (1999)

terminology, the region's citizens do not see themselves as "agents" of change but merely as "patients", which has to be taken care for, or simply as passive recipients of whatever public services the regime provides, [p. 11].

If the GCC region is to come to grips with change from within, it is imperative for citizens to be ready to engage fully in political and social dialogue and organisation. With its potential of enhancing economic and social well-being, promulgating social and intellectual development, and changing modes of thinking, the availability of affordable and quality education to all citizens is a key factor in ensuring social change and transformation.

2 EDUCATION AND THE REFORM PROCESS

There are two main channels through which education may enhance the chances of a meaningful and sustainable reform in the GCC region.

First and foremost, education broadens the economic and social opportunities available for individuals, giving them more choice and thereby more freedom, (Sen, 1999). In most of the poorer countries and where social conditions are lacking, a key reason that individuals fail to engage actively in politics and reform agenda is the costs associated with such activities. Active commitment in political and social reform takes time and effort, which may be luxuries for the poor or the uneducated. Although poverty is not a major factor for the GCC countries in general, income inequality is an issue in several countries, notably Saudi Arabia. More directly, broadening the potentials of individuals through education can empower them to break their chains of subordination, increasing the likelihood of active engagement in political and social dialogue.

Second, education reinforces the social and intellectual development of individuals. For example, education is a key tool for instilling civil behaviour among citizens. States that have developed such systems are able to cope with conflicts through peaceful means, enhancing the possibility of sustainable reform and change. As another example, an adequate and operational level of literacy, one of the key historical challenges in the region, is necessary for active and meaningful engagement in political and social dialogue. In a similar manner, good educational methodologies also reinforce critical thinking skills and the potential (and not just the right) to voice one's own opinion.

To achieve these ends, a good educational system should provide opportunities to all. All school-aged children should have the right and the ability to receive basic education. The system should deliver these services either freely or reasonably cheap. Quality and performance of the educational system is utmost importance. In addition, large disparities in educational opportunities can be a clear disincentive to engage actively in political and social reform discourse for the less fortunate individuals. In addition, uneven education policies may worsen income distribution, worsening the motives of future generations for active engagement in political and social change. For these reasons, ensuring access to affordable and high quality education opportunities to all citizens are necessary for facilitating the "reform from within".

The following is an assessment of the various aspects of educational systems in the GCC in light of the previous issues.

2.1 Educational attainment and quality

The GCC region as a whole compares well with other regions in terms of educational attainment in adult literacy, primary education and secondary education. In terms of higher education attainment, however, the enrolment rates are comparable with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and much less than more advanced countries. More generally, when comparisons are made with economies with comparable income levels, the GCC countries have not been able to convert their considerable resources into a well-functioning system that delivers quality education.

The attainment levels, especially the literacy rates, have shown significant improvements in recent years. According to latest statistics, adult literacy rates are around 90%, up from approximately 75%

two decades ago. This represents a significant improvement over several regions, including the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area, and more in line with progress in some of the emerging regions, notably the East Asia and Pacific, (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Adult literacy rates, in % of population of age 15 and above

	1990	2000	2007/8
Bahrain	83	86	91
Kuwait	76	86	94
Oman	..	78	87
Qatar	79	86	93
Saudi Arabia	71	79	86
United Arab Emirates	74	85	94
<i>High income: OECD</i>	99	99	99
<i>East Asia and the Pacific</i>	80	91	93
<i>Europe and Central Asia</i>	96	97	98
<i>Latin America and the Caribbean</i>	87	90	91
<i>Middle East and North Africa</i>	58	68	73
<i>South Asia</i>	47	58	63
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	54	59	62

Source: World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) and own estimates

Note: Adult literacy rates are often available only for census years, which vary from country to country. Linear estimates were used to estimate literacy rates for 1990 and 2000 whenever a sufficient number of observations were available. For the latest data, World Bank's estimates were used.

Table 2.2. Average years of schooling for ages 25 and above, 1990-2010

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Bahrain	6.0	7.2	8.3	9.0	9.4
Kuwait	5.5	5.7	6.1	6.0	6.1
Oman
Qatar	5.4	5.9	6.4	7.0	7.3
Saudi Arabia	5.5	6.0	6.6	7.2	7.8
United Arab Emirates	4.3	5.6	6.9	8.4	9.3
<i>Advanced economies</i>	8.9	9.4	9.8	10.4	10.6
<i>East Asia & Pacific</i>	4.9	5.7	6.4	6.9	7.4
<i>CEE & Central Asia</i>	8.7	9.3	9.9	10.2	10.3
<i>Latin America & Caribbean</i>	5.3	6.0	6.6	7.2	7.8
<i>Middle East & North Africa</i>	3.7	4.3	5.0	5.8	6.5
<i>South Asia</i>	2.9	3.3	3.6	4.1	4.5
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	3.2	4.0	4.2	4.6	4.9

Source: Barro and Lee (2010)

Notes: All values are estimated using a wide variety of data sources, including, but not limited to enrolment, drop-outs and repetition.

Another reliable indicator of educational attainment is the years of schooling. Table 2.2 below provides figures on the evolution of the educational attainment levels of post-university age adult population, i.e. aged 25 and above. In general, the number of years spent in school has increased in all the GCC countries for which data is available.¹ The progress has been particularly impressive in

¹ For Oman, the available enrolment data (not included here) shows that the country has also witnessed a similar development, although there are some unknown issues, such as the prevalence of drop-outs and repetitions.

Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, which have progressively approached the standards in Central and Eastern European and Central Asian countries in terms of years of schooling. The rise in the number of years has been less spectacular in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which barely surpass the average years of schooling in the MENA region. Kuwaiti schooling system has also not been very successful in keeping adults longer at school, with average years of schooling persistently trailing most of the emerging economies and regions. Attendance in tertiary education (Table 2.3) has improved but remains lower, comparable currently to Latin America and the Caribbean region as a whole. These figures should be interpreted with care as foreign university education represents a very popular alternative for most of the higher-income families.

Another shortcoming in the region is the low emphasis on early childhood education. This is most likely the outcome of the cultural aspects of the Arab society, where the traditional role of women is to remain home to raise children. The lack of proper infrastructure to respond to a growing demand for pre-primary education may be a challenge in the years to come, as women take more active role in economic life.

Table 2.3. Enrolment in tertiary education, 1991 – 2008

	1991	1999	2008	1991	1999	2008
	<i>Gross enrolment ratio (%)</i>			<i>Female-to-male ratio (%)</i>		
Bahrain	17	21	32*	136	175	253*
Kuwait	12	23	18*	..	240	231*
Oman	4	8	27	96	..	129
Qatar	22	21	16*	334	343	605*
Saudi Arabia	10	22	30	88	150	165
United Arab Emirates	7	18	25	402	295	205
<i>CEE & Central Asia</i>	34	37	55	..	113	123
<i>East Asia & Pacific</i>	5	11	26*	94**
<i>Latin America & Caribbean</i>	18	22	38	..	115	125*
<i>North America & Western Europe</i>	68	70	70	..	111	121
<i>Middle East & North Africa</i>	13	20	27	..	74	98
<i>South Asia</i>	6	8	11*	..	64	69*
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	3	4	6	..	71	68**

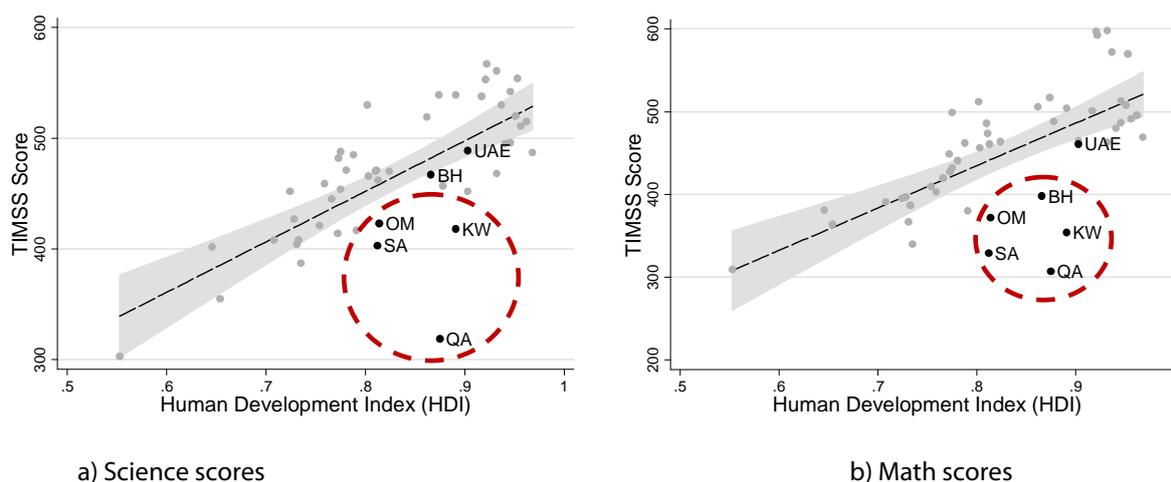
Source: World Bank and UNESCO

Notes: * 2007 data; ** 2006 data

Despite improvements in literacy and schooling, there are clear indicators that the GCC systems are unable to equip their youth with quality education. Figure shows that the GCC countries attain relatively low test scores, in spite of their high income and development levels. This is especially the case in math, where five out of six GCC countries score considerably below the norm for comparably developed countries. Qatar, one of the richest countries in the world in terms of per capita income, is among the worst performers in the sample—along with Ghana and Yemen. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman also achieve low scores, although less spectacularly. Bahrain's average test score in science is closer to the norm, although the country's 8th graders achieve a significantly low score in math. Only the United Arab Emirates (UAE) achieves scores that are within or close to the norms in both tests².

Figure 2.1. TIMSS test scores for 8th graders, 2007

² Similar results are also obtained from executive surveys conducted by the World Economic Forum (WEF). According to WEF's *Global Competitiveness Report 2010-2011*, the GCC countries achieve a much lower ranking than their competitiveness scores and income levels would suggest. Interestingly, Qatar does much better than the other GCC members in the survey results, achieving a fifth position in terms of the quality of its primary education system and a fourth position in terms of the overall quality of its system in preparing students to a competitive economy. These variances are likely to be due to the biases that surveys may contain.



Source: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and own calculations

Notes: The dashed fitted lines are based on regressions of test scores on development indices using a sample of 50 countries for which data is available. Shaded regions represent 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors of prediction. All scores are mean-scaled. HDI is developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which combines life expectancy, educational attainment and standard of living.

Some of these results are confirmed by the World Economic Forum's (WEF) assessment of the perceived quality of the educational and more broadly professional training systems. According to the executive surveys conducted under WEF's the *Global Competitiveness Reports*, the GCC countries achieve a much lower ranking than their competitiveness scores would suggest, (Table 2.4). The quality of math and science education is also low, as already captured by the TIMSS 2007 test scores. The quality of primary and higher education systems show clear signs of improvement in recent years, with the exception of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The figures also show that the GCC countries have a significant and relatively persistent deficiency in the local availability of specialized research and training services.

Table 2.4. Global Competitiveness Index (GCI): Ranking of educational and training systems

	<i>Quality of primary education</i>		<i>Quality of educational system</i>		<i>Quality of math & science education</i>		<i>Professional staff training</i>		<i>Local availability of research and training services</i>	
	2007	2010	2007	2010	2007	2010	2007	2010	2007	2010
Bahrain	65*	41	67*	38	80*	44*	59*	16	91*	81*
Kuwait	73*	79*	80*	88*	76*	89*	48*	96*	51*	75*
Oman	38	48*	50*	43*	66*	58*	38	45*	54*	85*
Qatar	33*	5	24	4	25	4	46*	19	55*	71*
Saudi Arabia	67*	54*	79*	41*	67*	49*	77*	34*	68*	34*
UAE	50*	29	39*	27	49*	26	39*	29	50*	23

Source: World Economic Forum (2007; 2010)

Note: The symbol (*) indicates that the ranking is below the country's GCI ranking.

Perhaps most spectacularly, Qatar has achieved a substantial progress between 2007 and 2010, moving up by 20 to 30 places in various measures. These findings are in sharp contrast with the low TIMSS 2007 test scores, as discussed above. The recent improvements suggest that the country's ambitious reform agenda that was implemented in 2004, the "Education in a New Era", which has sought to increase school autonomy, accountability, variety and parental choice, might have had a latent impact, not captured by the 2007 TIMSS test results or the GCI rankings, (Supreme Education Council, 2008).

These results show that GCC have been unable to divert their substantial wealth to provide a high quality of education in line with their income levels. Although literacy rates and years of schooling have increased over the years, several key indicators, such as performance in science and math fields, which are crucial for the development of a knowledge economy, are clearly lagging. The analysis also shows some ray of hope: Qatar's reform of its education system has put the country's education system one of the world's best, although its full effect on quality is not known yet.

When only the inputs devoted to education are considered, the inability of most GCC countries to improve the quality of their education systems is surprising. Over the last decade, the GCC countries have devoted substantial public funds into education, with a low of approximately 2% of GDP in the United Arab Emirates, to 3-4% in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, and a high of 7% Saudi Arabia. The region has one of the lowest student-teacher ratios, especially in the world in primary and secondary education with around 12-to-1 students per teacher, which is much lower than the ratios in most advanced economies, (Barber et al., 2007; World Bank, 2008, Tables A.1-2).

One potential explanation of the reason that the GCC's education systems may fail to deliver high quality education and performance is the quality of teachers and lack of proper incentives. Most of the GCC countries have failed to devise an operational model for performance-based incentives for teachers. Under Qatar's "Education for a New Era" reform package, an Evaluation Institute and assessment procedures have been introduced. Moreover, all the GCC members have taken the active decision to take part in the 2007 TIMSS assessment. Despite these, the systems currently provide little incentives or performance-based incentives for teachers and administrators. For the GCC region as a whole, the absence of proper motives and performance measures in education is believed to be political, reflecting the utilisation of the education system to "absorb excess national labour force", (Barber et al., 2007). More broadly, lacking voice, citizens have few tools to influence education policy by themselves, except for the lucky few that can put their children to private schools with better resources.

2.2 Educational methodology and curriculum

Recent research highlights the importance of pedagogy in primary and secondary schools, including an enhanced focus on inquiry-based learning instead of rote memorisation, which characterises the methodology in most of the region.³ As noted in UNDP's (2003) Arab Human Development Report, the curricula and the teaching methodologies followed in Arab countries appear to encourage submission and subordination rather than critical thinking, where

"[c]ommunication in education is didactic, supported by set books containing indisputable texts in which knowledge is objectified so as to hold incontestable facts, and by an examination process that only tests memorisation and factual recall", [p. 54].

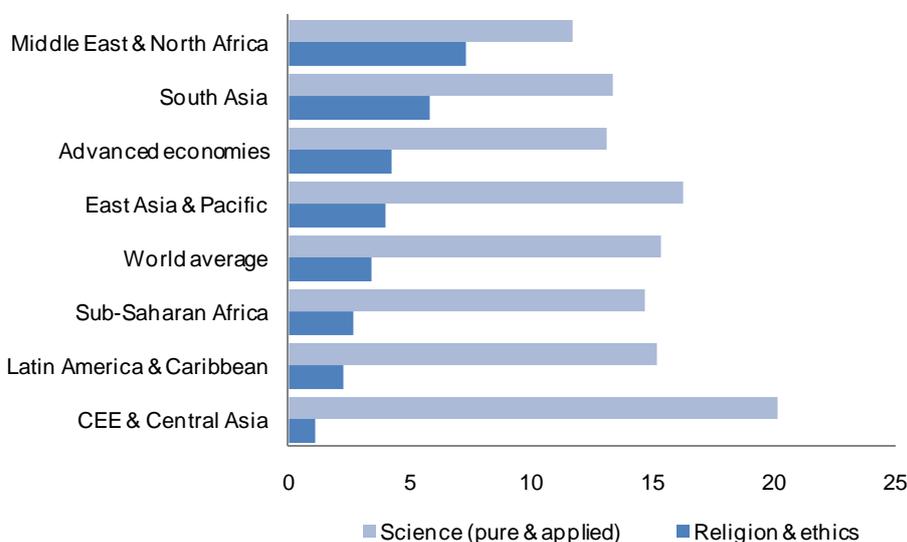
According to the authors of the report, such practices fail to invite free dialogue or thinking and serve to "weaken the capacity to hold opposing viewpoints and to think outside the box", (UNDP, 2004, p. 147). Rote learning is seen as a major contributor to the lack of progress in research and development in the region and stands as one of the major challenges in the path for achieving a knowledge society—one of the common strategic aims of the region.

Today, the education systems in GCC continue to apply outdated pedagogy, with predominance of Arabic language, history, and religion subjects taking precedence over math, science and computer classes. More broadly, the use of information and technical (ICT) technologies as a pedagogical tool has been relatively limited, despite strong evidence that students that have access to computers do much better in other fields, such as mathematics and science. The introduction of ICT in classes has

³ As discussed below, the modernisation of education methods and pedagogy along with the Finnish best-practice is a key part of a recent project between the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) and EduCluster Finland Inc., signed in June 2010.

not been accompanied with investment in hardware, software, training for teachers and maintenance.

Figure 2.2. Instructional time allocated to religion and science in grades 7 and 8



Source: Benavot (2006)

Note: All figures are for the year 2000.

Religious education represents a significant proportion of primary and secondary education in the GCC countries. The rising use of religious organisations, such as Koranic schools and local mosques, for providing ancillary education services could be an important driver in the recent drop in literacy rates, (World Bank, 2008, p. 148). However, time and resources devoted to religious studies is time that could have been spent on other disciplines, such as foreign languages, mathematics and science, which are essential in developing knowledge economies and thus more aligned with the countries' long-term socioeconomic priorities.

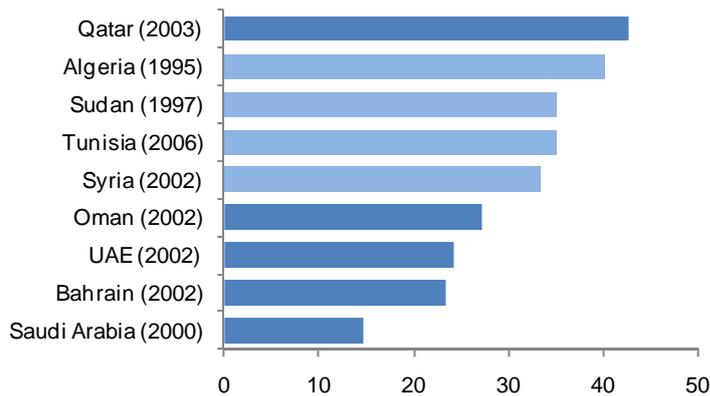
Figure 2.2 shows that the total time allocated to religious and moral education courses in the MENA countries is significantly above the worldwide averages as well as averages in other regions. In contrast, the percentage of time allocated to science courses, which include pure science (such as physics, chemistry, and biology) as well as applied fields (such as computer and technological fields), are the lowest in MENA countries.

The pervasiveness of religious and moral education is particularly striking in Saudi Arabia, where Islamic education classes represent about one-third of the total course-load of a typical primary school student and up to one-quarter of the total course in most secondary schools, (Maroun et al., 2008).⁴ Math and science education are given lesser importance, despite a more pro-scientific and technical orientation set out in the Ten-year Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education for 2004-2014.⁵ Only a minority of students specialise in natural sciences and technical fields during their upper-secondary education.

Figure 2.3. Share of students in higher education majoring in science-related fields

⁴ Supplementary information on Saudi Arabia's education systems is from the country profile available from the website of UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE), <http://www.ibe.unesco.org>.

⁵ A summary of Saudi Arabia's Ten-year Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Education is accessible at <http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Saudi%20Arabia/Saudi%20Arabia%20Education%20Plan%20English%20summary.pdf>.



Source: Radwan (2009) using figures from Arab Labour Organisation (2008), *First Arab Report on Employment and Unemployment in the Arab Countries: Towards Effective Policies*, Cairo, Egypt.

The choice of specialisation areas in higher education is another concern in the GCC region. Surveys reveal that the region’s markets are in short supply of university graduates with degrees in science and technology programs, (Maroun et al., 2008). Empirical evidence confirms that there is a mismatch between the needs of the private sector and the degrees obtained, reflected by an under-provision of science majors, (Figure 2.3). In particular, with the exception of Qatar and Kuwait (for which data is not available), the share of higher education students in GCC countries majoring in science and its related fields remain at or below 25%, which is significantly below the averages in the broader MENA region. Most strikingly, in Saudi Arabia, science majors represent less than 15% of all university students.

The same issues are also applicable to technical and vocational training (TVET) opportunities in upper-secondary and tertiary level education, which tend to be underprovided in the region. Additionally, lifelong learning opportunities are not available to many in some of the GCC countries, such as the Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Access to education

Over the past two decades, the significance of private schooling has changed considerably in GCC countries. Throughout the region, private universities, professional schools, and training centres are opening at an increasing pace. Over the past few years, several leading US and EU institutions have opened universities, notably in Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, granting degrees that are officially recognised in their home countries.

These developments hide an equivalent growth of private education in pre-tertiary levels. Table 2.5 shows that the private schools play important roles in primary and secondary education in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE. In the latter two countries, more than half of all primary school students attend private schools. This is in contrast with the experience in East Asia, where governments have committed themselves to basic education and provided incentives for the private sector to provide upper-secondary and tertiary education. One major concern is that systems that devote more resources to private schooling at the expense of public schooling may lead to a substantial exclusion of the poor and middle-income earners from access to quality education. This could be the case, if, for example, the fiscal resources devoted to public schools deteriorate as private schooling becomes more prevalent or if the financial assistance provided to poor students are inadequate.

Table 2.5. Enrolment in private schools, in % of total enrolment, most recent figures

	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>
Bahrain	28	19
Kuwait	38	29
Oman	7	2
Qatar	50	38
Saudi Arabia	8	13
UAE	67*	49*
<i>Europe & Central Asia</i>	1**	1**
<i>High income: OECD</i>	11**	17**
<i>Latin America & Caribbean</i>	12**	16**
<i>Middle East & North Africa</i>	7**	6**
<i>South Asia</i>	19**	48**
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	12**	..

Source: World Bank

Notes: * 2007 figures; ** 2003/4 figures

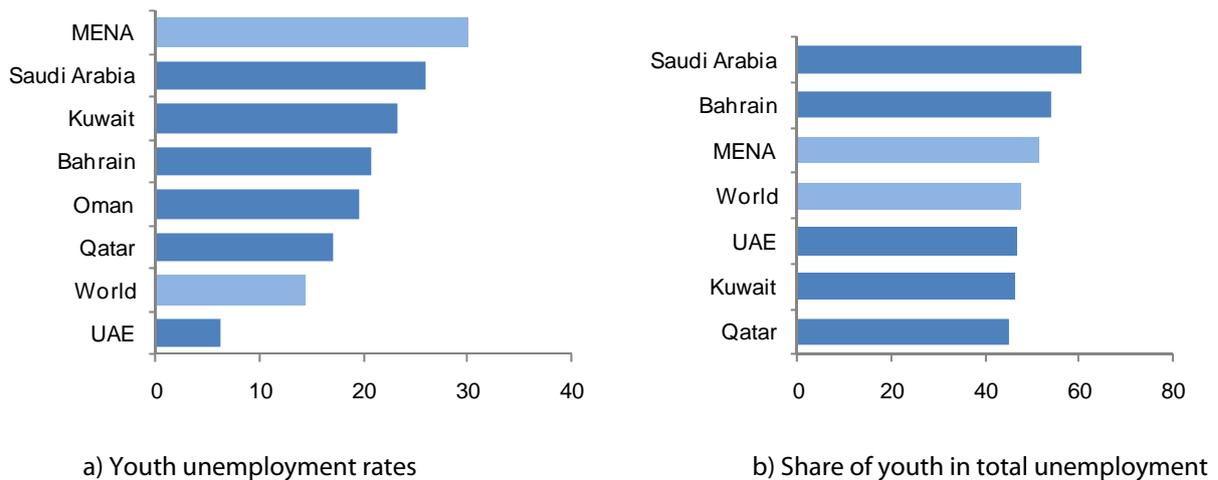
Access of women to education is another important aspect with distributional consequences. Although women's role in economic and political life has been relatively limited in the region, access to education is not a particular concern. To a large extent, girls have achieved similar levels of education as boys as the gross enrolment rates of the two are comparable. In fact, in many cases women have better access to education. In secondary and especially tertiary education women's enrolment rates actually surpass those for men in all GCC countries. In particular, in all GCC countries, the number of women in universities significantly surpasses the number of males, with a factor of two to six times with the exception of Oman and Saudi Arabia, (Table 2.3), The same tendencies are also apparent performance measures. Women are less likely to drop-out or repeat their classes in the GCC countries, much like in the greater MENA region, (World Bank, 2008, Table C.5). Moreover, the greatest performance differences between girls and boys within the sample of countries included in the TIMSS 2007 study are in Oman, Qatar and Bahrain, where girls outperform boys with a margin of five to ten standard deviations.

Although the superior performance of girls may come as a respite, there is reason to suspect that the situation may be an offshoot of another endemic problem. Most of the government schools in the GCC countries are segregated by gender, especially in post-primary level, where boys are taught by male teachers and girls by female teachers. Since women are by far more willing to become teachers than their male counterparts, due to cultural reasons, this creates an excess demand for male teachers. This could result in the choice of male teachers with less motivation and qualifications, potentially explaining the gender gap in performance, (Barber et al., 2007).

2.4 Outcomes of education

Individuals and public authorities invest in education systems anticipating, among other things, higher social and economic returns. In most advanced countries, receiving a higher quality education comes with the ultimate benefit of obtaining a better paid and more stable job opportunity. A more educated workforce also contributes to worker productivity, generating economy-wide benefits.

Figure 2.4. Youth (ages 15-24) unemployment in GCC countries, 2005



Source: Arab Labour Organization

In the GCC countries, much like the broader MENA region, the linkage between education and economic returns are at best weak, mostly due to problems during entry to the job market. The region's economies suffer from youth unemployment, although the rates are relatively low, (Figure 2.4a). This is due to the low unemployment rates in the GCC countries, ranging from lows of 2-4% in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE to 5-6% in Saudi Arabia and Oman according to 2006/7 data.⁶ When the share of Arab youth in total unemployment is depicted, however, a different picture emerges, (Figure 2.4b). Both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have more youth in their total unemployed workforce than the MENA and world averages. Moreover, the differences between less unemployment prone countries (such as the GCC region) and others diminish, with the youth representing roughly 50% of the total unemployment, with the exception of Saudi Arabia.

Although there are no coherent differences in unemployment rates between males and females (not shown here), these may change as women's participation rates increase from their current averages of 15 to 30% in Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia and approximately 40% in Qatar and UAE to become more in line with the international standard of 50% and above.

These observations underline a clear challenge for the GCC region as a whole. Rich in oil and economic opportunities but short on supply of labour, the region is a net importer of foreign labour. Starting with the oil boom of 1970s, the GCC countries have been constrained severely by labour shortages, with international workers representing between one-quarter to two-thirds of the total population. Recent studies show that most of these workers, especially those of Arab origin, work in higher skill and mid-skill jobs, (Fargues, 2006; Kapiszewski, 2006).

In short, the labour market is unable to meet the demands of the private sector adequately, leaving public sector as the key employer of the domestic graduates. Indeed, the public sectors have been significant contributors to employment in GCC countries. In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, for example, the public sector is by far the largest contributor to employment. As noted above, the state jobs, including in education, health and other public services, have been as the primary means of distributing oil revenues and increasing employment.

Much like its neighbours in the MENA region, the GCC will face a serious employment challenge in the upcoming decades due to a young demographic structure (i.e. the "youth bulge") and increased participation of women in the workforce. In the meantime, the public jobs will become less available,

⁶ For more on labour statistics in Arab countries, see Arab Labour Organisation's (ALO's) 2008 statistical package at <http://www.alolabor.org/nArabLabor/images/stories/Statistics/booktable-8.xls> [in Arabic].

partly due to ongoing reforms to curtail the size of the government. This means that if the current skill mismatches are not corrected, the unemployment rates are only going to worsen, challenging the economic well-being of the citizens.

3 EU-GCC COOPERATION IN EDUCATION

The EU-GCC cooperation in the field of education, scientific and technology have been relatively limited, capturing the following areas:

1. Student and staff mobility and exchange in higher education;
2. Research support under the EC Framework Programmes;
3. Specific funding for outreach programmes;
4. Cooperation between higher education institutions; and,
5. Bilateral cooperation between states on vocational and teacher training.

Currently, the cooperation between the EU and the GCC states on education, scientific and technology is based on the EU-GCC Cooperation Agreement in 25 February 1989,⁷ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening cooperation with third countries in the field of higher education (COM/2001/0385 final),⁸ and the Council Directive (2004/114/EC) of 13 December 2004 on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service.

In line with these provisions and decisions, the Joint Communiqué of the 16th EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting of May 2006 agreed to strengthen cooperation by increasing the participation of GCC countries in the EU's Erasmus Mundus, which provides financial support for institutions and scholarships for individuals. In the same meeting, the GCC countries showed an interest in participating in the EU's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). Until very recently, only Oman, a member of the International Cooperation Partner Countries (ICPC) group, has been eligible for FP7 financing.

Despite the recent decision to enlarge the scope of the Erasmus Mundus, the programme has provided only a very limited number of scholarships to GCC students. Since the academic year of 2008/9, only four students (two from Saudi Arabia and two from Oman) received scholarships. The low numbers appear to be entirely due to scanty interest in the programme.⁹ One potential explanation is that the financial benefits of these programmes are often less attractive than the scholarships offered by the governments of the GCC states to study in top European and US universities.

Within the FP7 work program for 2009, the European Commission issued a call for the establishment of a network for international cooperation (INCO-NET), which will include partners from several GCC-states. Officially launched in February 2010, the network's main objective is to create a platform "to identify common interests in research areas, set up [science and technology] priorities, support capacity building activities, and enhance the interaction between different cooperation instruments

⁷ The entire text of the Cooperation Agreement (Official Journal L 054, 25 February 1989, pp. 3-15), available at [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:21989A0225\(01\):EN:HTML](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:21989A0225(01):EN:HTML).

⁸ The entire text of the Communication (COM/2001/0385 final) is available at http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2001&nu_doc=385&lg=en.

⁹ According to the detailed statistics from the European Commission for the academic year of 2009/10, the total number of applicants from the GCC countries was 8; out of this total amount, only two received scholarships. For more information on the selection of candidates, see http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/results_compendia/statistics_en.php.

of the European Commission and EU Member States".¹⁰ To that extent, the project aims to close the gap on information sharing and network-building between the EU and GCC in research cooperation.

Other specific EU-GCC cooperation in research includes funding provided specific outreach projects, such as the "EU-GCC Al-Jisr Project" led by the Gulf Research Center (GRC)¹¹; Eurogolfe - Public Diplomacy and Outreach Project" (EPDOP) led by the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques¹²; and, "EU-GCC Chamber Forum" organized by Eurochambres and Federation of GCC Chambers of Commerce. Although these programmes do not directly provide funding for researchers in the region, they aim to encourage cooperation between the EU-GCC, which, as shown above, is lacking.

One interesting development over the last few years is the increased role of foreign higher education institutions in the GCC. Thanks to a liberalization of the higher-education sectors in some GCC countries, a number of US and Canadian universities have opened branches in the GCC countries, most notably in the UAE. A number of European universities have followed suit in recent years, including Universität Bonn, Paris-Sorbonne Université, Haute école des études commerciales, Freie Universität Berlin, Sciences-Po Paris, Exeter University, London School of Economics, London Business School, Ecole nationale d'administration, INSEAD Business School, University of Navarra, Oxford University, Cambridge University. While some of these institutions have opened degree-granting universities, others have engaged in joint academic programmes in a variety of fields as well as research and development and technology transfer activities with local universities, especially in the UAE.

Lastly, several EU member states have engaged in bilateral cooperation on vocational in several fields. For example, British Council's so-called "1001 schools" programme creates school partnerships between the GCC region (plus Iraq and Yemen) and the UK, providing leadership programs for head teachers and deputies as well as providing ICT training for teachers. German-Arab Education and Vocational Training Forum, held in May 2009 (and to be held in October 2010) is led by iMOVE, an initiative of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), and Ghorfa, Arab-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry, to provide provided matchmaking opportunities for vocational training suppliers and clients. As another example of bilateral cooperation, Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) signed a contract with EduCluster Finland Inc. in June 2010 to apply the Finnish best practices in curriculum design and pedagogy methods and develop the teacher and staff skills in two primary schools in Abu Dhabi. As part of the project, Finnish teachers will provide training and child-centered methods of teaching as well as teaching English language, math and science courses. In addition to its financial support for the program, ADEC will also support visits for UAE teachers and staff to Finnish universities and schools as part of its life-long learning aims.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To summarize, the current briefing has argued that social change and transformation in GCC countries is only possible with the active involvement of citizens in political and social dialogue. Reforms introduced by the ruling powers are often put forward to secure their own power or to appease foreign powers, often cosmetic and ineffective in actual implementation. Foreign pressure alone, especially when it is perceived as excessive external influence or downright arrogance, is unlikely to work or may even back-fire. To sum up, as highlighted in the 15th EU-GCC Council and Ministerial Meeting Joint Communiqué, the "development and modernisation process on political,

¹⁰ See the project website (accessed on 28 September 2010): <http://www.inconet-gcc.eu/about/basis-objectives/>.

¹¹ Other participants of the EU-GCC Al-Jisr Project consortium include the Arab Reform Initiative, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the Centre for European Policy Studies, the European Institute for Asian Studies, the Fundacion Para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior (FRIDE), the Instituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the Institute for Diplomatic Studies, Kuwait University, National Technical University of Athens, Sciences-Po, and Lund University. For more information, see <http://aljisir.ae/>.

¹² For more information, see <http://eurogolfe.sciences-po.fr/epdop-project.html>.

economic, and social domains should come from within the states and regions concerned and be owned by them.”

One of the challenges that the region faces, in terms of its potential for change, is the lack of organisation or understanding of political mobilisation. This highlights the importance of education, with its potential of broadening opportunities, intellectual development, and changing modes of thinking.

Various shortcomings of the system were highlighted. Among these, the most crucial concerns are as follows:

1. Low quality and performance in pre-tertiary level education;
2. Short supply of graduates with science and technology degrees;
3. Lack of accountability and incentives for teachers;
4. Aged curriculum and methodology in pre-tertiary level education; and,
5. Rigidities in the education pathway.

For its part, the EU’s multilateral and bilateral relationship with the GCC states has focused mostly on higher education and research. Providing students of the region with possibilities to receive university education and engage in research in prestigious EU institutions as well as exchange opportunities can be instrumental in creating role models, leaders and enhancing knowledge. However, most of the programmes, notably the Erasmus-Mundus scholarships, have not been successful due to a limited amount of interest on the part of GCC countries. For this reason, a proper assessment of the impact of extending education cooperation arrangements to include other programmes, such as the Jean Monnet scholarships for post-graduate research, is necessary.

Broadening the EU-GCC cooperation from its current focus to pre-tertiary education is also a much needed step. Currently, cooperation venues in primary and secondary level issues are narrowly addressed by bilateral cooperation between EU’s member states and GCC countries. If the countries in the region follow Qatar’s example, there is likely to be a demand for cooperation in performance measurement methods and methodology reform, in which the EU may deploy significant know-how through technical assistance and Twinning programmes. Moreover, teacher and staff mobility and training programmes, such as those that exist under ERASMUS for EU Member States and specific mobility projects with industrialised countries, can be extremely fruitful. As is often the case, foreign teachers, even if they are engaged only in teaching foreign languages may serve as role models or “agents of change”. EU-wide opportunities for providing vocational training and teachers’ training, such as the ones led by the German-GCC initiative, may also be complementary in supporting reform in teaching pedagogies.

More broadly, there is some space for cooperation on a broader level, notably in institutional and civil services areas. The region’s governments are showing some willingness to modernise their public and civil services. Local and municipal bodies as well as regulatory bodies can learn from the experience and best practice in Europe. Initiatives and cooperation in these areas can be developed, providing the GCC countries’ governments and public organs technical assistance. More specifically, the civil actors of participatory democracies, including civil society organisations, political parties and journalists, may be supported through a variety of initiatives to provide with experience and training opportunities in the EU.

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