

Editorial



Navigating the Intersection of Sustainability, Localization, and Education Policy in the Gulf

تقسي نقاط الالتقاء بين الاستدامة والتوطين وسياسة التعليم في الخليج

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Globally, “sustainability” and “sustainable development” have been buzzwords, signifying the concepts’ importance in overcoming the challenges our world faces. In response to this trend and in light of COP28, which took place in Dubai, UAE, from November 30 to December 12 2023, the 10th Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) Symposium was held to contemplate the role of the education systems of the Arab Gulf region and beyond in promoting sustainability and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The GCES Symposium is recognized in the region as a platform for discussing critical educational issues. Indeed, since the GCES’s inception, the organization has had a genuine goal and dedicated mission to contribute to the efforts of Gulf governments and their education systems to promote sustainable development for the planet. This editorial aims to reflect on this endeavor and introduce the special issue papers that were part of the GCES Symposium.

We argued in the symposium that sustainability and sustainable development would not exist without the pioneering role and efforts of education. All education system components (students, teachers, policies, policymakers, curricula, principles, etc.) should be assessed in light of this global agenda and its efforts. Our argument is positioned toward a holistic approach in which every input, output, and process of education systems should be reformed based on the frameworks of education for sustainable development, thereby delivering the impact required for a just, peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable world. Moreover, education and sustainability exist on the same page and cannot be separated from each other. Importantly, the symposium also stressed that quality education in the Gulf region is a must for creating global citizens who care about the whole world.

During the three-day symposium, participants emphasized that education should be a fundamental priority in the strategic plans of governments so it can fulfill its role in promoting sustainable development among nations. I argue here that education systems need to be empowered and supported to accomplish this mission. The role of

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governments is critical in nurturing the capacity of the education systems' stakeholders and furnishing the required resources. The six Arab Gulf governments have increased their attention and effort in enabling their education systems. Programs on greening education and education for sustainable development and climate change are present in plans, curricula, training, and activities on all levels of the education systems. In addition, since their 2015 inception, the 17 UN SDGs have been incorporated into the Gulf education systems, an action that demonstrates the efforts Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments are taking to achieve these goals. I believe such efforts are delivering results, and we have seen in the global reports how the Gulf education systems are competing with other systems in the Global South and the Global North.

Our symposium focused on different education and sustainability themes. Among these were diversity, equity, and inclusion in education; the role of education institutions as hubs for environmental and social education; curriculum and school privatization; teacher training and professional development; and innovative educational practices and experiential learning. Some papers highlighted the challenges and advancements in integrating students with disabilities into mainstream education in the GCC. Moreover, we had several papers addressing the "greening" tertiary education concept, in which universities are seen as hubs for promoting environmental awareness and sustainability leadership. Many papers emphasized the need for education systems to adapt to local contexts while aligning with global frameworks such as the SDGs. Artificial intelligence (AI) was also one of the themes, with discussions exploring how AI can enhance personalized learning and help teachers develop competencies that resonate with the demands of the 21st century. Overall, the symposium contributed to the broader regional discourse on how to create more sustainable and equitable education systems by addressing local needs and global expectations in the Gulf region.

In this special issue, we are featuring five papers related to the symposium themes. Arguing for new models that address global education challenges in a shifting geopolitical landscape, the first article takes a critical, historical look at the SDGs and their connection to education. The second paper examines the role of male sponsors in advancing women's leadership in the UAE, emphasizing the importance of institutional support and networking in promoting gender equity. The third analyzes the UAE's unique educational context through the region's PISA 2022 results, highlighting the implications of international comparisons for local education policy. The fourth paper explores novice teachers' perceptions of GCC teacher education programs, offering insights into the strengths and weaknesses of these programs and suggesting ways to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The last review of government-led reforms in the MENA region, focused particularly on the evolution of teacher education and professional development. Together, these articles contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable and equitable education in the region.

Having read the papers and thought about the current situation of GCC education systems, I would argue that a balance is necessary between focusing on achieving global educational agendas, such as the SDGs, and satisfying local Gulf priorities. Also very critical for the education systems is the need to consider their contexts, highlighting the importance of localizing educational reforms and policies to meet the

region's specific socioeconomic and cultural needs while staying aligned with international frameworks. Indeed, Gulf region educational systems face many challenges, such as disparities in access to quality education, the increasing influence of privatization, and the need for sustained investment in teacher training. I would insist on emphasizing the need for collaboration and knowledge-sharing in the Gulf region and the broader international community. I also suggest continual dialogue, research, and innovation in the Gulf's education sector, which are necessary to meet sustainability and localization challenges. I will end this editorial by calling for new contributions to the journal and continued participation in the upcoming GCES Symposia on topics related to education and sustainability in the Gulf region.

Author Biography

Dr. Khalaf Al'Abri is an associate professor of higher education systems and policies at the College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. He obtained a BA in Education majoring in English Language from Sultan Qaboos University in 2006, an MA in Educational Leadership from the University of Queensland in Australia, and a PhD in Education Systems and Policies from the University of Queensland in 2016. Dr. Al'Abri has an experience of over 17 years of teaching and research in the education systems of the Arab Gulf generally and Oman specifically. He is currently the head of the department of Educational Foundations and Administration Department. Dr. Al'Abri was the Director of the Main Library at Sultan Qaboos University (2020–2022), and prior to that (2016–2020) was the Head of the Quality Assurance and Academic Accreditation Unit at the College of Education. Dr. Al'Abri was also a visiting professor of higher education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Toronto, Canada (August 2022–August 2023). Dr. Al'Abri is interested in studying the impact of globalization on education systems and policies. His current research focuses on academic accreditation, SDG4, education for global citizenship, education for sustainable development, transformative education, university rankings, and internationalization of education. Dr. Al'Abri is currently the president of The Gulf Comparative Education Society.