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# The development of the education system in Qatar: assessing the intended and unintended impacts of privatization policy shifts

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## ABSTRACT

Qatar is caught in the struggle between reformation of its educational system to create a dynamic, local workforce and prepare their citizens for the competitive global market for higher education and jobs, whilst preserving the country's values, tradition and language. This paper examines the recent policy shifts, hitherto underexplored, analysing the intended and unexpected impacts that influenced subsequent policy reform. It begins with a background on neoliberal educational policies followed by a historical account of the education system, with a focus on post-2011 where the government introduced a voucher system to further privatization. Using quantitative longitudinal analyses based on tabulating detailed government educational reports from 2010 onwards, it aims to investigate the impact of these post-2011 policies on the number of schools, students, gender and demographic composition in the government and private schooling sector. The data illustrates how a simple, linear trend of privatization has not occurred and that significant demographic changes have begun to surface between government and private schools. If these trends continue at the same rate across the next decade, this will likely result in transformative social changes and divisions in relation to identity, language, gender, cultural values, socio-economic status, higher education choices and job opportunities.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In a century and a half, Qatar has transformed from a country with a small population of 20,000 with 15 schools in 1891<sup>1</sup> to one with a population of nearly 3 million and 529 primary and secondary schools serving 327,841 students as of the 2019/2020 academic year.<sup>2</sup> During that time period, the adult literacy rate rose from low levels to

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Anscombe, *The Ottoman Gulf: The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 56.

<sup>2</sup>MOEHE, *Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2020–2019*. Department of Educational Policy and Research, Educational Statistics Section (Doha: Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2020).

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above 93%.<sup>3</sup> These changes largely took place in the last 50 years, which emphasizes the pace and depth of these developments, and highlights the tremendous institutional and socio-cultural changes. The government of Qatar has ambitions that the next 50 years will be as transformative as the past, as the country aims to move from being dependent on oil and gas resources and a majority expatriate population to a local highly skilled and dynamic workforce that can build and maintain a knowledge-based economy that thrives in today's globalized and rapidly-shifting context. To this end, it has witnessed rapid educational policy changes. Against this backdrop, Qatar's education system has an underlying tension between preserving and maintaining their culture, religion, language, values and traditions, on the one hand, and being part of the global, competitive job market that values Western educational models and that demands a high command of the English language on the other.

Hitherto, most academic studies assess the shift in policies focusing specifically on language and its impact on identity, employment and higher education, particularly as Qatar is a majority expatriate country where English is mainly used.<sup>4</sup> Other studies examine the impact and efficacy of policy shifts using interviews with students, teachers or principals<sup>5</sup>; or through specific school case studies and comparisons<sup>6</sup>; or through interviews with ministry officials, education consultants and other key stakeholders<sup>7</sup>; or through consultant reports.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of these studies examine the period between 2001 and 2011, which was when the first major neoliberal policies were enacted, only to be revised later, as will be explained below.

This paper analyses the period from 2010 to 2020, covering more recent trends in Qatar's educational sector, particularly the introduction of the voucher system in 2012, which heavily subsidized private schools for Qatari citizens. Using quantitative longitudinal analyses based on tabulating detailed government educational reports from 2010 onwards, it aims to investigate the impact of these policies on the number of schools, students, gender and demographic composition in the government and private schooling sector. The paper argues that the last decade has witnessed a boost in the private education system. This increase has been caused primarily by the parallel increase in the expatriate population and to a lesser extent a shift of some Qatari citizens choosing to use the government vouchers to subsidize private school fees. However, a closer look at the data shows that this is not a simple trend of privatization. The government school system also witnessed an increase, albeit at a slower pace. Despite the introduction of the vouchers, the majority of Qatari citizens are still attending government schools, yet with

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<sup>3</sup>World Bank, 'Data Bank: Educational Attainment—Qatar', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CUAT.UP.ZS?locations=QA> (accessed October 25, 2022).

<sup>4</sup>For example: Sara Hillman and Emilio Ocampo Eibenschutz, 'English, Super-Diversity, and Identity in the State Of Qatar', *World Englishes* 37, no. 2 (2018): 228–247.; Eiman Mustafawi, and Kassim Shaaban, 'Language Policies in Education in Qatar between 2003 and 2012: From Local to Global then Back to Local', *Language Policy* 18, no. 2 (2019): 209–242.

<sup>5</sup>For example: Michael H. Romanowski et al., 'Qatar's Educational Reform: The Experiences and Perceptions of Principals, Teachers and Parents', *International Journal of Education* 5, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>6</sup>For example: Taraf Nasser Alnaimi, 'Reflections on Education Reform in Qatar: A Look at Independent School Experience', *Multi-Knowledge Electronic Comprehensive Journal for Education and Science Publications (MECSJ)* 20 (2019).; Tamader Althani, and Michael Romanowski, 'Neoliberalism and Qatari Preschools: A Comparative Study of England and Qatar', *Near and Middle Eastern Journal of Research in Education* 2013, no. 1 (2013): 2 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/nmejre.2013.2>.

<sup>7</sup>For example: Mohamed Alaa Abdel-Moneim, 'Between Global and National Prescriptions for Education Administration: The Rocky Road of Neoliberal Education Reform in Qatar', *International Journal of Educational Development* 74 (2020).

<sup>8</sup>For example: Ramzi Nasser, 'Qatar's Educational Reform Past and Future: Challenges in Teacher Development', *Open Review of Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23265507.2016.1266693>.

an upward trend towards private schools. The complex factors surrounding issues pertaining to cultural identity, Arabic language, global and local job markets and opportunities, and rapid social change that challenges traditional gender roles obfuscate a simple trend of privatization. We conclude with reflections on what this decade suggests for future educational reform and social changes within the Qatari landscape.

The significance of this research is twofold: first, it examines the hitherto scantily researched period from 2010 onwards using a quantitative, longitudinal method to accurately measure subtle yet significant changes in the private and governmental school sector that have wider implications for society; and second, it provides a case study for many other non-English-speaking countries, as will be discussed below, also in the process of enacting neoliberal educational policies. The paper begins with a background on neoliberalism and education followed by a brief historical overview of the Qatar educational system and policy shifts. Both provide essential context for the data, subsequent analysis and insight into future policy reform and trends. This is followed by the methodology, data results, discussion and concluding remarks.

### **Globalization, neoliberalism, and education**

In 'rapidly globalizing systems of schooling around the world, economic considerations have led to a push to impose neoliberal reforms in the field of education'.<sup>9</sup> Throughout Asia, Africa, the Arabian Gulf and the non-English speaking West, many governments, intergovernmental organizations and corporate bodies are promoting neoliberal English language medium policies as well as the adoption of Western education products and services in various ways transforming education into a lucrative industry with many multi-level actors and stakeholders.<sup>10</sup> This desire 'is mainly derived from the assumption that global market advantages coupled with stronger education systems can be obtained through the successful mastery of English-language within nation-states'.<sup>11</sup> As Tsui and Tollefson describe, globalization depends on technology and English and so countries are trying to ensure that their citizens are equipped with these two skills.<sup>12</sup> The perceived benefits of Western-inspired educational tools and curricula, including the English-language, have become essential in spreading neoliberal political, social and educational norms, which have fundamentally reshaped the very concepts of education and knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

The MENA region has followed this broad trend, albeit in varying degrees. From the '1980s even the formerly "socialist" Arab states opted for a policy of economic and social disengagement reflecting their integration into a capitalist world system ... [including] private educational sectors'.<sup>14</sup> According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2016, 'Arab societies perform below the world average on educational attainment, achievement

<sup>9</sup>Anita Gupta, 'How Neoliberal Globalization is Shaping Early Childhood Education Policies in India, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Maldives', *Policy Futures in Education* 16, no. 1 (2018): 11–28.

<sup>10</sup>Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>11</sup>Osman Barnawi, *Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2018), 17.

<sup>12</sup>Amy B. M. Tsui and James W. Tollefson, eds., *Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 1.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Roberts and Michael Peters, *Neoliberalism, Higher Education and Research* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008).

<sup>14</sup>Samira Alayan et al., eds., *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2012), 4.

and equitable access', often used to justify the need for substantive educational reform.<sup>15</sup> The resultant efforts have largely aimed at raising educational quality by improved teacher training and pedagogies that inspire critical thinking skills as opposed to rote memorization and upgrading the curricula to better prepare students for the current demands of the labour market and more Western-inspired, English-language programs and privatization.<sup>16,17</sup> As Kirkpatrick and Barnawi state broadly, in the region English ability has become increasingly synonymous with academic excellence and success, employability and professional mobility causing some parents to demand English programs even at pre-school levels.<sup>18</sup> That being said, there are also significant opposing voices, from religious-minded leaders to secular nationals, that warn against the dilution of local culture, language as well as the implicit subjugation that comes with importing foreign educational tools and services.<sup>19</sup>

In the comparatively well-resourced Arabian Gulf countries, education is at the heart of realizing far-reaching national transformation plans for economic diversification and building a knowledge-based economy. It includes 'new desires for Western-inspired forms of education, internationalization and transnational education; new ethos of English-medium formal education policies, curricula and classroom pedagogical practices; and new strong desire to purchase western higher education products, goods and services'.<sup>20</sup> High demand for better quality education is a result of a booming expatriate population, where in some countries they outnumber the locals, a youth bulge ranging between one-third to one-half of populations under 25,<sup>21</sup> coupled with a high GDP per capita. In their quest to rapidly improve educational standards for their citizens, GCC policymakers have mainly partnered with Western consultants who have recommended the standard neoliberal western models for educational reforms.<sup>22</sup>

Neoliberalism is defined as 'a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.<sup>23</sup> The three pillars of neoliberalism are freedom of the market, individualism and privatization. In short, with regard to education, neoliberalism takes form in market-driven approaches to educational systems, which turn education into a tradable commodity impacted by consumer

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<sup>15</sup>UNDP, 'Chapter 3: Education and the transition to work', in *Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality* (New York, NY: United Nations Publications, 2016) <https://arab-hdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/adhr-report-2018-full-report.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup>James L. Gelvin, ed., *The Contemporary Middle East in an Age of Upheaval* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2021), 59.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Kirkpatrick, ed., *English Language Education Policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>19</sup>Samira Alayan et al., eds., *The Politics of Education Reform in the Middle East: Self and Other in Textbooks and Curricula* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2012), 4.

<sup>20</sup>Awad Ibrahim and Osman Z. Barnawi, eds., *The Past, Present and Future of Higher Education in the Arabian Gulf Region: Critical Comparative Perspectives in a Neoliberal Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 1.

<sup>21</sup>Mona Al-Munajjed and Karim Sabbagh, *Youth in GCC Countries: Meeting the Challenge* (Riyadh: Booz & Company Inc, 2011). [https://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/2011\\_Youth\\_GCC\\_Countries\\_Meeting\\_Challenge\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/2011_Youth_GCC_Countries_Meeting_Challenge_Eng.pdf).

<sup>22</sup>Daniel J. Kirk, 'Comparative Education and the Arabian Gulf', in *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education*, ed. Alexander W. Wiseman and Emily Anderson (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing, 2013), 175–189.

<sup>23</sup>David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

demand, maximizing profits and efficiency. It shifts education from a social good to a market good.<sup>24</sup>

A recent report on education in the GCC by Alpen Capital, an investment banking advisory firm, best illustrates this trend. The report describing the GCC education 'industry' is punctuated throughout with marketing language and logic, such as 'supply', 'demand', 'competition' and 'marketing strategies' for schools, the 'growth' of the sector and describing children from middle-income families as 'new markets' as there is 'saturation' of the 'premium sector'.<sup>25</sup> It describes the population base for school and college age GCC students as steadily rising, being approximately 14.5 million in 2022, up from 12.9 million in 2017.<sup>26</sup> The report summarizes:

The GCC education sector is continuing to grow on account of rising population, high per capita income and a growing preference for private education. . . . Despite a slowdown in economic growth, the education sector has remained a top priority for governments across the GCC as witnessed by their sizeable budgetary allocations towards this sector. Government long-term strategic initiatives and spending has played a pivotal role in strengthening the sector . . . .To remain competitive, private and international operators are adopting innovative and novel marketing strategies to encourage student enrolments.<sup>27</sup>

Privatization has some advantages. It can provide higher-quality education relative to the government schools that are more responsive to the mercurial world. As the report repeatedly highlights:

. . . the private sector offers choices that are unavailable in the public sphere . . . . Secondly, the private sector has the inherent ability to respond rapidly to changing environment. And fewer environments are changing as rapidly as education today, driven by advances in technology and the need to prepare a whole generation for jobs that, in many cases, don't even exist today.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, women have greatly benefited, particularly from the internationalization of higher education. It is now possible for them to receive a qualification from a prestigious university without leaving the country.<sup>29</sup> Local people can also upgrade their skills and positions and gain internationally recognized qualifications while working, partially addressing the shortage of local talent.<sup>30</sup>

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of private education, some scholars fiercely argue that there are inherent defects in neoliberal policies in general. The main criticism is that these policies create systems that favour accumulation of private wealth in a few strata of society resulting in income disparities and deeply embedded inequalities.<sup>31</sup> This occurs not only at the corporate level but also at the individual level as access to quality education can become a product of financial privilege, thereby furthering inequalities in

<sup>24</sup>Awad Ibrahim and Osman Z. Barnawi, eds., *The Past, Present and Future of Higher Education in the Arabian Gulf Region: Critical Comparative Perspectives in a Neoliberal Era* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 1–4.

<sup>25</sup>Alpen Capital, *GCC Education Industry* (Alpen Capital, 2018), <https://argaamplus.s3.amazonaws.com/9e55ad53-477f-48f0-b202-2c2f03d6a03d.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup>Mourad Dakhli and Dina El Zohairy, 'Emerging Trends in Higher Education in the GCC', in *Innovation in Business Education in Emerging Markets*, ed. Ilan Alon, Victoria Jones and John R. McIntyre (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 50.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Abdullah Al-Beraidi, 'The Trap of Neoliberalism for GCC countries: Salvaging an Economy or Drowning a Community?', *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 11, no. 4 (2018), 63–82.

society.<sup>32</sup> The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), via SDG 4 that aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Notably, in the targets and indicators of SDG 4 are explicit mentions of free, universal and inclusive primary and secondary education (see Targets 4.1, 4.5, 4.a). While private education may strive to be inclusive, providing quality education for children with diverse learning abilities requires additional staff with appropriate training, which either increases operational costs or impacts quality. In practice, most private schools opt not to provide admission to children with disabilities (as a case in point: of the 322 private schools in Qatar, less than 10 are admitting students with disabilities). As a result, private education may increase a certain type of education quality, but it does not foster (in most instances) inclusive education. For this reason, the SDGs are clear that quality and inclusive education must be free. It is possible that private schools still operate in an educational ecosystem where schooling is free (e.g. subsidized by the government), however this differs in form and substance from the neoliberal case for educational privatization. As a result, the mission and the objectives of the education sector, as determined by relevant government actors, play a critical role in enabling quality and inclusive education, enacted through policies regarding privatisation (or the lack thereof). In order to contextualize the period of focus in this paper (2010–2020), we now turn to a brief history of the education system in Qatar, and the policy shifts that enabled various reforms.

### **Brief history of Qatar's educational system and policies**

With liquified natural gas (LNG) exports starting in 1997, the new Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, had resources coupled with his strong ambitions. Educated himself in the United Kingdom, the Emir set about to transform Qatar into a dynamic, modern economy and society.<sup>33</sup> Education was his focal point. The same year he became Emir (1995), he and his wife Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser, established the Qatar Foundation, with its flagship project, Education City (1997-), that became a home to branch campuses of six prestigious Western universities.<sup>34</sup>

However, one major challenge was that the K-12 government education system was not producing students that had the necessary skills to study at these prestigious universities, neither at the local branches nor compete globally.<sup>35,36</sup> Therefore, in 2001, the Qatari government commissioned the US-based think-tank, RAND, to assess the education system and provide recommendations for improvement.<sup>37</sup> This began a new chapter in the development of Qatar's educational system.

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<sup>32</sup>David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>33</sup>Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

<sup>34</sup>Qatar Foundation, 'About Us', <https://www.qf.org.qa/about>.

<sup>35</sup>Brewer et al., *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K-12 Education Reform in Qatar* (Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2007).

<sup>36</sup>Nassra Al-Banai and Ramzi Nasser, 'The Educational Reform in Qatar: Challenges and Successes' (Paper Presented at the Second International Conference on Education and Social Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey, February 2–4, 2015).

<sup>37</sup>Lolwah R. M. Alkhater, 'Qatar's Borrowed K-12 Education Reform in Context', in *Policy-Making in a Transformative State: The Case of Qatar*, ed. M. Evren Tok, Lolwah R. M. Alkhater and Leslie A. Pal (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97–130.



## 2001–2011

In 2001 RAND assessed the Qatari K-12 system. According to RAND, although key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, policymakers, and administrators were receptive to change, the system was rigid under the MOE, the curriculum was outdated and outmoded with an emphasis on rote memorization as opposed to critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The report produced by the American think tank suggested that schools had no vision or goals, that school buildings and classrooms were in poor conditions with a lack of basic equipment and supplies, and that teachers had low pay with few incentives with almost no professional development.<sup>38</sup> RAND offered three different options:

- (a) Option 1: A modified centralized model that gave more schools relatively more authority and autonomy.
- (b) Option 2: A decentralized charter school model under a new regulatory body that gave each school the freedom to design and implement their own internal affairs allowing space for innovation and competition.
- (c) Option 3: A decentralized and privatized voucher-based system, where Qatari parents receive vouchers to subsidize private school funding giving them more options to choose from, which would foster competition and thereby increase quality.

The Qatari state initially chose the second option and in 2002 with the Emiri Decree No. 37 a new regulatory body, the Supreme Education Council (SEC), independent of the MOE, was established. This new phase was dubbed 'Education for a New Era' (EFNE), and very quickly reforms were put in place. In 2004, the first batch of independent<sup>39</sup> schools were opened and by 2011 all MOE-schools were converted. The independent school model was based on four principles: autonomy through decentralized governance under the new SEC; accountability through performative tests and international tests; variety in philosophy and curricula except in the four core subjects (English, Mathematics, Science and Arabic) where certain standards had to be held; parental choice that would promote competition and accountability.

One of the main outcomes of the RAND-designed EFNE was a standards-based system.<sup>40</sup> This meant regular standardized school assessments and national tests, which would be made publicly available for parents to make informed decisions. This also involved setting curriculum standards for English, Mathematics, Science, and Arabic as well as professional development for teachers in these related areas. A number of offices under the SEC were established: School Evaluation Office, Curriculum Standards Office, Student Assessment Office and Professional Development Office.<sup>41</sup>

EFNE was designed to move from a rigid, outdated, bureaucratic educational system to a dynamic, flexible and competitive system that fosters best practices to attract and maintain students. However, many of these policies were top-down decisions, without adequate

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<sup>38</sup>Brewer et al., *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K-12 Education Reform in Qatar* (Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2007).

<sup>39</sup>The Arabic translation of 'charter schools' was not suitable, hence the term 'independent schools' was adopted as a synonym for these new types of government schools. In this paper, we use 'government schools' to encompass what was public schools and, for a time, called independent schools.

<sup>40</sup>Ramzi Nasser, 'Qatar's Educational Reform Past and Future: Challenges in Teacher Development', *Open Review of Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

<sup>41</sup>Amir Abou-El-Kheir, 'Qatar's K-12 Education Reform—A Review of the Policy Decisions and a Look to the Future' (2017).



stakeholder consultation and were enacted quickly with high expectations to get fast results. A survey that interviewed principals on their experiences of EFNE found that the primary challenges they faced were 'the continuous and sudden changes from the SEC and the unrealistic requirements imposed on schools and teachers'.<sup>42</sup> The lack of clarity and planning at the level of the SEC, according to the principals surveyed, ultimately resulted in the inability of the school to adequately implement the policies.<sup>43</sup> The primary example of this was the switch to English language medium of instruction. Not only did parents, and the wider society, including the media and religious scholars, see this as a threat to their cultural and religious identity and 'forced secularization',<sup>44</sup> but many teachers and parents were not proficient in the English language. This either led to teachers speaking partly in Arabic, undermining the entire purpose of English medium instruction and resulting in students still having to take bridge programs, or students' lack of understanding that led to low test scores frustrating all parties involved, demotivating students and hampering their learning process.<sup>45</sup>

Ironically, the plans were created to empower teachers and give them freedom in the classroom by removing MOE restrictions; however, many teachers felt overwhelmed and overburdened. They complained about pressure and the increased workload from the administrative tasks to meet all of the SEC requirements.<sup>46</sup> For the first-time teachers had to design and teach their own curriculum, and they lacked the necessary skills to do so. Although professional development courses for teachers were made available through various schemes, the rapid pace of change coupled with their lack of involvement in key decisions and new-found workload led to further frustrations, with many leaving the profession entirely.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, there were also many positives that came out of the reforms. In the same survey, the vast majority of teachers viewed the reforms as advantageous and felt it improved their teaching style shifting from a traditional teacher-led to a student-centred model, incorporating different activities for different levels and types of learners and integrating technology in their lessons. Similarly, principals also noted improved changes in their leadership styles, listening to their faculty more, involving and consulting them in key decisions and delegating responsibilities.<sup>48</sup>

Despite some of these positives, overall the RAND-designed EFNE was branded as a failure by the media, wider society and government officials.<sup>49</sup> In short, policy adoption rather than policy adaption was the main obstacle.<sup>50</sup> As Nasser succinctly puts it '[m]any would have

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<sup>42</sup>Michael H. Romanowski et al., 'Qatar's Educational Reform: The Experiences and Perceptions of Principals, Teachers and Parents', *International Journal of Education* 5, no. 3 (2013): 118.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Leigh Nolan, 'Liberalizing Monarchies? How Gulf Monarchies Manage Education Reform', *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 4 (2012): 7–36, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/liberalizing-monarchies-how-gulf-monarchies-manage-education-reform/>.

<sup>45</sup>Christina Maria Pasychyn, 'Zig-Zagging Education Policies Leave Qatari Behind', *Al-Fanar Media*, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2013/10/zig-zagging-education-policies-leave-qatari-students-behind/> (accessed October 25, 2013).

<sup>46</sup>Michael H. Romanowski et al., 'Qatar's Educational Reform: The Experiences and Perceptions of Principals, Teachers and Parents', *International Journal of Education* 5, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>47</sup>Ramzi Nasser, 'Qatar's Educational Reform Past and Future: Challenges in Teacher Development', *Open Review of Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1–19.

<sup>48</sup>Michael H. Romanowski et al., 'Qatar's Educational Reform: The Experiences and Perceptions of Principals, Teachers and Parents', *International Journal of Education* 5, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>49</sup>Shabina Khatri, 'Qatar Students Rank Near Bottom of Education Index Again, But Gains Made', *Doha News*, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-students-rank-near-bottom-of-education-index-again-but-gains-made/> (accessed December 2, 2013).

<sup>50</sup>Michael H. Romanowski and Xiangyun Du, 'Education Transferring and Decentralized Reforms: The Case of Qatar', *Prospects* 1, no. 14 (2020).

recognized that the curriculum, the charter-like model of independent schools, and teaching in a foreign language—English – was so abrasively none contextualized and out of touch with the cultural and contextual realities.<sup>51</sup> The absence of robust Islamic studies and Qatari history, coupled with the emphasis on mathematics and science taught in English, was perceived as a direct threat by the local communities, parents and the media.<sup>52</sup> The Arabic language is not simply the mother-tongue of Qataris and Arabs in general, but its history and connection with Islam is considered sacred and a great source of pride, heritage and identity. This made the English medium policy even more controversial and courted more resistance than in any other context or language.<sup>53</sup> To make matters worse, international tests such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), PISA and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) showed Qatari students were still at the bottom globally, even though they had shown significant improvements.<sup>54</sup> This ultimately led to the non-renewal of RAND's 10-year contract.

### 2012-Present

A key part of the post-EFNE period is built around rectifying the failures of the EFNE and continuing to improve in order to, according to the National Education and Training Sector Strategy (ETSS) 2011–2016 'develop an education system that equips citizens to achieve their aspirations and to meet the needs of Qatar's society and global market'.<sup>55</sup> This strategy and the more recent Education Strategy 2018–2022 both underscore that the main objectives of the coming period would be to improve student performance, have a qualified workforce and instil Qatari values, heritage and culture in both public and private education.<sup>56</sup>

To this end, the government made two significant changes: (1) a voucher system was introduced to subsidize Qatari nationals to attend private schools, and (2) government 'independent' schools switched the primary language of instruction back to Arabic. The former shift further enabled the privatization of the school system, while the latter increased centralized control over the government schools.

During the 2001–2011 period, Qatari nationals could attend private schools, but at their own expense. In 2012, Qatari nationals had access to vouchers, valued at QAR 28,000, which allowed them to send their children to a set of private schools approved by the SEC (Education Voucher System Law No. 7 in 2012). Approved schools were those that taught Qatari history, Islamic disciplines and the Arabic language.<sup>57</sup> The voucher system was the third option proposed by RAND in 2001. Although still called 'independent schools', the charter school system, which was the second option advocated by RAND, was fully abrogated. Based on neoliberal-inspired theory suggesting that privatization would increase competition between schools, it was assumed that schools would compete for

<sup>51</sup>Ramzi Nasser, 'Qatar's Educational Reform Past and Future: Challenges in Teacher Development', *Open Review of Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2017): 14–15.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Eiman Mustafawi and Kassim Shaaban, 'Language Policies in Education in Qatar between 2003 and 2012: From Local to Global then Back to Local', *Language Policy* 18, no. 2 (2019): 209–242.

<sup>54</sup>Shabina Khatri, 'Qatar Students Rank Near Bottom of Education Index Again, But Gains Made', *Doha News*, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-students-rank-near-bottom-of-education-index-again-but-gains-made/> (accessed December 2, 2013).

<sup>55</sup>MOEHE. Education and Training Sector Strategy 2011–2016 (MOEHE, Qatar), 11.

<sup>56</sup>MOEHE. Education and Training Sector Strategy 2018–2022 (MOEHE, Qatar).

<sup>57</sup>Nada A. Benmansour, 'Education in Qatar: The Complex Reality of Citizen Satisfaction' (SESRI: Doha, 2017).

students by improving their teaching quality while reducing their expenditure.<sup>58</sup> Unless accompanied by significant transformation in government schools, this process was anticipated to accelerate the privatization process.

The second major shift that took place was the return to Arabic as the primary language of instruction in government schools. This decision was in part related to problems (noted above) regarding the implementation of the 2001 changes and in part related to the negative perception society had of the changes. Similar to other countries struggling with the globalization of the English language as well as the complex colonial history with many English-speaking countries, the removal of Arabic as a primary language of instruction raised concerns about the loss of Arabic language proficiency, as well as limiting access to knowledge of local culture, history, and heritage.<sup>59</sup> Since 2011, Arabic is now the language of instruction at all independent schools, with the exception of a course that teaches science-based English terminology. This shift reverberated and continues to impact the educational system as well as higher education institutes and private school curricula. For example, since September 2012, Qatari history has become a mandatory subject in all private schools.<sup>60</sup> Qatar University also began to teach more subjects in the Arabic medium.<sup>61</sup>

At the institutional level, the SEC was replaced by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) in 2016. Soon after, in May 2017, the Emir signed legislation (Law No. 9 of 2017) which reverted back to a centralized approach for government schools, stripping away the RAND's model of autonomy and flexibility. The new MOEHE would now determine key structural and administrative issues such as curriculum, staffing school calendars, fees and admission requirements.<sup>62</sup> Private schools remained autonomous but Qatari history and Arabic were recommended as subjects, although many implemented these nominally.

## Methodology

This research is one component of a broader project on SDG Education and Global Citizenship in Qatar, funded by the Qatar National Research Fund. As part of understanding the drivers, enablers, and barriers of change within the education system, the set of research questions outlined in this article emerged, namely how these policies have impacted the number of schools and gender and student demographics in the last decade and the wider possible future repercussions on society, identity and employment.

This paper draws upon data made available by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) as well as from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). For the PISA

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<sup>58</sup>Harry Anthony Patrinos, 'Dr. Patrinos: "School Vouchers Can Help Improve Education Systems"', WISE, <https://www.wise-qatar.org/school-vouchers-usa-harry-anthony-patrinus/> (accessed January 10, 2014).

<sup>59</sup>Eiman Mustafawi et al. 'Perceptions and Attitudes of Qatar University Students Regarding the Utility of Arabic and English in Communication and Education in Qatar', *Language Policy* 21, no. 1 (2022): 75–119.

<sup>60</sup>Amal Mohammed Al-Malki, 'Public Policy and Identity', in *Policy-Making in a Transformative State: The Case of Qatar*, ed. M. Evren Tok, Lolwah R. M. Alkhater and Leslie A. Pal (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>61</sup>Eiman Mustafawi and Kassim Shaaban, 'Language Policies in Education in Qatar Between 2003 and 2012: From Local to Global then Back to Local', *Language Policy* 18, no. 2 (2019): 209–242.

<sup>62</sup>Shabina Khatri, 'Qatar's Emir Approves New Law to Overhaul Independent School System', *Doha News*, <https://medium.com/dohanews/qatars-emir-approves-new-law-to-overhaul-independent-school-system-c002bf25e9b8/> (accessed May 17, 2017).

data, we have utilized data selectively, as a way to validate or contest potential interpretations of the results. For the MOEHE data, we analysed the annual reports for the study period of 2010 to 2020.<sup>63</sup> Each report offers detailed information about schools, students, administrative and teaching staff, research, infrastructure, accreditation, and specialized schools. Data from each annual report was manually put together to create a database. Once we had gathered all the data in one place we were able to perform longitudinal statistical analysis in the form of graphs to visualize the trends, calculate absolute differences as well as percentage differences and ratios. This enabled us to capture the subtle changes that are difficult to discern from just graphs. Calculations and comparisons were conducted both between government schools and private schools and between 2010 and 2020 within each type of school were done.

### **Limitations**

One of the key limitations of this paper is the reliance upon available data from MOEHE, and we are thereby confined to the previously asked research questions and the data in their reports. For example, we were confined to their groupings of nationalities. These reports are rich sources of data, much of which we have not used in this paper, due to the specific scope and research questions outlined. These reports offer opportunities for further research and analysis by others. Since the data is quantitative and is dealing with student numbers and demographics, it inherently does not give us an insight into the multiple social reasons behind these trends. A key part that is missing is the complex decision-making factors that influence parents about which school to send their children, which is also an area for future research. We envision that research as involving both qualitative and quantitative mixed-methods approaches that can analyse rationales and justifications for decisions. This paper sets the foundation for that work, which the research project we are a part of hopes to contribute to, and are research areas we look forward to seeing others make contributions to as well. Another limitation of this study is that most of the secondary sources are drawn from English language studies, books, and reports. Other than a few Arabic language government reports, we have not surveyed the Arabic literature, dissertations, theses, and reports. A thorough study of Arabic language materials could complement this study and expand upon its findings.

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<sup>63</sup>MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2020–2019. Department of Educational Policy and Research, Educational Statistics Section, Ministry of Education and Higher Education: Doha (2020).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2019–2018. Department of Educational Policy and Research, Educational Statistics Section, Ministry of Education and Higher Education: Doha (2019).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2018–2017. Department of Educational Policy and Research, Educational Statistics Section, Ministry of Education and Higher Education: Doha (2018).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2017–2016. Department of Educational Policy and Research, Educational Statistics Section, Ministry of Education and Higher Education: Doha (2017).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2016–2015. Department of Educational Policy and Research, Educational Statistics Section, Ministry of Education and Higher Education: Doha (2016).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2015–2014. Educational Policy and Research Department, Ministry of Education and Higher Education: Doha (2015).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2014–2013. Supreme Education Council: Doha (2014).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2013–2012. Supreme Education Council: Doha (2013).

MOEHE. Annual Statistics of Education in the State of Qatar 2012–2011. Supreme Education Council: Doha (2012).

(2011).

## Terminology

Papers about the education system in Qatar use a range of terms (government schools, public schools, community schools, independent schools, embassy schools, private schools). For the sake of readability (as these terms have changed over time), we use government schools and private schools, where community and embassy schools are private (not funded by the State of Qatar nor following its curriculum).

## Results

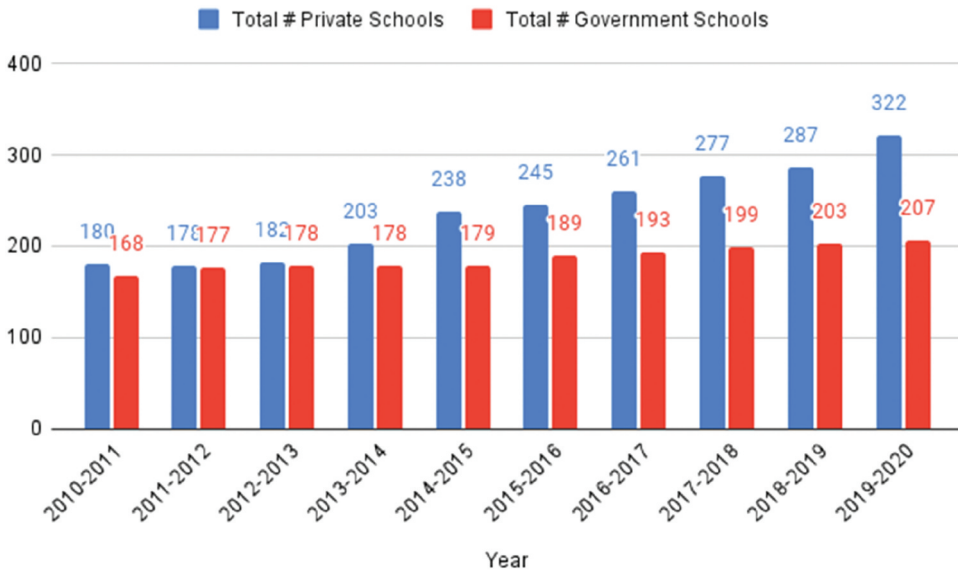
The historical context of the education system outlined in the previous section allows for an investigation of the impacts of policy shifts. While much has been written on the pre-2000 and 2001–2011 periods, comparatively little has been analysed in the post-2012 time period and the impacts of the policy changes therein. We structure this results section around the question of the impact of the introduction of the voucher system, first analysing the impacts and then exploring why the changes occurred in the ways that they did. The data below allow us to investigate this by looking at the following three trends: the growth of the private and government sector, demographic changes in terms of nationality and differences in gender.

The first question that might be asked of this time period is that if, as neoliberal theory and RAND's assumptions regarding the voucher system did in fact result in a rapid privatization of the education system. Based on the rise of private schools between 2010 and 2020 (from 180 to 322), it would appear that this shift did enable privatization. However, during the same time period, government schools also increased in number from 168 to 207 (see [Figure 1](#)). A parallel trend occurred with student enrolment, with both systems increasing in numbers, with a faster rate of growth in the private schools (see [Figure 2](#)). However, the percentage increase in private schools (79%) and their students (96%) is significantly higher compared to government schools (23%) and their students (38%). These percentage increases, however, need to consider high levels of temporary immigration to Qatar, which is characteristic of expatriate populations that are more sensitive to world events, such as COVID-19 or political blockades, and personal life events all of which result in returning back to their home country for various reasons. In 2010, the total population was 1.8 million, and in 2020 it had risen to 2.8 million.<sup>64</sup> As seen by [Table 1](#), the majority of the student population growth was expatriate students with four times as many expatriate students entering both the government and private schooling systems than citizens during this decade. The number of Qatari citizens in the school system in 2010 was 77,436 (39.9%) and in 2019 it was 104,638 (31.9%), a decline relative to the expatriate student population that experienced significant growth. This explains why the private sector experienced greater levels of growth in terms of number of schools and students, especially as expatriates are restricted to private schools, with some exceptions such as the children of people who work for the Qatari government.

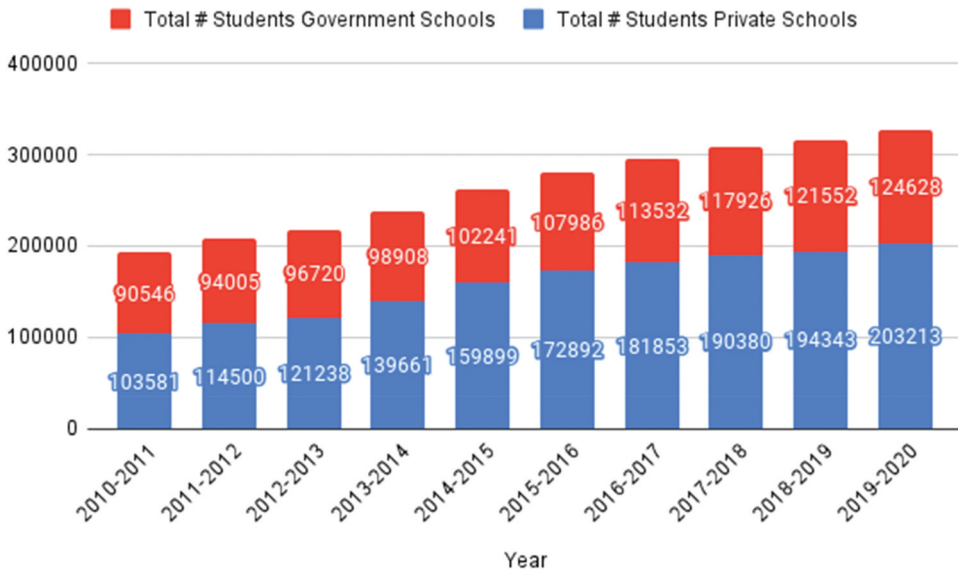
Although citizenship-specific data is not available, the Ministry provides aggregate groupings of populations (Qatar, GCC, Other Arabs and Other Nationalities). [Figures 3 and 4](#) respectively show the demographic changes by population group in private and government

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<sup>64</sup>World Population Review, *World Population Review—Qatar*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/qatar-population> (accessed October 25, 2022).



**Figure 1.** Total Number of Schools in Qatar (Primary, Intermediate, Secondary).

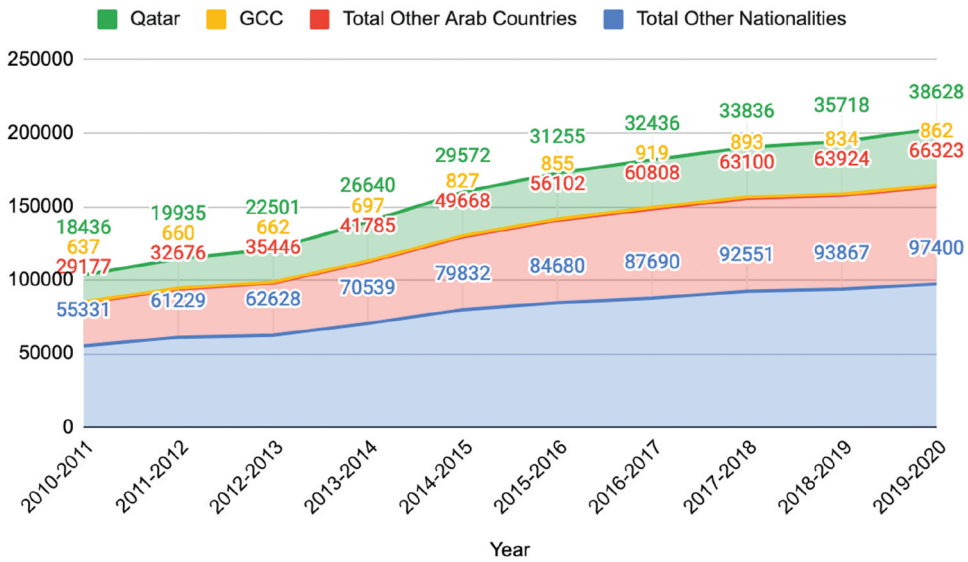


**Figure 2.** Total # of Students in Government and Private Schools.

schools during the decade. This data is also juxtaposed in [Table 1](#). As seen from [Figure 3](#), the numbers in each population group increased in private schools. The percentage growth between 2010 and 2019 in private schools is as follows: Qatari (110%), GCC (35%), other Arab (127%) and other nationalities (76%). The dip in GCC students in 2017 reflects the diplomatic crisis that resulted in the blockade of Qatar and departure of nationals from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirate, and Bahrain. The increase of Qataris in 2013, was from the

**Table 1.** Summary of the differences in public-private student demographic changes between 2010 and 2019.

School Type	Government				Private			
	2010–2011	2019–2020	Difference	% Change	2010–2011	2019–2020	Difference	% Change
Nationality/Year								
Qatar	59000	66010	7010	12%	18436	38628	20192	110%
GCC	3090	5419	2329	75%	637	862	225	35%
Other Arabs	23064	41819	18755	81%	29177	66323	37146	127%
Other Nationalities	5392	11380	5988	111%	55331	97400	42069	76%



**Figure 3.** Demographics of Students in Private Schools (by #s).

implementation of the voucher system, described above, where the government subsidized private school fees for Qatari nationals. This is also reflected in the lack of growth in government schools between 2012 and 2014 as shown in Figure 1.

The unexpected trend, given the growth of private schools and the introduction of the voucher system, is the simultaneous increase in enrolment in government schools for all demographic categories. There have been the following percentage increases in the government school system: Qataris (12%), GCC Arabs (75%), other Arabs (81%), other nationalities (111%). From the perspective of ratios, in the academic year 2010–2011 in government schools, for every 100 Qataris there were approximately 5 GCC Arabs, 39 other Arabs and 9 other nationalities. This shifted in 2019–2020 to 8 GCC Arabs, 63 other Arabs and 17 other nationalities for every 100 Qataris—a relative increase in all population groups compared to citizens. In the private system, for every 100 other nationalities, there were 33 Qataris, 1 GCC Arab and 53 other Arabs in the academic year 2010–2011, which shifted to 40 Qataris, 1 GCC Arab and 68 other Arabs for every 100 other nationalities by the academic year 2019–2020. Through the above figures and table, one can glean overall that although currently, as of the academic year 2019–2020 there are far more Qataris in terms of absolute numbers in government schools (66,010) compared to private schools



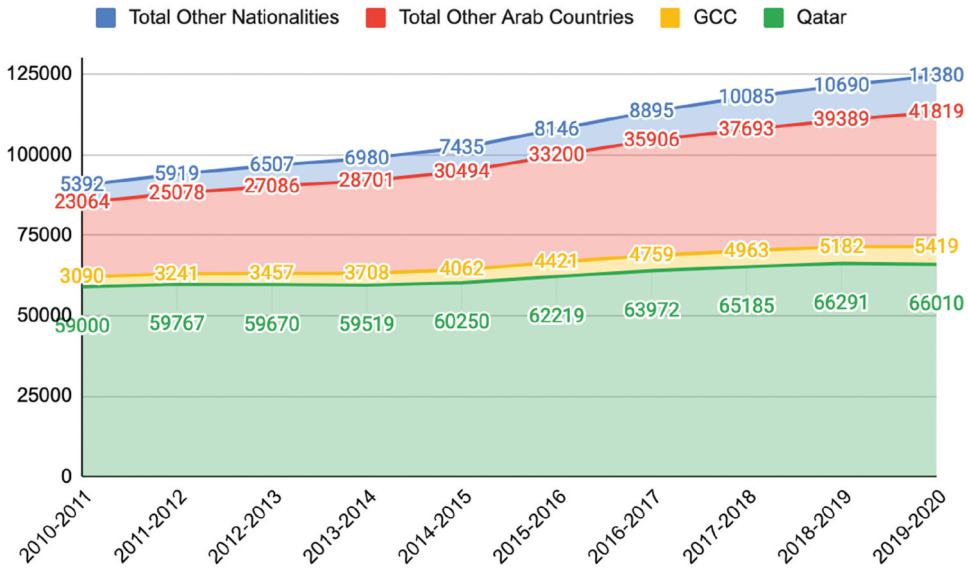


Figure 4. Demographics of Students in Government Schools (by #s).

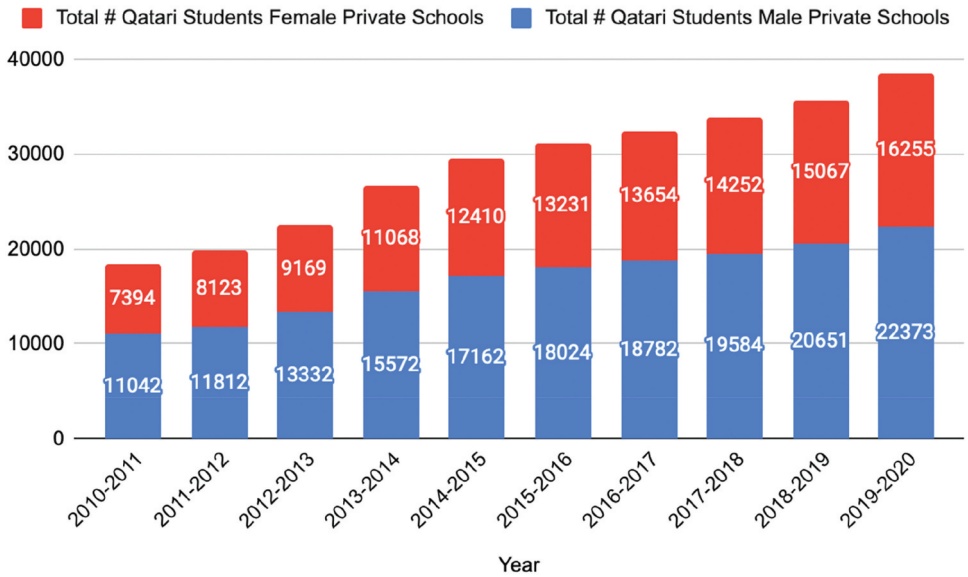


Figure 5. Gendered Analysis of Citizens in Private Schools.

(38,628), the rate of increase in private schools (110%) compared to government schools (12%) which has altered the ratio (moving from 33 to 40 for every 100 other nationalities in private schools) is significant. Put differently, in the academic year 2010–11, 76% of Qatari students at school were in government schools; this figure has now reduced to 63%. This means the majority of Qatari students are still in government schools, but there has been a shift towards private schools.

For the GCC population group, the figures are simpler. In absolute figures, their percentage increases and ratio relative to the other nationalities all indicate that they are mainly choosing government schools. For the Other Arabs population group, they have increased in absolute numbers in both public and private schools, but more so in private. The percentage change has also increased in both, but again more so in private. Therefore, although more are choosing private schools, there is still a sizable number in government schools. Other nationalities have ever so slightly increased in government schools but the overwhelming majority (90%) are in private schools as of the academic year 2019–2020, more or less as it was in 2010–2011.

A further question that arises regarding the policy shift of introducing vouchers for private schools is if there was a gendered impact. Using a sex disaggregated analysis, we find that there has been an increase in both males and females in private schools (Figure 5). The majority of private schools are not gender segregated (380 of 420 private primary schools are mixed, 90%), whereas the vast majority of government schools are gender segregated (98% of primary schools, 248 of 251; MOEHE, 2020). Contrary to what might be assumed about a conservative society, the percentage increase for Qatari females (120%) in private schools was more than Qatari males (103%). In government schools, Qatari females increased by 14% compared to 10% for Qatari males 10% (Figure 6). In short, there are just over double the number of Qatari females in absolute numbers in government schools, the rate of increase in private schools is higher. While there are more Qatari females in government schools relative to males and vice versa in private schools, this dynamic could reverse if these trends continue.

The aggregate trends and the gendered trends raise questions about parental decision-making motivations. For example, educational completion rates for Grade 12 are lower for Qatari male students in government (79.2%, 2019–2020) than private schools

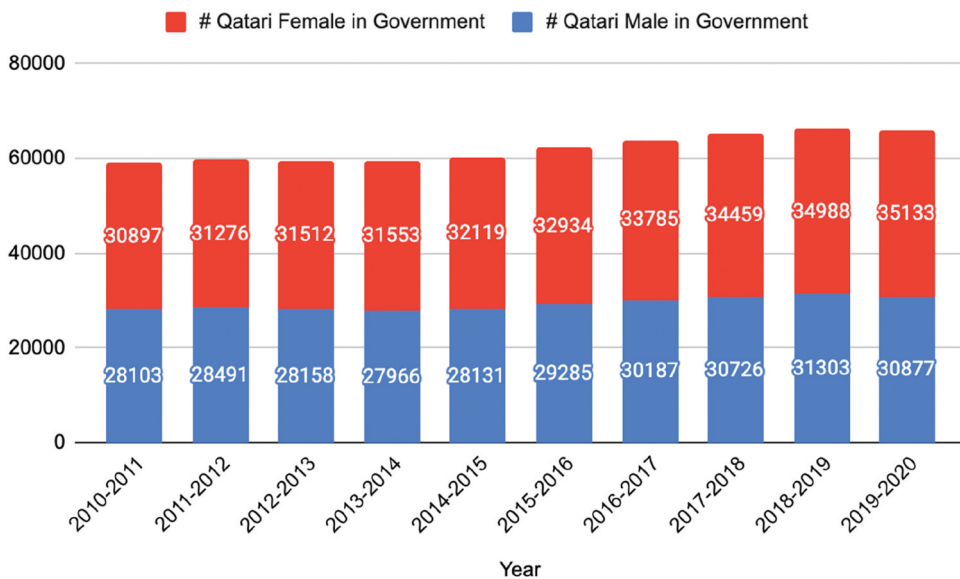


Figure 6. Gendered Analysis of Citizens in Government Schools.

**Table 2.** PISA 2018 snapshot of gender gaps in performance.

	Reading Scores			Maths Scores			Science Scores		
	Boys	Girls	Difference	Boys	Girls	Difference	Boys	Girls	Difference
OECD Average	472	502	30	492	487	-5	488	490	2
United States	494	517	24	482	474	-9	503	502	-1
United Kingdom	494	514	20	508	496	-12	506	503	-3
Australia	487	519	31	494	488	-6	504	502	-2
Qatar	375	440	65	402	426	24	400	439	39
UAE	403	460	57	430	439	9	420	447	26
Saudi Arabia	373	427	54	367	380	13	372	401	29

(92.9%, 2019–2020). Yet, far more families decide to send their boys to government schools (30,877) than private ones (22,373), even with the voucher option.

The PISA 2018 rankings (Table 2) add another layer of analysis to these gendered results. Qatar was particularly mentioned in the report in numerous places as a country that stood out for different reasons. Table 2 is a summary of the (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) OECD average followed by the big three educational exporters globally, United States, United Kingdom and Australia, as well as other Gulf countries who also participate in PISA, namely the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Qatar is still below the OECD average, but it was noted as one of the few countries that had significantly improved in all three competencies relative to most of the participating countries, which have remained stable in their scores, both in terms of long-term and short-term average change. In terms of gender, Qatar again stood out as a special case. Although Qatar, alongside the UAE and Saudi Arabia were amongst the few countries where girls are significantly outperforming boys in all three subjects, the difference in Qatar was more pronounced. In other words, in general Arab women from these three countries are performing at a higher level than Arab men, but the difference is the greatest in Qatar.

## Discussion

As was the intended impact of allowing for greater private sector involvement in the schooling system, the number of private schools and the number of students attending them increased overall in the last decade. This was driven by two factors. First, a demographic change, as many more expatriate families moved to Qatar during this time period. This is due to Qatar's ambitious national plans to rapidly transform Qatar to a knowledge-based economy, which requires a labour force with specific skills that are not found within the small, local population. Second, it was enhanced by the introduction of the voucher system in 2012, which allowed Qatari citizens to attend selected private schools. Although in absolute numbers there are more Qatari students in the government school system (66,010) compared to private schools (38,628) as of academic year 2019/2020, the trend in the last decade shows a 110% increase in Qataris in the private school system, compared to a mere 12% increase in the government system. This has subsequently shifted the demographical composition for each where there are now fewer Qataris relative to all other groups in government schools and more Qataris relative to all other groups in private schools. Moreover, the significant increase in Qataris in private schools is gendered. Again, although in absolute numbers there are more Qatari males

(22,373) in private schools compared to Qatari females (16,255) as of academic year 2019/2020, the percentage increase in the last decade for females (120%) is higher than that of males (103%). If these rates continue, Qatari females will outnumber Qatari males in private education for the first time.

One main factor in school choice is Arabic language and culture. As discussed above, many in society viewed the reforms of the EFNE to be too 'Western-centric' and an assault on local culture, values and traditions and most importantly, the Arabic language, a source of great pride and honour. The main medium of instruction in government schools is Arabic, seen as a conduit for preserving and maintaining local culture and traditions, and they are mainly gender segregated. On the other hand, almost all private schools have English as the main language of instruction, are not gender segregated and do not have robust curricula for teaching Arabic or Islamic Studies.

Therefore, preservation of language and culture is most probably one of the primary reasons in the unexpected simultaneous growth of the government sector in terms of the number of schools and students, despite policies easing privatization. A survey conducted by the Social Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) in 2012 and 2015 found that although Qatari parents were least satisfied with the K-12 education system out of all the governmental public services, in this specific sample more than 90% of Qatari parents still enrolled their children in government schools.<sup>65</sup> While generally dissatisfied in comparison to families with children attending private schools, the study found that even without financial constraints, Qatari parents were still choosing government schools to preserve their sense of identity and culture.<sup>66</sup> This is also due to the unique situation in Qatar, which has a majority English-speaking expatriate population. This is also most likely the reason for GCC Arabs, particularly females, choosing government schools.

However, these simple binaries ('Western' or 'traditional' education, liberal or conservative values) are not as straightforward as they may seem. Another study problematizes the dichotomy between global, Westernized English verses local, traditional Arabic in terms of everyday language usage, identity and educational systems. Hillman and Ocampo Eibenschutz argue through numerous interviews the fluidity and interaction between the two.<sup>67</sup> They illustrate how many Qataris seamlessly switch between standardized English, 'Gulf' or broken English, Arabic interspersed with English phrases, and local Arabic dialect. Each is used in different settings. Some mentioned how at times they would forget to 'switch' between these different versions, which would either result in laughter, if with friends, or chastisement from their parents if with family. What is noteworthy is that those same parents who would get angry at their children for speaking in English at home would be proud and boast about their children being at international university branches in the Education City receiving their education in the English language medium, considered a high status 'Ivy League' of the Gulf.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the desire to preserve language and culture does not neatly translate into choosing government schools.

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<sup>65</sup>Nada A. Benmansour, 'Education in Qatar: The Complex Reality of Citizen Satisfaction' (SESRI: Doha, 2017).

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Sara Hillman and Emilio Ocampo Eibenschutz, 'English, Super-Diversity, and Identity in the State of Qatar', *World Englishes* 37, no. 2 (2018): 228–247.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

The resultant education choices influence higher education and career opportunities, the former being related to language of instruction and proficiencies thereof and the latter of working language requirements, particularly Arabic proficiency in government employment. The English language requirements of the American universities' branch campuses mean that pathways are often created at an early age, with private school graduates attending the prestigious branch campuses in Education City, which opens up further global higher education and the job market. The unintended outcome is that this large minority who attend private schools have a low level of reading and writing proficiency in modern standard Arabic relative to those who attend government schools who usually attend Qatar University, where some disciplines are taught in Arabic and where gender segregation continues (in most instances, at the undergraduate level). This schooling divide is not only linguistic; however, there are socio-cultural, values, and worldviews embedded within imported international curricula that differ from the government curriculum, furthering the divisions in society.

High proficiency in the Arabic language opens up different career paths, namely local and public sector job opportunities, especially for Qatari males. Qatar has one of the highest labour force participation rates and lowest unemployment rates in the world. It has a large public sector that is known to be the highest paid yet least demanding job requiring minimum educational attainment, including male-dominated professions such as the military and police.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, on completing secondary school education, Qataris overall, and Qatari males in particular, can enter effortlessly into a well-paid, secure and respected profession. Proficiency in Arabic is essential for these government professions and so government schools would be the best option. Many argue this is the reason for low Qatari educational attainment overall, relative to the majority expat population, and lower educational attainment of Qatari males, relative to Qatari females, who have more options in the public sector.<sup>70</sup>

Other studies examining the gender imbalance in the Qatar education system point to the attitude of females being more positive and more inclined towards post-secondary education as they view education as an important determinant to their independence and success.<sup>71</sup> This is within the context of the dramatic social changes the GCC has witnessed that have had a direct impact on the family, especially women, their social status and their life expectations outside of traditional gender roles. For example, opportunities for women in education and employment have opened up new lifestyle choices; this has altered the formation of the family in terms of, inter alia, marital age, birth rates, infant mortality, children's health and education, and divorce rates.<sup>72</sup> The higher rates of Qatari females entering the private school system could be a reflection of changing societal norms; the decision-making process about how schools are chosen for children and the impact of gender is an area of further investigation. What the data in this paper is showing, however, is that Qatari women are performing at a much higher standard

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<sup>69</sup>Abdel Latif Sellami, 'Parental Influence on Student Educational Expectations: Results from the 2012 Qatar Education Study', *International Journal of Higher Education* 8, no. 4 (2019): 189–201.

<sup>70</sup>Mohammed Al-Waqfi and Ingo Forstenlechner, 'Stereotyping of Citizens in an Expatriate-Dominated Labour Market: Implications for Workforce Localisation Policy', *Employee Relations* 32, no. 4 (2010): 364–381.

<sup>71</sup>Abdel Latif Sellami, 'Parental Influence on Student Educational Expectations: Results from the 2012 Qatar Education Study', *International Journal of Higher Education* 8, no. 4 (2019): 189–201.

<sup>72</sup>Jennifer E. Lansford, Anis Ben Brik, and Abdallah M. Badahdah, *Families and Social Change in the Gulf Region* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 3.

relative to Qatari males and that this gender difference is more pronounced in Qatar compared to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This is coupled with the increasing trend of Qatari females entering private schools, which boast higher scores and provide a pathway to English-medium higher education institutes and jobs. These trends, if continued, could result in further rapid and complex social transformations.

Another important trend in the data was the rise of non-citizens in government schools. For this, context appears to matter. Most expatriate families cannot register their children in government schools, unless one of their parents works for the government, and more recently, people living in some rural and remote areas. One of the pushes for such families to attend government schools, other than language, job opportunities, and values, is economic. Government schools are free, whereas private schools can be very costly in Qatar, with the highest-ranking schools in Doha beyond the financial capacity of non-citizen bureaucrats with rising rates. Although we do not have evidence on parental decision-making of non-citizen parents whose children attend government schools, this provides some insight into why government school enrolment is expanding for non-citizens despite the low completion rates and parental perceptions of educational quality.

The unexpected and unintended impacts of past policy reform have influenced reforms that followed. Based on this assessment, we may be able to anticipate future educational reform in Qatar. We posit three, the beginnings of which are starting to emerge already. First, we see that Arabic will be increasingly important in private schools. Although Arabic was supposed to be taught at all private schools, in many instances it was not, or was not taught to a level of sufficient proficiency. As of the 2020–2021 academic year, the MOEHE has begun to be more serious about ensuring Arabic was taught and private schools have since introduced the subject—although in most private schools Arabic still remains at a basic level or has jumped to the government curricula based on age level, which is too difficult for children who have not had the foundation years. It seems plausible that in the foreseeable future the voucher system might be tied to effective and comprehensive Arabic language instruction. Second, we see that government school graduates have the disadvantage of lower completion rates and fewer pathways for higher education, particularly due to English language proficiency, and resultingly we expect additional investment in government schools. This will act as a mechanism to increase educational quality and ensure all those attending government schools are better prepared for higher education as well as a wide variety of future careers. Third, as a result of the divisions in society being enabled by the private and government educational pathways, we anticipate much more emphasis within schools and beyond to enculturate a common set of values that unify society, particularly amongst citizens, but also for society at large.

## Conclusion

Put briefly, neoliberal educational policies and a burgeoning expatriate population that, with few exceptions, can only send their children to private schools, have resulted in a boost in the private education system in Qatar. Although there are currently more Qatari citizens in government schools, which consist of more Qatari females than males, the trend in the last decade has been rising numbers of Qataris, particularly Qatari females,

choosing private schools. Qatari females are significantly outperforming Qatari males at a much higher rate than in other GCC countries. Another major trend is a growing government educational sector, albeit at a relatively slower pace, with more non-citizens attending government schools. This has now begun to alter the demographic ratios in both private and government schools, where in the former there are more Qataris relative to other nationalities and vice versa in the latter. If the same trend continues at the same rate over the next decade, there will be a transformative shift where more Qataris will be in private schools with more Qatari females relative to males and more non-citizens in government schools.

Government schools and private schools are currently divided in terms of language of instruction, educational quality, socio-economic status and implicit cultural values, which simultaneously open up and restrict different sets of opportunities and instil a certain worldview. Gender is also becoming another divisive factor. This has a significant socio-cultural impact, which will only accelerate if these trends continue without intervention. For this reason, the authors posit that future educational reforms will work towards bridging these unintended gaps, namely Arabic language in private schools, English language and educational attainment in government schools, and a common set of values and shared sense of identity in both, particularly for citizens.

Qatar's educational reforms and policy changes serve as an example for similar countries attempting to improve their educational systems, be competitive in the global higher education and job market whilst maintaining internal social cohesion, values and culture or, at the very least, slowing down the pace of change. The case of Qatar illustrates the false and overly simplistic neo-liberal assumption of privatization fostering competition and better educational attainment overall. Complex factors of identity, language, cultural values, finance, higher education choices, job opportunities and gendered life expectations also play a critical role.

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