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# EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN QATAR AND ITS RELATION TO QATAR UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT:** The College of Education of Qatar University used various qualitative methods to determine how best to promote the ambitious reform program launched by The Supreme Education Council (SEC) in Qatar, focusing on the creation of "Independent Schools". After extensive interviews and questionnaires with students, administrators, and teachers, the College of Education at Qatar University has set up programs to play a key role in this reform by assisting the Independent Schools in the professional development of teachers, promoting of action research to improve curriculum and methodology, training educational leaders through a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership, and providing postgraduate diploma courses to introduce graduates in various fields to the teaching profession.

## 1. BACKGROUND

In November, 2002, Qatar's Emiri Decree #37 established the Supreme Education Council (SEC) to direct a comprehensive program of educational reform in Qatar (Supreme Education Council, 2007a). One of the key components of the reform was the establishment of "Independent Schools", defined as follows:

*An Independent School is a government-funded school that is granted autonomy to carry out its educational mission and objectives while being held accountable to terms agreed to in a contract. All Independent Schools must meet established curriculum standards in Arabic, English, mathematics, and science, as well as comply with periodic financial audits. Tuition is free for Qataris and others eligible for public education. (Supreme Education Council, 2007b)*

Note especially that Independent Schools are publicly funded, but are granted wide-ranging independence in their choice of curriculum and methodology.

As a result, the new Independent Schools, having been thrown into deep water and told to swim, need considerable assistance in writing their own curriculum and providing for the professional development of their teachers. The Supreme Education Council has attempted to provide this assistance in a two-pronged strategy.

### 1. Professional Development

Teachers in the independent schools must be trained in new methodologies, even in writing their own curricula and materials. There are many new teachers in the system and the demand for recruiting teachers is high.

## 2. Research

The Supreme Education Council and the Qatar Foundation are placing a high priority to research in all fields, but in the educational sector the emphasis is on “Action Research”, that is, research in schools that has a direct application to educational practices in Qatar.

### 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND METHODOLOGY

Given the challenges of the new system, as well as the priorities set out by the S.E.C., the College of Education of Qatar University wanted to know the best ways to participate in the development of the new system. Therefore the initial research question was:

*How can the College of Education best promote the goals of the Educational Reform in Qatar?*

The first step in the process of answering this question was to meet with S.E.C. officials along with the Qatar University President and Vice President. Based on these interviews, the following steps were taken:

#### A. A Master’s Degree Program in Educational Leadership.

This program, inaugurated in 2006, was designed to enhance the leadership skills of school principals and other educators in leadership positions in Qatar. These post-graduate students were then asked to assist in assessing the current state of the reform process in Qatar and to suggest ways in which the College of Education could assist in this process. This was done in two ways.

##### 1) Presentation of Policy Topics

Each student presented one aspect of the reform process. The topics included: History of education in Qatar, history, goals and initiatives of the reform, Organizational structures, curriculum issues, staff recruitment and retainment, professional development, transition to the independent school system, inclusion (special education), stakeholders, schools and families, media relations, behavior issues, Qatar and the world, vocational education, and extra-curricular activities.

##### 2) Focus groups

The presentations were followed by lively focus group discussions on how best to assist the implementation of the reforms related to the topics listed above.

#### B. The Center for Educational Development and Research (CEDR)

In order to facilitate and coordinate the related goals of Professional Development and Research, the College of Education in 2007 set up a Center for Educational Development and Research (CEDR). The mission of the CEDR is as follows:

*The mission of the Center is to promote research at all levels throughout the College of Education, Qatar University, and the academic community of Qatar. It will also promote the professional development of teachers in the Qatari school system, as well as within the College of Education and Qatar University. Research will be linked to Professional Development through action research in schools and within the University.*

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The CEDR addressed the question of how best to promote research and professional development. Two research questions were investigated:

- a. How can research best be carried out in the context of the educational reform?
- b. What are the most appropriate professional development activities that can be carried out for teachers.

Research on this question was carried out in two strands.

3) Research Questionnaire

All faculty members of the COE were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their current and past research activities. Individuals chosen from various departments were interviewed as to what kinds of research could be done to promote the educational reform in Qatar.

4) Survey of Teachers at Al-Shaqab School for Girls

The teachers were asked what kinds of professional development activities they felt they needed. This survey was done in individual interviews as well as in written questionnaires addressed to members of specific departments (mathematics, science, etc.).

### 3. RESULTS

#### A. Leadership Students

The interviews, presentations, and focus group discussions of the post-graduate students provided many insights into the relationship between Qatar University and the Qatar school system. Recommendations commonly expressed were:

- 1) Because of the increased element of choice given to the Independent Schools, these schools needed help in writing materials and adapting their teaching to the official standards set out by the Supreme Education Council.
- 2) Because of the extreme mobility of teachers and the rapid increase in recruitment, professional development, in the form of methods workshops, was highly important.

Course evaluation questionnaires revealed a high degree of satisfaction with the first year of operation of the Master's Degree in Leadership. Course evaluations of three courses (Foundations of Educational Leadership, Curriculum Design and Development, and Management of School Information Systems), gave mean overall ratings (out of 4.0) of 3.03, 3.74, and 3.60, respectively.

#### B. Research Questionnaires

The research interests of the faculty members were consistent with the drive for action research in schools. Projects in the past year included:

- Qatar University's role in developing professional growth
- Rights and responsibilities of students

- Documentation in Art Education
- Enrichment activities in Art Education
- Work satisfaction of Physical Education Teachers
- Physiological levels in Down's syndrome students
- Traffic Accidents among the Younger Generation
- Teaching Assistants in Independent Schools

On the basis of these and currently submitted proposals, it was clear that the Faculty of the College of Education have research interests which can contribute to the educational reform process.

### C. Survey of Primary Teachers

The teachers at Al Shaqab School decided that each Monday afternoon, the Al Shaqab teachers would reserve a two-hour block for professional development workshops. At the beginning of the academic year, these workshops should be devoted to topics of a general nature, such as the conducting of action research in the classroom or classroom management. Later, teachers of individual subjects such as science or mathematics receive more specialized workshops in their given subject area.

Topics for the workshops were determined by the teachers themselves and focused around a central theme. For example, the mathematics teachers at Shaqab suggested the general theme of "Linking Mathematics to Real Life," with five specialized workshops on "Running a Simulated Shop," "Writing Stories with Mathematics," "Real-life Problem-solving," "Estimating Answers," and "Real-life Games."

The workshops set up by the College of Education, in conjunction with the Al Shaqab teachers, are written collaboratively developed by several professors in the College of Education. In this way, the professional development of both the Shaqab teachers and the University professors is enhanced. These workshops are then made available to other Independent Schools within the Qatar system, so that any Independent School may request the Supreme Education Council to sponsor one of the workshops presented by College of Education members.

## 4. ACTIONS TAKEN RESULTING FROM FINDINGS

### A. Research

The Supreme Education Council has designated research as an essential ingredient in the reform process. In particular, action research, carried out within the schools, is seen as an important way to improve the methods and curriculum in Independent Schools. To this end, CEDR coordinates research activities in the schools and assists teachers in the methodology of action research through workshops and other materials.

CEDR also endeavors to bolster research activities in other ways:

- 1) *Twice-monthly research symposia.* Results of current research projects are presented fortnightly to a large audience of university teachers and others.

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Distinguished academics from outside the University are also invited to present talks of topical interest. For example, visiting experts from Qatar's "Education City" present their work to the general public through the research symposia.

- 2) *University student research projects.* The Qatar Foundation (2007a) funds student research projects of all sorts through its Undergraduate Research and Evaluation Program (UREP). In the College of Education, CEDR has promoted the submission of nine different student research projects by groups of two or three students, supervised by College of Education members.
- 3) *Funding for COE faculty research.* The COE Research Committee has approved funding requests for three projects so far this semester. They are in the areas of inclusion of special education students, teacher satisfaction in Independent Schools, and behavior problems of special education students.

## B. Professional Development

- 1) *Workshops.* College of Education faculty members have acted on the recommendations of the Al Shaqab teachers and have given a series of workshops based on the topics suggested by the Al Shaqab teachers. As proposed, the first two months were devoted to general topics for all teachers, e.g. "Action Research," "Classroom Management," "Time Management," and "Integrated Curriculum." Beginning in December 2007, the workshops passed to the individual subject groups. For example, the mathematics teachers have done workshops on "Estimation," "Problem Solving with Sequences," and "Getting to Know Numbers."
- 2) *Publication of a newsletter for Independent School teachers.* These short newsletters provide information on research into recent topics of interest to teachers, such as innovations in curriculum or methodology. In fact, a similar newsletter has been in operation for the past three years (20 issues), published as part of the College of Education Newsletter. The section, with the online title of "Educationalist" (*Terbawiyat* in Arabic), contains articles with topics of interest to teachers, such as discipline-based art education, using computers to solve environmental problems, theories in e-education, and body movement in physical education.
- 3) *Observation Visits to Independent Schools.* Faculty members from the COE visit Al Shaqab school and others on a weekly basis to observe teachers and discuss issues of current issues to teachers. These meetings are usually held with subject-specific teacher groups who may have questions regarding the presentation of certain topics in their subject areas.

## C. Diploma and Degree Programs

The need for qualified teachers who have the knowledge and skills to teach in a reform community is great; for this reason, Qatar University also has launched several programs for students who already have a Bachelor Degree, to provide the knowledge and skills specific to teaching. QU offers diplomas in Special Education, Early Childhood, and Primary Education. The Primary Educator Preparation Program (PEPP) is unique (Texas A&M University, 2007),

as it is a partnership with Texas A&M University (2007), a *Research One* university in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The grant-funded project pairs visiting professors from the main campus of Texas A&M in College Station, Texas, with Qatari professors to co-teach the courses. This ensures that students in the program have access to knowledge and skills that are supported by the most current research while building capacity at QU.

The College of Education is also planning the following programs to promote the professional development of teachers:

- a. *Bachelor of Primary Education* – a four-year (120 credit-hour) program including content instruction in the major subject areas of science, mathematics, English, and Arabic.
- b. *Advanced Diploma in Secondary Education* – a one-year (24 credit-hour) course designed to bring holders of bachelor’s degrees into the teaching profession
- c. *Teacher Professional Development Program* – one-semester courses for both pre-service (147 contact-hours) and in-service (132 contact-hours) teachers who need upgrading of their teaching credentials.

## 5. SUMMARY

The College of Education, Qatar University, is assisting the development of education in Qatar in many ways:

- The Center for Educational Development and Research
- Professional Development workshops in Independent Schools
- Administration of Al Shaqab Independent School for Girls
- Financial Support for Faculty Research
- Student research projects through the Qatar Foundation’s “Undergraduate Research Experience Program”
- A Master’s Degree program in Educational Leadership
- Post-graduate Diploma programs in Primary Education, Secondary Education, Special Education, and Early Childhood Education.
- Dissemination of information to schools through its “*Educationalist*” online newsletter.

Perhaps the initiatives being tried at Qatar University and the lessons learned can inform supportive efforts in other reform communities.

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<sup>1</sup> A university is designated “research one” if its faculty are among the most respected in the nation in published research.

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## 6. REFERENCES

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