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Controversial debates about workforce nationalisation: Perspectives from the Qatari higher education industry

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ABSTRACT

Workforce nationalisation in the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries is a crucial challenge for their development plans. The current study explores controversial debates about workforce nationalisation to understand the existing threats from the views of less examined key stakeholders, namely, educators and senior students. The study argues that the identified obstacles relate not only to policy flaws but also to the education – employability gap, phantom employment, and detrimental social and community perceptions. Given its exploratory nature, the study adopts a qualitative approach and uses 28 semi-structured interviews to identify critical obstacles to effective workforce nationalisation from human development, legal development, and socio-cultural perspectives. The findings contribute to the literature on GCC workforce nationalisation by unpacking educators' and senior students' views.

Introduction

Massive numbers of expatriates have been introduced to the GCC countries over the last five decades leading to what is called the 'national minority state' (Gowri 2016; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi 2020). To respond to this challenge, the GCC countries adopted workforce nationalisation strategies to lessen the extensive reliance on foreign labour. However, these strategies have: (1) faced difficulties in implementation, (2) were predominantly explored from policy and employers' perspectives and (3) have not received adequate scholarly attention, as indicated by several extensive reviews (e.g. Karam and Afiouni 2014; Elbanna et al. 2023). For example, in implementation, the GCC countries adopted labour quota policies; unfortunately, recent research describes such policies as counterproductive (Barnett, Malcolm, and Toledo 2015; Ali et al. 2020).

From a scholarly perspective, although (1) the growth in numbers of national employees has been meteoric and is the result of strategic government interventions and

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investment, yet, surprisingly, limited research explored the views of relevant stakeholders such as students and educators to present their assessment of the compatibility, employability of national graduates and perceptions of Qatarisation from key beneficiaries (Elbanna 2022; Elsharnouby et al. 2023) and (2) the literature on workforce nationalisation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) exists, there is an underrepresentation of scholarly literature on workforce nationalisation in the remaining GCC countries, particularly the focus of this study, Qatar (Forstenlechner 2010; Albejaidi and Nair 2019).

It is therefore established that there is a current and continued debate over the success of workforce nationalisation strategies and not a collective consensus on how to address the obstacles to its successful implementation. In fact, the question is quite controversial, and our study aims to examine the controversial debates from three perspectives: human development, legal development, and socio-cultural. We define controversial debates as discussions in which opposing viewpoints are presented from different perspectives, resulting in disagreement due to differences in opinions.

As in other GCC states, Qatarisation is a focus of the Qatar National Vision 2030, which aims to increase the percentage of Qatari citizens employed in the public and private sectors (Al Jawali et al. 2021). To this end, Qatar adopted several initiatives such as improving education standards and setting policies to enforce quota systems, which require target industries to maintain a minimum ratio of Qatari workers to expatriate workers (Dalloul, Amanulla, and Elbanna 2021). Despite being in place for three decades, Qatarisation has had little success in practice (Parcero and Ryan 2017; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi 2020).

For example, although Koji's (2011) study attempted to identify obstacles to workforce nationalisation and propose structural remedies to its dilemmas in a similar context (i.e. the UAE), this scholarly endeavour remains conceptual and did not provide empirical evidence to extend the research dialogue in this area (Albejaidi and Nair 2019; Elbanna et al. 2023). Furthermore, Koji's (2011) study discussed the political-economy controversies surrounding labour nationalisation in the UAE and presented a conceptual analysis of the effect of the government's legislations over three decades. The study examined the evolution of national labour policies and identified labour issues from the government and national workers' perspectives rather than presenting empirical evidence from relevant stakeholders such as those in the higher education sector. Surprisingly, it is hard to find studies that tackle educators' and students' assessment of workforce nationalisation after such a long implementation period (Alfarhan Usamah 2018; Oxford Analytica 2022). Unpacking the perceptions of educators is necessary to explore, for example, their views of the compatibility of the supply side (e.g. graduates' qualifications) and the market needs (e.g. employability skills/competencies). Furthermore, exploring local students' perspectives is crucial to understand how the policy's key beneficiaries perceive workforce nationalisation.

Informed by these considerations, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) what are the controversial debates about Qatarisation from the perspectives of educators and senior students? (2) What are the obstacles that hinder the implementation of Qatarisation? (3) What perspectives should be applied to address the existing debates and obstacles? To answer the research questions, it was necessary to explore collective views that discuss the compatibility, employability, and perceptions of

key beneficiaries of Qatarisation. We argue that the problem with Qatarisation lies not only in the policy flaws, which have already been noted (Williams, Bhanugopan, and Fish 2011; Parcero and Ryan 2017; Elbanna 2022), but that the obstacles raised by stakeholders from the higher education industry further clarify the problem. Therefore, there remains a need to conduct empirical research from relevant stakeholders other than policymakers and employers to accumulate a sound body of knowledge upon which effective policies can be prescribed (Forstenlechner and Mellahi 2011; Belwal, Belwal, and Al-Hashemi 2019).

To capture micro (individual's) and macro (environmental) levels of analysis, the study adopts the Ecosystem Perspective Theory (EPT). The EPT draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work to capture the impact of biological, emotional, and social elements on human beings. The EPT is considered a suitable theoretical lens for our work around exploring the controversial debates, obstacles, and perspectives of Qatarisation because it provides an overarching view of the multiple interrelated contexts in which Qatarisation is implemented. It also provides a theoretical backdrop for exploring different layers of meanings of controversial debates about Qatarisation and its related domains, such as education, employment, economic and culture as perceived by students and educators in their capacity as individuals who interact with the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, the EPT bestows a framework to recognise interactions, synergies, and conflicts among various stakeholders of labour nationalisation (Sahli 2021).

Theoretical background and literature review

Workforce nationalisation: An overview

The excessive dependency on expatriates results in a demographic imbalance and leads to the rising unemployment among nationals and possibly an identity crisis issue (Koji 2011; Afiouni, Huub, and Randall 2014). Hence, workforce nationalisation recognises the need to place nationals at the centre of the workforce to ensure that a country's endogenous social and economic development is met. Workforce nationalisation is conceptualised as a national policy to replace foreign workers with nationals through employment quota targets (Goby 2015; Abaker, Al-Titi, and Al-Nasr 2019). Previous studies have observed that a state intervention is a common practice across GCC countries, either directly by imposing quotas and reserving certain jobs for nationals (Forstenlechner, Lettice, and Özbilgin 2012) or indirectly by enhancing local employees' employability through capacity building (Albejaidi and Nair 2019). Since the economic downturn in 2008, there have been renewed government policies directed towards nationalising labour markets. This has been clearly noted in the GCC countries as addressed above and worldwide, such as the Trump administration in the US enacting policies to reduce immigration (Payan 2016), the conservative measures in the UK to reduce immigrant labour, and similar efforts in Singapore (Tan et al. 2017).

Regardless of numerous policy measures, workforce nationalisation initiatives have been hindered and the aspired outcomes are yet to be achieved (Harry 2007; Forstenlechner 2010; Forstenlechner and Mellahi 2011). For example, there remains evidence of negative stereotypes by both public and private employers, expatriates and the national citizens themselves. The stereotypes pertain to the lack of professional

competencies, skills, work commitment, and enthusiasm among national employees (Belwal, Belwal, and Al-Hashemi 2019). It has also been established that following several crises in the GCC, such as the Gulf War in 1991, the 2008 financial crisis, and complications of the Arab Spring, the enacted policies have not delivered the intended results, and there have been calls for more effective nationalisation strategies (Elbanna 2022). Finally, scholars have called on policymakers to enact a broad institutional reform to ensure the effective implementation of nationalisation strategies (Barnett, Malcolm, and Toledo 2015; Glaister, Al Amri, and Spicer 2019).

Ecosystem perspective theory: An overview

According to the EPT (Bronfenbrenner 1979), the environment is a set of interrelated contexts where an individual is typically affected by complex environmental influences that include the: micro-, meso-, exo- and macro- systems. Each level affects the individual significantly. The micro-system involves influences which the individual interacts with on a regular and daily basis. The meso-system captures interactions between elements in the micro-system. The exo-system further expands to capture interactions between micro-and meso-systems. Finally, the macro-system includes the societal context in which the individual is embedded and represents the society's prevailing cultural and economic conditions. The EPT notes that systems are dynamic and constantly affect an individual's consciousness (Leonard 2011).

In the present study, the micro-system captures the setting in which the Qatari national has direct interactions with significant actors in his/her eco-system such as parents, teachers, expatriates, and friends. According to EPT, lateral interactions between actors in the micro-system capture a meso-system. Exo-system then expands to capture an outer circle of relationships such as employers, legislators, and administrators. The macro-system then captures the prevailing cultural, social, economic, and religious norms and represents a diverse cultural context that includes elements from the society and community surrounding an individual including beliefs, ideologies, policies, and laws (Farrell 2008; Sahli 2021).

A fundamental predictor of labour nationalisation success is a supportive ecosystem that encourages the development of relationships between the different contexts in which the labour nationalisation legislation is instated. Multiple contexts can exist, compete, and complement each other; hence, EPT facilitates the examination of synergies and conflicts among contexts in which government agencies, policymakers, teachers, universities, and human beings operate. Consequently, EPT is a suitable theoretical lens for examining labour nationalisation because it is expansive and focuses on complex layers of the education system, families, employers, governments, and local community while simultaneously providing a focused view and an analysis of the individual national worker.

The extent of synergy among contexts is fundamental to the success of labour nationalisation initiatives; conflicting demands and messages are detrimental to the successful implementation of well-planned policies and legislations. While a national student or a worker is typically located in the smaller micro-system, the wider contexts and relationships with the exo-system and macro-system ascertain success or failure of the labour nationalisation strategy and affect perceptions about enacted policies. Hence,

the labour nationalisation strategy calls upon governments to consider factors that act as enhancements or hindrances to synergies among the wider community participants (such as students, teachers and employers) in the exo-system and macro-system as elements of each system are continuously affecting and are affected by one another (Belwal, Belwal, and Al-Hashemi 2019).

Overview of workforce nationalisation initiatives in Qatar

The first Qatarisation policy was issued in 1962, which stipulated that Qatari nationals are given priority when filling vacant positions (Zweiri and Al Qawasmi 2021). To enhance participation of nationals in the workforce, governments in GCC countries, including Qatar, enacted policies in the form of an expatriate-to-national ratio called the quota system to recruit and retain the national labour force in public and private organisations (Parcero and Ryan 2017). As a result of such changes to legislation, it has become increasingly unlikely for a large organisation to establish itself in the GCC without addressing the nationalisation of human resources. The Qatarisation program proposes a quota of 50% of Qataris in key positions in the oil and gas industry and 100% in all non-specialist positions in the government (Kamrava 2015).

Like other GCC countries, Qatar has a high number of nationals employed in the public sector who receive extremely generous wages; therefore, nationals are demotivated from moving to the private sector, leaving the private sector devoid of nationals (Parcero and Ryan 2017; Belwal, Belwal, and Al-Hashemi 2019). Qatar is also a welfare state that offers generous endowments to its national citizens (Toledo 2013). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the nation faces a lack of incentives typical in welfare states. Like the rest of the GCC, the cultural distaste for low-status jobs is also prevalent in Qatar, where young Qataris are experiencing increasing career aspirations and are generally reluctant to accept vocational jobs (Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2002). Despite the generous provision of general education and training opportunities to Qataris, the main attitude among nationals is to avoid technical education and vocational employment. Nationals prefer a university education, with a preference for non-technical areas (Madhi and Barrientos 2003).

The government attempted to address these challenges by imposing the quota system on selected sectors. The implementation started in the oil and gas industry. Although original deadlines had been set, the dates have been extended and the effectiveness of these measures has been questioned (see Toledo 2013; Kamrava 2015; Jabeen, Faisal, and Katsioloudes 2018). Opponents of the quota system criticise the severe penalties imposed on the violating organisations and the consequent adverse effects on the stability of foreign workers in GCC countries (Abaker, Al-Titi, and Al-Nasr 2019). Furthermore, it is regarded as a form of discrimination that would hinder diversity in the workplace and prevent hiring qualified personnel (Ali et al. 2020).

Methodology

Research context

Qatar is one of the highest income developing economies, backed by the world's largest natural gas reserves. Rising economic prosperity contributes to the nation's continued

stability (Kamrava 2015). Qatar's economy grew by 1.6% in 2017, rising to 2.4% in 2018 and 3.1% in 2019, while the country's population is estimated at 2.7 million, with expatriates representing about 85.3% of the total population. The share of the national workforce in 2020–2021 accounts to approximately 6%, which means the country's ratio of expatriates to nationals is one of the most imbalanced populations in the world and most certainly within the GCC countries (Zweiri and Al Qawasmi 2021).

The average number of schooling years for adults in 1985 was approximately 4 years; data from 2019 indicate a 90% literacy rate and an average of 10 years of schooling (Ali et al. 2020). Massive commitments are made by the government to Qatari nationals, who are endowed with a generous citizenship package that includes, for example, free education and healthcare. In addition, nationals are exempted from paying utilities and are eligible for free land and interest-free loans for the construction of a home; generous employment packages are also prevalent in the public sector (Tlaiss and Al Waqfi 2020).

Research strategy and data collection

The workforce nationalisation strategy is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon with economic, social, cultural, and political aspects. Thus, the present study relied on a qualitative research design, which has proved useful in providing detailed insights to capture the nuances of participants' experiences (Finlay 2013). An in-depth interview was adopted to unpack participants' experiences and enrich the quality of the research findings (Guba and Lincoln 1994). To maintain control to discuss specific predetermined themes while simultaneously allowing for a higher degree of flexibility to gather additional insights, semi-structured interviews were chosen. To collect data from both academics and local senior students, two interview protocols were developed. These protocols were designed to incorporate relevant discussion questions informed by existing literature on workforce nationalisation in GCC countries and specific research questions guiding the study. The interview questions, which can be found in Appendices 1 and 2, provide a clear framework for gathering meaningful insights and perspectives from both participant groups.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select the study's participants. The research team sought to identify individuals knowledgeable about Qatarisation and representative of two main yet different stakeholders in the higher education sector. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with academics and 12 interviews with local senior students over a period of four months. To ensure that we accounted for coverage through variation (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008), the sample of academics represented different disciplines (e.g. finance, mechanical engineering, biomedical sciences, architecture, management, and law) to ensure different perspectives were accounted for. The sample of the senior students included prospective graduates with a business administration background to ensure that students refer to the same criteria when discussing employment and career issues. In line with the qualitative research literature, we continued the interviews until saturation or informal redundancy (Guba and Lincoln 1994), at which point no novel insights emerged to inform the identified themes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed via the Zoom video platform, due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of conducting the field study. The interview transcripts were sent to participants for approval to ensure the reliability and validity of

Table 1. Contextual background: Academic participants.

No.	Academic/ managerial rank	Discipline/ management level	Pseudonym	Gender	Overall experience (years)	Current university experience (years)
1.	Associate Professor	Finance	Ziad	Male	18	8
2.	Professor	Physics	Ahmed	Male	19	6
3.	Professor	Mechanical Engineering	Farouk	Male	19	7
4.	Associate Professor	Biomedical Sciences	Mazen	Male	24	8
5.	Assistant Professor	Architecture	Khaled	Male	31	7
6.	Professor	Operations Management	Abdullah	Male	32	8
7.	Lecturer	Management	Hassan	Male	25	7
8.	Associate Professor	Statistics	Omar	Male	20	7
9.	Associate Professor	University Senior Administration	Fatema	Female	20	9
10.	Associate Professor	Civil Engineering	Tarek	Male	14	7
11.	Professor	Computer Engineering	Ali	Male	15	13
12.	Professor	Civil Engineering	Arafa	Male	25	7
13.	Professor	University Senior Administration	Karim	Male	11	13
14.	Professor	University Senior Administration	Sheikha	Female	8	8
15.	Assistant Professor	Law	Yehia	Male	9	17
16.	Lecturer	Management	Seif	Male	5	5

Table 2. Contextual background: Student participants.

No.	Year (Level of study)	GPA	Major	School	Age	Work Experience	Pseudonym	Gender
1	2nd (MBA)	3.83	Engineering (Computer Science)	Public	38	15	Hoda	F
2	1st (MBA)	2.6	Business	Private	31	No work experience	Yasser	M
3	2nd (MBA)	3.3	Business	Public	34	13	Maryam	F
4	2nd (MBA)	4.00	Executive Leaders Program	Public	38	20	Jassim	M
5	2nd (MBA)	3.7	Business	Public	36	13	Jaber	M
6	2nd (MBA)	3.56	Business	Public	30	No work experience	Fatima	F
7	1st (MBA)	3.1	Business	Public	30	4	Salma	F
8	Final Year (Bachelor)	3.02	Marketing & Management	Public	26	No work experience	Nayef	M
9	Final Year (Bachelor)	3.65	Business	Public	34	9	Yasmine	F
10	Final Year (Bachelor)	2.82	Marketing	International	25	No work experience	Noufal	M
11	Final Year (Bachelor)	3.6	Accounting	Public	24	3	Naser	M
12	1st (MBA)	3.7	Major: Administration Minor: Finance	Public	46	10	Adel	M
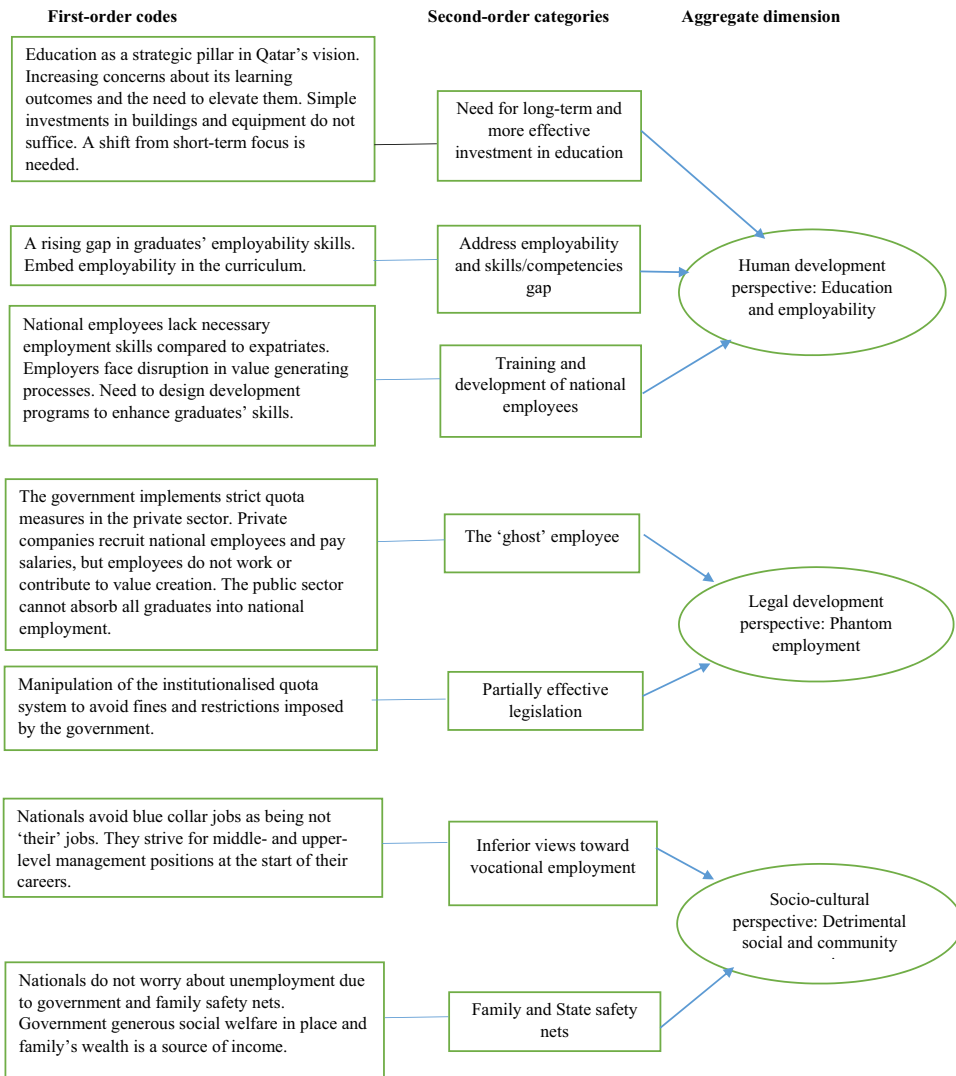
Figure 1. Data structure.

the data. In total, we conducted 28 interviews lasting 56 hours, with an average interview duration of 120 minutes. Tables 1 and 2 present a description of the study's participants.

Data analysis

We adopted a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns in line with Douglas, Shepherd, and Prentice (2020) and Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) approach to qualitative data analysis. NVivo10 software was used for organising and analysing the data. Following Douglas, Shepherd, and Prentice (2020) process, we used 3 interviews with educators and 3 interviews with senior students to identify key issues for determining the controversial debates about Qatarisation and, consequently, built the first order

codes. The code list was then used to code the remaining interviews. The data analysis followed an iterative approach, constantly comparing data, codes, and sub-themes. The second-order sub-themes were directed towards overarching theoretical dimensions (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012). The data structure model is presented in Figure 1.

An evaluation of the research approach and findings

The authors employed four measures to ensure trustworthiness of the qualitative research process adopted in this study and its findings. First, an 'audit trial' (Tracy 2010) was maintained by documenting all our research activities and methodological choices and providing justifications for the appropriateness of these choices to address the research questions in the current context (e.g. using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis). Second, special attention has been paid to the sampling strategy to enable researchers to yield rigorous outcomes. Two criteria were used to select the participants: relevance to the subject matter and diversity (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam 2003). We ensured that all selected participants were knowledgeable about Qatarisation and aware of the obstacles facing its implementation. In addition, we ensured diversity among academic participants (were from diverse disciplines or held diverse administrative positions, ranging in age and experience) and students (were both male and female, ranging in age, employed and unemployed).

Third, the credibility of findings was facilitated through the way methodological and analytical decisions are presented (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997). Methodological procedures for this study are thought to be rigorous and appropriate to yield interpretations of participants' experiences. Moreover, interpretations are thought to be plausible (there is a relationship between the interpretation and data) and illuminating (providing new themes and a creative understanding of experiences).

Fourth, we took a reflexive stance in conducting the current research (Wang, J, and Roulston 2007). As a qualitative inquiry, there was a subjective interaction between the authors and the phenomenon. We believe that 'reality' is subjectively experienced in participants' minds, and therefore qualitative researchers should attempt to understand participants' experiences in their terms (Hirschman 1986). However, we acknowledge that themes discussed in the findings section are neither objective accounts of the data nor projections from the researchers' personal world (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997) rather, they can be viewed as perceptual accounts offered by interview data that evolved in a specific context and subject to a continuous hermeneutic process.

Findings and discussion

To answer the questions of this study, we unpack three themes, namely, (1) the gap between education and employability (2) the existence of phantom employment; and (3) detrimental social and community perceptions, that outline the controversial debates about Qatarisation and discuss the obstacles that hinder its implementation. The identified themes are discussed from three perspectives: human development,

Table 3. Summary of the study's themes.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Verbatim
Human development perspective	Minimise the education and employability gap through: • Long-term effective investment in education system • Remedies to graduates' competencies gap • Training and development of the national employee	State of the art education facilities is one side of the equation, investments should include updated curriculum, extra curricula activities and training on soft skills (Arafa, professor) It is sad, but we graduate and on the first day of work, we realise that we have not been trained on what the company is looking for, shocking but true (Yasmine, student)
Legal development perspective	Prevailing phantom employment phenomenon because of the: • Ghost employee who does not actually work for the organisation • Partially effective legislation	Many of my relatives are employed without doing real work, their colleagues, usually expatriates, are the ones who do the 'actual work' and receive less benefits and salaries (Adel, student) I do a lot of consultancy work for governments and when I present restructuring proposals to specific divisions, they simply say, they can't implement because of the quota imposed – it is about numbers of Qataris who are employed, not the real work they do. (Yehia, associate professor)
Socio-cultural perspective	Detrimental social and community perceptions that are the result of: • Inferior views toward vocational employment • Family and State safety nets	Unfortunately, my family and of course the society will look down at me if I tell them I do not want to join the University and want to be a plumber or a painter. As a national, I will lose my social status (Nayef, student) We know that if we fail there will be a back-up, a support, from the family or from the government. We apply for the subsidy, and we will get it, regardless of whether we pass with A or fail. So, some students will not be bothered (Salma, student)

legal development and socio-cultural. The study also captures reciprocally adjacent contexts at the micro and macro level of analysis. We present the themes in the data structure in Figure 1 and present a summary table of the identified themes and major findings in Table 3.

Human development perspective: employability and education

The first theme in our analysis relates to the 'Qatari individual' as a key pillar for the government's initiatives and captures the individual's micro-system. At this level, interactions between individuals as the main actor in the micro-system and several elements in the exo- and macro-systems (such as the individual's interaction with professors, the academic institutions in which he/she studies and employers, to list a few) affect perceptions of the workforce nationalisation policy. Participants identified that merely restructuring the education system will not achieve intended outcomes and that better links with the labour market must be established to account for employers' needs. The gaps identified under this theme are (1) long-term and effective investment in education, (2) the employability and skills/competencies gap, and (3) training and development of national employees. The identifications well recognise the interdependencies and the synergies required between the layers of the ecosystem in which the national student and a prospective employee is embedded.

Long-Term and Effective Investment in Education

Although the development of a national workforce through investment in education has been recognised as one of the strategic pillars of Qatar's vision, educators and students queried the actual results. Participants criticised the government's focus on short-term remedies and the emphasis on infrastructure investments in buildings and technological equipment.

> 'Qatarisation cannot be addressed by temporary measures. A holistic view is needed. Policymakers should override the temptation to achieve short-term success'. [Sheikha, Professor, University Senior Administration, female]

> 'The investment in education is not about the buildings and ensuring you have state-of-the-art equipment. The government needs to look at the education framework and competencies, skills, teachers, etc. Unfortunately, students achieve good grades but when they take employment, they struggle'. [Karim, Professor, University Senior Administration, male]

For both educators, long-term investments in the education sector based on applied learning is fundamental for enhancing graduates' employment. Participants wished for a transformation in the country's emphasis from investing in educational buildings and technology to an education system that integrates opportunities for work placement and professional internships. Students appear to agree with educators on that combining subject area knowledge with professional work experience would enable national graduates to excel. Jaber comments:

> 'I would not mind a placement year; it is a valuable experience and would prepare me for future job hunting'. [Jaber, Student, male, 36]

Educators discussed the significance of including the employer's voice in curriculum design, particularly in technical disciplines, where graduates could be directly recruited into specific professional jobs and work placements.

> 'I worked in the UK; professionals are invited to curriculum boards during course design—we simply listen to their views about future employees. It is as if you are capturing the "wish list" about the ideal graduate'. [Tarek, Associate Professor, Civil Engineering, male]

Participants also discussed the significance of establishing scholarship schemes and research-driven education to enhance national labour competency. Although it was acknowledged that results of such schemes would only be evident in the long-term, the participants elaborated on the merit of encouraging graduates from such schemes to take private employment and transfer skills to fresh national graduates.

> 'Unfortunately, these [research] centres and initiatives like knowledge villages and team academies do not yield results immediately. The government will have to wait for at least a decade to assess the outcomes which will be brilliant. By then, they [Qatar] will have a pool of competent graduates and condolences for the long wait that graduates can mentor other young nationals—at that point, these initiatives will have an exponential knock-off effect'. [Ali, Professor, Computer Engineering, male]

Employability and Skills/Competencies Gap

Participants queried the competitiveness, skill sets, and work ethics of national employees. The proposed solutions involved embedding employability skills in

various taught modules and mirroring best practices by leading countries such as the UK and the US. The discussions also revolved around the need to move towards applied learning and deviation from theoretical assessments. Responses reflected the need to review education courses and curricula to ensure that they meet market demands.

> 'As a Qatari student, when I apply for a job or internships, I get asked about my commitment and career goals, and often I do not know the answer because I am not trained. I know in Europe, the UK, and the US, employability skills are taught as a module in human resource management'. [Hoda, Student, female, 38]

Participants also argued that the education reforms would not be effective if they were not supported by relevant stakeholders. They also argued that reforms should demonstrate commitment to certain values, such as integrity, hard work, resilience, diversity, professionalism, and excellence.

> 'I think our education is skewed towards memorising theories and concepts rather than their application. During job interviews, I get asked about many transferrable skills and how I would apply my knowledge to the organisation, and I am stuck, although my GPA is high, and I am on the Dean's honour list!' [Naser, student, male, 24]

> 'I believe there's a need to move the curriculum to applied learning. Case studies in lectures and exams, simulations, etc., are innovative learning tools that we need to embed in our delivery to ensure graduates are employable. Unfortunately, educators don't do enough of that. Most of us teach by discussing titles of the book chapters, and there is no synthesis of knowledge'. [Ahmed, Professor, Physics, male]

An overarching theme is the necessity to address the employability and competencies gap as a fundamental step towards achieving an effective Qatarisation strategy. In participants' views, closing such a gap would enhance hiring managers' willingness to recruit, train, and retain national employees.

Training and Development of National Employees

Participants reported that, despite the Qatari government's massive investments in science parks, education facilities, and learning technologies, the training and development for national employees has been minimal. A mismatch between labour supply and demand leads public and private organisations to recruit expatriates because of their advanced skills compared to national employees. To address the problem, large national employers should be leaders in institutionalising training programs to reveal and further develop local talents. In addition, policymakers may reward private organisations that mimic such practices by placing them on the preferred suppliers' list or extending nominal and non-nominal benefits.

> "Employers, particularly the private sector, perceive Qatari graduates as lacking long-term career development and commitment; hence, they are reluctant to invest in their development. If you encourage organisations to develop training programs, reward them for the implementation. Just reward them the same way you reward the organisations that fulfil the quota and hire nationals. Motivate them by placing those companies on the bidders' list and extend preferential exemptions". [Khaled, Assistant Professor, Architecture, male]

In participants' views, employers may face disruption in value-generating processes if they rely solely on the national workforce due to the issue of differing attitudes and behaviours. Legally, it is difficult to dismiss a national employee; therefore, national employees often exhibit low commitment to an organisation's performance outcomes (Zeffane and Melhem 2017). These perceptions lead employers to restrict investments in training and developing national employees.

> 'I get it when organisations prefer to hire expatriates because they are more committed than many of us and have experience. I know many Qataris who left a year after taking a full-time job and some of them would undergo the interviewing process and then decide to quit. It is sad but unfortunately true'. [Jassim, Student, male, 38]

Participants agreed that new educational programs should be launched to prepare nationals for private sector employment and argued that the reformed programs should integrate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines. Later in this work, we explain why nationals are not attracted to study vocational and knowledge-intensive degrees from a socio-cultural perspective.

> 'Reform the curriculum of schools and universities, and motivate [students] to learn languages, science, maths, etc., from the early age. They will have a good foundation and hence could be further trained'. [Arafa, Professor, Civil Engineering, male]

In sum, the analysis of the first theme recognises the dependencies of the Qatari national in the micro-system on the wider layers of the meso-, exo- and macro-systems and establishes a missing link between the employability and education of Qatari nationals.

Legal development perspective: phantom employment

In this theme, responses establish the need to address a legal framework within which the Qatarisation strategy is institutionalised. The analysis captures two obstacles at the macro-system: (1) the ghost employee phenomenon and (2) the partially effective legislations. In this theme, the influence of inter-related multifaceted legislations and societal norms at the meso, exo and macro systems is evident. The analysis identifies that participants' sense-making of the external environment led to a set of beliefs and attitudes towards the legislative system, which affected the implementation of the Qatarisation policy and reduced access to real employment.

The 'Ghost' Employee

Participants discussed the mandatory industry-specific quotas. Although the responses reflect the success of the public and banking sectors in implementing the quota system; a fact widely acknowledged by many statistics (Al Waqfi and Forstenlechner 2012). However, participants questioned the effectiveness of the quota system in delivering the intended outcomes.

> 'I regret to say the quota system has led to many problems. After 20 years, it is unfortunate to find that some employees are registered to work for a particular organisation but, they are staying at home'. [Adel, Student, male, 46]

> 'Everyone in this country is familiar with the government's rule that nationals are given priority when it comes to recruitment. It's a fact, but students also know that the vast majority

of those who work in the private sector have no real work. For sure, this affects their motivation'. [Hassan, Lecturer, Management, male]

Although the quota system has played an important role towards the implementation of the Qatarisation strategy in some industries, the pressure led to the development of the 'ghost employee' or the 'phantom employment' phenomenon. This phenomenon occurs when an organisation hires a Qatari national, pays them a salary, and requests that they stay home to ensure that the company satisfies the quota imposed and avoids fines and other administrative penalties. The overall perspective is that existing legislations led to a situation where nationals are only 'making the numbers' as established by Marchon and Toledo's (Marchon and Toledo 2014) study rather than being employed based on their competency level and suitability to the roles (Elbanna 2022).

Although we could establish participants' awareness that the first and most symbolic labour policy was the decision that Qatari nationals be given priority in employment, the effectiveness of the measures was queried in terms of the negative impact such phenomena may have on the future engagement and commitment of national graduates, particularly in private organisations.

Partially Effective Legislations

We established from the previous theme that quota systems led to the development of phantom employment, which led to discussions about participants' perceptions and identification of the existing legal framework. Participants explained that Qatar's private sector's extensive reliance on expatriates is due to the excessive demand for labour following the economic boom in the 1990s which could not be met by the local workforce at the time. However, they also said that it is time for nationals to step up and seek an active role.

'It [expatriate employment] was crucial in the 1990s. There was not enough supply of nationals. Now, we can take a more active role in our economy'. [Yasmine, Student, female, 34]

However, participants established that restrictions are not the remedy and that employers should see the value of recruiting and training national employees. In addition, their voices should be heard when formulating the regulating framework.

'I don't think the current regulations are that effective. If the employer is not convinced that the national will perform, they will evade the rule. I know they aim for a 5% increase yearly by restricting expatriate recruitment, but in my view, the private sector is not compliant. Policymakers should bring them [employers] to the table and listen to what they have to say'. [Noufal, Student, male, 24]

'You can't just push it with quotas. This would hinder hiring the best employee for the job'. [Fatema, Associate Professor, University Senior Administration, female]

The responses also identified a lack of transparency and ambiguity in the nationalisation policies and regulations.

"If you ask anyone whether the rules and regulations are announced, they will say no. We know that nationals' employment is a priority, but the targets, data, and facts are classified as confidential information". [Seif, Lecturer, Management, male]

Participants further discussed how an effective Qatarisation strategy would benefit from affirmative action and the creation of a social context of values and beliefs to augment

enacted policies. In their view, rules and regulations are only part of the puzzle. There were also calls to revise existing laws that prohibit the dismissal of national employees due to unsatisfactory performance. This step was reported as a fundamental measure to encourage real national employment in the private sector and a step towards minimising 'high uncertainty costs' associated with national recruitment.

> 'Rules and regulations are one side of the coin. So far, they [rules] have proved ineffective. Therefore, they [rules] should be complemented with a wide social context that cherishes and encourages the national worker to add value'. [Maryam, Student, female, 34]

The analysis identifies that safeguarding national employment by imposing incentives and severe restrictions on violators results in a phantom employment phenomenon widely acknowledged as an impediment to effective Qatarisation. Furthermore, the arbitrary enactment of formal regulations in the form of numeric targets rather than real measures contributed to the ineffectiveness of current nationalisation outcomes. This finding confirms recent research by Alfarhan and Al-Busaidi (Alfarhan and Al-Busaidi 2019) which established that the failure of nationalisation strategies in the GCC region is inflicted by skewed practices that frame nationalisation along a strict continuum of the quota system in the absence of a well-designed legislative framework.

Socio-cultural perspective: detrimental social and community perceptions

Several cultural prejudices have been reported at the exo- and macro-system level of analysis including (1) inferior views towards vocational employment and (2) family and state safety nets.

Inferior Views towards Vocational Employment

This theme relates to nationals' views towards vocational occupations, low-level management positions, and entry-level and blue-collar jobs. The responses identify that nationals have cultivated a culture that avoids blue-collar jobs and a perception that they do not need to do entry-level work assignments as these are jobs for expatriates. Like earlier studies, our study identifies that individuals often believe that self-reliance and civic duty are inferior tasks (Ardichvili and Kuchinke 2002; Zavyalova et al. 2011).

Participants urged nationals to take entry-level jobs and to accept wages set by the market.

> 'We are starting to see nationals who work in a service sector like hospitality, but the idea of accepting certain roles such as taxi drivers or workers in supermarkets is still unacceptable. Society should accept a Qatari barber, taxi driver, etc. This shift is crucial to the success of Qatarisation'. [Adel, Student, male, 46]

> 'I tell my students; you must progress from an entry-level to senior management. For example, you will never be a good marketing manager unless you personally collect data in malls and acquire hands-on experience'. [Yehia, Assistant Professor, Law, male]

> 'Students do not expect nor accept that they need to do entry-level engineering jobs and be on the workshop floors or the rigs. They think they will be a senior manager right after graduation. In my view, that's the most important shift that society needs to focus on'. [Farouk, Professor, Mechanical Engineering, male]

This emergent theme led to discussions about the reason for the prevalence of such norms and values and the impact of the wider cultural norms at the macro-system. Participants attributed the cause to family and state safety nets and the existence of an implicit social contract.

Family and State Safety Nets

Given Qatar's small population, the Qatari government did not experience challenges in the distribution of wealth among national citizens. The default solution has been the reliance on extended social welfare benefits in the form of free education and monetary allocations to families, as well as the repayment of any outstanding personal debts. Nationals enjoy a sense of entitlement, and the state subsidises national's earnings by topping their benefits. The generous welfare benefits represent an implicit 'social contract' between the government and national citizens (Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010; Yamada and Hertog 2020). However, few participants queried the sustainability of the social contract since the GCC region is facing significant challenges due to rising unemployment rates among nationals and the unstable economic growth due to the fluctuations in oil prices. The responses capture the need to encourage a knowledge-based economy and acknowledge the government's initiatives in this regard, such as the launch of the Education City and the opening of international universities' branches in Qatar.

> *'Qatar is recognised as one of the wealthiest nations in the world, if not the wealthiest. Wealth pauses several opportunities but at the same time, there are challenges. If you know you do not need to work or progress in a career, then what's the purpose of your life or your education?' [Nayef, Student, male, 36]*

> *'We see it all the time. We must talk to them and convince them of the value of knowledge and learning. We urge them to sit for their exams and do well in their studies. Life has been easy for them. They have never seen the hard part ever, so I would see that they are not as motivated as students in other parts of the world, who for example, struggle to pay their tuition'. [Ziad, Associate Professor, Finance, male]*

Because there are two safety nets in the form of a generous social welfare scheme for nationals' and families' personal wealth, the responses reflect that nationals do not have to worry about unemployment. Furthermore, they often exhibit a weak work ethic because they do not perceive a link between their work efforts and financial rewards. It may be that the presence of the social safety nets in the two forms affected nationals' motivation and incentive to seek graduate employment right after graduation. Nationals receive welfare benefits through free education, medical and social services, housing, and employment in governmental and semi-governmental bodies. Therefore, the current Qatarisation initiatives will not change nationals' perspectives on vocational training and education and that debates about Qatarisation are strongly influenced by the social structure and welfare mechanisms in place.

Conclusion

This exploratory study delivers new insights from the perspectives of less examined stakeholders, namely, educators and students, in an almost completely overlooked study setting, namely, Qatar, to help explore what is needed to prepare nationals for

entry into the skilled workforce and reflect on mechanisms and policies that have been institutionalised for years. The findings indicate that the identified obstacles associated with human development, legal development, and socio-cultural factors need to be addressed for Qatarisation to achieve the desired outcomes.

A fundamental aspect of the ongoing controversies relates to deficiencies in the education system as the main supply of national human capital. Participants queried excess investments of the government in educational facilities and technologies, which did not resolve the mismatch between local labour supply and demand. Instead, they wished for investments in the learning experience and curricula. This was associated with other debates on the gap between employability and education and the lack of training and development offered to national employees (Forstenlechner, Lettice, and Özbilgin 2012). Although it is critical for Qatar to secure jobs for locals, developing them to perform these jobs efficiently and effectively is another important debate. Part of this debate is related to policy flaws, which have been noted in the form of 'phantom employment' and legislation shortcomings. Hence, this study suggests that rules and regulations should not be considered as the remedy but rather as part of a more comprehensive reform.

The findings show that a key obstacle to an effective Qatarisation policy implementation so far has been detrimental social and community perceptions. Nationals hold inferior views towards certain occupations such as vocational employment, entry-level and blue-collar jobs. Educators in this study attribute this to cultural norms and values, family and state safety nets, and social welfare benefits. Understanding these issues is fundamental for knowing why current Qatarisation initiatives do not achieve their desired targets in certain sectors such as the private and manufacturing sectors.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study have several important theoretical implications. First, there is a pressing need for theory and evidence concerning the factors that enhance workforce nationalisation practices in the GCC countries. Considering the similarities between Qatar and its GCC neighbours, the development of such theory can help expand the boundaries of successful nationalisation practices beyond the borders of each country. In this regard, our findings and related research (Elbanna 2022; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi 2020), could be utilised to contribute to the development of workforce nationalisation theory. For example, our findings provide support to research (Elbanna and Fatima 2022; Marchon and Toledo 2014; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi 2020) that existing legislation of localisation in the GCC countries created a situation where organisations, particularly in the private sector, employ nationals not based on their competency and suitability but rather to meet the quota imposed and avoid administrative penalties. This common result across different GCC countries can help rethinking the role of the quota system in implementing localisation strategies in the GCC countries.

Second, in relation to EPT, the study concurs with views on the significance of individual and contextual systems in shaping an individual's growth and development. Therefore, we advance views towards capturing independence between systems and the need to adopt a holistic strategy to plan, implement and evaluate strategies among various stakeholders. A holistic view that captures various levels of analysis would

address obstacles from various yet relevant perspectives (c.f., McLean and Jiantreerangkoo 2020). Third, institutional theory can be considered to further understand our findings. For example, there is a need to see Qatarisation from the institutional perspective since economic and cultural variables favour informal institutions over formal ones (Al Jawali et al. 2021; Glaister, Al Amri, and Spicer 2019). Hence, examining more closely the institutional logics within the Qatari organisations would help explore how they face institutional obstacles associated with Qatarisation. In addition, we need to see these obstacles as institutional logic that guide policymakers and managers when making Qatarisation decisions instead of embracing them as institutional constraints (cf., Lounsbury 2008).

Policy implications

The present study provides some guidelines for policymakers and human resource development professionals to enhance the implementation of the Qatarisation strategy. First, better collaboration between educational institutions and employers is needed to consider employers' voice and narrow the employability-education gaps. Moreover, cooperative education programs which combine classroom-based education with practical work experience could also be implemented (Elbanna 2022). To address our findings concerning the lack of training and development offered to national employees, particularly in the private sector, policy makers may reward private organisations that invest in developing national human capital by placing them on the preferred suppliers' list, extending nominal and non-nominal benefits or mitigating the quota targets.

Second, one way to overcome the lack of attractiveness of the private sector to nationals is to narrow the gap in working conditions, responsibilities, and wages between the public and private sectors. Structural changes are required to make both sectors seem equal for citizens such as lowering the legal obligations of employers towards nationals (Baruch and Forstenlechner 2017). Furthermore, the government can reduce the attractiveness of public sector employment by replacing the permanent employment scheme for nationals with more temporary jobs. Third, instead of relying only on the quota measure and turnover rates to assess the success of workforce nationalisation strategy, a multifaceted measure should combine other criteria such the length of service, work achievement, and quality of job-related training/support. The development of national occupational standards, which is a prevalent global phenomenon known under variant names in different countries, is a worthy initiative in this direction to ensure that national employees entering the workforce market have relevant skills and knowledge for employment (for more details, see, Lee and Jacobs 2021).

Fourth, since laws and regulations are not remedies per se, policymakers are advised to rely more on soft measures, (e.g. preferential treatment in awarding government contracts and financial and non-financial incentives) such as labour market dynamics, than legal coercion to encourage private sector companies to hire nationals. Fifth, policymakers need to consider that nationals' perception that they are entitled to a secured job irrespective of their skills or competencies should be changed. This can be achieved through several routes such as infusing a work ethic and values in schools' and universities' curricula and national media campaigns that target both parents and children about the basics of 'being a good employee', and instilling fundamental principles such as

hard work, ambition, and commitment in children minds. Although these actions seem common sense, their absence could be a root cause for the stereotypical beliefs towards national employees (Mellahi 2007). Furthermore, enacted policies should attempt to change nationals' perceptions of the workforce nationalisation as a safety net mechanism since it has yielded some undesirable outcomes such as phantom employment, incompetent workforce, and misallocations of support. Alternatively, using the 'safety trampoline' metaphor (Morgan 2020), policymakers could design and communicate the workforce nationalisation as a 'safety trampoline'. This perception shift is needed to overcome the entitlement mentality among local job seekers.

Finally, because of the regional-centric perspective associated with nationalisation initiatives in the GCC region over the last three decades, it is the time to explore different approaches for human resource development (Looney, 2004) including these proposed in different regions such as Southeast Asia and ASEAN (e.g. Crocco and Tkachenko 2022) and sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Ekuma 2019). This can stimulate scholars, policy makers, and practitioners, in Qatar and other GCC countries, to think differently, work beyond dominant Qatarization practices and taken-for-granted assumptions and consequently look at other appropriate human resource development practices across the globe.

Limitations and future research

In interpreting the results, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it has an interpretive eye from stakeholders in higher education. Although we ensured the relevance to the subject matter and diversity when recruiting participants, further studies could explore the controversial debates which emerged in this study from the perspectives of students or graduates with different educational backgrounds, employees, employers, and policymakers. Second, the current study unpacked Qatarisation obstacles without differentiating between impediments related to hiring male and female nationals across sectors. Future research could focus on industry-specific challenges and differentiate between obstacles to hiring local men and women. Each sector of the economy has challenges when hiring local men and women (e.g. business hours, salaries, skill sets). Third, since the focus of this study is Qatar, future researchers need to replicate and extend this study to other GCC countries to validate its findings.

In addition to addressing the above limitations, there are other avenues for future research. First, given the unprecedented new reality created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the EPT emphasises on the significance of both individual and contextual systems in shaping an individual's growth and development and capture independencies between systems (Stokols 1996), exploring the impact of this pandemic on workforce nationalisation and development, at the micro, meso, macro, and cross-country levels, is an important avenue for future research (see for example, McLean and Jiantreerangkoo 2020). Second, a fundamental question that needs further research is what it takes to change the attitude and values about work among nationals? A related possible avenue for future research is the need to explore how community norms of what constitutes a 'good' and 'right' could affect behaviour towards blue-collar jobs and how institutional goals should be modified to motivate nationals to undertake vocational education and blue-collar jobs in GCC countries. Third, there is a need to holistically look at national human resource development as

a 'national policy agenda' that accounts for human, legal, and socio-cultural factors to integrate efforts on the macro-governmental level and address societal norms and values. Fourth, the 'phantom employment' phenomenon, including its antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes, is a promising area for future research to explore effective ways to manage it.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions (Academics)

(1) In your view, could you please tell us what does Qatarization means to you?
(2) To what extent do stakeholders (e.g. ***students, management of higher education institutions***, employers, government, etc.) see Qatarization as you do?
(3) In your opinion, what role can the higher education system play in implementing the Qatarization strategy? Can you please elaborate more on this role in enhancing nationals' competency (skills) levels? (encourage informant to provide real examples or proposed ones on such role, e.g. collaboration between HEIs and the industry, courses/workshops delivered by HEIs)
(4) Are you satisfied with the current role of the higher education system in enhancing the effective implementation of Qatarization strategy? Why? (Probes conflicts between stakeholders, lack of investments, community perceptions, etc.)
(5) What are the shortcomings in the current higher education system that hinder the effective implementation of Qatarization? *(Encourage the informant to elaborate more on one or two shortcomings and further discuss them).*
(6) How can higher education institutions improve these shortcomings? Would you suggest specific enhancement measures for this purpose? If yes, what are they?
(7) Are you aware of any higher education initiatives in other GCC countries, which enhance the nationalisation initiatives in these countries? If yes, can you, please, elaborate/tell us more about these initiatives and how can we benefit from them for Qatarization?
(8) Do you see any impact of Coronavirus pandemic on the higher education system now and in the future?
(9) In your view, will the Coronavirus pandemic have an impact on the role played by the higher education system on Qatarization? If yes in which way(s)?
(10) Are there any other views or/and issues about the role (contribution) of higher education towards Qatarization you would like to share? (You can encourage informants by highlighting important issues raised by other informants such as admission criteria for university and capabilities of pupils graduating from high schools, desire for specific jobs and employers, the role played by the family, peers, etc.)

Appendix 2: Interview questions (Students)

(1) In your view, could you please tell us what does Qatarization means to you?
(2) In your view, what are the fundamental skills that should be acquired from the years you have spent in the University that enable you to be 'an attractive employable candidate' for public and private organizations?
(3) Do you think your study at the university helped to deliver that and to what extent? Please clarify/elaborate on your answer whether you answered 'yes' or 'no'.

The interviewer/research assistant should here brief the student about the meaning of Qatarization (highly qualified hard working Qatari to replace non-Qatari counterparts) then ask:

(4) In general, are you satisfied with the current role of the higher education system in preparing Qatari graduate? Why (probes: are skills and competency the result of the individual, no impact of education, applied learning from schools)?

(5) What are your concerns about the higher education system in Qatar and its role in the Qatarization initiatives?

(6) How can we improve this role? Would you suggest enhancement measures to higher education/University level to enhance Qatari employability? If yes, what are they?

(7) If you compare yourself to a graduate from other GCC countries (UAE, KSA, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman) or developed countries (e.g. UK, USA and Germany), what are the differences or/ and similarities if any?

(8) Do you think students are interested more in gaining knowledge, high marks or both? (probes: higher grades need hard work, is it the case, grades may be enhanced by getting help from outsiders for assignments and projects (ethics); the role of university management in forcing the values of hard work and ethics)

(9) Do you think the newly Arabic tracks at QU has enhanced or diminished the quality of higher education and hence Qatarization strategy? Why?

(10) How do you see the impact of Coronavirus pandemic on QU now and in the future?

(11) In your view, will the Coronavirus pandemic have an impact on the role played by Qatari universities including QU on Qatarization? If yes, in which way(s)? For example, which actions should QU take to enhance the opportunities of Qatari students (e.g. to provide them with new IT capabilities) in order to secure relevant jobs given the pandemic impact on the job market in the future?

(12) Are there any other views or/and issues about education and its role towards Qatarization you would like to share? We would truly appreciate your personal views as a 'student'