

Policy Brief

EDUCATION, SOFT POWER & INTELLECTUAL SOVEREIGNTY IN THE GULF

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Through its curriculum, a society transmits its memory, shapes collective identity, and prepares the next generation not only to work but to think. Beyond domestic social policy, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries should view education as an instrument of soft power: a means to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion.¹ What happens in classrooms shapes how the region is perceived abroad by forming the ambassadors who will engage the world with cultural conviction.

For decades, much of GCC schooling has operated within imported curricular frameworks and external validation systems. These models have expanded global access and mobility, yet they have also anchored standards of excellence outside the region. The central question is strategic: will the region remain primarily a consumer of imported curricula and validation systems, or will it design and export an educational model rooted in its own language, culture, and civilizational history?

Even more fundamentally, there must be a reckoning with how we define a child's success. If our answer is an A-level grade, an SAT score, or admission to a foreign university, then we have already surrendered the definition of excellence to institutions that know little of our history, our language, or the values we hope to transmit. What we choose to measure in our classrooms is a declaration of what we value as a society. Reassessing those metrics is the first and most essential act of educational sovereignty.

THE SCALE OF EDUCATIONAL DEPENDENCE

Following oil discovery and the formation of modern Gulf states in the mid-20th century, domestic educational infrastructure was limited. Merchant families who could afford it were educated abroad in British-administered Egypt, Kuwait, and India, absorbing colonial examination systems, English-language instruction, and bureaucratic governance models that later shaped assessment cultures across the region. What began as a practical response to limited local infrastructure became a structural norm.

The educational sectors in the Gulf states continue to illustrate this dynamic today. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) reports student enrolment at private schools in Dubai grew by 6% during the 2024-25 academic year, with 387,441 students (of which 33,210 were Emirati) enrolled at 227 schools offering 17 different curricula. The West Asia region now hosts nearly 2,000 international schools serving approximately 1.75 million students.²

The economic implications of this dependence are significant. The GCC K-12 (kindergarten to grade 12) private education market was valued at approximately USD 33.6 billion in 2025 and is projected to exceed USD 65 billion by 2031. This represents billions of dollars flowing annually through curricular systems whose intellectual con-

tent, assessment frameworks, and standards of excellence are determined elsewhere. The question facing the GCC countries is not whether their education systems meet global standards, it is whether global standards will eventually reflect Gulf intellectual priorities.

READING DECLINE, ARABIC EROSION & THE LOSS OF INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

Globally, sustained reading is in decline. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 recorded the largest drop in reading performance among 15-year-olds since 2000.³ Within the GCC, reading scores remain well below the OECD average of 476. The UAE's 15-year-olds scored 417, Qatar scored 419, and Saudi Arabia scored 383. In Qatar, only 53% of students attained minimum reading proficiency, compared with 74% across OECD countries. Saudi Arabia's reading score dropped almost 17 points between 2018 and 2022.⁴ These scores reflect reading performance across all languages of instruction, not Arabic specifically. They indicate a broader reading crisis that compounds a growing disconnect from cultural engagement with local texts, scripture, poetry, and the intellectual traditions that have shaped Gulf identity.

The roots of this crisis originate beyond the classroom. Neuroscience research consistently shows that approximately 90% of a child's brain architecture is formed by the age of five. The language a child hears, the stories they absorb, the cultural environment they inhabit during those years not only influence later learning, they lay the neural foundation for it. It is likely that many children in the Gulf have limited exposure to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) before they enter formal education, given that MSA differs significantly from the spoken dialects used at home. If advanced literacy in formal Arabic is weak from this early stage, access to classical schools of thought, historical consciousness, and moral vocabulary narrows. A society that does not read deeply in its own language cannot think independently within its own intellectual tradition.

The deeper consequence is cognitive, as deep reading trains the mind to question, to hold competing ideas in tension, to resist the first answer offered. When that capacity erodes, people stop thinking for themselves. The challenge, then, is not simply that GCC students are underperforming on reading assessments. It is that a generation is at risk of losing the foundational cognitive discipline required to think independently about who they are, what they value, and whose ideas they are living by.

INDIGENOUS GULF PEDAGOGIES & INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS

Before formal state schooling emerged in the mid-20th century, education in Gulf societies was informal, relational, and embedded in daily life. Oral tradition served as the primary curriculum, with poetry, genealogy, and faith-based proverbs preserving ethics and identity. Poetry was not merely artistic expression but a vehicle for transmitting ethical codes such as courage, loyalty, and generosity, and was regarded as a form of intellectual capital. Marcel Kurpershoek's documentation of oral poetry traditions in central Arabia and Saad Sowayan's research on *nabati* poetry provide scholarly evidence for the sophistication of these traditions.⁵

Knowledge was exchanged in *majlis*-style circles that reduced hierarchical distance and encouraged collective inquiry. Research on classroom design supports many of these traditional principles, suggesting that spatial arrangement plays a fundamental role in how students engage with learning.⁶ Bedouin learners developed adaptive reasoning through navigation, weather interpretation, and resource management. Memory was trained to an exceptional degree in the preservation of genealogies spanning multiple generations. International models confirm the viability of embedding such traditions in formal education. For example, New Zealand's integration of the Māori knowledge system, *mātauranga Māori*, in national curricula and Alaska's standards for culturally responsive schools demonstrate that indigenous knowledge and global academic rigor are not mutually exclusive.

Drawing from these traditions is a basis for structural redesign. Hybrid pathways, greater parental involvement, and meaningful engagement with elders can restore mentorship as a central feature of education. Intergenerational interaction strengthens moral formation in ways that standardized instruction alone cannot. Curriculum content should also reflect lived heritage: experiential modules such as falconry, weaving, animal stewardship, and environmental engagement cultivate responsibility, patience, craftsmanship, and ecological awareness. These are not extracurricular additions but are expressions of regional values.

The Gulf's educational heritage is not only practical but also deeply intellectual. What modern psychology describes as metacognition, the ability to reflect on and regulate one's own thinking, has long existed within local intellectual traditions. For example, the concept of *muḥāsabat al-nafs* (ethical self-accounting) articulates these capacities within a culturally and morally grounded framework. This is not a minor semantic point but rather illustrates a broader pattern in which Western terminology has replaced indigenous vocabulary that articulates equivalent, and often richer, ideas. The Gulf does not lack educational traditions or the language to describe them;

it stopped using both. Reclaiming that vocabulary and embedding it in pedagogy is itself an act of exercising intellectual sovereignty.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE & THE OUTSOURCING OF THOUGHT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming labor markets at unprecedented speed. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 estimates that 39% of workers' core skills will change by 2030, with AI literacy, technological competence, and leadership among the fastest-rising demands.⁷

But the real challenge is not only about jobs and employment, but about how people consume information. AI systems encode the worldview of their training data. The Stanford Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence AI Index Reports [document](#) how even models "trained to be explicitly unbiased continue to demonstrate implicit bias." Whoever trains the models shapes the narrative, and data sovereignty is intellectual sovereignty. Some governments have begun to act: [the UAE's National AI Strategy 2031](#) and [Saudi Arabia's SDAIA initiatives](#) signal commitment to AI governance. But these strategies must extend explicitly into education. Large language models trained on national archives, jurisprudence, literature, and regional scholarship can provide personalized learning while preserving cultural authorship. When designed locally, AI stops being someone else's voice in our classrooms and starts becoming our own.

When students turn to AI to summarize, analyze, and conclude on their behalf, they are not just saving time. They are outsourcing the thinking process itself to systems trained on data they did not produce, reflecting values and encoding assumptions they did not choose. In a world where information is instantly delivered through chatbots, education in the GCC cannot remain focused on imported content or rote knowledge transmission. It must pivot toward experiential learning, apprenticeships, and project-based work, enabling students not merely to consume information but to interpret, question, and author it from within their own cultural framework.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences identifies eight distinct cognitive capacities: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic.⁸ Yet most education systems in the Gulf measure only two or three of these. Intrinsic motivation, driven by curiosity, mastery, and purpose, produces deeper and more durable learning than extrinsic incentives tied to grades or rankings. If the GCC is serious about educational sovereignty, it must begin by broadening its definition of what a successful child looks like. This Brief proposes

the following policy recommendations for GCC states.

1. Establish Gulf-wide shared educational standards and assessment systems

The GCC states could establish a shared Core Values Framework that begins not with learning outcomes or subject lists, but with a description of the graduate the region wants to see: ethically grounded, culturally fluent, intellectually independent, and civically responsible. This could translate into the development of national curricula and assessment frameworks that better reflect regional priorities. Governments should shift the metric and evaluate schools on the depth of their graduates' cultural literacy, their capacity for independent thought, their competence in Arabic, and their readiness to contribute to the societies that raised them.

This does not necessarily mean abandoning international examinations, but regionally designed assessments that are rigorous and recognized internationally can sit alongside them. Singapore has shown this is possible; it maintains internationally recognized qualifications co-developed with the University of Cambridge, while embedding national priorities such as bilingualism, cultural identity, and holistic student development through reforms led by the Ministry of Education Singapore.⁹ Schools can also consider reducing standardized testing in early and middle years to reduce high-pressure examinations that stunt intellectual curiosity and independent thinking.

2. Reform teacher training & encourage intergenerational involvement in education

GCC states should invest in training and upskilling teachers to foster inquiry, social-emotional learning, reflection, and problem-solving. The GCC states need teachers who are not only trained in pedagogy but rooted in the culture, language, and intellectual traditions the curriculum seeks to preserve. This means offering competitive salaries, creating scholarship programs that attract high-potential students based on locally grounded definitions of merit and success into the teaching profession, and building mentorship structures that pair new teachers with experienced, culturally rooted educators. Moreover, governments can fund public awareness campaigns that promote reading aloud in Arabic in homes and encourage intergenerational knowledge-transfer of oral histories and traditions.

3. Build national 'Centers of Excellence' that align with local contexts and domestic educational requirements

Curriculum research, Arabic pedagogy, and digital learning innovation should not depend on foreign consultancies. Permanent institutions dedicated to these functions, modeled on bodies like [Finland's National Agency for Education](#), can act as

research hubs that can also advise on policy.

4. Train AI systems on regional and local histories

If AI will shape how the next generation learns, then the data it learns from must include the Gulf's own archives, jurisprudence, literature, and scholarship. While governance of educational AI systems should remain under each GCC member state's national authority, coordination could enable the sharing of best practices.

5. Build an Arabic knowledge commons

Significant investments should go into the creation of high-quality educational content in Arabic on par with other languages. This includes investing in engaging Arabic-language media, film, animation, and digital content that exports Gulf culture and values to the world. This would serve not only Gulf states but the broader Arab world as educational soft power as well.

CONCLUSION

Reassessing success in education requires a deep audit of what we are prioritizing and how can we design an entire educational experience that communicates to children that their culture and values are the foundation of excellence rather than being secondary to it. Parents must ask what they are truly celebrating when a child gains admission abroad and policymakers should question whether benchmarking exclusively against OECD metrics has made the region's own priorities invisible. Additionally, employers must question whether screening by institutional prestige rather than demonstrated skills is reinforcing imported standards of excellence. The path toward educational sovereignty is not a retreat from the world but a more confident engagement with it, grounded in language, heritage, and the conviction that the Gulf's intellectual traditions are strong foundations upon which to build.

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