

HASSAN AL-DERHAM

President of Qatar University

Mohamed KABBAJ

I would like to introduce the last intervention Mr Hassan Al-Derham. He is a well-known civil engineer and also President of Qatar University.

Hassan AL-DERHAM

First of all, I am going to briefly ask a few questions and try to challenge a few of the assumptions mentioned by my colleagues. Mr Masood Ahmed mentioned that Qatar, for instance, the majority of citizens relied on public government jobs, and that figure is 85%. Let us take a trip down memory lane. Two generations ago, before the discovery of oil, citizens of Qatar and the Gulf countries relied primarily on their own efforts. These were through fishing, pearl diving and commerce in general. The Gulf region was known to be a trendsetting region for trade movements between Eastern Asia and India on the one hand, and Europe and other countries on the other. These were through the ports and harbours of Basra, for example, and other maritime routes.

Originally, our people were considered entrepreneurs back then. However, with the discovery of oil and the exploitation of oil, people took the easy road, and that means the more comfortable road. This involves heavy reliance on government subsidies, government allowances, and government jobs as well. This was how people started taking up government jobs, because this was considered an easily accessible sector. Graduates are now being encouraged to become entrepreneurs. In our national plans, we have aligned strategies in order to establish a balance between these issues.

In the last few months, we have witnessed the latest global changes. For instance, the surprising access of Mr Donald Trump to the US presidency will entail new challenges and changes if he were to carry out his electoral plan in terms of foreign policy, economic approach, etc. This will require a number of countries to re-examine their own policies. Therefore, the higher education sectors in these countries have to review and re-examine their own policies.

Since education is an intrinsic part of society and economic cycles, it has to accompany the latest changes. All these challenges cast a shadow on the educational sector and lead to increasing competitiveness in the business sector. These changes, these shifts, will highlight the expected role of higher education systems. These will be affected in two ways. First, higher education institutions are places where scholars and thinkers gather and debate and come up with solutions to the challenges in society. This is particularly if these educational institutions were national, just like the University of Qatar.

At the same time, these institutions have to follow up on the latest labour market needs. My colleagues mentioned, for example, the future technological developments, the so-called disruptive technologies, which will affect the entrepreneurship and business sectors. In the early '90s, we saw a big company like Kodak having to go out of business, because photography had become digital, instead of analogue conventional photography. We also saw this in different companies, such as Uber, for example, which is operating a real change in the ways people deal with means of transport. We will see this happening even more when it is a machine-to-machine conversation, or the Internet of Things. There is this changing nature of different information and data, when we talk about Google, Apple, and other data companies. This will cause a real shift in the types and needs of the market. This is something that

educational institutions have to follow up on and draft their curriculum accordingly. We know that the Arab region suffers from high levels of unemployment. Our economic, science and technological advancement is threatened by political insecurity and instability.

Even though, in Qatar, we have good resources and a good political environment, there are two things we cannot overlook. First, in Qatar, we have to understand that this world is interconnected, and we do not live in our own bubble. Everything is inter-related and everything is affected by the latest global trends – be it oil prices, trade liberalisation, market openness, and so on. We should also not overlook the limited nature of these non-renewable carbon resources, and therefore we should not rely on them as a sole source of energy. The only unlimited source of potential is our human thinking.

The need for economic diversity and to build a knowledge-based economy and society is something that we have been working on for the last decade. Qatar National Vision 2030 has already been announced, and in Qatar, a number of initiatives were taken by the government. For instance, education in general was re-examined and recalled into question, as well as higher education in Qatar University. Over 12 years ago, there was a project to renovate and develop this university. It got its own autonomous budget, which allowed us to gain academic credentials and devise its own curricula in line with the labour market needs. The Qatar Foundation for Science Education and Community Empowerment was established, and it took a number of initiatives. These included the Qatar National Research Fund, the Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP), and Hamad bin Khalifa University (HBKU), which is a research university. Three national research institutes joined HBKU, so there are a number of initiatives taken by the state and in this regard.

In the state of Qatar, we are also seeking to further promote a number of initiatives and programmes, such as developing our social and human science projects. This is as well as Islamic and legal studies and Sharia studies. We all know that the developments that took place in a number of universities were originally focused on applied sciences, such as medicine, engineering, etc. However, we still lag behind international universities when it comes to human sciences and social sciences. Why? It is because our Arab people did not deal with the Arab Spring or how it manifested the way they should have.

The fact that they did not deal with the Arab Spring the way they should have is because we lack the proper thinkers and think tanks. We should be able to orient this new trend of the Arab Spring towards a better outcome, so as to serve the ambitions of our Arab people. This is not only the case for Qatar University or other universities and the GCC. It happens in all parts of the Levant. Graduates of social sciences in the West find a very important role to play for themselves in their communities, which is not the case for us in the Arab world. This is one of the things that we will try to work on in the near future. In reviewing our strategic research objectives, we have identified the main skills and competencies that we have to focus on. This is to devise an educational plan to achieve these objectives.

This is because conventional education is no longer able to keep up with the latest fast changes in different sectors. We focus on the main competencies, which has become a pressing need. These are mainly language skills, mathematical skills, good communication skills, cooperation, participation, research and problem solving. In our future plans, we will try to guarantee that the graduates of these universities can find a good job and can find a good way to use their skills.