



EU-GCC AI Jisr Project **مشروع الجسر**



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Bertelsmann Stiftung



Promoting EU-GCC Cooperation in Higher Education

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Policy Brief

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AI-Jisr Policy Paper

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Based on the UNESCO Education for All Framework of 1999 and in response to the seminal Arab Human Development Report of 2003, the GCC states have developed numerous strategy papers to reform their education systems. The promotion of social and human development through education has in fact become a national priority among GCC member states based on the acknowledgment that without action, the knowledge gap between the Arab world and the rest of the world would only grow further. As a result of this assessment, all the GCC states have invested considerable political and financial resources to modernize and expand their education sectors.

In conjunction with the rising importance of education, the Euro-Gulf Research Unit at Kuwait University, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and the Gulf Research Center, within the framework of the AI-Jisr Project on EU-GCC Public Diplomacy and Outreach Activities, held an expert workshop and open forum on March 10-11, 2009 in Kuwait to explore in detail how best to foster and carry forward cooperation in one area of education, that of higher education. The discussion highlighted that the EU and the GCC states face many of the same issues in terms of the development of their educational institutions, the proper dissemination of knowledge, quality and equality within education, and modernization of their systems. Both sides also appear to be aware that the task of building knowledge societies is an ongoing process and as such are increasingly committed to forge new areas of cooperation and exchange.

As a result of this workshop, the AI-Jisr Project has put together concrete policy suggestions that should be contemplated by officials and policy practitioners from both the European and the Gulf sides when it comes to devising new programs of cooperation. The following policy recommendations elaborate suggestions on how both the EU and the GCC should seek to engage with various facets of reform efforts. Among the key components put forward for consideration are twinning programs, regular working groups, summer programs, joint applications for research funding, establishing a partnership for research exchange, developing a network of cooperation within the GCC, and establishing programs in the fields of quality assurance, teacher training and teacher mobility. Taken together, this can evolve into a concrete and holistic plan for action as far as cooperation in higher education between the GCC and the EU is concerned.

Make education the focus of EU-GCC cooperation

The European experience has proven that cooperation in education, exchange programs for students, researchers, and young professionals etc. build the social

fabric that is needed to substantiate and enhance political and economic relations. Programs like the Erasmus Mundus, the Jean Monnet Program or the Marie Curie Fellowships have gone a long way towards promoting a sentiment of integration especially among the youth of Europe who today feel more European than ever.

In terms of EU-GCC ties, one must note that education as a field has been part of the relationship since the signing of the Cooperation Agreement in 1988. In addition, the 17th Joint Ministerial Communiqué of May 2007 “insisted on the urgency of finding practical ways to strengthen cooperation in the field of education between universities in both regions.” Yet, in order to really promote understanding and develop a broad-based relationship, the EU and the GCC states should broaden their shared agenda to include all levels of education, from pre-school to university. The EU should be responsive to requests from the GCC, but beyond that also actively offer its support. However, all cooperation efforts need to take into account that the education sector must be attuned to the cultural environment in which it is operating and exports or imports of ready made-solutions are hardly successful. It must therefore also be acknowledged that building partnerships takes time and that ultimate success in cooperative endeavors can only be measured over a certain period. Thus, efforts to broaden cooperation in education must move from short-time thinking programs to long-term engagement. Nevertheless, the time for engagement is now so that benefits can be reaped in the not-so-distant future.

Create ownership at decision-maker level

There is a need for an overall framework under which cooperative measures can be put in place. Such a framework must allow for institutional relations to develop and must reflect the political will to move forward to implement ideas and initiatives. This is where the EU and GCC as regional institutions have a role to play. At the same time, in order to become sustainable, actors are needed that feel ownership and initiate and implement concrete cooperation projects. Such ownership can best develop against the background of cultural experience and the establishment of personal relations. Hence, as a starting point, the EU and the GCC should seek ways to increase direct contacts and the exchange of personnel at all levels. Of particular importance is the decision-maker-level, e.g. school directors, university professors, division managers etc. For example, regular exchange visits of rectors of universities would contribute towards promoting better and substantive cooperation. In addition, there needs to be better coordination between planning and implementation in order to reach the decision-makers so that good initiatives see the light of day and to ensure that those initiatives are then carried out to their proper beneficial intention. Only if these key actors put their efforts in cooperation projects, there is a chance that these projects will eventually materialize.

Get people on the move

In conjunction with the above, it is absolutely essential to establish links for the exchange of students and researchers at different stages of their career. As far as Europe is concerned, for example, Erasmus mobility has proven a remarkable

success for the participating researchers in the EU. This program should be opened to researchers from the GCC as soon as possible. Short-term visits of partner institutions abroad, as envisaged in this program, could be implemented with little organizational effort and make Erasmus mobility a particularly attractive cooperation scheme. Moreover, the EU should consider opening its Marie Curie Program for doctoral students from the GCC states and encourage further joint masters programs. At the undergraduate level, it might be advisable to supplement Erasmus Mundus, which has not been very successful in the Gulf so far, with summer universities on selected topics that can be combined with language courses and intercultural training. Such short-term programs are an easy way to gain first-hand experience abroad and prepare students to participate in long-term programs later on.

For the GCC states, GCC universities should be encouraged to apply for funding through the Jean Monnet program and support the establishment of research projects on the EU in the GCC. The GCC could further contemplate a similar initiative to promote more effective and broad-based Gulf studies in Europe. The Kuwait Fund for the Advancement of Sciences has begun to establish Chairs for Gulf Studies at prominent universities in Europe. This should be expanded to include several more European countries. The GCC should also devise an Erasmus Mundus project of its own in order to make it possible for European students to study at universities in the Gulf, for example, within Qatar Education City. Overall, there is a need for broad-based and frequent exchange programs that can bring together students, teachers, administrators and high-level education decision-makers.

Increase awareness of both the European Union and the GCC states

Both the EU and the GCC need to engage more effectively in public diplomacy efforts to increase the awareness of Europe among GCC citizens and vice versa. One way to do this is by establishing or funding executive learning programs for decision-makers and other opinion leaders as well as summer universities for students to impart knowledge about the EU's functioning and institutional set-up, the relationship between the EU and the member states, Europe's role in international affairs etc., or the issues and debates that are shaping development and change in the GCC countries. Better coordination should also be pursued to manage educational exhibitions in both the GCC states and in Europe to display opportunities and available programs. A council among universities could manage such annual exhibitions.

On all of these fronts, the EU should make use of the fact that the GCC states share a common language and support the translation of relevant publications on Europe and European politics into Arabic. This is of particular importance when it comes to the programs that are already open for Gulf participation but over which there exists almost no general public knowledge. In this context, it is important to stress that there are already numerous initiatives available that simply need to be promoted better than it is currently the case. There is no need to start from scratch and come up with totally new concepts.

Integrate the GCC states into the European Research Area

The inclusion of the GCC states into the EU “Financing Instrument for Cooperation with Industrialized and other High Income Countries” has already facilitated inter-regional research efforts. In addition, the EU should encourage the GCC states to join its Framework Program (FP). So far only Oman, which is regarded as a developing country, is registered as an International Cooperation and Partner Country (ICPC). Given the other GCC states’ status as industrialized countries, their inclusion would provide the FP with additional financial resources and, at the same time, make established research networks across Europe and beyond accessible for institutes from the Gulf region. The proposed establishment of an INCO-NET that includes the GCC states as part of FP7 is a step in the right direction and should be pursued further.

It is of equal importance and relevance to look into the establishment of joint research task forces. Here, the EU and the GCC should identify issues of common interest (e.g. energy issues and renewable energies, water management, climate change, the healthcare sector, logistics and even international politics) and initiate and co-finance inter-regional research projects and networks that address these topics. Projects like Al-Jisr, Eurogolfe or Eurogulf serve as positive examples in this regard but much more could be done. Such initiatives would also greatly promote the creation of national R&D policies for the GCC states. At this stage, the fact that the GCC states import a large part of their technology from abroad while ranking internationally low in terms of innovation is a clear indicator that such policy alone is insufficient. It also puts GCC states at a competitive disadvantage over the medium and long-term. Better inter-regional cooperation efforts will go a long way to alleviate this situation.

Include issues of general education

Reforms of the general education system are high on the agenda of the GCC states. Any improvement at the level of higher education has to rest on a solid foundation built during pre-school, primary and secondary education. The GCC states’ education strategies acknowledge this and include three interrelated aspects: a) changes in the curricula to increase the share of mathematics, sciences and foreign languages; b) employment of teaching methods that encourage creativity, critical thinking, and abilities to abstract thought instead of memorizing; c) training of teachers to enable them to implement the new curricula and to apply the new teaching methods.

Curricula, teaching methods and teacher education are subjects to reform in Europe, too. There are many lessons that have been learned in Europe and some of them are certainly of interest for the GCC states. The EU should collect the lessons learned from European reform efforts and share these experiences with the GCC states. These can be elaborated in regular working groups composed of high-level education officials from both sides. Furthermore, the EU should encourage its member states to task their national agencies for international cooperation to provide the GCC states with technical and personnel support where this is wished. In this context, it is desirable that the EU member states coordinate their efforts to maximize synergies where possible.

Cooperate on education governance

With the aim of modernizing their economies the GCC states are trying to implement reforms and bring about a level of change at the social level that is both unprecedented and unparalleled. Within this process, the governance structures in education tend to lag behind in their development, and assistance from the EU in this field could prove beneficial especially in terms of further modernization of existing systems. For example, the strongly centralized educational administration in the GCC should be decentralized to allow for the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process. Wherever possible, decision-making authority should be delegated to the schools and universities. These institutions should be given the freedom to creatively develop their own approaches and institutional cultures within the framework provided by the government. Moreover, the establishment of parents' associations, student unions and other interest groups with a stake in education should be encouraged. Such groups voice suggestions and concerns; they contribute to innovations as well as quality management in the education sector.

Most EU member states possess such decentralized structures. They should offer support and advice on the administrative steps that have to be taken to transform the bureaucratic structures. Additionally, they should offer assistance to schools and universities to effectively use their new competences. These are all areas in which the EU in particular can play a vital role in terms of expertise and knowledge concerning the development of the educational sector.

Strengthen quality management and evaluation

The GCC states opened their education systems for private service providers and invested large sums of money in international cooperation projects. Yet, up to this point, there is a great variation in input and output, and it remains to be seen whether the investment leads to sufficient results. Similarly, the modes of accreditation and evaluation for these providers and projects vary even within the country and the fact that access to education has significantly increased does not mean that the quality of education has improved at the same rate. On all these fronts, changes are required to increase the transparency of the education system and allow parents and students to make their education choices on a well-informed basis. The EU should offer support for the GCC states to establish adequate evaluation and rating procedures for private and public education institutions at pre-school, primary, secondary or higher education levels. There is a need to establish both national and regional education standards to assess the performance of graduates and the quality of the programs being offered. In addition to leading to a comparability of the different schools and universities, it would promote efforts to standardize accreditation, evaluation and rating criteria. Special attention should be paid towards improving the quality of teachers. As the example of Singapore has underlined, spending on education will have very little impact if it is not matched by a significant improvement in the quality of the teaching personnel.

Assist regional efforts to expand vocational training

The GCC states aim at building a skilled national work force to reduce their dependence on foreign workers and to diversify their economies. Similar programs are running in many Gulf countries. The EU member states possess long experience with vocational training at home as well as in third countries. They should make their experiences available to the GCC states and offer personnel and technical support for their efforts. In addition to that, private enterprises play a crucial role as providers of vocational training across Europe. Hence, the EU and the GCC states should include the private sector in their deliberations as well as the implementation of concrete projects.

Encourage inter-regional cooperation at all levels

The European experience shows that cooperation in education can contribute to regional integration at all levels, a development that links well into the fact that the GCC states are pursuing an ambitious regional agenda as well. As a result, there is a need for regional cooperation programs that include school partnerships, university cooperation or joint research programs, just to name the most straightforward examples. To make such programs possible, as well as to increase flexibility and ownership, the GCC states should empower the implementing institutions to engage in these kind of cooperation projects, a step that follows on the need to press forward with accompanying administrative reforms. Such efforts could also promote the establishment of regional standards for degrees and evaluation criteria and ratings for universities and colleges, as described earlier. The EU experience in accreditation procedures should be brought into the discussions here.

In the end, while education remains a national effort and prerogative, a proper development of policies within the EU-GCC relationship can provide the necessary framework under which cooperative efforts can achieve their maximum effect. Given their young demographic structure, there will be increased demand in the GCC states for quality secondary and tertiary education. Education is thus the one area where collaborative projects can lead to concrete results. Given that education is as much about learning as it is a cultural effort to build bridges and promote greater understanding, this certainly will prove to be the single most important field that can genuinely lead to closer ties between the member states of the GCC and the EU.

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AI-Jisr Project for GCC-EU Relations



Since July 2008, the Gulf Research Center is leading a two-year project on “Public Diplomacy and Outreach devoted to the European Union and EU-GCC Relations.” This has been named the AI-Jisr project on GCC-EU Relations. In response to a call from the European Commission, the project’s main objectives are threefold. First, it aims to enhance public and well as professional knowledge and understanding of the European Union, its policies and institutions, among GCC citizens. Second, it strives to strengthen reflection and debate about EU-GCC relations and contribute to the future of policy-making between the two regions. Finally, closer links between the EU and the GCC will be ensured through the dissemination of information on the EU.

As part of a broader consortium put together by the Gulf Research Center, the AI-Jisr project includes partners such as the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the Arab Reform Initiative, the Institute of Diplomatic Studies, Riyadh, the Euro-Gulf Research Unit at Kuwait University, the National Technical University of Athens, the Fundación para la Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University and the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po).

The activities of the project are divided into the following work packages:

Work Package 1: A series of training workshops held in GCC member countries to raise awareness among GCC states, diplomats, academics and opinion makers about the EU.

Work Package 2: A series of workshops to be held in Europe and GCC countries devoted to the larger concept of “Considering the Scope for Expanding EU-GCC Co-operation: Suggestions for Taking the Relationship Forward.”

Work Package 3: The translation of key introductory textbooks on the EU into Arabic.

Work Package 4: A research project on the challenge and potential of economic growth and diversification in the GCC, including an analysis of how the benefits of the expected Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can best be reaped

Work Package 5: Creation of a website to ensure that the knowledge gathered, analyzed and archived in this project is widely circulated.

The project’s timeframe is 2 years with activities occurring between July 1, 2008 and June 30, 2010.

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