

# Meeting the Needs of Pupils with Autism in Qatar: Moving forward

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

wise

world innovation summit for education  
مؤتمر القمة العالمي للابتكار في التعليم

An Initiative of Qatar Foundation

UNIVERSITY OF  
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## Executive Summary

**T**he Qatar National Autism Plan (NAP) 2017-2021<sup>1</sup> was launched in April 2017. This addresses the needs and rights of autistic people and their families, and focuses on the six pillars of awareness; early recognition and screening; diagnosis and assessment; interventions; education and transition into adolescence, adulthood and elderhood. A number of stakeholders and ministries are involved in implementing this plan and it highlights the commitment of the Ruling Family, the government and stakeholders to driving forward change in this area.

This research was commissioned by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), an initiative of the Qatar Foundation, to address how to strengthen the education pillar of the Qatar National Autism Plan 2017-2021, given the importance of the role of education in social inclusion and quality of life for autistic people and their families.

### Aims & Methodology

The study examines how far Qatar has come in implementing its vision of educational inclusion, identifies the barriers to realizing this vision, and makes recommendations for how to improve autism education.

The research consists of:

1. A contextual enquiry investigating conceptions of inclusive educational practice and provision in Qatar, drawing on international and national literature and policies.
2. Empirical research that gathered stakeholder perspectives to understand the views, perspectives and experiences of those who engage directly in policy, practice and provision. Focus groups (n=14) and semi-structured interviews (n=9) captured the perspectives of 71 participants who care for, work with, or are engaged in developing policy for individuals with autism.

Three overarching themes emerged:

- Awareness, Knowledge and Understanding
- Policy, Provision and Practice
- Personal and Professional Development

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1. Although the NAP was launched in April 2017, it had not yet been published at the time of us conducting this research. We were therefore unable to reference the NAP beyond alluding to the six pillars.

## Findings

Awareness of autism has clearly increased in Qatar, and there have been a number of excellent initiatives. Misconceptions about autism nevertheless still exist, and there is a need to continue raising awareness of autism. Despite the existence of pockets of excellent practice, there is still patchy diagnostic and post-diagnostic support and many parents feel lost post-diagnosis. In moving forward, the priority will be to ensure that autistic people and their families have full access to excellent and mandated diagnostic, post-diagnostic and early intervention services.

In education, there is need to collate further data on the numbers of pupils with autism and to develop an appropriate range of provision for all children and young people with autism, whether they are Qatari or expatriate. Educators need to know more about which approaches, interventions and services are most appropriate for children and young people in Qatar. Teachers and schools also need more tools and good professional development to help them provide a differentiated curriculum and pedagogy that takes account of the specific needs to pupils with autism.

Social and leisure facilities need to be extended for autistic people. Provision is needed for vocational training, housing, further education and college opportunities for autistic young people and adults, and for supporting transitions between stages of schooling and from school to adult services.

Personal and professional development is currently disjointed, and there are concerns about the quality of training. In addition, most materials and resources to diagnose, assess, and teach are developed in English speaking countries and there is a need for homegrown, local and culturally appropriate materials. There is a need for larger numbers of specialist staff with knowledge of Additional Educational Special Needs (AESN) or autism. Current levels of knowledge among parent organizations and staff in specialist provisions could be harnessed to enhance the knowledge, understanding and skills of a greater number of therapeutic and educational staff.

## Key Recommendations

### Awareness, knowledge & understanding

- Develop and implement culturally appropriate diagnostic and assessment instruments, as well as training programs for health and therapeutic staff so that the number of professionals offering diagnostic services and post-diagnostic support is increased.
- Promote awareness campaigns that focus on autism as a different, rather than deficient or disordered way of being. Ensure that these cascade knowledge about child development, and about red flags in particular. Engage key religious leaders in challenging conceptualizations of autism as an illness, and in leveraging Islamic teachings in raising awareness of autism.
- Conduct further research to gather the views and experiences of children and young people with autism so that their perspectives can inform professional and personal development programs in autism education.

## **Policy, provision & practice**

- Mandate post-diagnostic support and early intervention provision.
- Undertake further work to determine numbers of autistic children and young people in order to inform educational planning and ensure that an appropriate range of provision is developed.
- Investigate which approaches and interventions are most appropriate for autistic pupils and their families in Qatar so that approaches and interventions are underpinned by research as well as the individual needs of the pupil and their family.
- Develop a strategy and implementation plan for supporting the transition of autistic people into adulthood and for providing a range of opportunities and services in adulthood. Identify a range of centers, and social and sports activities that will accommodate the needs of individuals with autism. Schools and other professionals should make extensive efforts to ensure that autistic students are consulted in decisions that ultimately affect their lives, especially at key transition points.

## **Personal & professional development**

- Develop a website that provides information about autism, and the evidence base for approaches and services, as well as a range of practical resources and relevant material to support parents, educators and individuals with autism.
- Gather highly qualified bilingual professionals, parents and individuals with autism to coordinate efforts to develop culturally appropriate diagnostic and assessment instruments along with training materials and information for parents. This could include the development of a progression framework that is relevant to Qatar alongside a set of National Standards for settings and a Competency Framework for practitioners.
- Establish an accreditation system for personal and professional development, with a professional body that oversees it and that draws on the expertise and knowledge that currently exists in Qatar. Current providers should be supported to develop in-depth University-based provision further.
- Set up an interdisciplinary research centre for excellence in autism education that integrates efforts from Gulf countries and the wider Arab world.

## Summary & Conclusions

There is great potential to improve awareness, knowledge and understanding of autism alongside the development of policy, practice and provision in Qatar, as there are high levels of knowledge among parent organizations and staff in specialist provisions. This knowledge could be harnessed to enhance the knowledge, understanding and skills of a greater number of therapeutic and educational staff.

In moving forward, the priority will be to ensure that autistic people, their families and caregivers have access to effective support through the diagnostic process and post-diagnosis, and that requisite educational support is available.

We recommend that a cross-ministerial committee is set up to oversee development of provision and policy and that a collaborative network is funded to develop and implement the recommendations related to awareness, knowledge and understanding, as well as personal and professional development. People with autism and their families should have representation on the board, alongside key stakeholders and professionals from a number of organizations.





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