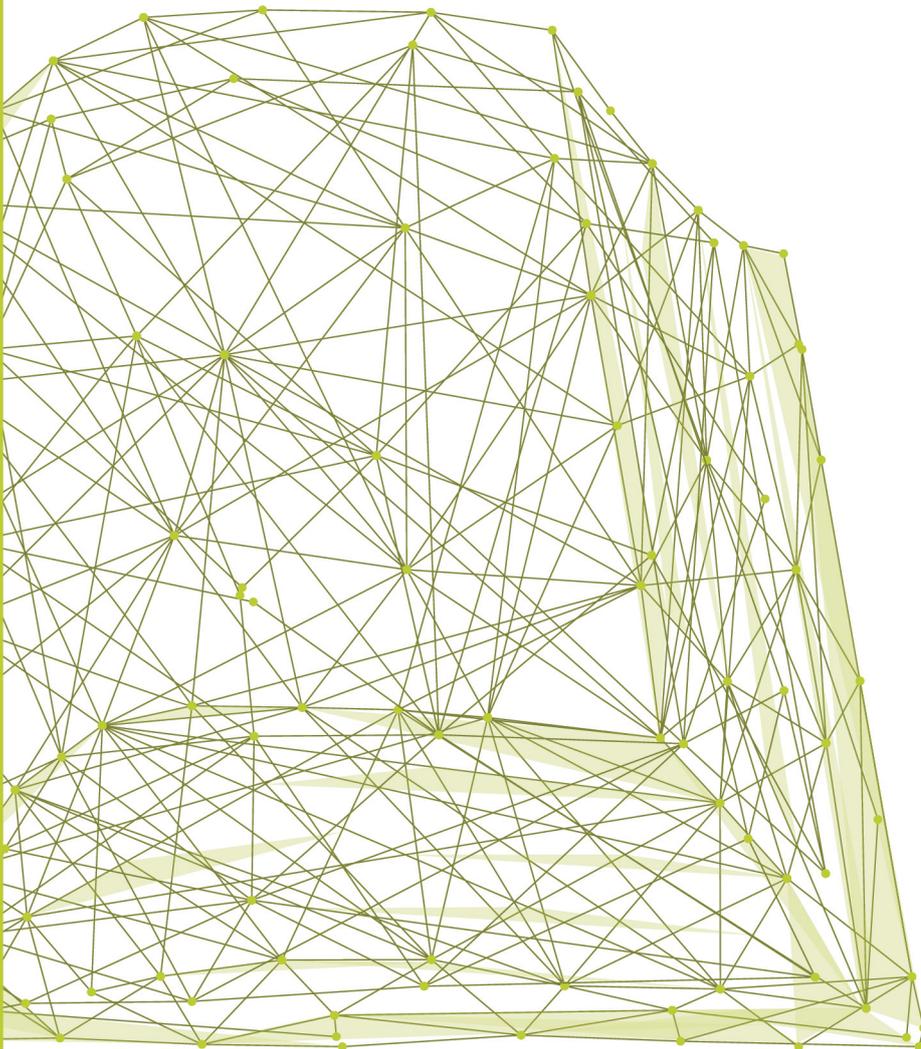


THE PURSUIT OF INSTITUTIONAL EXCELLENCE: CASE STUDIES FROM QATAR



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universities around the world compete for talented faculty and researchers, for promising students, and for resources and research funding. One element in that competition is where institutions appear in the various university rankings. For around two decades, university ranking schemes have claimed to be relatively objective measures of institutional quality that can help faculty, prospective students and their parents, policy-makers, funders and industry make decisions about where to work, study, invest or recruit.

The various ranking schemes tend to value institutional wealth, selectivity, research productivity (as measured in numbers of high impact peer-reviewed articles in reputable journals as well as grant monies secured), and reputation among peers. This makes these schemes relevant to a fraction of the global higher education student population and about 15% of the more than 17,000 universities globally. Rankings do not engage the majority of higher education institutions including many which demonstrate excellence and have a strong impact on their local communities and in pursuit of their mission. For example, research that addresses local challenges and aims to improve the lives of people in a specific locale can impact the wellbeing of many similarly, teaching that leads to improving specific skills required for a regional labor market can address local economic and social problems. Other forms of institutional excellence can be manifested in how the beliefs and values of an organization influence its effectiveness in teaching students and guiding their development as future citizens.

This report attempts to provide an understanding of how some universities, which do not appear among the top ranked institutions, pursue and achieve excellence in their local contexts and serve their local and regional communities.

Qatar University (QU) and Georgetown University (GU-Q) Qatar are two cases that demonstrate excellence in distinctive ways. These two case studies are part of a larger study of several universities in different parts of the world led by scholars at the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD) within the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE). The institutions in this study, and the two profiled in this report, are not household names in Boston, Bangalore, Bonn or Beijing. They do not sit atop most international ranking schemes. But, they are engaged in work that matters to their community. These institutions have a great deal to teach us about what it means to pursue excellence without the deep pockets of a "world-class university" or 600 hundred years of history.

The research team collected data by interviewing senior faculty and administrators from both institutions in Spring 2019 using a semi-structured interview protocol to understand how each institution's mission and vision are articulated and enacted; how faculty and administrators view the institutions' roles in serving the needs of their local communities; and how the institutions address the challenges they encounter in their trajectory. Data collected from interviews were supplemented by a review of institutional documents including annual reports, fact sheets, and strategic plans, among others. This report should be relevant for university leaders, policy-makers, funders, and international organizations engaged in developing higher education systems.

Both Qatar University and Georgetown University-Qatar engage in a variety of practices that reflect high international standards. Faculty and administrators understand why these practices are being implemented and how they are aligned with the institution's larger mission. QU and GU-Q

have both cultivated institutional cultures that promote excellence. The norms and values embedded in their institutional cultures can be expressed as four shared commitments.

The first element is a commitment to understanding, supporting, and challenging students who will become Qatar's future leaders. Both institutions offer more than degrees—they aim to offer an education that prepares students for jobs and for meaningful lives as good citizens and leaders in their communities.

A second belief that informs the work of both institutions is an unwavering commitment to academic excellence and innovation. These institutions have systems which pursue high academic standards through strict adherence to relevant policies and practices. Whether these standards, policies and practices are mandated by the home campus in the case of GU-Q or developed internally in the case of QU, the goal in both cases is to provide an excellent education that caters to the needs of students and employers as well as impactful research that addresses the challenges of Qatar and the region.

The third element that the institutions share is a commitment to pursuing excellence in a manner which balances the desire to meet international standards of quality with the need to remain relevant to the local context. A commitment to continual improvement and pursuit of a larger public purpose is the fourth element underpinning a culture of excellence in both institutions. What drives this concern for continuous improvement is the understanding that they are contributing to a larger project—the development and the future of Qatar.

This study points to alternative approaches to established models of institutional excellence, including those pursuing wealth, selectivity and research productivity. The two case universities face unique challenges and pressures but do not respond to these challenges by conforming to international practices that do not fit the needs of their communities. Instead, they are trying to strike a balance between rigorous international academic standards and relevant policies and practices.

