

Qatar – a new beginning? The development of a collaborative research and education environment in Education City, Doha

Qatar is emerging fast as a major player in scientific research. The country is transforming itself into a knowledge society, which poses highly interesting and challenging questions. In this article, we are focusing on Education City in Doha, and the partnerships forged there between the Qatar Foundation and several North-American universities. What happens when you are able to nurture research and develop science using all the current knowledge, and are also able to push the envelope in terms of access to literature, library systems and publishing?



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“Here, we don’t have to undo the mistakes we made in the past” is one of the sentences that still rings in my ears when I think about the first time I visited Education City on the outskirts of Doha, Qatar.

Qatar is one of the fastest developing countries in the gulf region and is becoming increasingly influential on the world stage. With a population of approximately 1.2 million, Qatar has one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world, thanks to its natural resources, oil and particularly, natural gas. However, the Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, is showing considerable foresight in preparing Qatar for the future and for reducing dependence on hydrocarbons in the long term. His wife, Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned, is the Chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. She is seen as the ‘guiding light’ that steers the country’s ambitious efforts to develop a knowledge society. Her tireless quest for excellence in research and education is challenging established structures and helping to propel the country forward.

Just as the high-rises in the West Bay of the capital, Doha, were being developed and the country attracting financial investors, the Qatar Foundation began to create Education City and held discussions with leading universities about the possibility of setting up campuses in Doha.

After careful consideration, several trips into the desert and getting accustomed to Qatar’s unique culture, several American universities agreed to establish campuses in Doha. Today, there are branches of leading North American universities in Education City, including Virginia Commonwealth, Georgetown, Northwestern, Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M University and Weill Cornell Medical College (WCMC). These universities are fully accredited and offer the exact same programmes of study as their counterparts in the USA, as well as adhering to the same strict admission policies as their North American colleagues. Lectures are held in Doha and in the main North American campuses and are frequently relayed into lecture theatres through video links.

In addition to these campuses, the Qatar Foundation has also set up a Faculty of Islamic Studies and the Sidra Medical Hospital. The Qatar Science and Technology Park will act as an incubator for new industries and related commercial research and development. Today, the institutions in Education City offer some of the best facilities in the world and student numbers are rising steadily.

However, the Qatar Foundation soon realized that sustainable higher education could not be maintained without a focus on research. To attract researchers, the Qatar Foundation now offers state-of-the-art research facilities which are helping to



The front of Weill Cornell Medical College, Qatar, with the organic design of the Qatar Convention Centre in the background nearing completion. Words (Learn, Think, Innovate, Grow, Imagine, etc.) in both Arabic and English were placed throughout Education City as part of a recent campaign.

keep world-class researchers and professors in Education City and develop knowledge sharing and development. The Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) has developed two funding programmes: the Undergraduate Research Experience Programme (UREP), which will fund student research projects at universities and colleges in Qatar as well as providing a mentoring programme, and the National Priorities Research Programme (NPRP), which is aimed at researchers in academia, industry and the public sector. The NPRP is the largest funding programme, and in its second cycle it will fund research of US\$45 million, with grants ranging between US\$20,000 to US\$350,000 per year. Following a request for proposals, all projects are peer reviewed by international researchers and competitively selected. As one researcher commented, "If you want to do research, this is the place to be". The vision becomes apparent as you approach Education City and see all the brand new facilities being built in the desert like hypermodern spacecraft.

The vision is to develop a knowledge- and research-based society which is of significant importance for Qatar, the region and beyond. Education City already attracts students from all over the world who bring a hugely exciting mix of nationalities and cultures to Qatar; today, one of the housing compounds of the Qatar Foundation is home to more than 60 nationalities. The mix of cultures and nationalities becomes visible when walking through the Liberal Arts Building, currently the 'heart' of the campus and also the temporary campuses for Georgetown University and the Faculty of Islamic Studies. But this diversity is also reflected in physical appearance: students in traditional clothes walk among others wearing suits and jeans. It is a tolerant and respectful atmosphere that can be sensed here – meeting new people is very easy and always an exciting opportunity for friendships and networking. Medical researchers, engineers and social science experts meet and discuss projects, and suddenly find common



View from WCMC-Q over to the Liberal Arts Building, with decorative detail (right)

ground in their research. There are, however, some pertinent and compelling questions that are raised by these developments. How can research facilities be developed (almost) from scratch? What sort of library set-up would one expect to have when there is nothing to start from, just our experience from the past?

The libraries in Education City work closely with their North American counterparts and have taken different approaches to setting up a library to serve their students and researchers. All have embraced digital delivery, and the library of Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar (also referred to as WCMC-Q) has taken a radical approach. The role of the library and the accessibility of information has been an integral part of the planning. There is a library room – but the whole library is also distributed across the building. When the students leave the lecture theatre or a seminar room, they always find ‘pods’ where they can access the electronic resources.

At WCMC-Q, librarians become ‘knowledge navigators and information mediators’ – the library’s print holdings are less than 2% of overall holdings. But when developing a library, why not make sure that the library is always available and present in a location where students and researchers meet? Not all libraries are as ‘radical’ – and the medical field is particularly well suited to mostly electronic access. Slowly, the experience the librarians in Qatar have developed with their fully distributed and electronic library model is having an impact on the procedures at the North-American ‘motherships’ and lessons are being learned from the unique experiences.

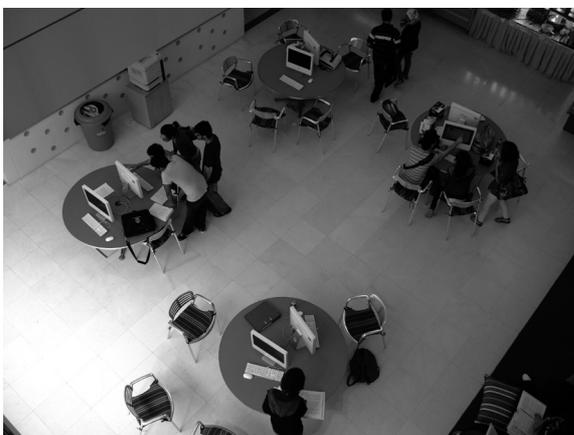
But there are cultural challenges as well; a helpdesk information system is also provided

between a given university campus in Doha and its counterpart in the US. There is also the time difference, the differences in the working week (in Doha the week runs from Sunday to Thursday) and, of course, yet different hours during the month of Ramadan, which is during a different period every year as it follows the Hijri (lunar) calendar.

Though the universities, the staff and the researchers have had to work with immense challenges, they have also been given a huge opportunity. The overall experience is refreshing, as everything has been set up from scratch to accommodate the needs of students and researchers who themselves are keen to be there at the beginning of something new and to experience the best practices in the world from a different perspective.

Where there is research – there is publishing. It comes as no surprise that the Qatar Foundation wanted to establish a publishing centre in Education City. Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing’s (BQFP) mission is to facilitate reading and writing – and promote reading in Qatar. At the same time, BQFP will be publishing books in Arabic and English, and is developing into a major publishing house in the Middle East.

Even more significant is the development of a scientific publisher in Education City. Managed by Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Journals was founded in December 2009 and as we are setting this up, we have to ask similar questions to those discussed above. How will the editorial policy of a scholarly publishing house based in the Middle East be different? How can the opportunity to start from scratch be translated into the scientific publishing world? What is the right publication



The WCMC-Q, left: café area with distributed library; right: one of the four pod-like lecture theatres

vehicle for particular research areas? What is a journal? Since most publishers are now moving from the granular structure of journals to bespoke online platforms – why not start with this platform in the first place? What is an article? Does it have to be just text? What about rich media? And multimedia? How do you apply journal metrics to this structure? What is the business model? Open access, subscriptions, or both? Our ambition is to push the envelope of scholarly communication without sacrificing quality.

It is a challenging yet rewarding environment, that requires the right mentality to adapt to. Many developments which are easy in Europe and America can prove to be painstakingly long in the Middle East, whilst other questions, difficult from a European perspective, can be resolved much easier. We have to look at every detail, and rethink everything we know, as here in Education City researchers, funders, librarians and publishers work together towards one common goal: to advance research and develop science and to create a new influential scientific hub. Will we succeed? We hope so, and we are giving it our best. It will certainly be exciting and should also be exciting to observe.

Further resources

(All sources accessed 9 February 2010)

Qatar Foundation Homepage:

www.qf.org.qa

Qatar Foundation Research division:

<http://www.qf-researchdivision.org/>

Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF):

www.qnrf.org

Qatar University:

<http://www.qu.edu.qa/>

Universities in Education City:

Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar:

<http://qatar-weill.cornell.edu/>

Texas A&M University at Qatar:

<http://www.qatar.tamu.edu/>

Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar:

<http://www.qatar.vcu.edu/output/Page1.asp>

Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar:

<http://www.qatar.cmu.edu/>

School of Foreign Service in Qatar: Georgetown University:

<http://qatar.sfs.georgetown.edu/>

Northwestern University in Qatar:

<http://www.qatar.northwestern.edu/>

Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies:

<http://www.qfis.edu.qa/>

Sidra Medical and Research Center:

<http://www.sidra.org>

Qatar Science and Technology Park:

<http://www.qstp.org.qa>

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