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Revitalizing Qatar's National University

Since the 1990s, the State of Qatar has capitalized on the country's oil and gas wealth to launch economic and social initiatives aimed at modernizing and diversifying the country's economy. Improving and expanding Qatar's education system is key to this social and economic development. The first of these initiatives, chronologically, was developing Education City, which hosts branch campuses of leading foreign universities, each serving Qatari and non-Qatari students in particular study programs.

Such branch campuses cannot, and were never intended to, accommodate the large majority of Qatari secondary school graduates who sought academically oriented higher education but did not qualify for or chose not to attend foreign universities. For these graduates, Qatar University (QU) was and still is the most appropriate option. By 2003, however, the need to strengthen QU to meet the needs of a new generation of Qataris became apparent.

The QU Reform Was Motivated by Observed Problems

In its earlier years, QU had been regarded by many observers as one of the best universities in the Middle East. But by a number of measures, QU's performance had been deteriorating for several years before the reforms were launched. Among the most prominent were the lengthening time students required to complete their degrees and the number who did so with very poor grades. Qualitative indicators of student engagement also suggested problems, particularly among male students. The quality of the faculty was also declining. The number of full professors had fallen sharply in the years before the reform, and morale was widely reported to be low.

In 2003, QU had no written compilation of procedures documenting how academic or administrative processes should be conducted, which meant that key aspects of QU life were handled through sometimes inconsistent

Abstract

Although Qatar University (QU) had been well regarded in the past, its performance had deteriorated by 2003, and the country's leadership was concerned that the university was not meeting Qatar's needs. From 2003 to 2007, the university led a reform process facilitated by RAND and outside experts, which clarified QU's mission and reformed QU's major administrative and academic structures, policies, and practices in line with that mission. As of January 2007, the university had achieved a majority of the necessary reform actions, although important work remained for the future.

improvisation or governed by long-standing but unwritten tradition.

Finally, and most important, evidence was accumulating that QU was failing to meet the needs of the larger Qatari society, with both public- and private-sector employers reporting that few QU graduates met required employment standards.

QU Led the Reform

The reform effort was guided by the principle that, while impartial outside experts were critical, QU itself had to lead the reform. Therefore, a Senior Reform Committee (SRC) of senior QU members and outside experts from top universities in the United States and United Kingdom served as a forum for discussing QU's mission and helped shape reform proposals.

The SRC operated from January 2004 to January 2007. It first defined the appropriate mission for QU, which included being the major postsecondary school option for qualified Qatari students; identified major impediments to QU's ability to fulfill that mission; and then recommended reforms.

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Most of the Reforms Have Been Implemented

The table shows the recommended reforms and progress toward meeting them as of January 2007. Each reform had a set of key actions that needed to be accomplished. For example, the first reform—create institutional autonomy—had nine key actions, such as “create and vest ultimate authority in a Board of Regents.” In this case, eight actions were achieved and one was partially achieved. Overall, of the 45 key actions, 38 were either achieved or partially achieved and the remainder were in progress by January 2007.

Status of Implementing QU Reforms, as of January 2007

| Recommended reform | Number of key actions that are part of reform | Status | | |
|--|---|-----------|--------------------|-------------|
| | | Achieved | Partially achieved | In progress |
| 1. Create institutional autonomy | 9 | 8 | 1 | 0 |
| 2. Improve university decisionmaking processes | 6 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| 3. Revitalize academic structure and services | 7 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| 4. Improve management of faculty | 9 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| 5. Foster and support student achievement | 8 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. Strengthen the university community | 6 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| Total | 45 | 25 | 13 | 7 |

Implementing the Reforms Required Difficult Trade-Offs

In retrospect, several factors made the reform possible: leveraging the momentum created by the major changes occurring in the country; organizing the effort into distinct phases to allow activities to be completed modularly; and creating milestones to measure progress. Strong, well-supported leadership and QU’s role in leading the reform agenda, with support from outside experts, were vitally important.

Still, designing and implementing the reform agenda involved difficult choices. First, the administration chose

to uphold its new standards and aimed to serve average and above-average students rather than lower the standards to serve all students regardless of their preparation for university studies. Second, it aspired to goals that could realistically be achieved in a few years while making provisions for more ambitious expansion later.

Third, to reinforce existing QU strengths and try to share those strengths more broadly within QU, it chose the more traditional path of creating a College of Arts and Sciences rather than attempting a more innovative academic structure that would have combined the College of Science with the College of Engineering.

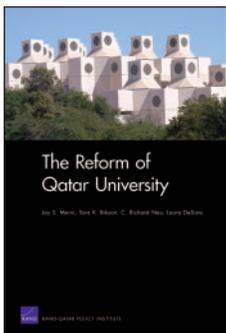
Fourth, in deciding whether to assign a number of promising young faculty members to key administrative positions or allow them to pursue their academic careers, QU’s president chose to assign them to leadership positions, with the hope they might eventually be able to return to teaching and research.

Finally, the rapid pace of reform led to considerable confusion and some resistance to change. QU’s president chose to enlist a growing circle of respected faculty supportive of change rather than trying to bring the entire faculty along at once.

Looking Forward: The Challenges Ahead

By January 2007, the reform’s major structural and organizational objectives were achieved, but not yet fully institutionalized. The next major test for the reforms will come when the current QU administration, which conceived and implemented the reforms, is replaced by new leaders. QU’s autonomy may also be tested by demands placed on it by the state, which provides most of its financial resources. Finally, over time, QU must find ways to support transformation of the faculty’s and students’ attitudes, expectations, and behaviors, which cannot be forced from the top.

The reforms have brought changes in QU’s structure and organization and have prompted the beginnings of change in the less formal and less easily controlled spirit of the university. Completing these latter changes and making them enduring are the challenging tasks that QU must confront in the coming years. ■



This research brief describes work conducted by the RAND-Qatar Policy Institute and RAND Education and documented in *The Reform of Qatar University*, by Joy S. Moini, Tora K. Bikson, C. Richard Neu, and Laura DeSisto, MG-796-QATAR (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG796>), 2009, 122 pp., \$24.00, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4744-1. This research brief was written by Paul Steinberg. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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