

CONFERENCE STATEMENT

In recent years, economic and social transformations have been central to Gulf governments.

As part of their national development strategies, regional governments have made reforming their education systems a top priority to address unemployment, promote economic diversification, and prepare for a low-carbon future.

In pursuit of this goal, Gulf governments have significantly increased spending on education, research, and innovation. Despite their efforts, the quality of education in the region remains uneven and is struggling to meet the demands of the iob market. even with the demographic advantage of a largely young population. A key reason is that social and cultural barriers remain difficult to bypass despite a strong push for reform.

This conference aims to explore the role of education in social reforms in the Gulf, while unpacking the reasons behind the mismatch between educational output and the labour market. It also seeks to draw upon the lessons offered by both the Gulf region and Singapore in their respective approaches to prepare their workforces for the future.



CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

25 JUNE 2024 (TUESDAY)

9.00 AM WELCOME REMARKS

Mr Bilahari Kausikan

Chairman, Middle East Institute, NUS

9.05 AM OPENING REMARKS

Mdm Halimah Yacob

Chancellor of Singapore University of Social Sciences, former President of Singapore

9.30 AM PANEL 1: EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS: ALIGNING VISION, CURRICULUM, AND INNOVATION

Dr Ahmad Hasnah

President, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar

Dr Mansoor Al Awar

Chancellor, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, UAE

Mr Wong Siew Hoong

Adviser, Ministry of Education

Ms Michelle Teo (Moderator)

Executive Director, Middle East Institute, NUS

10.15 AM Q&A SESSION

11.00 AM TEA BREAK

11.15 AM PANEL 2: BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Dr Hanaa Almoaibed

Visiting Fellow, LSE Middle East Center

Dr Mohamad Mustafa Al-Najjar

General-Director of the General Directorate of Training, Ministry of Labour (Oman)

Mr Soh Wai Wah

Principal and CEO, Singapore Polytechnic

Dr Clemens Chay (Moderator)

Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, NUS

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

25 JUNE 2024 (TUESDAY)

12.00 PM	Q&A SESSION
12.45 PM	LUNCH BREAK
1.30 PM	PANEL 3: WOMEN: LEADING THE CHARGE
	Ms Alia Al Khaled Former Kuwait Parliament Member Member of Education and Special Needs Committee
	Ms Mariam Jaafar Managing Director and Partner at BCG (Singapore) Member of Parliament, Singapore
	Ms Rafiah Al Talei Editor-in-Chief Sada, Middle East Program Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC
	Dr Emman El Badawy (Moderator) Director, Peace, Security & Foreign Policy, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change
2.10 PM	Q&A SESSION
2.45 PM	TEA BREAK
3.00 PM	CLOSING SESSION
	Mr Chan Chun Sing Minister for Education
	Mr Bilahari Kausikan (Moderator)

Chairman, Middle East Institute, NUS

SPEAKER OPENING REMARKS



MADAM HALIMAH YACOB

Chancellor of Singapore University of Social Sciences, former President of Singapore

Madam Halimah Yacob, Chancellor of the Singapore University of Social Sciences, served as the eighth, and first female, President of Singapore from 2017 to 2023. Prior to that, she was, from 2013, the first female Speaker of Parliament. After getting a law degree from the University of Singapore in 1978, she joined the National Trades Union Congress and headed the women's development secretariat and the legal services department before becoming NTUC's deputy secretary-general. She stood for election as a People's Action Party candidate in 2001 and was the first Malay woman to be elected an MP. Before becoming Speaker, Madam Halimah served Minister of State in the Ministry of Social and Family Development. She was also the first Singaporean to serve on the Governing Body of the International Labour Organisation, a United Nations agency, between 1999 to 2011.

PANEL ONE EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS: ALIGNING VISION, CURRICULUM, AND INNOVATION

As part of their economic reform plans, Gulf Arab states have made significant investments in educating their predominantly young populations for the future workforce. However, preparing today's young minds for tomorrow's jobs goes beyond traditional classroom learning.

The critical questions revolve around the Gulf Arab societies' efforts at moving towards an educational ecosystem that measures up to international standards. How will they reconcile religious/moral education with their respective national curricula to develop a highly-trained workforce for a knowledge-based economy? How can they persuade their people to forgo established preferences? Other questions include how to integrate lifelong learning into cultures that traditionally prioritise a linear path to job opportunities and career progression. In this regard, can Asian education systems act as alternative study destinations to Western ones?

This panel aims to discuss the aforementioned themes, while also exploring how education policies align with broader national goals.

EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS: ALIGNING VISION, CURRICULUM, AND INNOVATION



DR AHMAD M. HASNAHPresident, Hamad Bin Khalifa University

Dr Ahmad M. Hasnah is President of Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), a member of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development in Doha. Since he joined QF in 2002, Dr Hasnah has been a key player in the development of Education City into a unique hub for knowledge and education through partnerships with world-class educational and research institutions.

In his roles as the Director of Academic Affairs and later as the Associate Vice President for Higher Education, Dr Hasnah has been actively involved in negotiations which led to the joining of many of the QF partner universities, such as Texas A&M University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Georgetown University.

Following his appointment as the Executive Vice-President and Provost of HBKU in May 2014, he has been instrumental in the establishment of six colleges: The College of Islamic Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the College of Science and Engineering, College of Law, College of Health and Life Sciences, and the College of Public Policy, which offer interdisciplinary graduate and PhD programmes. As President, he led the development of HBKU's strategy to achieve a unique multi-disciplinary education experience, embedding a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship across different segments of the university, to become a leading institution in education and research.

Dr Hasnah has also taken part in the conception and shaping of the World Innovation Summit for Education (Wise), a unique global event which aims at creating an international multi-disciplinary platform to shape education models, explore ground-breaking innovations, and take concrete steps in making significant improvements to worldwide education in the 21st century.

He is on many Joint Advisory Boards, including Weill Cornell Medicine- Qatar and Northwestern University in Qatar. He was a member of the Joint Advisory Boards of Texas A&M University at Qatar, Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, and Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar for the past 10 years, and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Community College of Qatar for the past six.

Dr Hasnah has been a panellist in many international conferences, such as the NAFSA Conference in the US, Going Global Forum, SCUP North Atlantic Regional Conference, and Reinventing Higher Education Conference at IE University in Madrid.

He holds a Masters (1993) and PhD (1996) in Computer Science from the Illinois Institute of Technology, USA. He graduated from Qatar University in 1990 with a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and Physics.

EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS: ALIGNING VISION, CURRICULUM, AND INNOVATION



DR MANSOOR AL AWAR

Chancellor, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University Member, Executive Council of the Association of Arab Universities (AARU)

'Pride of the Emirates Medal' 2022

Dr. Mansoor has served as a chair of several prestigious entities including institutions, award juries, and others related to innovation, leadership, education and excellence, including:

- 1. Chairman of the Governing Board of the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (IITE) "2014-2021".
- 2. Chair of jury for the Arab Government Excellence Award, the Arab world's most prestigious award under the umbrella of the League of Arab States in the field of Arab governance excellence.
- 3. Chair of jury, Egypt Government Excellence Award.
- 4. Chair of the Global Government Excellence Award jury for two consecutive sessions during the Government Summit in Dubai in 2022 and 2023.
- 5. Chair of jury, Minister of Interior Excellence Award since it was launched in 2011 (UAE).
- 6. Jury Member of the Dubai International Best Practice Award for Sustainable Development.
- 7. Judge, Innovators Under-35 awards (IU35), launched by Dubai Future Foundation and MIT Technology Review Arabia.

Dr. Al-Awar has launched, founded and led several innovative enterprises, such as:

- Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU), the region's first university with a smart learning approach.
- Innovation Arabia, the annual scientific conference with a focus on innovation in the Arab world.
- First Quality Department at Dubai Police, including suggestion and self-assessment schemes and a public opinion survey centre.
- Emirates Business Women Award, at Dubai Quality Group.
- Middle East eLearning Association (MEEA)
- Middle East Quality Association (MEQA)

Dr. Alawar has received numerous awards and accolades: Pride of the Emirates Medal, Golden Order of Merit, on Arab World Good Governance, and ICT & Knowledge CEO Excellence Award, etc. He has published several books on innovation management, leadership, higher education and quality.

EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS: ALIGNING VISION, CURRICULUM, AND INNOVATION



MR WONG SIEW HOONGAdviser, Ministry of Education

Mr Wong Siew Hoong is Adviser in the Ministry of Education, Singapore. He was formerly the Director-General of Education in the ministry. In his ministry duties, he was involved in many professional issues related to teaching and learning in schools. These included curriculum planning and development, school management, and professional development of teachers.

Mr Wong studied History at the National University of Singapore and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree. He completed a Diploma in Education at the National Institute of Education. He also obtained a Master in Education from Harvard University.

He taught in a junior college and a secondary school, and was principal of two secondary schools before his appointment as Director of Schools, Deputy Director-General of Education (Curriculum), and Director-General of Education in 2015.

Mr Wong is currently Chairman for the National Institute of Education International, Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, the TALIS Governing Board at the OECD, and the Deputy Chairman of the National Institute of Education Council. He also serves on the Board of the Founders' Memorial, the Governing Board of the Singapore International School (Hong Kong), and the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism.

MODERATOR

EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL PROGRESS: ALIGNING VISION, CURRICULUM, AND INNOVATION



MS MICHELLE TEO

Executive Director, Middle East Institute, NUS

Michelle Teo has more than 20 years' experience in both the government and private sectors. Her career has spanned international relations, corporate and digital communications, and the globe. Her career with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has taken her to Europe, Australia, North America, the Middle East, North and South-east Asia. Michelle served as Singapore's Deputy High Commissioner in Canberra. She then joined IBM, first as Communications Leader with IBM Singapore, and later with IBM ASEAN. Prior to joining the Middle East Institute in NUS, she worked with local SMEs focused on digital content redesign for Singapore Government agencies.

PANEL TWO

BRIDGING THE
SKILLS GAP: THE
ROLE OF TECHNICAL
AND VOCATIONAL
EDUCATION AND
TRAINING

Despite rapid economic growth and an increased focus on the private sector, unemployment remains an ongoing challenge for the Gulf economies. The public sector employs up to 90 per cent of well-educated nationals, while the private one, which will be increasingly important to their future economies, is dominated by expatriate workers. However, the private sector faces significant challenges due to a skills gap, hindering its potential to foster economic diversification and employment. To address this, Gulf governments are increasing expenditure on technical and vocational education and training, but with limited success.

This panel examines the measures used by regional governments to enhance this sector, their shortcomings, and aims to offer Singapore's successful ITE path as a model for study.

BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING



DR HANAA ALMOAIBEDVisiting Fellow, LSE Middle East Center

Hanaa Almoaibed is an academic researcher and strategic socio-cultural consultant, working with governments, the non-profit, academic, and private sectors to conduct and activate research in the Arab Gulf states. Her work focuses on education, skills, and labour markets as well as youth, gender, and sustainability. She is a Visiting Research Fellow at the London School of Economics, and a Research Fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh. She is also a Consulting Fellow at Chatham House in London and a Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Hanaa holds the position of Vice-President of at Arab Institute for Women's Research the Empowerment, and is the Education Pillar Chair at Johara Global, a network bridging experiences of women in the Middle East with Europe and North America. She has board-level experience in the energy sector and the education sector. She is a non-executive director of Rawabi Holding in Al Khobar, and United Safety Ltd in Canada. She is the Vice-Chairman of the International Advisory Board of the ZADK Culinary Academy and a Council Member of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. She holds a PhD from UCL and an MSc from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING



DR MOHAMAD MUSTAFA AL-NAJJAR

General-Director, the General Directorate of Training, Ministry of Labour (Sultanate of Oman)

Dr. Mohamad Al-Najjar earned his BSc. in Civil Engineering from AL-Mustansiriya University (Iraq) in (1998), MSc. in Engineering and Management from University of Exeter (UK) in (2003), and his PhD in Geotechnical Engineering from the University of Exeter (UK) in (2007).

He started work as assistant lecturer in the Engineering Department at the University of Exeter, then was lecturer in the Civil and Architecture Engineering Section – Engineering Department / Higher College of Technology HCT - Ministry of Manpower (Sultanate of Oman). After five years, he was appointed as Acting Head of the section.

During his tenure, he was engaged in a variety of undergraduate academic disciplines related to teaching civil engineering courses, labs, and workshops. In addition, he was engaged in quality assurance work in the Higher College of Technology HCT - Ministry of Manpower (Sultanate of Oman) for four years (2007-2010). From 2012-2020, he was the Director of Occupational Standards Centre, Ministry of Manpower, Sultanate of Oman.

In 2021, he was appointed as Director General of the General Directorate of Training, Ministry of Labour, Sultanate of Oman, and continues in that role. Currently, he is also a member of several committees at the regional, national, and international level that are related to education, qualifications, skills, competencies, and human resources. In addition, he has membership of several professional societies at the national and international level.

Dr Al-Najjar received an honorary fellowship at the University of Exeter for scientific research from the Department of Engineering - College of Engineering, Computer Science and Mathematics, where he published many articles in international peer-reviewed scientific journals and working papers in specialised scientific conferences and symposiums.

BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING



MR SOH WAI WAH
Principal and CEO, Singapore Polytechnic

Mr Soh Wai Wah is the Principal and Chief Executive Officer of Singapore Polytechnic.

He joined the government of Singapore in 1982, when he was awarded a scholarship through which he pursued a bachelor's degree in economics at Cambridge University. He has been the Principal and CEO of Singapore Polytechnic since 1 Oct 2016. During his tenure, he led the polytechnic through various transformations, including the change to flipped learning pedagogy, and the introduction of the common core curriculum.

MODERATOR

BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP: THE ROLE OF TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING



DR CLEMENS CHAY

Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, NUS

Dr Clemens Chay is a research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute. His research focuses on the history and politics of the Gulf states, with a particular emphasis on Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. At MEI, he spearheads a public education series entitled "Bridging the Gulf". His recent academic publications include a chapter that examines Kuwait's parliamentary politics in The Routledge Handbook of Persian Gulf Politics (2020), a chapter in the edited volume Informal Politics in the Middle East (Hurst, 2021), and a study appearing in the Journal of Arabian Studies, titled "The Dīwāniyya Tradition in Modern Kuwait: An Interlinked Space and Practice". His commentaries have been featured in different outlets, including ISPI, KFCRIS, and AGSIW. He is currently working on a book project related to Kuwait's diwaniyas (affectionately known as diwawin, and more widely-known as majalis outside Kuwait), the reception rooms for informal meetings that have implications for society, politics and diplomacy.

Prior to joining MEI, Dr Chay was the Al-Sabah fellow at Durham University, where he taught and completed his PhD in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, and where he also received an MSc in defence, development, and diplomacy. A Sciences Po Paris alumnus, he read his BA at the Menton campus.

PANEL THREE WOMEN: LEADING THE CHARGE

Female empowerment has been a key pillar of social and economic reforms in the Middle East over the past decade. Arab women have long been seen as being confined to the home, but many are driving change by playing vital roles in modernisation, contributing in government, business, education, and culture.

This panel will discuss how Arab women are advancing the reform agenda in the Middle East, their motivations behind these efforts, and the ongoing challenges they face.

WOMEN: LEADING THE CHARGE



MS ALIA AL-KHALED

Former Kuwait Parliament Member

Member of Education and Special Needs Committee

Alia Al-Khaled is a Kuwaiti political activist dedicated to advocating for women's rights and community health. Elected to Kuwait's 2022 National Assembly, she is one of only two women who took office as a parliamentarian. In her legislative role, she served on two committees focused on education and special needs. Her professional background includes work in journalism and the health sector. She has contributed to local media outlets, such as Al-Anbaa and Al-Qabas, and was General Manager at Al-Omooma Hospital. Alia holds a master's degree in Business Administration with a focus on sustainability from Hult International Business School in the UAE.

WOMEN: LEADING THE CHARGE



MS MARIAM JAAFAR

Managing Director and Partner at BCG (Singapore) Member of Parliament, Singapore

Ms Mariam Jaafar is a Member of Parliament for Sembawang GRC.

She is a Managing Director and Partner at Boston Consulting Group (Singapore), where she is a core leader of the Telecommunications, Media and Technology Practice, and the Financial Institutions Practice. She also leads initiatives that aim to increase the numbers, success, and satisfaction of women at the firm across Southeast-Asia under Women@BCG.

Prior to BCG, Ms Mariam worked for Barclays Wealth, where she was Chief of Staff and COO for Asia, Middle East and Africa, as well as for the venture capital firm Vertex Management, as an Investment Manager. Ms Mariam serves on the Board of Directors of the Government Technology Agency (GovTech), and Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC), as well as the Board of Governors of Raffles Girls' School (Secondary). She has also served on a number of government committees, including the Committee for the Future Economy Main Committee, where she was also the Co-Chair of the Future Connectivity Sub-committee.

Ms. Mariam is an alumna of Stanford University, where she earned both a master's and bachelor's degree (with Distinction) in Electrical Engineering, receiving the Frederick E Terman Engineering Scholastic Award. She also holds a master's in business administration at Harvard Business School, where she was a recipient of the HBS Jackson C Tai Family Fellowship.

WOMEN: LEADING THE CHARGE



MS RAFIAH AL TALEI

Editor-in-Chief Sada, Middle East Program Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC

Rafiah Al Talei, an eminent figure in Middle Eastern journalism and scholarly circles, currently serves as the Editor-in-Chief of Sada, part of Carnegie's Middle East Programme. Her expertise spans over a quarter-century, and is deeply rooted in civil rights, women's advocacy, and Gulf political dynamics. Her illustrious career includes a pivotal role as a Senior Producer at Al Jazeera Media Network's Public Liberties and Human Rights Center, reinforcing her commitment to pivotal societal issues.

Al Talei, a distinguished alumna of Qatar University with a PhD. in Gulf Studies, has been celebrated for her academic and professional pursuits. Her intellectual journey includes prestigious fellowships at Stanford University, Syracuse University, and the National Endowment for Democracy. Complementing her academic accolades is a certificate from the Harvard Kennedy School in Public Narrative, underscoring her leadership and storytelling prowess.

An active researcher, Al Talei has collaborated with institutions like Freedom House, Irex, and multiple universities, focusing on women's rights. Her political aspirations were evident in her candidacy for the Omani parliament (Majlis Al-Shura), reflecting her dedication to public service and governance.

Her influence extends to international platforms, notably as a speaker on media freedom and female empowerment in the Gulf. Her insights resonated at the inaugural Arabic-language Ted Summit in Doha in March 2023, where she addressed women's political representation in the Gulf, marking her as a vanguard voice in regional transformation.

MODERATOR

WOMEN: LEADING THE CHARGE



DR EMMAN EL-BADAWY

Director, Peace, Security & Foreign Policy, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

Dr Emman El-Badawy is the Global Director for Peace & Security & Foreign Policy at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI). In this role, she oversees the strategy and delivery of the Institute's advisory work on national security and diplomacy for government clients.

In addition to her role at TBI, she is also a fellow of the British Academy, and of the Department of War Studies' Grand Strategy Centre at King's College London, where she undertook UK government-funded research to inform the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, known as CONTEST.

Emman has specialised in Middle Eastern affairs for the past 13 years, as the region underwent significant social, political and economic reforms. Before her role at the Institute, she lectured on the Middle East and political Islam, and was a global consultant on counter-terrorism, extremism, and de-radicalisation, and on religious and terrorist violence.

Emman has been a BBC expert voice on the Middle East since 2014 and provides commentary for various broadcast outlets on unfolding events, often representing TBI. She contributes regularly to, and her research has been featured on international media, including Sky News, BBC News, Channel 4, ITV News, Al Jazeera, and CNN.

She holds a PhD in Arab and Islamic studies from the University of Exeter.

CLOSING PANEL

DIALOGUE

SPEAKER CLOSING REMARKS



MR CHAN CHUN SING

Minister for Education, Republic of Singapore

Mr Chan Chun Sing was appointed Singapore's Minister for Education on 15 May 2021. He is also Minister-in-charge of the Public Service since 1 May 2018.

Mr Chan drove Singapore's economic and industrial development as Minister for Trade and Industry (MTI) from 1 May 2018 to 14 May 2021. At MTI, he ratified the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, as well as deepened international co-operation on the digital economy. As Deputy Chairman of the People's Association from 1 October 2015 to 14 May 2021, he oversaw national efforts to foster social cohesion.

From May 2015 to May 2018, he was Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and expanded the labour movement network to represent all working people in Singapore. Prior to NTUC, he served as Minister for Social and Family Development (2013-2015), and Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (2011-12). He was also Second Minister for Defence (2013-15), and Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts (2011-12).

Serving with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) from 1987 to 2011, Mr Chan held various appointments, including Chief of Army. He left the SAF to run in the 2011 General Election and was elected Member of Parliament for Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency.

An SAF (Overseas) and President's Scholarship holder, he graduated with First Class Honours in Economics from Christ's College, Cambridge University, UK. He was also awarded the 1998 Distinguished Master Strategist Award by the US Army Command and General Staff College. In 2005, he completed the Sloan Fellows Programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology under the Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship.

MODERATOR

CLOSING REMARKS



MR BILAHARI KAUSIKAN

Chairman, Middle East Institute, NUS

Mr Bilahari Kausikan is the Chairman of the Middle East Institute, an autonomous institute of the National University of Singapore. Mr Kausikan was Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2013, having served as Second Permanent Secretary since 2001. He was subsequently Ambassador-at-Large until May 2018. His earlier appointments at the Ministry include Deputy Secretary for South-east Asia, Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, and Ambassador to the Russian Federation. He was educated at Raffles Institution, the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York.

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MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE 29 HENG MUI KENG TERRACE BLK B, LEVEL 6, #06-06 **SINGAPORE 119620**



CONTACT.MEI@NUS.EDU.SG

+65 6516 2380

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MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE - NUS m

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