

DEVELOPING LOCAL LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS IN QATAR TO ADVANCE EQUITY, INCLUSION AND SOCIAL COHESION





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CHAPTER ONE

The educational experiences of a young person growing up occur across multiple, varied learning environments. Humans are born learning and continue to learn throughout their lives through every interaction and experience. These experiences shape our knowledge, skills and attributes, our self-efficacy, sense of belonging and wellbeing, and begin within our families, communities and neighbourhoods. They continue through the more structured settings of K-12, higher education and beyond, through extracurricular and informal experiences with athletics and the arts, with museums and other cultural institutions, parks, online, and through employment. The broader networks of support, experience and influence, in addition to school, play a seminal role in shaping who we become, and our aspirations and ambitions.

Not every young person, however, has the opportunity to access such a full breadth of learning experiences, within and outside school. In Qatar there is a growing impetus to understand the potential role and value of 'learning ecosystems' in expanding opportunities for youth learning, improving equity, inclusion and social cohesion. The notion of a learning ecosystem recognises that education and learning, and the provision of support for young people more generally, is a collaborative endeavor. A broad diversity of actors and stakeholders has an important role to play and should be proactively involved.

It's also increasingly well understood that transformational change which improves learning outcomes for all youth can't be achieved through smart policies or well-designed programmes alone. Change requires a collective effort among community members and multi-stakeholder collaboration that are deeply rooted in context. This has become especially apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic when it has been necessary to mobilise assets, partners and allies across communities to support learning in new ways. In this unique environment the concept of a learning ecosystem has taken on a heightened global relevance.

This research aims to better understand the potential of the learning ecosystems concept in Qatar, focussing on five core areas:

1. Understanding the expression of the values and goals of equity, inclusion and cohesion in education.
2. Specific educational practices that advance these goals, such as innovative pedagogies, teaching and learning practices, in both formal and informal learning.
3. How collaboration and partnership working between different organisations is pursued in Qatar, the nature of collaborations, and the motivations and incentives that providers have to collaborate.
4. Understanding forms of local leadership, and the systemic structures and processes which incentivise or hinder innovation and collaboration.
5. The use of technology, particularly how the remote learning experience during the Covid-19 pandemic has changed teaching and learning, and the adoption of new practices.

The study was conducted through a participatory action research approach, encompassing surveys, interviews and co-designed workshops with stakeholders, including learners, in Qatar. Approximately 150 local stakeholders (as well as a selection of global experts) were engaged in the process; the findings speak to their insights, perspectives and hopes for the future. Those young learners we collaborated with spoke of their desire for purpose, for fairness, for their voices to be heard, to be successful, and to be able to make change in the areas that they are passionate about.

Summary of Main Findings

Qatar has made significant progress in improving its education system, driving up learning participation and investing in the skills of its current and future workforce, including through high quality higher education and vocational training. Strong leadership prioritises education for national development, and investments have been made in a wide diversity of innovative learning assets, spaces and opportunities through both formal and informal learning. Ongoing structural challenges, however, are perpetuating inequalities and holding back the country's economic and human capital potential.

Challenges include unequal distribution of, and access to, assets and resources, low or concentrated levels of collaboration and practice sharing between providers, and lack of coordination capacity and appropriate incentives at a systems level.

These challenges require a multi-layered “whole system” response to improve equity and inclusion, and help the country achieve its national development goals. This is where the growth of “learning ecosystems”, building alignment and purposeful collaboration across institutions and sectors, could add significant value.

Values and goals of equity, cohesion, inclusion and resilience

These priorities are perceived through various different lenses across government schools, private schools and informal learning providers in Qatar. Including through religious, national and internationalist values, and the lens of 21st century skills. Intercultural values, faith, and thematic focus areas can help create alignment and develop common languages and trust between different organisations, for example related to the Qatar National Vision 2030, Sustainability, STEM/STEAM, or the World Cup. Values and skills are being promoted through a range of teaching and learning practices and strategies in schools, through extracurricular activities and campaigns, and intercultural exchanges.

Innovative practices, pedagogies, and teaching and learning strategies

There is a diversity of innovative practices that promote equity, inclusion and cohesion across the education system, including in instructional practices and methods, and many innovative schools and new types of learning spaces (such as mobile labs, and satellite learning hubs). Innovation, however, appears concentrated in a small number of schools, networks, and communities of practice. A wide breadth of learning opportunities is also available through the informal learning sector and extracurricular activities, however private and government schools do not take advantage of these opportunities equally. With regards to workforce readiness, recognising prior learning and expanding skills certification could improve participation, including through portable credentials and personalised pathways. Improved professional development opportunities for teachers and educators is also needed to support their capabilities and confidence around new practices.

Collaboration and Partnership Working

Despite significant opportunities for partnerships and collaboration, there is a lack of knowledge across the system about these and how to access them, and overall an appetite for more collaboration amongst school leaders and educators. Typically, small-scale collaborations arise related to specific topics or for a specific purpose, for example between schools where there are curriculum similarities. Launching and sustaining collaborations is challenging in Qatar, with government schools particularly constrained, which needs to be addressed. There is also a need to grow professional confidence around collaboration, for example through setting clear standards and expectations, and investing in leadership development.

System leadership, coordination, enabling conditions for collaboration

Developing local leadership and systems expertise is key for innovation and collaboration in education, and more capacity for partnership working (and innovation) is needed, both centrally and within schools, with the necessary incentives and structures in place at a systemic level. A systemic effort is also needed to codify innovative practices, and improve coordination capacity eg. via an intermediary entity or broker. The role of NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) is underdeveloped and should be further explored in relation to education and expanded.

Remote learning and technology during Covid-19; harnessing system-level gains

Research participants identified a number of potential longer term gains from the experience of remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Notable changes which have relevance for the development of learning ecosystems included:

- Improved learning content; both the quality of online content and new resources
- Development of new technical infrastructure and communications systems to support learning
- Increased variety of opportunities for teacher professional development
- New opportunities for parental engagement
- Improved teacher capabilities around innovation and change
- Improved collaboration opportunities with external partners
- Increase in school freedoms and the decentralisation of some responsibilities

Main Recommendations

These findings were tested through workshops with local stakeholders, as well as with the Research Advisory Board, resulting in the following main recommendations from this research study. The recommendations frame actions that could be taken by specific organisations, and at a multi sectoral level, to support the growth of learning ecosystems toward equitable and more inclusive learning over time.

Recommendation 1: Carry out in depth mapping of the existing learning ecosystem and learning assets across Qatar, as part of developing a comprehensive knowledge bank of learning and skills opportunities on offer.



Recommendation 2: Create greater alignment to shared goals, values and priorities for youth learning among various providers of learning. Include the core values of equitable and inclusive learning.



Recommendation 3: Explore further the use of inclusive co-design practices to support organisations and stakeholders to develop shared and co-owned visions and goals, around which collaboration can be developed and deepened.



Recommendation 4: Invest continually in, and support the development of inclusive and equitable practices, in both formal and informal education, with a focus on connecting and amplifying the vast array of practice existing across the system.



Recommendation 5: Strengthen the network infrastructure for collaboration and practice sharing, particularly among government and private schools, including the role of partnership brokers.



Recommendation 6: Invest in the interpersonal skills and capacities needed for collaboration and partnership working.



Recommendation 7: Develop strategies, practices and tools to increase connections among schools, informal learning providers, higher education, businesses and industry.



Recommendation 8: Improve data generation, knowledge and information sharing, and communications across the system.



Recommendation 9: Invest in advocacy, media platforms and storytelling as culture change tools.



Recommendation 10: Review systems level incentives and structures that enable or hinder innovation and collaboration.



Recommendation 11: Expand educational leadership across government, to strengthen policy making and implementation.



Recommendation 12: Increase institutional capacities for innovation and systems thinking to support the development of learning ecosystems.



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