

# **Buying, selling and outsourcing educational reform: the Global Education Industry and ‘policy borrowing’ in the Gulf.**

Maryam Mohamed\* and Paul Morris

*Institute of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom*

\*corresponding author

Maryam Mohamed

Institute of Education, University College London

Email: [maryam.mustafa.14@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:maryam.mustafa.14@ucl.ac.uk)

Paul Morris

Institute of Education, University College London

Email: [paul.morris@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:paul.morris@ucl.ac.uk)

Maryam Mohamed is a PhD student at the UCL Institute of Education.

Paul Morris is Professor of Comparative Education at the UCL Institute of Education. From 2001 to 2007 he was President of the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

## **Buying, selling and outsourcing educational reform: the Global Education Industry and ‘policy borrowing’ in the Gulf.**

This paper analyses the approach to systemic educational reform in the Arabian states of the Gulf and the central role within that of the Global Education Industry (GEI). Initially we identify the commonalities of their approach; subsequently we compare the approaches in Bahrain and Qatar. We demonstrate how the GEI is embedded in all stages of policy making, delivery and monitoring which revolves around the selling of ‘best global practices’. We argue that the outcome is a commercial model of applied ‘comparative education’ designed for ‘selling to the other’ and it is both distinctive and ineffective; it also provides a vision of the future as educational policymaking is increasingly outsourced to the private sector. We conclude with a discussion of the conditions which facilitated this approach and of the consequences of relying on it.

Keywords: Policy Borrowing, Educational Reforms, Arabian Gulf, Global Education Industry, Consultants

## **Introduction**

Nations have long looked beyond their borders to identify features from other educational systems they could ‘borrow’ and this was especially intense when systems of mass education were being established in the 19th century. Policy borrowing continued to underpin educational reforms throughout the 20th century but, as Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) argue, the motivations for comparing educational systems shifted and along with it the motives for policy borrowing. After WW1, it was driven by the desire to avoid conflict by ‘understanding the other’. Later, when new post-colonial nations emerged, it became a tool for ‘constructing the other’ and was packaged by international agencies as a plan for development.

By the end of the 20th century, globalisation, technological advancements and the rise of a system of global governance changed the focus towards what Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal describe as ‘measuring the other’ where international comparisons of pupil performance, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), are used as indicators of the ‘efficiency’ and ‘quality’ of education systems. High performing countries are assumed to have a high quality system, and provide the ‘best practices’ that other nations should emulate; Nóvoa (2018) recently described this as ‘prescribing to the other’.

Arguably the Gulf’s reliance on policy borrowing to construct a ‘modern’ education system surpasses that of any other region/nation since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is the contemporary equivalent of the exercise undertaken in Japan during the Meiji restoration (Shibata 2004). In parallel, as we demonstrate, the role of the large network of international agencies and commercial companies which advise on policy and provide services (hereafter referred to as the Global Education Industry (GEI)) in the Gulf region is distinctive and provides an insight into the nature of education governance when functions traditionally

viewed as embedded within the role of the state are privatised and provided by actors from the GEI. Despite this, whilst there is an abundance of ‘grey literature’<sup>1</sup> (especially Consultancy and International Agency Reports), there is a paucity of scholarship on the region.

Our purpose is to determine the critical features of the approach to educational reform in the Gulf region focusing on its key actors, the GEI; and their source of products and services, policy borrowing. In so doing we recognise Verger, Steiner-Khamsi, and Lubienski (2017, 326) observation that ‘despite its common features... the GEI is evolving in a variety of ways in different territories and in relation to different educational markets’.

We demonstrate how in the Gulf the GEI has effectively combined forms of comparison used for ‘measuring’ and ‘prescribing’ to the other’ to create a business model for ‘selling to the other’. The outcome is an approach to educational reform that revolves around a set of commercial transactions in which a nation state enters into contractual arrangements with members of the GEI, led and coordinated by a lead consulting company, to purchase advice, the wholesale ‘borrowing’ and implementation of educational ‘best global practices’ and the provision of functions (e.g. planning, monitoring and evaluation) traditionally undertaken by the state.

The next section outlines those aspects of the literature which are pertinent to the Gulf; the second introduces the region, focusing on the political and economic contexts that frame educational policymaking and the key literature which has focussed on education reform; the third then analyses the educational reforms of Bahrain and Qatar; the final section discusses its consequences and the conditions which facilitated its emergence. The analysis of the reforms focusses on key policy and consultancy documents, the extant literature as well

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<sup>1</sup> This "refers to the literature that is not formally published in sources such as books or journal articles" (Lefebvre, Manheimer, and Glanville 2008, 106)

as the lead author's experience working for the Economic Development Board (EDB) alongside the McKinsey team and other international 'partners' in Bahrain.

### **The Global Education Industry and Policy Borrowing**

Commercial interest in education is not a new phenomenon, Tooley (2001) was one of the first to use the term GEI to refer to the growing private sector which was directly providing schooling mainly in developing countries. Subsequently with the drive to reduce the size of the public sector in many countries the private sector began offering a wide range of services previously provided by the state (Lubienski, Steiner-Khamsi, and Verger 2016). The emergence of comparative data sets such as PISA facilitated the entry of new actors into the policymaking arena and this has been reinforced as policymakers seek to portray their policy decisions as non-ideological and evidence based (Tröhler 2015). Ball (2007, 2012) has charted the rapid growth of the network of actors that comprise the Global Education Industry (GEI) since the start of the 21st century. Lubienski, Steiner-Khamsi, and Verger (2016) define the GEI as 'an increasingly globalised economic sector in which a broad range of educational services and goods are produced, exchanged and consumed, often on a for-profit basis'. They market their expertise as providers of solutions which are largely derived from analyses of 'what works' and 'best practices' in high performing nations on international tests.

Ball (2012, 93) argues that with the growth of the GEI the role of the state has shifted from public service delivery to 'a combination of regulation, performance monitoring, contracting and the facilitation of new providers of public services'. He also notes that members of the GEI do not work in isolation but operate as a highly complex and interconnected Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANS) (ibid); and he describes how traditional 'statework' has been exported to the private sector, which is now operating inside

governments (Ball 2009). As we demonstrate the Gulf represents an extreme case of the export of statework to the private sector.

The role of the different actors comprising the GEI has been analysed, including, the role of consultancy firms (Gunter, Hall, and Mills 2015) philanthropies (Au and Lubienski 2016; Olmedo 2016), education businesses (Riep 2017); and Verger (2012) has analysed the central role of public-private partnerships. Whilst GEI members of this network may differ on the specific policies they advocate they share and protect their core principles which revolve around a belief in the dictum articulated by Andreas Schleicher ‘that your education system today is your economy tomorrow’ (as cited in Coughlan, 2013) and their ability to identify and transfer the causes of high educational performance. Auld and Morris (2014) have identified the modus operandi of the GEI and the strategies they employ to mask their inability to deal with the complexities of identifying causal connections and policy transfer between nations (2016).

Holden (2009) argues little attention has been paid to the role of commercial interests in the transfer of policy and that within education, the role of non-state actors (especially consultancy companies) in policy borrowing remains under-researched. Their role and modus operandi has been recognised in political science. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) highlight the policymakers’ increasing reliance on the advice of consultants and Bock (2014) demonstrates the inherently politicised nature of their expertise. Stone (2004) argues that non-state actors play a prominent role in policy transfer and, in addition to providing specialised expertise, they are often employed to legitimate preferred policy options. We demonstrate how policy borrowing is central to the work of those members of the GEI that are engaged in what Ball terms ‘policy businesses’ (Ball 2012, 114) and to those employed as subcontractors to deliver borrowed policies.

Whilst the term ‘Policy borrowing’ is broadly accepted in the literature and used herein, it is both unsatisfactory (with its connotations of returning the policy and borrower/lender agency) and used to describe a diverse range of processes that have different labels in other disciplines (e.g. policy learning, transfer and diffusion). Phillips and Ochs (2003, 451) define it as “the whole range of issues relating to how the foreign example is used by policy makers at all stages of the processes of initiating and implementing educational change”. Earlier research on policy borrowing focused on its features and functions to explain substantive forms of borrowing between nation states (Ochs and Phillips 2002; Phillips and Ochs 2003). Ochs and Phillips (2004) identify a continuum of educational borrowing; at one extreme the transfer of policies could be imposed, for example, under colonial rule or as a condition for receiving aid. In contrast it might be initiated voluntarily. More recently, policy borrowing has shifted away from referencing other nations to referencing what Rizvi (2006) terms ‘global imaginaries’ such as ‘best global practices’ and ‘world class schools’. Steiner-Khamsi (2016) argues the growing influence of global governance on educational policy making has spurred the emergence of two distinct analytic approaches; the first of which is applied and normative advocates the borrowing of policies using comparative data to identify and promote best practices. The work of the OECD, Consultancies (Barber, Chijioke, and Mourshed 2010; Barber and Mourshed 2007; Tucker 2011) are illustrative. The second approach adopts an interpretive perspective and asks questions designed to understand when, why and how policy borrowing occurs, was it substantive or symbolic, how was causality established, who benefits/loses; and how the transfer was translated in the local context.

From this latter perspective much policy ‘borrowing’ has been viewed as not signalling the substantive intention to ‘adopt’ an external policy but rather a discursive and symbolic reference to foreign education systems or the world situation for the purpose of

legitimizing a domestic policy. Schriewer and Martinez (2004) argue it is the ‘socio-logic’ at home which is the best predictor of international referencing; Rappleye (2006, 2012) and Adamson et al. (2017) show how debates on education reform take on the form of ‘political theatre/ pantomime’ as politicians skilfully use external references and the mass media to legitimise their policies (Grey and Morris 2018); Steiner-Khamsi (2004) demonstrates how such external referencing can facilitate the creation of political coalitions, reduce opposition to reform and facilitate the mobilisation of resources.

Two limitations of the literature are especially pertinent; first, these studies focus on examples either from the West or on poorer nations. In the former context policymaking and GEI actors are operating within relatively well-developed and established policymaking contexts; in poorer countries policy borrowing and the role of the GEI is often a condition of aid and their role is often funded by third parties. In contrast, the Gulf States are affluent, not dependent on aid but have relatively underdeveloped capacity. Second, the literature relating to the Gulf is both sparse and dominated by the ‘grey’ literature of the GEI which is firmly rooted in an applied -normative- policy advocacy perspective and is often designed to market their services.

## **The Gulf**

The six monarchies of the Gulf on which we focus (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) share the same political system, economy, language, religion, culture and history (Abraham 2015) and in 1981 created the Gulf Cooperation Council as a political and economic union. By the turn of the 21st century, they entered a period of economic liberalisation and limited political reforms (Ehteshami and Wright 2007). The political reforms were broadly liberalising through the establishment of consultative councils and elected parliaments (GCC Secretariate General 2002); however, the changes were gradual and Abraham (2015) argues not equivalent to western-styled



democratisation. Bahrain and Kuwait are constitutional monarchies, while the rest remain absolute monarchies where political power lies with the head of the state. The situation in the constitutional monarchies is similar, despite the establishment of institutions such as parliaments, the constitutions continue to provide the sovereign the power to appoint the government and set public policy (Kapiszewski 2006; Parolin 2006). Consequently, the role of the legislature remains largely advisory (Khodr 2014).

The civil service, created in the 1930s, expanded in the 1960s due to oil wealth (Ayubi 1990) and the large public sector is the main employer of nationals. The centralised policymaking process has confined the public sector to implementing and administering policies. This is reflected in the processes of educational policymaking; education reforms were initiated and announced by a member of the royal family with no public contestation or debate and they did not pass through the legislature. Research on the civil service has highlighted its dysfunctionality; Jreisat (2012) argues that it has: overstuffed agencies, low productivity, red tape, and lack innovative and effective public managers. These ‘dysfunctions’ were also highlighted by a number of reports calling for public sector reforms (UNDP 2002).

In most Gulf States oil accounts for between 70 and 80 percent of government revenues (IMF 2016) and it has funded their modernisation plans through an impressive programme of infrastructure development. However, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they faced a major challenge: their dependence on oil was unsustainable and subject to volatile price and demand oscillations. This is against a background of high population growth; a rapidly growing domestic labour force; and a labour market that has been dependent upon migrant workers. By 2010, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, foreigners accounted for more than 65 percent of the total labour force; and as high as 94 percent in Qatar (Baldwin-Edwards 2011).

In response, they launched ‘transformational reforms’ that shared a common vision: diversification away from oil dependency to create ‘knowledge-based’ economies (Hvidt 2013). The key means to achieve this was to rapidly reform the education system to achieve goals such as developing pupils’ ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills’; the rationale for reform and the performance indicators are derived from comparative data. For example Bahrain’s Economic Vision 2030 states:

... we need to develop an education system that provides every citizen with educational opportunities appropriate to their individual needs, aspirations and abilities. Education and training needs to be relevant to the requirements of Bahrain and its economy, delivered to the highest possible quality standards, and accessible based on ability and merit. (EDB 2008b, 21)

And the measure of success is:

... Improvement of educational institutions in independent quality reviews and national examinations; scores in international tests of school performance (for instance, TIMSS, PISA and PIRLS) (ibid, P.22)

The same metrics have long been used by international agencies to demonstrate that the region is performing poorly; as a UNDP report illustrates:

Overall, the quality of education is poor. Standardized international tests in education such as TIMSS and PISA show Arab countries scoring well below the average even if results are adjusted for per capita income, particularly in the rich Gulf countries (UNDP 2016, 31)

As Morgan (2017) argues, the results of these tests are uncritically accepted as an accurate and objective measure of educational quality. Overall schools are portrayed as unsuited to meeting the needs of the 21st century and Alayan, Rohde, and Dhouib (2012, 1) argue ‘the line of argumentation has generally favoured economic indicators and quantifiable levels of socio-political “modernisation” as “measuring sticks” for the effectiveness of a country’s

education system’.

Scholarship on the region focuses on assessing the outcomes of borrowed policies and evaluating their implementation, as well as adopting a normative approach to understand what can be learned from other systems. The tenor of this literature is that the reforms have had no or very limited impact. For example:

Over the past decade and a half, key countries of the Gulf ... have invested considerable resources in education. Driven by a desire to better prepare their economies and societies for an increasingly globalised and competitive world ... And yet despite the availability of ample financial resources and expert policy and management advice, most independent reviewers have concluded that the actual results have fallen short of initial expectations. (Alfadala 2015, 4)

And the reasons were:

Most, if not all, of these outcomes were found to stem from a single, underlying response to the reforms being introduced: resistance to the change. (ibid, p.7)

Wiseman, Alromi, and Alshumrani (2014) focus on the challenges of transforming the Gulf States into knowledge-based societies; their portrayal is also one of worthwhile and desirable reforms meeting local obstacles. Kirk (2014) in his analysis of reforms in Bahrain looks at the implementation of the ‘borrowed’ Singaporean teacher education model and argues that it failed because it suffered from the lack of contextualisation; ‘too fast, too foreign’. Alkhater (2016) argues that Qatar needed to reform but this was undermined as the locals subverted their implementation. Donn and Al Manthri (2013) explore educational borrowing in the Middle East, which they portray as a ‘baroque arsenal’ (i.e. outdated) that ultimately leads to failure and unsustainable solutions. Saif (2016) similarly adopts a critical and historical perspective to argue that their dependence on foreign advisors is a continuation of their colonial past (as protectorates) and that imported reforms have a history of failure.

## **Educational Reforms**

Table 1 below shows the key features of the K-12 reform programmes across the six countries. As shown, they share a strong degree of commonality: they began around the turn of the millennium; they were coordinated at the highest national level, in many cases outside the Ministry of Education's (MOE) remit; they hired an external consultancy to lead the reforms and subsequently a range of specialist providers to implement specific initiatives; the reforms sought transformative changes across the educational system; and, they were all based on purchasing 'best global practices'.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Table 1: K-12 Educational Reforms in the Gulf

	<b>Bahrain</b>	<b>Kuwait</b>	<b>Oman</b>	<b>Qatar</b>	<b>Saudi</b>	<b>UAE/ Abu Dhabi</b>
<b>When</b>	2005	2003	1998	2001	2007	2005
<b>Why</b>	Increase the skill level by developing education and training to strengthen effectiveness in the labour market	Students are performing poorly on international assessments	Need to diversify the economy and keep pace with technological change, require new educational goals to prepare Omanis for life and work in the new conditions created by the modern global economy.	Future economic success will increasingly depend on the ability of the people to deal with a new international order that is knowledge-based and extremely competitive.	Improve the skill levels to participate in the labour market – Invest in human capital	Develop an internationally competitive education system where students are able to take their place in a knowledge-based society and economy
<b>What</b>	Teachers' and School systems' performance management	Curricular reform, the development of national assessment systems, improvement of school leadership, and creation of professional standards	Changing the schooling structure, curriculum and assessment Changing the MOE structure Teacher training	New governance Institutions More school autonomy	In addressing primary and secondary education, the Kingdom has introduced a policy of tatweer, which means "reform" – Tatweer is a Holding Company that invests in education and is given the mandate to implement the reform strategy	Comprehensive new schools model reforming what and how the student is taught in the classroom
<b>Who</b>	EDB and McKinsey & Co.	MOE, the National Center for Education Development (NCED) and the World Bank	MOE and the World Bank	Supreme Educational Council and RAND Corporation	MOE and Ministry of Economic Planning and international partners	Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) <sup>2</sup> and International Partners

<sup>2</sup> later renamed to Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK)

GEI reports on the region also share a common template in how they frame the ‘context’ of the nation they were selling their services to; the portrayal was wholly economic and, as Rappleye and Un (2018) demonstrate, projects the interests and logic of the GEI. Schooling is portrayed solely as a source of human capital development; education quality is measured by reference to cross-national tests; economic growth is assumed to result from improving the nation’s performance on those tests; and rapid reform is advocated to create a ‘knowledge Economy’ and ensure the nation is not left behind in the ‘global race’. In describing the ‘context’ the reports are silent (Piattoeva, Klutas, and Souminen 2019) on the many social and political issues which affect the region; for example those relating to governance and policymaking, public sector efficiency, labour market imbalances, citizenship and sectarianism. However, those aspects of the local context emerge later in reports which seek to explain why the reforms have not achieved their targets. Below we focus on the reforms in Bahrain and Qatar.

## **Bahrain**

Bahrain has one of the oldest education systems in the region. In 1930, the government assumed responsibility for two pre-existing schools, a boys’ school, established in 1919, and a girls’ school in 1928, marking the beginning of formal public education (Ministry of Education). Today, education in Bahrain is free and compulsory in the early stages. 195,427 students are presently enrolled in Bahrain’s 281 schools (iGA 2016). More than 70% of the schools are public and are administered directly by the Ministry of Education. Bahrain has one of the highest indicators of literacy and enrolment rates in the region (UNESCO 2010).

In 2001, a 'national charter' outlined ambitious political and economic reforms; the former introduced a new constitution and significant liberalisation, including parliamentary elections. These were followed by a package of economic, labour market and education reforms spearheaded by the EDB who worked in 'partnership' with McKinsey & Co., a management consulting firm, which played the leading role in the design and implementation of these reforms.

The Education reform package was launched in 2005 and 'aimed to increase the skill level of Bahrainis to strengthen their effectiveness in the labour market' (EDB 2006). The initial reform period from 2005 until 2010 involved three phases and involved teams representing local stakeholders and international advisors appointed by the EDB. The reform strategy was explicitly based on a form of policy borrowing:

They [working teams] were asked to study the most successful reforms undertaken around the world, and employ the learnings to develop a bold and comprehensive reform plan for Bahrain (ibid, p. 6)

This logic guided all stages of the reform; these were termed the diagnostic, the strategy design and implementation phases.

### ***The Diagnostic Phase (June to November 2005)***

The EDB and McKinsey consultants 'diagnosed' the education system through surveys of students, parents and businesses, in addition to focus groups with top performing students, schools and university visits, interviews with key officials, and reviews of internal and external reports such as the reports of the UNDP (2005) and TIMSS results analysis (EDB 2006).

The findings highlighted the system's underperformance relative to international benchmarks which showed that, in 2003 TIMSS, Bahrain's students ranked 37th in

Maths and 33rd in Science out of 45 participating countries, placing them well below the international average EDB (2005). They concluded that the problem did not lie with the inputs into Bahrain's education system (as expenditures and teacher/student ratios were comparable to the highest performing systems); but claimed:

The curriculum is focused on knowledge and not skills' and  
'The quality of teaching is poor, resulting from a failure to attract, train, and manage teachers (ibid, 2005, p. 3)

These findings were presented in a workshop sponsored by the Crown Prince and attended by 200 key officials; this created the necessary momentum, despite the initial reluctance from the MOE, to support the reforms, and attracted the attention of the local media, which described the findings as 'shocking'.

### ***The Strategy Phase (February –May 2006)***

This focused on identifying solutions proven to have an impact on teacher quality and the performance management of the school system. An Education Reform Board, headed by the Deputy Prime Minister was established to oversee the development of the reform strategy and a Project Management Office (PMO) in the EDB facilitated this phase. Over a period of four months, McKinsey consultants conducted benchmarking studies of top performing countries to identify 'global best practices' in the areas that the diagnostic identified as reasons for the underperformance. Local teams reviewed these studies and travelled to many of these countries, including Australia, Finland, Singapore and New Zealand, and many organisations from those nations were selected to deliver the reforms in the next phase. Based on this, the reform strategy identified the best possible improvement 'levers' which were narrowed down to those that had the most potential for improving the education system (EDB, 2006). These included the



establishment of a teacher training college and managing school performance through the establishment of an independent quality assurance authority. The plans were also shared with international experts for ‘auditing’ purposes before finalisation (ibid).

***The Implementation Phase (June 2006 – December 2010)***

Implementation was outsourced to specialist service providers, or as they were termed ‘international partners’ identified in the previous phase. The PMO was tasked with monitoring the progress during this phase using monitoring tools developed by McKinsey. Implementation started in 2008 following a process of service provider selection through tendering. The selected ‘international partners’ began their work in the summer of 2008 and continued to operate until late 2010. Table 2 summarises the prioritised initiatives and the service providers.

Table 2: Summary of Bahrain’s Key Initiatives and Service Providers

<b>Area of reform</b>	<b>Justification for prioritisation</b>	<b>Proposed initiatives</b>	<b>Implementation/ Providers.</b>
Teaching profession	Poor performance attributed to the quality of teachers	<p>Improve <b>quality of selected teacher candidates</b></p> <p>Establish a new teacher training college that provides <b>pre-service and in-service training</b></p>	<p><b>National Institute of Education (Singapore):</b> to assist the MOE and the University of Bahrain in developing the teacher selection processes</p> <p>And in establishing a teacher training college that offers pre-service and in service programs as well as designing the ideal profile of a teacher candidate and an admissions criteria to select the best candidates for the teaching profession</p>
School systems’ performance management	System performance management necessary to improve teaching quality	<p>Establish a <b>national examination system</b></p> <p>Introduce independent <b>school inspections</b></p> <p>Improve <b>teacher performance management</b></p>	<p><b>Cambridge Examinations (UK):</b> to design and deliver the national examinations systems</p> <p><b>Nord Anglia (UK):</b> to establish the schools review unit</p> <p><b>National Institute of Education (Singapore):</b> to develop a Performance Management system for the MOE.</p>

During the early stages of implementation in 2008, the EDB and McKinsey developed a plan for a second wave of reforms; their focus shifted to improving the performance of the MOE and improving learning practices in schools (EDB 2008a). This was portrayed as necessary to sustain the momentum of reform, and to continue to build on the initial three phases. The document recognised that the improvement of students' performance in TIMSS 2007 was 'marginal' compared to the results in 2003; pupils continued to perform below the international average.

## **Qatar**

Qatar witnessed an economic boom and political change at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which resulted in the government focussing on education. The first formal school was opened only in the 1950s but the wealth of natural resources allowed for the rapid growth of access to education (Nasser 2017). Today, education in Qatar is free and compulsory until the age of 18 (IBE 2011). There are currently 304 independent schools, which are privately operated but publicly funded, and 541 private schools, including kindergartens which together cater for 296,323 students (the Peninsula 2017).

In 2001 the head of state appointed RAND Corporation to evaluate the education system and propose a reform that would enable the country to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century needs (Zellman, Constant, and Goldman 2011). The leadership believed that the system was not providing students with the necessary skills for the labour market and that it was rigid, out-dated, and resistant to reform (Brewer et al. 2007). Similar to Bahrain, the reform was carried out in phases and based on purchasing foreign examples of 'best practice' (ibid, pp. 47-55). The phases are described below.

### ***Phase 1: System Evaluation (September 2001 - May 2002)***

RAND, who described their role as 'overseeing' the project, performed an analysis of

the education system through a scoping exercise where they worked with a local coordinating committee comprising senior Qatari officials; the evidence used involved observations of schools and ministries, interviews with relevant individuals and documentary analysis (Brewer *et al.*, 2007). RAND presented its finding as a ‘confirmation of weaknesses’ (ibid, p. 37), referring to the leadership’s initial concerns. They identified the problems as the:

- Ministry: lacked vision and supported unsystematic growth. Their hierarchical approaches did not foster innovation and the reporting and communication lines were not clear
- Curriculum: was out-dated and unchallenging. The delivery was centrally controlled with little room for teacher agency.
- Schools: lacked autonomy and accountability. Investment in basic infrastructure was poor
- Teachers: their pay and incentives were low. The Teachers’ Allocation Policy and Teacher Training were poor.

RAND urged the leadership to consider structured and systematic change in order to build a ‘world-class’ K-12 education system.

### ***Phase 2: Options and recommendations***

In 2002, RAND presented their solutions. Their approach was two layered, on the ‘overarching level’, they recommended that the ‘system of governance’ must change regardless of the reform initiatives proposed in the second layer because reform requires changes to the system’s behaviour that must be institutionalised and supported for a long period of time to guarantee visible results (Brewer *et al.*, 2007, p. xix). Fig.1 shows the proposed governance options.

	Option 1 Modified Centralized Option	Option 2 Charter Option	Option 3 Voucher Option
<b>Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Least amount of change where MoE is still in charge but schools have more autonomy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partial decentralization, multiple school types, parental choice and independent monitoring body</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High decentralization, fully privatized system</li> </ul>

Figure 1: The Governance Options

The leadership selected the second option under which, all government schools would be converted into charter schools (later renamed ‘independent schools’). This allowed continued government control of schools, and forms a first step towards moving to the voucher system. The second reform layer focused on: evaluation mechanisms to assess the performance of students and schools; International benchmarked curriculum standards; and, teachers’ professional development.

### ***Phase 3: Implementation (from 2002)***

RAND argued the whole system required restructuring to support the government-funded independent schools and success necessitated an institutional reorganisation (Brewer *et al.*, 2007, p. 91). In November 2002 the Supreme Education Council (SEC) was established and given legal authority over the MOE, making the latter an operator of schools while the former became the policy making entity (Qatar Legal Portal 2002). The SEC was also given the responsibility for developing curriculum standards and national assessments. Implementation started with a pilot of independent schools. Table 3 summarises the reform initiatives, why they were introduced and the service providers.

Table 3: Qatar’s initiatives and service providers

Area of reform	Justification	Proposed initiatives	Implementation/Providers
Ministry	...was unable to deliver the proposed reform	Restructure the system and create: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supreme Education Council (SEC)</li> <li>• Evaluation Institute</li> <li>• Education Institute</li> </ul>	<b>RAND (USA)</b> assisted the government in establishing and supporting the new institutions
Schools	... were underperforming and lacked the autonomy to improve.	Introduce Independent schools using the American Model of Charter schools as a reference  Select independent operators through open-competition for contracts  Develop regulatory framework for independent operators	Multiple international school operators for the first phase, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Multiserve (NZ)</b></li> <li>• <b>GTZ (Germany)</b></li> <li>• <b>Mosacia (US)</b></li> <li>• <b>CfBT (UK)</b></li> </ul> The <b>Charter Schools Development Centre (USA)</b> was asked by the SEC to support the education institute
Curriculum	... was below expectations	Develop international curriculum standards for core subjects (Arabic, English, Maths and Science)  Introduce unified national testing in core subjects.	<b>CfBT (UK)</b> : to develop the curriculum standards for the core subjects: Arabic, English, Maths and Science.  <b>ETS (USA)</b> : to develop national assessments for Arabic and English <b>CTB (USA)</b> : to develop national assessments for Maths and Science
Teachers	Improve teachers’ professional development	Introduce training opportunities for all teachers	<b>CfBT appointed</b> jointly with the <b>University of Southampton</b> <sup>3</sup> Independent School Operators (Discontinued after 1 year)

## Outcomes

The ‘Performance Indicators’ developed by the GEI suggest that the reforms have not achieved their targets in those Gulf nations for which comparable longitudinal data is available. For example, Bahrain specified that:

By June 2013, all Bahraini students will be at or above grade levels in Mathematics, Science, Arabic and English based on international standards

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By June 2013, 75% of Bahraini schools will be rated at least 'good' by Bahrain's Quality Assurance Authority, compared to 24% currently. In addition, 100% of Bahraini schools will be rated at least 'satisfactory', compared to just 64% currently. This means that by June 2013, Bahrain should have no 'inadequate' schools (EDB, 2008a, p. 5)

In 2018 these indicators have not been met; students continued to perform below the international average in Maths and Science (Mullis et al. 2016), only 30 percent of schools were rated above 'good' and 27 percent of schools were rated 'inadequate' in 2015 (Quality Assurance Authority 2015).

In Qatar, between 2005 and 2007, RAND reviewed the performance of the independent schools and new institutions. They reported that the reforms were only successful in their early years (Zellman et al. 2009, xviii) and attributed this to the uncertainty resulting from frequent changes to policies by the SEC (ibid, p. xix). Alkhatir (2016) argued that the interdependence between policy design and implementation was underestimated or understudied, especially in terms of the local context and behaviour of stakeholders, all of which led to conflict that ultimately contributed to the reform's reversal. The government ended its partnership with RAND in 2013 and subsequently the SEC has been marginalized and absorbed into the MOE (Al-Maadheed 2017). Today, Qatar continues to perform below the international average in PISA 2015 (OECD 2018). Kuwait is similar; its reforms were initiated in 2003 with the World Bank (World Bank 2015) and focussed on improving student performance on TIMSS. However pupils' performance at Grade 4 and 8 on TIMSS has declined consistently since 1995 (Winokur 2014).

Despite this, the Gulf States continue to buy the services of the GEI; current reforms in Qatar are delivered by the GEI, Kuwait recently renewed its partnership with

the World Bank and Bahrain recently invited international consultancies to tender for a to 'improve the Efficiency and Effectiveness of the MOE'.

## **Discussion**

The reform strategies of Bahrain and Qatar are typical of the approach to educational reform of the other Gulf States. Whilst McKinsey and RAND differed in their analysis of the problems and solutions and described their roles differently ('partners' and 'overseers') there was a strong degree of commonality in the policymaking process; the main features were:

- (1) The reason for introducing the reforms revolved around the need to improve the quality of the education systems, invest in human capital, meet the needs of the 21st century, realise the national economic visions of diversifying away from oil towards a rapidly growing knowledge-based economy. The language draws heavily on an economic discourse which is oriented to choice, markets and competition.
- (2) The portrayal of poor educational quality/standards is derived from comparing the performance of the national education system against rankings in standardised tests like TIMSS and PISA. These are taken as an accurate proxy of the quality of schooling and provide the sole metric for evaluating the reforms success. They are also portrayed as having a direct causal impact on economic growth.
- (3) The reform strategy uses an essentialised form of policy borrowing which involves the GEI selling a range of products that are described as 'best global practices'. These are portrayed as the transferrable sources of success in education systems that performed well on international tests.

- (4) Lead consultancies from the GEI are employed to play a central role in statework; including: evaluating the performance of the education systems, advising on strategies for reform and products for transfer, managing their implementation, and evaluating their progress. The central role of McKinsey and RAND in Bahrain and Qatar are illustrative. The implementation of the transferred processes and policies are subsequently outsourced to a network of more specialised providers drawn from the GEI as outlined in Tables 2 and 3 and the lead consultant is involved in monitoring their performance
- (5) Educational reforms are initiated at the top leadership level, and located outside the jurisdiction of the Education Ministries, marginalising their roles and strengthening the role of the newly established semi-government agencies which worked closely with the lead consultants and were given power over traditional ministries.
- (6) Based on the key indicators used from the outset by the GEI the reforms have not been successful; this failure has been explained by reference to features of the local context and the GEI continues to be contracted to reform the educational systems in the region.

The first three of these characteristics reflect the standard business model of the GEI and their usage of comparative data on education systems globally, see for example (Auld and Morris 2014). The remaining features are distinctive to the Gulf, and, in combination with the other features, they serve to locate education as a tool of economic policy and place its control firmly outside the MOE in an agency in which the lead consultants play a key role. Whilst the fifth feature is not specific to the Gulf, as Winther-Schmidt (2011) demonstrates, it tends to be a policy primarily pursued in poor nations reliant on foreign aid.



Our analysis has two implications for the role of policy borrowing; firstly the existing portrayals of policy borrowing as a symbolic, discursive and legitimacy exercise designed to harness support and create coalitions in contested political environments do not apply to the Gulf. Public contestation over reforms or the legitimisation of existing political agendas are not features of policymaking in the Gulf's highly centralised political systems. The decisions to engage in policy borrowing are substantive and largely uncontested attempts to improve the quality of education and were initially well received by the local media and the various stakeholders. The domestic 'socio-logic' of the Gulf States seems to have involved the wholesale adoption of the logic of the GEI. Secondly, the region does not fit neatly into the continuum used to differentiate types of policy borrowing (Ochs and Phillips, 2004). Despite the apparent voluntary initiation and intent to reform by the state, non-state actors dominate the process just as in coercive policy transfer situations often associated with poorer nations dependent on external aid (Auld, Rappleye, and Morris 2018). This confirms Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) claim that the role of consultants in policy transfer complicates the categorisation between coercive and voluntary transfer.

With regard to the implications of this study for our understanding of how the GEI operates, at its core, as elsewhere, the GEI is selling goods and services for a profit in the region; this involves a large and complex network wherein lead Consultants select specialist providers to deliver a wide range of tasks and the products sold are portrayed as global 'best practices'. Against that commonality there are a number of distinctive emphases; the first and most apparent is the depth and breadth of the GEI's role in the Gulf; it was ubiquitous and deeply embedded. The services they provided meant that they were engaged in all stages of the policymaking process from identifying the problems, advocating the options, implementing the solutions, monitoring provision and

evaluating them. The lead consultants were therefore involved in undertaking those functions that have been portrayed as central parts of 'statework' elsewhere as privatisation has increased (Ball, 2009), specifically the regulation, performance monitoring, contracting and the facilitation of new providers of public services. The lead consultants were effectively operating as part of the 'shadow education ministry' and this role was institutionalised by their involvement in the semi-government agencies which were created to circumvent the MOE's. This role allowed the lead consultant, not only to sell its services but also the power to influence what was subsequently purchased from whom. Secondly, notwithstanding the extensive and interdependent networks and coalitions which characterise the operation of the GEI (Ball, 2012) and which were readily evident in the range of sub-contractors employed, the lead consultants entry (and sometimes exit) into each of the Gulf nations was ultimately dependent on its connections with and the support from the Monarchy (Saif, 2016). Thirdly, the embeddedness of the GEI, and specifically their role as self-evaluators of the reforms, placed them in a powerful position to ensure reengagement and locate the sources of failure within the local 'context'; which excluded the GEI and their reforms.

Why does the Gulf provide an environment in which 'reform', based on a combination of privatisation, outsourcing and transactional policy borrowing thrive and in which the failure to deliver is not a barrier to reengagement? There are five main reasons identified in the literature. First, the Gulf States' dependence on Western expertise is not a recent phenomenon but is a continuation of their colonial legacy. As Saif (2016) explains, when these countries were British protectorates, British administrators played the central role in building the state and its institutions. Second, they are high-income countries with abundant resources and with an urgent need to diversify their economies. Third, the weak capacity of public administration warranted

the reliance on external consultants who were perceived to possess the expertise and knowledge about top performing systems and also justified the establishment of parallel semi-government agencies to overcome the rigidities of the traditional bureaucratic agencies (Abdel-Moneim 2016, 3). Fourth, the absence of reliable and timely local data on educational performance was used to legitimise reliance on standardised comparative data (e.g. TIMSS and PISA) and provided the basis to ‘borrow’ ‘world class’ policies from high performers. Fifth, as the Auld and Morris (2016) demonstrate the GEI, especially McKinsey and the OECD, have developed a persuasive range of strategies to: frame education through their vision of a world in which future economic growth is dependent on performance on international tests, notwithstanding the extensive evidence to the contrary (Feniger and Atia 2019; Komatsu and Rappleye 2017); to mask the fundamental limitations of their logic (especially their inability to establish causality) and to explain failure as the result of ‘local’ forces (e.g. resistance, noncompliance) and not the GEI or its policies.

## **Conclusion**

A contemporary and distinctive model of educational reform has emerged in the region over the last two decades and continues despite its lack of success in achieving its targets. Our analysis demonstrates the critical features and especially the central role played by the GEI, and specifically the lead consultant, in this enterprise. The outcome is the emergence of a form of applied comparative education in which the GEI has harnessed ‘measuring and prescribing to the other’ to create a business model for ‘selling to the other’; the reforms are sold on the basis that they represent the ‘best global practices’ of high performing nations. This model provides a vision of the future beyond the Gulf; albeit a vision driven by different conditions and motives. That approach is now emerging elsewhere; for example, the promotion of privatisation and

competition, the quest for a small state and the consequent reduction of the role and capacity of the civil service by privatising and outsourcing policy work is evident in England where the state has, in its belief in the efficiency of markets, decimated the capacity of the civil service and is increasingly reliant on the private sector in both the implementation of policy and policymaking. However, this approach in the Gulf, albeit in an accelerated form, appears to have failed to achieve its specified outcomes and created a cycle of dependency that further reduces the capacity of the local public sector.

Poorer nations do not have the resources to employ Consultants on the scale evident in the Gulf; however, the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals has resulted in a shift away from a concern for educational access to a similar concern for ‘measurable’ quality. The OECD has moved to develop ‘PISA for Development’ as the means to measure and compare the quality of schools across lower and middle income nations. When the test is fully developed and league tables of performance are published it will be used to identify and promote best practices; the GEI will be provided with the essential currency that facilitates its business. In parallel the post 2015 paradigm for development promotes a new element, namely, the goal of ‘establishing a broader and more substantive partnership among all nations and private entities’ (OECD 2013, 7). Whilst poorer nations may not be able to pay directly for the services of the GEI we face the prospect, that aid will be channelled to employ the GEI to assist poorer nations to measure and improve their PISA for Development scores.

At the outset of this article we described the Gulf’s dependence on policy borrowing as the contemporary equivalent of Japan during the Meiji Restoration. That association needs revisiting as the differences are significant: Japan’s goal was to achieve self-reliance through modernisation as the state successfully borrowed and

adapted Western models to the local context in the context of a revolution. A century and a half later the process of policy borrowing in the Gulf now involves purchasing 'reforms' that have limited evidence of success and are based on dubious claims and metrics, from a Global Industry based in the West.

Closer attention and analysis of what is happening in the Gulf could illustrate the consequences of borrowing systems of educational policy making which involve: the privatisation of the policy making process; an enhanced role for the GEI as the purveyors of 'best practice'; a reliance on standardised global tests of pupils to assess the quality of educational systems; and the singular framing of schools as sources of human capital.

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