Chapter 7
Qatar University Foundation Program: A Means to Access Higher Education and a Pathway for Transformation

Maha Al-Hendawi, Mohammad Manasreh, James Scotland, and John Rogers

Abstract  Qatar has long sought to promote education among its citizens. One of the challenges that has emerged is maintaining academic standards at a tertiary level while still providing access and equity to learners. Recently, the search for this balance has been played out through the language and admissions policy of this Gulf state’s first and only national university, Qatar University. Historically, Qatar University has strived to find a balance between upholding Arabic academic traditions and meeting the language needs for its economic activities as well as finding a balance between maintaining academic standards while providing an education that is equitable and accessible to its citizens. In 2003, Qatar University began a process of structural reform. Learners whose English language competency was not at the required level were enrolled into a newly expanded Foundation Program. This Program was initially designed as a pathway program to provide students with a preparatory route for entry into their desired colleges. Further changes to educational policy in 2012 necessitated restructuring Qatar University as Arabic became the language of instruction. This, in turn, redefined the role of the Foundation Program. This chapter is an exploration into how the Foundation Program adapted and evolved in order to better serve the constantly changing needs of Qatari students.

M. Al-Hendawi (*) · M. Manasreh · J. Scotland · J. Rogers
Qatar University, Doha, Qatar
e-mail: maha.alhendawi@qu.edu.qa

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1 Introduction

Qatar has constantly sought to promote education among its citizens while at the same time preserving the traditional Arabic language of Qatar and the Islamic world. Recently, the search for a balance between educational standards, local traditions and customs, and equity and access to education has been played out through the educational policy of this Gulf state’s first and only national university, Qatar University. Although, Arabic is Qatar University’s official language of instruction, historically it has sought to find a balance between upholding Arabic academic traditions and enhancing literacy skills in English. In 2003, Qatar University underwent a process of deep structural reform. This reform required that most majors at the university switch to an English language medium of instruction and led to an expansion of the existing Foundation Program. Nine years later this language policy was reversed by Qatar’s Supreme Education Council (SEC). Consequently, departments which had previously taught exclusively in English had to switch back to teaching in Arabic. This change in language policy also initiated a restructuring of Qatar University’s Foundation Program. This chapter describes how the Foundation Program adapted and evolved to better serve the constantly changing needs of its students.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, a brief description of Qatar and its post-secondary educational offerings are provided. This is followed by a brief history of the origins and evolution of the Foundation Program. Next, the relationship between the language policy of Qatar University and the Foundation Program’s role in providing students access to their desired colleges at the national university is explored. This is followed by a description of two major educational reforms that have attempted to address the issues of equity, accessibility, and inclusion in Qatar’s higher education as well as the role of the Foundation Program in these reforms.

2 The State of Qatar

Qatar is one of the smallest Gulf States in the Middle East. It is a nation of 11,427 km² and has an approximate population of 2.5 million (Ministry of Development and Planning 2016) consisting of around 278,000 nationals (Snoj 2013). The remainder of the population comprises an expatriate workforce. Largely as a result of the number of foreign workers residing in Qatar, English is widely spoken as a second language, since it is the most commonly shared language among the foreign workers residing in Qatar. In addition, English is taught at kindergarten and elementary school level. However, Arabic remains the first language of the local population and holds the status of being the official national language.

It is also important to acknowledge that Qatar is a prosperous country, largely as a result of possessing one of the world’s largest natural gas reserves (Moini et al. 2009). However, Qatar has also proven itself to be ambitious in its plans to develop the country and its human capital, following a sustainable model that should outlast
its finite hydrocarbon reserves. Thus, one of Qatar’s historic long-term aims has been to develop a diversified, knowledge-based economy. In order to achieve economic diversification, in 2008 Qatar launched the Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV2030) as a blueprint which defines Qatar’s long-term outcomes and provides a framework within which national strategies and implementations can be developed (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics 2013). Within the QNV2030, education has a central role in the establishment of a robust and self-sustainable private sector.

It has long been recognized that Qatar’s education system is crucial to the success of its national vision (Brewer et al. 2007). Qatar seeks a national labor force which can effectively participate in both the public and private sectors of its economy. Due to its relatively small population, if Qatar’s full potential is to be realized, then each citizen must strive towards their full potential. Qatar’s National Development Strategy explains that “efforts that equip Qataris with the skills required to attain their maximum potential in both the public and private sectors warrant close attention, and their success will be vital to creating a vibrant non-hydrocarbon economy and broader societal capabilities” (General Secretariat for Development Planning 2011, p. 62).

In summary, upgrading and deepening the knowledge, education, and skills of Qataris is now a national priority, and Qatar’s national university currently has a central role in equipping Qataris with the skills that they need to participate in Qatar’s increasingly diversified, knowledge-based economy. As an illustration of this recognition, Qatar’s education system has undergone a series of educational reforms in recent years at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. These reforms have been aimed at raising Qatar’s “human resources to a level of competency that meets the technological, business, and industrial needs of the country while at the same time responds to the social and cultural challenges that are bound to accompany accelerated development” (Al Misnad 2009, p. xiii). As this chapter is focused on issues of equity and the pathway program at Qatar University, a full description of these reforms is beyond the scope of this chapter. For a full description of the reform efforts undertaken within the State of Qatar, please refer to Brewer et al. (2007), Brewer and Goldman (2010), Moini et al. (2009), and Zellman et al. (2011a, b).

2.1 Education City

At present, there are a number of options in Qatar for students who wish to pursue post-secondary education. Arguably the most well-known of these options is Education City, a development within Qatar that hosts a number of branches of foreign universities (Brewer et al. 2007). Education City is the principle project of the Qatar Foundation, a not-for-profit organization devoted to the development of education, science, and community in Qatar (Moini et al. 2009). Education City, which has been described as the Ivy league of the Middle East (Lewin 2008), currently includes branches of six American universities (Virginia Commonwealth University, Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University, Weill Cornell
Medical College, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, and Northwestern University in Qatar), one French university (HEC Paris in Qatar), one British Institution (University College London Qatar), and, most recently, a Qatari institution (Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies) that offer studies in several areas including Islamic law, finance, and public policy (Brewer and Goldman 2010; for a full description of these universities and the degrees and programs that they offer, refer to the Qatar Foundation Website: www.qf.org.qa).

2.2 Qatar University

In addition to the universities affiliated with Education City, there are a number of other post-secondary options available in Qatar. These include branches of other foreign institutions, such as the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar, Stenden University Qatar, and the University of Calgary in Qatar, as well as Qatar University, the national university of Qatar. Qatar University, which was formally founded in 1977, comprises nine colleges: Arts and Sciences, Business and Economics, Education, Engineering, Law, Pharmacy, Sharia and Islamic Studies, the College of Medicine, and the College of Health Sciences, as well as the Foundation Program. Qatar University is the main provider of tertiary education in this Gulf State. Its colleges offer over 70 specializations at the undergraduate level. These are aligned with the growing needs of the labor market and the aspirations of the society it serves. At present, over 15,000 Qatari and non-Qatari students are enrolled at the university (Qatar University 2015).

3 Equity in Higher Education in Qatar

It is important to highlight that issues of equity, inclusion, and participation in higher education have long been a key concern in the implementation of the many education reforms that have taken place in recent years in Qatar (e.g., Brewer and Goldman 2010; Moini et al. 2009). As noted above, there are a number of post-secondary options available for students in Qatar. However, a number of these options are not realistic for many of the students who wish to pursue higher education. As an example, the universities in Education City are all co-educational. This is a delicate issue, in that gender-segregated classrooms are the norm as per Qatari customs and traditions, in particular for female students (Moini et al. 2009). Because women typically remain close to their families according to Qatari tradition, it is clear that the options are limited for females because they also may not be able to pursue tertiary education abroad while remaining consistent with the Qatari culture. In addition to the limited access that females have to the universities within Education City, it is also important to consider the fact that Education City is often referred to as the “Ivy League” of the Middle East (Lewin 2008). As expected, such
a comparison indicates a level of prestige associated with studying in these institutions. However, this prestige also comes at a price in that these schools admit relatively small cohorts of students and are thus very selective in their admission processes. In sum, although there are a wide range of options available for post-secondary education in Qatar, many of these universities are not accessible to the majority of the population due to the particularities of local tradition as well as the selectivity of these universities in their admissions.

In light of the limitations outlined in the paragraph above, one of the roles of Qatar University has been to be the main post-secondary educational option for Qatari citizens. However, it is important to stress that the emphasis on inclusion and equity in Qatar University comes with a simultaneous emphasis on offering a rigorous and quality education to its students. The education which the university provides is strongly aligned with Qatar’s 2030 National Vision. It is expected that Qatar University produce qualified graduates to enter the country’s constantly expanding and diversifying labor market. This expectation is acknowledged within Qatar University’s 2015–2016 Undergraduate Student Catalog, which states that the university seeks to “provide post-secondary education opportunities for Qatari citizens with the goal to building a workforce of competent and skilled graduates in line with the labor market needs and adhering to the principles of Qatar National Vision 2030” (Qatar University 2015, p. 24).

In the sections that follow, this chapter will outline two major reforms undergone by Qatar University in recent years, and discuss the impact that these reforms have had on equity, participation, and inclusion at Qatar University. As discussed above, these reforms were carried out with the aims of providing high quality education and of improving the access and inclusion in the educational opportunities offered at this university.

### 3.1 The 2003 Education Reform

When it opened in 1977, Qatar University taught its courses solely in Arabic. However, in the early 2000s both English and Arabic were languages of instruction. Three colleges (Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Sharia, Law, and Islamic Studies) taught courses in Arabic (Moini et al. 2009, p. 11). The remaining colleges (Engineering, Science, and Business and Economics) taught courses in English.

In 2003, Qatar University underwent a process of deep structural reform. At this time, potential employers in Qatar (both public and private) reported that often the university’s graduates did not meet the standards required for employment (Moini et al. 2009, p. xxi). Thus, this reform project was intended to enhance the quality of education that the university offered and better align the university with the technological, business, and industrial needs of Qatar’s increasingly knowledge-based economy.

The reforms were internally led and implemented. They were based on the principles of autonomy, decentralization, and accountability. The university was given
the power to allocate its budget as it saw fit; responsibility for academic decisions was returned to colleges and academic departments; and new systems of accountability were introduced (Moini et al. 2009). Furthermore, the reform project considered the English language to be a means to a world-class education. Therefore, one of the more controversial parts of the reform project was the switch to an English language medium of instruction for most majors at the university (Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015, p. 207). Initially, only the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies was allowed to continue to teach through the medium of Arabic. The admissions requirements for the other colleges were then raised. A minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) 5.5 overall score was required for students who wished to enroll in a course which was conducted in English. Students who were unable to meet these requirements were enrolled into the Foundation Program.

3.1.1 The Evolution of the Foundation Program

As noted above, the reform of 2003 was carried out with the intention of raising the educational standards of Qatar University. It was believed that, by improving the quality of education offered, the graduates would be better equipped for their future careers and/or post-graduate studies. However, it was also recognized that the raising of these standards posed some risks to the degree of accessibility of university education. In particular, with the adoption of English as the primary medium of instruction and the newly introduced admission requirement of a minimum IELTS score, it was not possible for citizens who lacked proficiency in English to study at tertiary level in Qatar. The key point here is that a lack of proficiency in a foreign language (i.e. English) could potentially deny citizens access to their national university. To address this issue, the reform project recommended that the existing language program be strengthened and be made available to students entering all programs at the University (Moini et al. 2009, p. 31).

Although Qatar University had offered supplementary English and Mathematics courses prior to the reform of 2003, it was as part of this reform that the Foundation Program was formalized as a pathway program to provide equity and access to higher education for students who lacked the necessary competencies for admission. In its initial form, the Foundation Program provided training in English, Maths, and Information and communications technology (ICT) and was envisioned as a necessary and positive means of raising the standards within the university while providing access to post-secondary education for the citizens of Qatar.

3.1.2 Unintended Consequences of the Foundation Program

Many viewed the Foundation Program positively; from 2004 to 2012, it helped thousands of students, in particular female students, to access higher education and gain entry to their respective colleges. However, despite the positive benefits brought by the change to studying through the medium of English, some stakeholders in the local community were not satisfied. This dissatisfaction was largely due to the
admission requirements of the university as well as with the structure and regulations of the Foundation Program. For example, students who entered the Foundation Program were expected to complete successfully all the courses in the program in four semesters (i.e. two years), or in order to exit the program, a student needed to achieve the proficiency requirements (e.g., IELTS 5.5 overall score or equivalent) needed to matriculate to their chosen undergraduate program within the university. In other words, once a student achieved their departmental entry requirements, they were still required to pass the prescribed Foundation English courses. Students who did not attain a satisfactory IELTS score within two years were required to withdraw from the university. As can be inferred, the IELTS requirement as well as the Foundation Program came to be viewed over time as a barrier to departmental enrollment.

In the fall of 2006, the Foundation Program designed and administered a questionnaire to 244 students (Foundation Program English Department 2009). This questionnaire was part of an ongoing needs analysis. The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit feedback about the program from one of its key stakeholders, the students. The most significant finding which arose from this questionnaire was that many students were extrinsically motivated. They were attending foundation courses not because they wanted to improve their proficiency in English but because it was a university requirement. This problem persisted over the next two years. Once again, an internal report by the Foundation Program (Foundation Program English Department 2011) found that some students expressed low morale, poor motivation, and dissatisfaction at being forced to enroll in a non-credit-bearing course for a significant length of time. Many students chose not to enroll in the courses offered by the Foundation Program or dropped out after enrollment. The same internal report indicated that approximately 50% of the students who registered with Qatar University and were expected to enroll in the Foundation Program either did not register for Foundation courses or dropped out of the courses once they had registered (Foundation Program English Department 2011). Furthermore, even after participating in the Foundation Program for two years, some students were not able to attain the required level of English to matriculate in their department of choice (see Table 1).

Contrary to its original role and purpose, the Foundation Program was perceived by many students as an obstacle which prevented them from entering their departments.

Additionally, the Foundation Program was a controversial topic in the wider Qatari community. Within the wider society the Foundation Program was viewed as having failed the members of society who, after completing the two-year program,

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<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>Number of students admitted to the Foundation Program</th>
<th>Number of students who did not attain the required level of English</th>
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<tr>
<td>2010–2010</td>
<td>3992</td>
<td>213</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010–2011</td>
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<td>196</td>
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were unable to attain the required IELTS score. There were widespread complaints that the English language instruction policy “discriminated against nationals” (Gengler 2012). The reality was that, although the Foundation Program was created with the intention of providing equitable higher education access to all members of the Qatari society, it functioned as a filter for the university. The key point here is that after studying for two years with the Foundation Program, some students were unable to obtain the required language skills; thus, a lack of proficiency in a foreign language (i.e. English) was denying these citizens access to their national university. Once again, a change in educational policy at the governmental level triggered a restructuring of Qatar University as well as of the Foundation Program.

3.2 The 2012 Education Reform

In 2012, the appropriateness of English as the official medium of instruction at Qatar University was being questioned by the wider community. The Qatari public expressed widespread concern that: younger Qataris were neglecting their heritage and Arabic language skills (Powell 2012, p. 109); teaching in the medium of English was not compatible with traditional Qatari values and therefore inappropriate (Zellman et al. 2011a, p. 59); and learning through the medium of English, rather than Arabic, was a major cause of low student achievement (Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015, p. 207). These concerns were carefully taken into consideration at the governmental level.

In 2012, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) issued a decree which mandated that Arabic should become the official medium of instruction at Qatar University (Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015). In line with the 2003 reform, the medium of instruction for nearly all undergraduate degree programs taught at Qatar University at the time was English. As a consequence of the 2012 decree, most disciplines immediately switched language of instruction to Arabic. In addition to the programs that were already offered in Arabic, Business and Economics, Law, Mass Communications, and International Affairs were also offered in Arabic. The remaining colleges of Science, Engineering, and Pharmacy continued to use English as the medium of instruction. Consequently, these colleges became the clients for the Foundation Program. This change in language policy necessitated restructuring the existing Foundation Program.

The impact of this restructuring was immediately apparent in the number of students admitted to the university. The introduction of Arabic as a medium of instruction led to a sharp increase in the total number of students who were admitted, and subsequently enrolled, at Qatar University in 2012 (see Figure 1 below).

Subsequent years have seen further shifts in enrollment, with Qatari students now comprising the majority of all students. Additionally, students who are enrolled in the disciplines whose medium of instruction was affected by the 2012 decree have largely welcomed the change. Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb (2015) collected feedback from 295 students from the College of Law, College of Business, Department of Mass Communication, and Department of International Affairs.
They found that, although most respondents highly valued English, they supported the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction (Ellili-Cherif and Alkhateeb 2015, p. 212). These data can further support previous claims that English was a barrier to higher education for the local population in Qatar.

This section has provided an overview of the history of the Foundation Program, its context, and the factors that have necessitated changes to the curriculum and purpose of this program. The following section will shift perspective and provide details of how the Foundation Program has adapted to these factors, in particular with details of changes to the curriculum of the existing Foundation Program and the development of the embedded sub-program in undergraduate courses that are part of the university general education courses.

4 The Current Foundation Program

As noted above, the 2012 reform necessitated the restructuring of the courses offered by the Foundation Program. The most fundamental change stemmed from the university re-introduction of Arabic as the medium of instruction for some streams of study. Importantly, the Foundation Program was called upon to provide English language instruction for students enrolled in majors with Arabic as the medium of instruction (e.g., Arabic, College of Law, College of Business, Department of Mass Communication, and Department of International Affairs). This required the creation of a new sub-program, called the Embedded Program. The Embedded Program is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow. However, as was the case in the past, the Foundation Program also was to continue to provide English courses for students who wished to enroll in majors with English
as the medium of instruction (e.g., the colleges of Science, Engineering, and Pharmacy), yet did not possess the necessary competency in English to do so. These courses are henceforth referred to as Foundation English courses.

The most fundamental change to the Foundation English courses as part of the 2012 reform was that the program was reduced from a 2-year program to a 1-year program. Furthermore, the IELTS exam was removed as a pre-requisite for students to matriculate into their English-stream undergraduate majors. In other words, requirements that had previously acted as barriers to entry were removed to provide greater ease of access for students to the university.

It was also recognized that multiple avenues were needed for students to gain entry to their undergraduate studies at Qatar University. At present, students can gain entry to undergraduate programs offered in English through two different pathways: an English proficiency exam or the completion of the Foundation Program. Upon enrollment in an English-stream major, students are required to present proof of their level of proficiency in English. Those who meet the requirements of their chosen college (i.e., an IELTS score of 5.5 or above) are able to matriculate directly into their chosen majors. Those who fall short of the requisite level or who are unable to present proof of their proficiency in English are asked to take a standardized placement test upon enrollment. The results of this exam are then used to place students at the appropriate level of the Foundation Program or to exempt students completely from Foundation courses if they attain scores which are high enough. Alternatively, students may begin their undergraduate studies by completing all components of the Foundation Program.

4.1 Embedded Sub-program

As noted previously, Qatar University experienced a dramatic increase in enrollment following the 2012 reform that re-introduced Arabic as a medium of instruction. However, the university recognized the importance of English for these students’ future academic and professional careers. Therefore, to accommodate students enrolled in Arabic-stream majors, a new sub-program was developed within the Foundation Program. This sub-program, named the Embedded Program, consists of a series of four language courses that are designed to provide students with the English skills needed for their future academic and/or professional careers. Unlike the Foundation Program courses, these four English courses are undergraduate level courses, are part of the core curriculum of Qatar University and are credit-bearing.

4.2 A Framework for Understanding These Changes

Phillip and Ochs’ (2003) framework of principles of borrowing in education is particularly useful to understand the efforts toward education reform that took place in recent years at Qatar University. According to this framework, there are four main
stages in the borrowing process: cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and integration. The first stage, cross-national attraction, involves seeking out and borrowing practices and policies from external sources. This stage can be motivated by a variety of impetuses including internal dissatisfaction with the current practices of the educational system. The second stage, decision, concerns the “who” and “how” of the decision process; the decision stage can be characterized as a “top-down” or “bottom-up” process. The third stage, implementation, is self-explanatory in that it involves the many steps undertaken to put the “borrowed” policy into practice. The final stage, internalization, is concerned with the realities and aftermath of the implementation process. It is at this stage that the impact of the borrowed policies and/or practices on the internal system is examined and the effectiveness of the changes is evaluated. Furthermore, it is at this stage that modifications in the borrowed policy can be made in light of the local context.

Phillip and Ochs’ (2003) principles of borrowing in education appear to be a useful framework for examining the timeline of the various reform projects in Qatar University. For instance, if we take the 2003 reform project as an example, the initial stage of the model, cross-national attraction, involved identifying English as a means of improving the educational standards at Qatar University. This need for change resulted from a number of factors, the most notable being reports from many employers that graduates of the university did not meet the minimum standards for employment (Moini et al. 2009). The second and third stages, decision and implementation, discussed above can be characterized as having followed a “top-down” process.

The final internalization stage took place between the reforms of 2003 and 2012, during which time the effectiveness of the policy was evaluated in light of the impact that it had on a number of different areas, such as quality of education at Qatar University and the unintended consequence of hindering access to higher education for a majority of the local population. The reform project of 2012, then, can be seen as a reiteration of this cycle in order to better adapt the borrowed policy and/or practice to the local context in which it was implemented. This second round of reform at the university illustrates that reform is not a one-off event but is instead part of an ongoing cycle of identifying needs, implementing the necessary change to address them, and then evaluating the impact of this change on the educational system.

5 Conclusion

Looking forward, there are a number of initiatives and changes at Qatar University that will undoubtedly create new opportunities and challenges for the Foundation Program. As this chapter has illustrated, the reforms carried out by Qatar University to better serve the local community have resulted in positive changes in the educational system, as well as unintended consequences. It is important to stress that these reforms should not be seen as one-off events, but are instead part of an ongoing narrative in which Qatar University continues to adapt and adjust its policies and curriculum in an effort to continue to serve its student population. In other words, reforms within the
university can be seen as part of an ongoing cyclical process designed to provide a quality post-secondary education that is equitable and accessible to the citizens of Qatar. As part of this goal, the Foundation Program has fulfilled, and will continue to play, a key role at Qatar University in that it provides a pathway for its students to build their competencies in order to be successful at the undergraduate level.

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