

A portrait of Dr. Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad, President of the University of Qatar and Member of the Supreme Education Council. She is wearing a black hijab, glasses, and a light grey blazer. She is seated at a desk with a microphone in front of her, looking slightly to the left. The background shows a framed picture on a shelf.

Dr. Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad
President of the University of Qatar
Member of the Supreme Education Council

Education Reform in Qatar The Big Picture

Dr. Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad is a leading proponent of education reform in Qatar. A nationally known academic who holds a PhD in education from the University of Durham (U.K.), she is president of the University of Qatar and a member of the Supreme Education Council (SEC). In an exclusive interview with the SEC publication "Education for a New Era", Dr. Al-Misnad addresses a wide range of educational issues. Following are excerpts of the interview:

"The initiative to reform the education system in Qatar was not an overnight decision... It was a well thought out plan emanating from a firm belief and aimed at finding a substitute to the existing system."

Q. What is the role of the SEC in the K-12 reform effort?

The SEC is the leading authority responsible for directing the nation's education policies and overseeing the implementation of the K-12 reform initiative. This reform is an integral part of the country's comprehensive strategy to improve its education system. There were clear areas in need of improvement, such as the need to graduate more students with the necessary skills to continue with higher education. Hence, the government commissioned an international team of experts who conducted a two-year study to evaluate the education system. The team met with stakeholders at the Ministry of Education, University of Qatar and other sectors. The team's findings and recommendations were the basis of the comprehensive reform initiative "Education for a New Era" launched nearly three years ago.

Q. What is the role of the Ministry of Education in the reform?

Actually, the Ministry of Education (MOE) plays a major role in the education reform effort. MOE personnel worked alongside the team who conducted the preliminary study that analyzed our existing system. So, they have been involved in the entire process, but the responsibility to implement the K-12 reform lies with the SEC and its institutes.

Q. There seems to be growing public engagement and dialogue on education issues in Qatar. What role does public opinion and dialogue play in the reform?

Public engagement is healthy because it will put pressure on the concerned officials to find suitable solutions. We can't deny that there is a public concern about this initiative – which is natural and legitimate. We would be really worried if the society felt left out and watched the reform from afar

in silence. That would mean that our people are passive. But we know that Qatari people are responsible citizens who actively engage in all issues concerning their society. And education is an issue of deep concern to the people in Qatar and abroad. It also impacts all sectors of the society. I am personally convinced that the whole society has recently become more engaged in the reform effort and we are likely to see them more involved as long as they see the outcomes of this change.

Q. The reform is being implemented as swiftly as possible. Do you feel things are moving too quickly?

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The operator concept is new to our people but once the reform builds more momentum and people become more familiar and involved with the process, they are likely to accept it and scrutinize it objectively

I don't feel so, although I quite understand the viewpoint of those who feel we are in a hurry. Over two academic years, only 33 schools have been converted into Independent Schools and I think this amply demonstrates that we are in no hurry. On the other hand, currently, there are people who would like to send their children to Independent Schools but there are no seats available. So, we are caught in the cross fire between these two views.

Q. Teachers are critical to the education reform effort. What is the SEC doing to ensure that there are enough teachers in the Independent Schools?

This is a strategic initiative pursued by the State of Qatar, so there is absolutely no question of reversing the policy on this issue

Currently, we are working on two fronts to resolve this issue. The Education Institute is conducting comprehensive on-the-job training programs for MOE and IS teachers. On the other hand, the University of Qatar is providing pre-service training programs to graduate trained teachers for primary schools. There is no quick solution to the problem of a teacher shortage. Independent School teachers should be well qualified, and clearly they need more time to be able to master the curriculum standards philosophy and develop the necessary skills and best practices in teaching.

Q. Is there any concern that the SEC may reverse major components of Education for a New Era like the establishment of Independent Schools?

The initiative to reform the education system in Qatar was not an overnight decision. It is an integral part of our education policy. It was a well thought out plan emanating

from a firm belief and aimed at finding a substitute to the existing system. This is a strategic initiative pursued by the State of Qatar, so there is absolutely no question of reversing the policy on this issue.

Q. Are you aware of any similar reforms in other GCC states or internationally?

Every country is striving to build a good and solid education system but no country can claim to have the best education model. So you will notice varying efforts to improve the education systems worldwide and this is quite natural. If Qatar succeeds in reforming its education system as envisioned, then it would be a great accomplishment and we will be happy if others try to learn from our model.

Q. Did you anticipate any challenges with implementing Education for a New Era?

Yes, we did expect major

challenges. It is quite natural that a bold initiative with such scope and ambition be challenging. Personally, I believe the main challenge is developing and supporting a qualified workforce – teachers, administrators and others. The other challenge is one that will take some time. This reform is a structural transformation in managing and overseeing the education system and the society will need more time to understand this big change, accept it and fully support it.

Q. What kinds of international expertise has the SEC sought in the reform effort?

This question is not specific to the education sector only but to all other sectors in Qatar. Since the discovery of oil in this country, we have depended on expatriates, whether in the oil industry, education or any other field. The country continues to hire international experts but this has not come at the expense of our own people. With respect to the K-12 reform, we are keen to employ highly skilled individuals who can help this reform move forward. Qataris are deciding and setting the policies and directing and carrying out the implementation process. All the SEC members and the directors of the institutes are fully involved in the reform and are well-known individuals in the community. We will continue to develop our local capacity.

Q. Can you talk about Independent School Operators and the mechanisms in place to monitor their performance?

The operator concept is new to our people but once the reform builds more momentum and people become more familiar and involved with the process, they are likely to accept it and scrutinize it objectively. We must create an incentive mechanism in the system to attract qualified Qataris to participate in this effort and for that reason operators must be financially compensated for their efforts. But at the same time, we want to assure the public that we have a profit mechanism in place, which is highly monitored.

Q. What is the evaluation system in place to ensure the quality of outcomes?

Evaluation is key and essential in this initiative to demonstrate the progress of the reform over time. Any education system must have a built-in mechanism to measure outcomes and improve performance. Each system must conduct annual assessments and release results. Without such a mechanism in place, it will be extremely difficult to identify weaknesses in the system.

Evaluation is the instrument that will explain to parents, students, teachers and the SEC, the strengths and weaknesses in the system and how it can be improved. Evaluation will also hold all stakeholders accountable.

Q. In your opinion, how can the SEC continue to engage the public on education issues?

The SEC should continue with its communications effort to increase public awareness about the importance of this K-12 reform. Over time, people will be able to understand how the Independent School system operates. I also believe that if we succeed in attracting more MOE administrators and teachers to become operators, we are likely to improve people's perception about the reform and gain more support.

Q. What are some of the challenges that lie ahead? This initiative aims mainly to improve the performance of our schools. The improvement lies in teaching delivery, the learning process, parental involvement and student engagement.

During the implementation, we are likely to be faced with issues that we were unaware of at the outset. But we have the mechanisms and the willingness to resolve all issues as they surface. This reform is in constant change and by design is subject to annual review and gradual

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Projects like the K-12 and University of Qatar reforms require billions of dollars and our government is fully committed

implementation to ensure adaptability and consistency with global development.

Q. Does the University of Qatar have a role in K-12 reform?

We at the University of Qatar do our utmost to support the K-12 reform effort because it will alleviate a lot of the burdens that we are currently enduring at this transitional or setting-the-foundation phase. Currently, public education is not 12 years of schooling but it extends to 13 or 14 years, and this is not in the benefit of anyone.

The role of the College of Education, for instance, has become very critical in this new education era. Successful K-12 reform requires large numbers of qualified teachers and administrators. The college has therefore geared most of its programs to serve the K-12 reform in anticipation of preparing qualified teachers and school leadership. We currently have a graduate program to prepare primary school teachers.

Q. Do you face any competition from the universities at Education City?

The international campuses at Education City have many advantages and have contributed positively to the reform effort at the University of Qatar. Education City has opened many avenues for our faculty in terms of research, exchange and networking. We alternate faculties and conduct joint research projects. It is now our turn at the University of Qatar to prove that our outcomes are competitive with those graduating from Education City. We welcome the competition because a monopoly is likely to be a barrier rather than an opportunity.

With regard to competing for students, I don't think that is an area of contention. Education City campuses are highly selective and the University of Qatar is a public institution with the capacity to serve larger numbers.

Q. What programs do you have for teacher preparation?

We have a number of programs such as the Primary Teacher Preparation Program – a pre-service diploma which is administered in cooperation with the University of Texas A&M. We offer a diploma in Special Education and a diploma in Early Childhood Education.

We also have plans to offer a

masters degree in Education Leadership, which is targeted at educators to manage schools. We intend also to offer graduate diplomas to prepare teachers for the preparatory and secondary schools.

Hopefully all these programs will help in preparing highly qualified educators. But we must realize that this issue will take time, particularly since Qatar is in an economic boom and most graduates are unlikely to opt to work in the education field. We are noticing this trend nowadays, particularly among female graduates, who 20 years ago were only allowed to work in the education sector. Now, they have more opportunities and thus the issue of a teachers shortage may extend from 5 to 7 years.

Q. What kinds of funds have been allocated to the K-12 reform effort in order to help it meet its goals?

Our education system is funded from the State's national budget. Projects like the K-12 and University of Qatar reforms require billions of dollars and our government is fully committed. You can't reform without allocating sufficient funds. Education is one of the public services that require continuous funding. Most nations are convinced that education is an investment for the future. Since the State of Qatar is on a threshold of economic prosperity, we must prepare future generations to be in charge of their own destiny and that can happen only through good education.