

# THE GLOBAL EDUCATION MARKET, CRITICALITY, AND THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM IN THE OVERSEAS CAMPUSES OF QATAR AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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## *Abstract*

The paper examines how critical thinking is faring within the university curriculum in the cross-border education market that has developed since the 1995 General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The overseas campuses of western universities fill the education hubs that have emerged in the Middle and Far East over the last two decades. In Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) western universities must negotiate the establishment of overseas campuses in dialogue with autocratic regimes that do not uphold rights to free speech. The paper questions the claim, made by some UK and US universities, that overseas campuses necessarily enlighten the political and cultural life of the states in which they do business and so offset contradictions between the liberal university and autocratic rule. However, an analysis of UK and US campuses in Qatar and the UAE suggests the global education business impedes political reform. The critical pedagogy necessary to build indigenous subjectivities in the Gulf states is marginalized by the global education market's emphasis upon westernized curricula. Indeed, far from liberalizing social and political life, western campuses curtail the development

of indigenous consciousness necessary for democratization. The liberalizing influence of overseas campuses in the Gulf states remains predominantly economic. In short, the global education market is building new hierarchies of knowledge production that reverse prior decolonization, re-westernize Gulf higher education, and stifle the criticality essential for political and social reform.

*Keywords:* curriculum, cross-border education, westernization, Gulf states, marketization

## **THE GLOBAL EDUCATION MARKET, CRITICALITY, AND THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM IN THE OVERSEAS CAMPUSES OF QATAR AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

In the high culture enclaves of Education City in Qatar and Saadiyat Island in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), overseas university campuses provide higher education for consumption in the Gulf region. On the outskirts of Doha in Qatar, Education City is home to eight overseas campuses (six from the US, one British, and one French), plus the Qatar Islamic College, the Qatar Science and Technology Park, an Al Jazeera office, and the private Qatari university, Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU). The Education City project aims to build Qatar's knowledge economy by establishing overseas university campuses alongside Qatari institutions. Established in 1997 by the then ruling emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his wife, the part private, part state-funded project is run by the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. Saadiyat Island is a similar project in the UAE which consists of eight US universities and branches of the Guggenheim and Louvre museums.

Qatar is using its sovereign wealth fund to purchase education services from overseas providers on a large scale. Education City's rapid expansion has been boosted by funds from the wife of Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (Kerr, 2013), the emir who abdicated in June 2013 in favor of his son, Tamim Al Thani. In 2014-15 the education budget reached its highest rate so far at \$62 billion (Kovessy, 2014). Unsurprisingly, Qatar is a target market for UK and US education

exports. However, negotiations with the autocratic regimes in Qatar and the UAE required that UK and US trade initiatives raise questions about the extent to which commercial partnerships can ensure academic freedom and freedom of association are protected. The common riposte of UK and US universities to critics of the education business is to claim western campuses in the Gulf liberalize state and society by their very presence. In the article, I examine whether such frequently asserted claims to liberalize can be substantiated. While liberalism encompasses values of liberty, reason, individuality, progress, and free trade in various measures (Freeden, 2015), in its current neoliberal form liberal values are directed towards predominantly economic ends. The shift in liberal values from “liberal universalism” to “neoliberal globalism” (Freeden, 2015, p. 110) has particular import for the university, a liberal institution rooted in liberal freedoms of speech, critical thinking, and association (Mill, 1859). The knowledge economy privileges economic imperatives and subsumes education’s political and social values. In this neoliberal context, are western campuses necessarily the starting point for the ideas and values that could yield social and political reform in the UAE and Qatar? In answering these questions it appears that liberal changes to wider Gulf politics and society emanating from overseas university campuses are hard to identify. Indeed, the business interests of the overseas campuses often overlap with the interests that shape the Gulf status quo—interests that could marginalize indigenous campaigns for political and social reform.

I begin by examining the global education market that produces the Gulf state education hubs. The second section examines the distinctive political economy that shapes the status quo, and hence education policy and university practices, in Qatar and the UAE. All Qatari citizens are entitled to free higher education in one of the three indigenous Qatari institutions or an Education City overseas campus. Ruling family members oversee governance in Qatari institutions. Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani, also Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior, heads the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Board of Directors, Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al Thani is CEO of the Qatar Foundation (QF), and Qatar University’s

(QU) Board of Regents contains several ruling family members. Education reforms in the 1990s-2000s established free, compulsory state education for all pupils aged six to fifteen in 2001, and newer state-funded independent schools gained the freedom to recruit staff (Moini, Biksom, Neu, & DeSisto, 2009).

QU reforms between 2003 and 2007, the opening of Education City in 1997, and the opening of two new Qatari institutions, HBKU and Qatar Community College (QCC), in 2010 mean all full Qatari citizens can exercise their entitlement to free higher education. However, Qatari citizens make up just 6% of Qatar's total population. Qatari citizens are a privileged minority who enjoy the world's highest average income. The other 94% of the population are foreign migrant workers, mainly from southeast Asia, employed under the *kafala* system (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2012). *Kafala* employers prevent workers from freely leaving their job or moving to another company (Morin, 2013) by withholding workers' access to driving licenses and bank accounts. The *kafala* system operates throughout the economy across skill levels despite superficial 2016 reforms. In educating Qatari citizens, I suggest the presence of overseas campuses sustains both the economic and political configuration of citizenship rights and the inequalities of the Gulf state labor market.

In section three I examine how UK and US universities, as liberal institutions, negotiate labor rights and academic freedom with ruling elites in Qatar and the UAE. In section four I contend such negotiations often produce a westernized, and therefore colonizing, curriculum in overseas campuses in Qatar and the UAE and weaker institutional autonomy from the government. In contrast the public, indigenous QU offers a wide, liberal arts and science curriculum and since the 2003-2007 QU reforms, self-governance (Moini et al., 2009, p. 55). Furthermore, liberal social and political movements in Qatar can also emerge outside the university. In section five I consider the extent to which the global education market sustains the status quo in Qatar and the UAE and consider its impact upon the pursuit of regional development goals in the Gulf.

The global economy and transnational capitalist class disrupt the center-periphery dichotomy that once defined postcolonial theory. With this in mind, the article draws upon postcolonial theories that acknowledge and interrogate both the context of globalized capitalism (Harshe, 2013, p. 5; Ashcroft, 2013) and the transnational capitalist class (Robinson & Harris, 2000; Robinson, 2011; Robinson, 2012). Qatar and the UAE show nation states in a global economy can retain substantial political and legal power within their borders (Cahill, Edwards, & Stilwell, 2013). In Qatar and the UAE sovereign wealth funds and deregulated migrant labor supplies keep costs low (Carroll, 2012) and bolster the fortunes of Gulf national capitalists within transnational capitalism (Carroll & Sapinski, 2016). Qatari and UAE education hubs educate both the national and transnational capitalist class (Ong, 2006). I contend that under neoliberalism the Gulf's overseas campuses exert a liberalizing influence that is predominantly economic. In the globalized knowledge economy the liberal institution of the western university can operate within autocratic regimes that limit the extent to which social or political liberalism on campus can shape wider society. A curriculum limited to westernized interests prevails in the overseas campus while the wider curriculum at the indigenous public institutions QU and QCC can engage with national development objectives. Scope exists for transformative pedagogic theory and practice that can enter a dialogue with wider society. Such pedagogic insights reflect the wider context of indigenous knowledge beyond the campus, which can inspire the de-westernization of art and culture and the democratization of Gulf state politics.

## **TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY**

Liberalizing claims are central to the rhetoric of transnational and national education policy in both western and non-western states. The Gulf state appetite for western higher education has heightened UK and US emphasis upon business opportunities in Qatar and the UAE, particularly since the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) deregulated cross-border education in 1995. The Cross-Border Education Research Team statistics show US universities run the most transnational campuses and dominate the Middle and Far East "education hubs" (Cross-Border Education Research, 2017). The UK

is the second largest provider of overseas education. A Department of Business Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2013 report has identified education as the “second largest global sector after health-care” (BIS, 2013a, p. 5) with 28,150 Gulf state students (excluding Saudi Arabia) studying in UK transnational programs in 2011-2012 (BIS, 2013b, p. 84). UK education exports in 2011 were worth £17.5 billion with 75% of that income coming from UK-based foreign students (BIS, 2013b, p. 4). Transnational education is prioritized for expansion despite the reported downturn in enthusiasm from some UK universities (Havegal, 2015). The 2014-2015 Qatari education budget was the largest to date at \$62 billion and the UKTI Education report, “Education Opportunities in Qatar” (2014) identified Qatar as offering “High Value Opportunities” (HVOs) for education export investment.

Yet is there a political and academic price to be paid for this trade in education exports? A price that tests the evangelical tone of the liberalizing claim? For Donn and Al Mantra (2010) the division between states that produce education exports and states that consume constitutes an emerging new global structural inequality. The new structures shrink the scope of liberalization to market freedoms alone whilst marginalizing social and political liberalism. An example from the UK transnational education policy is the eclipse of the late 1990s “development” thinking by business goals. The British Council’s 2016 Cape Town “Going Global” conference agenda claimed only market-driven higher education policy could secure the Millennium Development Goals for education access. In the UK it is now rare to find higher education policy literature without an income generation objective, with the exception of access issues. Indeed, under the auspices of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills between 2009 and 2016, UK higher education policy appeared unremittingly and single-mindedly driven by market goals, far more so than in the US where education policy has remained within the Department of Education.

The UK policy paradigm shift obscures the liberal, non-commercial contributions education makes to public life, from fostering civic debates to informing the voter and juror, to protecting public health and the environment. Global society networks are not

restricted to free marketeers and their capital. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Labor Organization (ILO) legal frameworks codify social and political rights crucial to building egalitarian education on a global scale. I test the western universities' claim to liberalize against UNESCO and ILO rights. Current UK policy that prioritizes the pursuit of global advantage in market share and intellectual property ownership over cooperative, reciprocal research opposes the spirit of the UNESCO Convention. The claim that the global education business liberalizes is accurate only in as far as a liberal free market in education export exists. Two questions remain: To what extent does consuming western education liberalize politics and society in the Gulf states? How far can a liberalization defined solely in terms of market freedoms and westernization build the indigenous knowledge production required for democratization in the Gulf?

## **LIBERALIZING BEYOND THE BORDERS OF THE OVERSEAS CAMPUS: QATARI STATE AND SOCIETY**

The Qatar Foundation (QF) aims to build a “progressive society,” “protect (Qatari) heritage,” and address “immediate social needs” in Qatar (QF, 2017). Education City projects reflect the foundation’s aims through events including lectures by Asifa Quraishi-Landes on Islamic law, de-westernized feminism and decolonization (QF, 2017a), health research by Qatar biobank (QF, 2017b), and the promotion of women’s mental health (QF, 2017c). However, to what extent do Education City projects liberalize the wider Qatari politics and society that exist beyond the perimeter fence? A Human Rights Watch report on migrant population rights in Qatar suggests wider social welfare liberalism is minimal; labor regulations, housing standards, and health care provisions do not apply to migrants in Qatar (HRW, 2012). Any liberalizing influence beyond the economic liberalism of the free trade in global education commodities and migrants’ deregulated working conditions is hard to find. It appears Gulf state ruling regimes and western universities can happily coexist.

Indeed, negotiations between overseas universities and Gulf state regimes could even serve to sustain undemocratic government institutions and inequitable labor market conditions. It is the sheer scale and reach of the state in Qatar and the UAE that generate the extensive business opportunities so prized by western exporters in the global education and training market. Economic liberalization in the education trade exists within, and indeed is facilitated by, a state which is illiberal in social and political terms. State power in the Gulf rests upon political institutions and a legal framework that impede the forms of liberalization that democratize politics and social life. First, Qatar's competitive position within the global economy is bolstered by *kafala*. The migrant labor supply provides a compliant labor force which subsidizes the national economy and bolsters political stability. The skewed and exploitative labor market underpinning all Qatari business requires large scale political reform well beyond the reach of liberalizing projects within overseas campuses. Second, the liberalization of wider Qatari society requires the extensive reform of political and legal institutions in Qatar, a project that necessarily occurs outside the overseas campuses. Sharia, specifically Wahhabi Hanbali jurisprudence, is the main source of law under the Qatari Constitution. Non-Qatari political organizations and trade unions are banned, and Qatar is not a signatory of the 1966 United Nations Human Rights International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Stork & McGeehan, 2013). Very little public opposition is voiced against the ruling regime. Qatar was silent during the 2011 Arab Spring.

A closer look at Qatari state institutions indicates the scale of political and social reform required. A 2013 Human Rights Watch report highlighted two illiberal aspects. First, a lack of legal transparency illustrated by the secret trial and sentencing of Mohammed Al-Ajami in 2012 for "insulting the Emir" in poems others posted on social media. Second, a lack of promised government reforms illustrated by Emir Shaykh Tamin al-Thani's retention of his veto despite his June 2013 pledge to democratize the Shura [Assembly] on gaining power (Stork & McGeehan, 2013). Up to 2014, liberalizing political reforms were unrealized. Amnesty International



claimed the 2014 cybercrime law endangered freedom of expression by criminalizing views opposed to Qatari “social values” and “general order” and forestalled debates about specific rights by leaving “social values” undefined (Amnesty International, 2014). Similarly, *kafala* remained in place despite the December 2016 enforcement of labor law reform no. 21 (2015) to end the system (HRW, 2017). Furthermore, Qatar has not yet ratified the ILO Convention 97/143 on migrant labor (Migrants Rights, 2015). Of the eight Fundamental ILO Conventions, Qatar has ratified five and the UAE six (ILO, 1975). In short, the scale of political and social illiberalism in Qatar and the UAE highlights the complex task confronting any liberalizing initiative and suggests the impact of overseas campuses on political and social reform could be overstated.

## **LIBERALIZING WITHIN THE OVERSEAS CAMPUS: NEGOTIATING LABOR RIGHTS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE GULF**

If liberalizing wider Qatari or UAE politics and society is a tall order for a western university, perhaps a more reasonable expectation is the protection of academic freedom within the overseas campus. After all, the western university should surely seek to ensure liberal political and social values prevail within the campus boundary. The difficulties of New York University (NYU) in protecting the workers’ rights on the NYU Abu Dhabi campus in the UAE show liberalization is more difficult to put into practice than initially expected. NYU was aware some contractors in the UAE mistreated migrant workers by charging workers fees before granting contracts, confiscating workers’ passports, and giving misleading information about pay rates. To protect good working conditions NYU agreed to a Statement of Labor Values with the Executive Affairs Authority (EAA) of Abu Dhabi based in UAE law. The statement limited work hours, banned child and forced labor, ensured UAE health and safety regulations were met, and protected women workers’ rights (NYU Abu Dhabi, 2010). However, when Saadiyat Island campus construction began in 2010, workers still endured substandard conditions (Carrick & Batty, 2013), as NYU later acknowledged (Saul, 2015b). The most recent Gulf

Labor report (2015) claims forced labor continues in the Abu Dhabi Mafraq Workers City accommodation (2015, p. 17) and Qatari *kafala* reforms are piecemeal (2015, p. 21).

NYU's limited claim to liberalize is also evident in the university's struggles to maintain the "Statement of Values" (2010) on academic freedom agreed on with the UAE government before the Abu Dhabi campus opened in 2012. The 2015 UAE immigration ban on NYU academic Andrew Ross, a member of Gulf Labor and author of *High Culture: Hard Labor* (2012) challenged NYU Abu Dhabi academic freedom agreements, showing academics, like all UAE foreign migrant workers, are vulnerable to illiberal labor and immigration laws. Ross's ban underlines the need for staff unions to defend mutually dependent rights of freedom of association and academic freedom. In Saul's report (2015a), Marjorie Heins of the American Association of University Professors concluded a "lack of respect for free speech permeates the entire enterprise" at NYU Abu Dhabi (Saul, 2015a). Here, then, is the first challenge to the liberalizing myth of the Gulf state overseas campus; if NYU, a university with worldwide prominence, cannot uphold the Statement of Values (2010) on academic freedom negotiated with the UAE, claims overseas campuses can liberalize autocratic Gulf states are questionable.

The 2014 contract between the UK's Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and Qatar to provide courses for the Qatar Police Training College in Doha also tests the liberalizing claim. The MMU-Qatari police business partnership departs from the long tradition of cooperative, publicly funded research in the UK (White, 2015) and was agreed upon despite opposition from the University and College Union (UCU) to the provision of police training for a state with anti-LGBT laws (Wilkinson, 2014). The university has since stated academics are not required to contribute to the program. However, the contract illustrates how participation in the neoliberal global education trade does not diminish a nation-state's exclusive power over its institutions of law and order. Qatari police studying at Qatar Police College who attend a UK course will on their return enforce Qatari laws under the legislative and executive power of the Qatari absolute monarchy. The claim universities exert a liberalizing influence on

Qatari society and state is difficult to sustain here. Given the restriction on academic freedom in the NYU Abu Dhabi campus, which occurred despite the NYU Abu Dhabi Statement of Values (2010) agreed to with the UAE, MMU's "memorandum of understanding" agreed upon with Qatar (James, 2014) does not remove the need for vigilance in the defense of academic freedom.

Agreements between western institutions and Gulf states to protect construction site workers and academics are often not enacted. The 1997 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, which protects the "institutional autonomy" necessary to academic freedom, requires all UNESCO member states—which include the UK, US, Qatar, and the UAE—to comply with the articles. This global institution defends liberal rights in education, and any of the states can appeal as an authority. While the UN recommendations lack the legal ratification of conventions, member states are expected to heed recommendation norms and principles. The 1997 Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel, article 18, which protects the autonomy of the university as the "institutional form of academic freedom," provides a global framework for the defense of academic freedom outside marketed education (UNESCO, 1997). In short, UN agreements provide an alternative global structure for education reform that exists outside the market and can protect workers' rights.

## **NOT LIBERALIZING BUT MARGINALIZING INDIGENOUS DEBATE IN THE GULF?**

Overblown claims by western universities to liberalize social and political life within and outwith overseas campuses in Qatar and the UAE make light of barriers faced by indigenous campaigns for democracy and human rights in Qatar. The outwardly facing liberalism of Education City and Al Jazeera may speak to the world but has yet to spark democratic or labor reform movements at home. Ironically, the overseas campus and its limited curriculum can wrest control over knowledge production from indigenous academics and impede the development of indigenous institutions and subjectivities.

Emerging structural inequalities in the global education market suggest new projects to decolonize the curriculum are needed. It is the western, restricted scope of the curriculum vended by the US and UK overseas campuses that colonizes indigenous knowledge. Courses in business, management, and archaeology align the curriculum with long-standing western interests in the Gulf that obstruct indigenous knowledge production. In contrast, indigenous Qatari universities, such as Qatar University (QU) and Qatar Community College (QCC), have a broader approach to knowledge and education. The wide arts and science curricula on both campuses include the history, politics, and culture of Middle East and the Gulf, subjects which can problematize the politics and culture of the Qatari state and society.

Education City's overseas campuses dwarf the oldest public indigenous university, Qatar University. QU, the only native university until 2010, was founded in central Doha soon after Qatar's independence from Britain in 1971. In contrast to Education City's overseas institutions, QU has the wide curriculum necessary for a critical education that can contribute toward national development projects. Substantial QU reform between 2003 and 2007 saw institutional autonomy granted in 2004 and an independent Board of Regents and President appointed (Moini et al., 2009, p. 40), albeit with continued ruling family participation. The administration was decentralized by the election of an academic senate and faculty accountability for staff assessment (Moini et al., 2009, p. 41). Departments were restructured, including a law college separate from the College of Sharia (Moini et al., 2009, p. 41). Reforms reiterated the importance of a liberal curriculum encompassing history, literature, government, science, and critical thinking skills (Moini et al., 2009, p. 29). QU's creativity in new projects such as the current *Encyclopaedia of Occidentalism* (QU, 2017) and long-standing contributions to regional Gulf studies, continues to offer new perspectives on westernization and build regional alliances with neighboring states. Like QU, QCC, which opened in 2010, also offers a wide curriculum that encompasses the politics, history, and culture of the Gulf and the Middle East.

However, pedagogical freedoms remain marginalized. The ruling regime dominates Qatari national education reforms, including the Qatar National Vision 2030, begun by Emir Khalifa Al-Thani in 2008 to reduce reliance on skilled expat labor through a national education program to facilitate “qatarisation.” Ruling family members still influence university governance on the QU Board of Regents and restrict the HBKU syllabus to instruction in “Qatari moral and ethical values, traditions and cultural heritage” (Qatar Foundation Telegraph, 2015). Initial assessments that suggest liberal goals to strengthen the autonomy of university governance and build a “culture of freedom of inquiry” remain unrealized (Coughlan, 2012). Participation in the global education market has stalled the de-westernization of university curricula in Qatar; overseas campuses emphasize westernized curricula while the ruling government’s emphasis on Qatari dominant values and ahistorical traditions restricts curriculum innovations in Qatari institutions. The scope of QU research has shrunk. University reforms subsumed five research centers into new departments (Moini et al., 2009, p. 12), and QU became a solely undergraduate institution (Moini et al., 2009, p. 25) with reduced tenure security and extended expatriate contracts (Moini et al., 2009, p. 30). With research outsourced to overseas campuses and the private HBKU, Qatar increasingly lacks the public research base needed to support an indigenous research agenda. In short, marketized global education makes it harder for Qatar and the UAE to sustain decolonized, de-westernized curricula that can inform the political and social liberalization on which democratization depends.

It has not always been this way. The 1974 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning Education for International Understanding, to which Qatar and the UAE are signatories, emphasized education’s role in the “struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism in all its forms” set out in article 18 (d) on “colonization and decolonization” (UNESCO, 1974). The 1978 UN Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in H.E. in the Arab States, aimed to preserve “cultural identity and co-operation between states in the region,” support the “democratization of education” (article 2 [b]), and make education available “as widely

as possible” across states in the region (article 2 [vi]). Such UN goals are harder to realize when Gulf states contract out higher education to overseas providers.

The overseas campus’s westernized curricula appears a retrograde step that slows decolonization in Gulf universities. Freire’s message on why and how pedagogic freedom mattered for 1960s anti-colonial movements remains apposite to contemporary Gulf state struggles to build individual and collective subjectivities. Freire (1970) reminds us that the decolonized subjectivities that underpin a democratic, indigenous pedagogy are constructed through “producing and acting upon [their own] ideas, not consuming those of others” (p. 89). Dabashi (2015) suggests Said’s decolonizing critique set out in *Orientalism* (1978) remains unrealized where nonwestern nations consume western education; indeed, new “regimes of knowledge” now surpass orientalism and incorporate graduates into hegemonic values (p. 16). In this way, the nonwestern subjectivities crucial to building indigenous social movements can be marginalized in Gulf universities. The structural inequalities of the global education business, in which western producer states reframe consumer state education systems, indicate struggles over the “production and regulation of subjectivity” and remain at the crux of postcolonial emancipation (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 320).

Rather than western universities leading the way, liberal opposition to Qatar’s autocratic status quo instead stems from Qataris. The campaign group Qataris for Reform, the author Ali Khalifa al-Kuwari, and the poet and Cairo University student Mohammed al-Ajami are some of the voices in the struggle for political and social reform in Qatar. Qatari resistance is rare. The last widespread social unrest in Qatar, by the Pan-Arab and anti-colonial Qatar National Unity Front in 1963, was crushed, and the exiled leaders withdrew, taking their critical awareness of regional and cultural identities. The western university marginalizes the construction of indigenous knowledge crucial to Qatari social reform movements, and its western curriculum runs counter to the construction of a Qatari education that prioritizes indigenous analyses of objective conditions and subjective experiences of everyday life in the Gulf. Such indigenous knowledge production

can inform social movements able to interrogate the domestic and regional basis of ruling elite hegemony.

## **LIBERALIZING OR SUSTAINING THE STATUS QUO?**

If overseas campuses do not liberalize the Gulf state and society, and indeed even marginalize the Qatari opposition, could the global education business instead serve the illiberal function of consolidating the Qatari status quo? Western university business interests in the Gulf could dis-incentivize universities from problematizing Gulf state power and in doing so reduce liberal pressure for reform. When Qatar buys Education City services, commercial contracts governing the transaction allow the state to limit the influences western education might exert on Qatari society. The sovereign wealth fund used to provide free university education for Qatari nationals ensures 50% of Education City student places are reserved for Qatari citizens (Kerr, 2013). In a global education market which burdens students with debt, free tertiary education may increase students' acquiescence to Qatar's status quo. The severe punishment of Qatari students, like Mohammad Al-Ajami, who speak up for reform outwith the enclave only highlights the gap between Education City and wider Qatari society.

Do western universities lack incentives to analyze how substantial liberal reform might happen in the Gulf states? Indeed, why would a UK or US university be keen to contest the *kafala* system and repressive labor laws so fundamental to the status quo in customer states like Qatar and the UAE? Certainly, UK and US engagement with Gulf state labor law in the absence of promised reforms questions the claim that the very presence of western campuses exerts a liberalizing influence in Gulf states. Western education providers in the Gulf might opt to take the ruling elite's political reassurances at face value. The Qatar Police College program at MMU is described as preparation for the 2022 Qatar World Cup; however, Qatar's police training investments are also informed by more immediate domestic pressures generated by migrant labor system discord. Just as Qatar can marginalize any resistance that might emerge from an indigenous university by importing western staff and curriculum, so the state opts out of the politics of production by buying in labor. Over the last

thirty years the growing migrant worker population, poor working conditions, and denial of migrant citizenship rights has gradually built a climate of political discontent that threatens to spark unrest. Extending citizenship rights could quell foreign migrant worker unrest in Qatar, but equally an extension of citizenship to non-Qataris could make the current large incomes enjoyed by the small Qatari citizenry unsustainable.

Policing Qatar's social border between citizens and migrants has intensified since 2011 when the Syrian civil war brought regional migration pressures to the Gulf (Stephen, 2015). The critical analysis of Qatari social policy is not prioritized by the western education imported by the ruling elite, despite such questions being central to Qatari political economy. In the context of regional demographic pressures in the Gulf economies caused by refugees fleeing conflict in Syria, the Doha 2022 World Cup is still several years away and is one of the less complex matters faced by Qatari Police College trainees (Qureshi, 2014). The overseas campus appears more likely than Qatari universities to ignore the nuances of Gulf regional politics. Indeed, Keane (2010) has described the US and UK-led Gulf wars prior to the Middle East migration crisis as underpinned by western claims regarding the "pragmatic superiority of democracy" (p. 846), and perhaps shades of foreign policy arrogance inform the liberalizing claims of the western campus. Certainly, commercial contracts now give western universities ongoing business interests in the undemocratic status quo that stifles free debate in Qatar and the UAE.

## CONCLUSION

Since the 1990s Qatar and the UAE have invested in education at all levels in order to build a knowledge economy within their respective states. In Qatar the introduction of free, compulsory primary and secondary education and the development of higher education at Qatar University, Qatar Community College, and Education City have produced a new generation of skilled workers. However, education hubs pinpoint new structures of postcolonial inequality produced by the transnational class within the globalized economy (Ong, 2006; Dwivedi & Kich, 2013). A knowledge economy built on



consuming services results in a higher education system that serves the transnational elite, not the indigenous population.

The often-repeated claim that western education exports foster liberal ideas and values in autocratic Gulf states seems unsubstantiated. Indeed, rather than exporting freedoms, the establishment of western university enclaves in Education City and Saadiyat Island depends upon access to the foreign migrant labor force, the source of substantial structural inequality that underpins the autocratic status quo in Qatar and the UAE. US and UK education exports to the Gulf impede the development of an indigenous curriculum necessary to imagine far-reaching reform in domestic and regional Gulf politics. Although indigenous Qatari academics are outside negotiations between the power brokers of the Qatari ruling elite and western universities, the UNESCO recommendations offer guidance for all members of signatory states and can inform campaigns to decolonize education and sustain academic freedom. The imported overseas campus marginalizes the public university in Qatar, the institution in which a wide-ranging curriculum, autonomous governance, and outreach programs can nurture political and social liberalization and reform outwith the structural inequalities produced by the global education market.

The global education business is creating a new structural inequality; producer states deprive consumer states of the financial and intellectual resources to build indigenous subjectivities and future institutional infrastructure. The end result is about as illiberal as can be; a westernized curriculum extends across the Middle East, and Gulf state populations lose the power to produce the education they want rather than to consume the education they are given.

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