

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Debate Arises at Qatar U. Over Decision to Teach Mainly in Arabic

By Ursula Lindsey  
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A decision by Qatar's educational authorities that the country's leading public university should revert to Arabic as its language of instruction has stirred up debate in the small, gas-rich Persian Gulf kingdom. Many Qataris have welcomed the move as a validation of their mother tongue; others worry that it will weaken graduates' job prospects.

**"This is not the only time we've seen this kind of tension arise" at universities in the Persian Gulf, says Jason Lane, director of education studies at the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York at Albany (and a *Chronicle* blogger). "It's a question of legitimacy. Externally, English is viewed as a dominant language, conferring legitimacy in academic and business realms." But when national education systems in Arab countries abandon Arabic, "there's an issue with internal legitimacy," he says. "There is a lot of concern over whether you are forsaking your culture, giving up your history."**

Perhaps in response to such concerns, the Supreme Education Council has decreed that Arabic will be Qatar University's "official teaching language" and that the faculties of law, international affairs, mass communication, and management will shift to teaching in Arabic rather than in English, as they have done over the last decade. Some faculties, such as engineering and pharmacy, will continue to teach in English.

The new decision marks a departure from recent university policy, which has strongly promoted the acquisition of English-language skills. Qatar University has adopted a spate of reforms in the past years, as the wealthy emirate's rulers have focused intensively on the higher-education sector with the intent of turning their oil-rich country into an education "hub" and training their population of a few hundred thousand for a post-carbon future.

Qatar University is home to about 8,000 students. The majority of them are Qatari nationals who speak Arabic.

"There is a long tradition of teaching science, medicine, and engineering in English in national universities in the Middle East," notes Peter Heath, president of the American University of Sharjah and a member of Qatar University's Board of Regents in an e-mail to *The Chronicle*. "There is also a long tradition that Arabic, Islamic studies, and history/social studies are taught in Arabic." The best language to use in teaching law, business and management, education, and the social sciences remains a matter of debate.

"The Supreme Education Council of Qatar for around a decade appeared to favor increasing the use of English at the university level," says Mr. Heath. "Now it seems that they have decided to promote Arabic in certain subjects currently taught in English. How best to balance the use of the two languages will continue to be a subject of discussion and at times controversy, whether in Qatar or in other Gulf and Middle East countries."

## Unpopular Language Requirements

Until now, students at Qatar University who didn't show sufficient English proficiency were obliged to take a foundation course to bring their language skills up to par. The English-language requirements have been unpopular among many students who have had to spend up to several additional years honing their English before beginning their degrees.

The recent decision has been highly controversial. On a university message board, about 40 percent of students said they were against the decree while 60 percent said they supported it.

"Imposing English this way has been an injustice to the students and to the Arabic language," wrote one student. "Every country is proud of its language and applies it in its national and sometimes even international activities. Except us!"

But several students and graduates argued that English-language skills are a necessity in today's job market, and that obtaining a university degree without acquiring such skills is of limited value.

Others criticized the decision as "random" and "unstudied," and complained that the educational authorities don't seem to have a coherent plan for the development of higher education.

Educational authorities in Qatar have encouraged English-language teaching at the secondary-school level. Courses at the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar and at the Community College of Qatar (which is administered by the Houston Community College) are in English. An enclave of half a dozen prestigious for-

eign-branch campuses in Qatar, including those of Weill Cornell Medical College, Northwestern University, and Texas A&M, also operate in English.

## Foreign Faculty Affected

Most universities in the Persian Gulf use English now, but they face challenges, says Christine Farrugia, a doctoral student at SUNY-Albany whose research focuses on local responses to the adoption of foreign higher-education programs. Often when students aren't fluent in English, bilingual professors end up distilling the course materials into Arabic, says Ms. Farrugia, and students don't fully engage with the course materials in either Arabic or English. "There are some real policy issues in terms of preparing students all along the pipelines in order for them to be able to perform fully in English at the university level," she says.

At Qatar University, the language shift will affect "the type of textbooks and other resources available for use in the curriculum in the specified subject areas," notes Mr. Heath.

**The administration has yet to clarify the future of English-speaking professors in the affected faculties. But a shift from English to Arabic undoubtedly has "implications more broadly for faculty recruitment," says Mr. Lane. Until recently, Qatar University has been aggressively advertising for foreign faculty. Now, says Mahmoud Galander, chair of the department of mass communication at the university, "the focus will be more on recruiting professors with Arabic or Arabic and English fluency." It is a requirement that will certainly "limit the pool of applicants," notes Mr. Lane.**