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Branding in Transnational English Medium Instruction-Oriented Universities in The Arabian Gulf: Implications for Language Policy

Osman Z. Barnawi*

Royal Commission for Yanbu Colleges and Institute
ORCID: 0000-0002-0070-3473

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Abstract

Conceptualizing branding as ongoing strategic efforts formulated by transnational English medium instruction EMI)-oriented universities in today's competitive Higher Education (HE) market in order to create uniqueness for their academic programs as branded commodities, this paper (a) examines the forms of branding crafted by universities in the Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates) in order to claim uniqueness for their academic programs, and (b) inquires into whose interests (i.e., students, teachers, universities, investors or governments) are thus best served. Data were collected from policy documents, promotional materials (e.g., slogans) and official speeches on recent major branding initiatives undertaken by universities across the region. These data were treated as a research site which has its own history, players and nuances. The findings reveal that because of the different branding efforts intertwined with neoliberal language policy agendas undertaken by universities, with generous logistic, legal, and financial supports from their governments, a collision of conflicting interests and objectives among different players has arisen. This undesirable outcome leads governments and universities to represent and imagine each other as rivals instead of as collaborators aiming to secure various regional interests, including joint educational work. The implication of this phenomenon is that transnational English medium instruction-oriented policies have brought about apparent educational inequalities and social class in HE sectors of the region. This paper closes with recommendations to align the branding efforts with the regional interests stipulated in the Arab Bureau of Education for the Arabian Gulf countries.

Keywords: branding, transnational education, universities, English medium instruction

Introduction

Transnational higher education (TNHE) generally refers to the transformation of higher education (HE) "across the globe as Western-based universities export models—driven by a neoliberal agenda to maximize financial profit"—constantly compete in international rankings; attract international consumers (e.g., teachers, researchers, and investors); and elevate university global outlook (Barnawi, 2017; De Costa, Green-Eneix, & Li, 2021). This TNHE enterprise manifests itself in different forms, including: cross-border and virtual education; overseas branch and replica campuses; co-founded campuses; transnational academic mobilities; study abroad programs; mobility of academic programs, brand and symbolic resources; and franchise academic programs (Altbach & Forest, 2007; Barnawi, 2021; Phan, 2016).

* Corresponding Author.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0070-3473
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Under this condition, English is construed as a common corporate (trans/international) language which enables all stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, universities, and governments) to partake in various transnational education activities (Gounari, 2020; Lu, 2020). Importantly, English medium of instruction (EMI), which mandates English as an essential tool for the delivery of academic content in non-English-dominant countries, is used as both the driver and the vehicle in enabling and channeling neoliberally-driven TNHE expansion (Barnawi, 2021; De Costa et al., 2021). That is, "EMI is enabled by TNHE, and the latter is often mediated through EMI" (De Costa, Green-Eneix, & Li, 2020). This symbiotic relationship between EMI and TNHE has recently been examined by several scholars in different non-English-dominant countries including Saudi Arabia (Barnawi, 2021), United Arab Emirates (Phan, 2016), China (De Costa et al., 2021), and Qatar (Hillman, Graham, & Eslami, 2021).

Although recently much has been written on TNHE in relation to EMI in the past research studies, there is rarely any explicit exploration of branding *per se* in relation to transnational EMI-oriented universities. In this paper, branding is understood as ongoing strategic efforts formulated by transnational EMI-oriented universities in today's competitive HE market in order to create uniqueness for their academic programs as branded commodities. A detailed account of branding in relation to language in HE will be provided in a later section. To bridge such a research gap, this paper used the research literature on language policies alongside (Anholt, 2007) notion of 'Competitive Identity' (CI) as a conceptual lens for engaging with the aforementioned inquiry. While "language policies generally seek to establish, regulate, and conform linguistic practices—whether explicit or implicit—that occur within an 'authorized' domain" (De Costa et al., 2020), CI is construed as a model for realizing national competitiveness in the global market. These two conceptual lenses will be unpacked in a later section.

It is argued in this paper that exploring branding *per se* in relation to EMI policies is critical for language indexes values, ideologies, and agendas (be they cultural, political, and/or economic) in a particular educational setting. Crucially, investigating such a line of inquiry offers us an additional lens through which we can see the role of English and its economic as well as its ideological imperatives in the process of transnational university branding strategies, thereby contributing new directions to the scholarship of English medium instruction (EMI).

To that end, this paper examines the ways in which branding is played out in transnational EMI-oriented universities across the Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait. It explores (i) how universities in the GCC make use of transnational EMI education to imagine and represent both themselves and their rivals, and (ii) the forms of branding strategies that they craft to claim uniqueness of their academic programs. Investigating branding in transnational EMI-oriented universities in the GCC is essential. That is, it allows us to understand how transnational universities in the GCC region customize their programs or courses according to their local intellectual conditions. Importantly, branding practices which are applicable in the west may not work well in the GCC region. Hence, strategic efforts created by universities in the GCC to claim uniqueness of their academic programs require cultural, linguistic, ideological, socio-political, and economic alignments with the needs of the region. In such a scenario, the question arises how far these EMI-oriented programs could be qualified as branded commodities.

In what follows, this paper situates branding as a neoliberal policy agenda through the prism of language. Next, branding is unpacked in contemporary transnational EMI-oriented universities, with a particular focus on (Anholt, 2007) notion of CI. After that, the state of the HE sectors in the Arabian Gulf region was sketched out. Next, through the analysis of policy documents, promotional materials (e.g., slogans) and official speeches, examples of the major branding initiatives undertaken by universities across the region were examined. To better understand whose interests (i.e., students, teachers, universities and governments) are best served, it has been argued that different branding strategies undertaken by universities in collaboration with their governments across the region need to be conceptualized through what is termed as the *Arabian Gulf educational imagination*. The paper is concluded with recommendations to effectively align branding efforts with the regional interests stipulated in the Arab Bureau of Education for the Arabian Gulf countries.

Theoretical framework and Literature Review

In this study the research literature on branding in relation to language as well as branding in transnational higher education provide a framework for examining branding *per se* in relation to transnational EMI-oriented universities, and at the same time offering an analytical basis for the data of the current study.

- *Understanding branding through the prism of language*

As a complex regime of value, branding means "the relationship between a range of materially sensible object-signs (commodities, trademarks, slogans, spokespersons, sponsored events, and spaces, etc.) and some imputed virtual commonality, dubbed by marketers as the brand's "image," "essence," or "personality". This relationship holds when such object-signs, or brand instances, are taken as indexes of, and entrances to, the social imaginaries that the brand's image, essence, or personality affords". (Nakassis, 2013) One way to understand this complex idea of the branding regime is through the prism of language.

Language (in this case, English) is understood here as a practice that emerges from "the activities it performs" as well as being a material part of our everyday social and cultural engagements (Pennycook, 2010). In understanding our lived experiences and everyday relations to branding, we need to consider how language, as a set of practices/actions, creates the context(s) in which it is used. The very notion of practice elucidates "the relation of action and discourse" (White, 2007)'Practice' refers to "bundles of activities that are the central organization" of our everyday life (Allen, 2004). We therefore should conceptualize "language as a wider communicative code, encompassing written, oral, and digital instantiations of single linguistic items, phrases, or even whole dialects functioning as brands but also branding and branded discourses, which are indexed through specific uses of language" (Pennycook, 2010; White, 2007).

Within the branding practices, language (here, English) operates at both 'descriptive' and 'associative' ways (Bailey & Milligan, 2019; White, 2007). "Descriptive language is seen as language used either wholly or broadly to inform consumers and target groups about what it is that the [TNHE] brand actually does, means, or offers" in a given social context (Nakassis, 2013; White, 2007). In contrast, associative language refers to the ways in which language is used to create a bold association with the desires, interests, imaginations, and needs of the social actors in a given educational context. By way of illustration, in non-English-dominant countries, transnational English medium instruction (EMI)-oriented policies are crafted by universities in collaboration with their governments to claim uniqueness of their academic programs; secure their economic competitive advantage; maintain their global outlook; and brand their nations through the use of the English language.

- *Branding in transnational EMI-oriented universities in non-English-dominant societies*

Branding (including self-branding), an idea rooted in Western neoliberal ideology, occurs in transnational EMI-oriented universities at governmental, institutional, and individual levels. Yet, the manifest presence of this phenomenon is constantly ignored by the contemporary scholarship of applied linguistic in general and transnational English medium instruction (EMI)-oriented HE. In illustration of this gap, Anholt (2007) succinctly states,

[Today,] responsible governments, on behalf of their people, their institutions, and their companies, need to discover what the world's perception of their country is, and to develop a strategy for managing it. It is a key part of their job to try to build a reputation that is fair, true, powerful, attractive, genuinely useful to their economic, political, and social aims, and honestly reflects the spirit, the genius, and the will of the people. (p. 4)

Anholt (2007) quote above elucidates what he terms as 'Competitive Identity' (CI) in branding. CI is construed as an approach for achieving national competitiveness in the global market by governments, universities/institutions and/or people.

Under the rubric of neoliberal free-market ideologies, different transnational EMI policies have been strategically crafted, branded and socio-economically and materially exchanged by different stakeholders (e.g., governments, universities, etc.) across the globe. It is argued that various

transnational EMI policies crafted by universities in collaboration with their governments in non-English-speaking countries function as nation branding. The idea of nation branding is understood as a means of sustaining "a country's economic competitive advantages" (Lu, 2020). As an illustration, governments in non-English-dominant countries see TNHE as an economic tool through which their nations can gain access to science and technology as well as educational opportunities in the West; compete in the global job market; and thus become productive citizens (Barnawi, 2021; De Costa et al., 2021).

- *Branding in TNHE sector*

The TNHE sector is seen as another major income earner and a way of nation branding through which they could: prepare domestic students for the global job markets; recruit international students, teachers, and researchers; and generate tuition fees (Phan, 2016)). To illustrate, in building TNHE regional hubs in Asia, several branding strategies are crafted among rivals such as Malaysia, Singapore, and China, based on their comparative advantages; for example, the Malaysian government desires and aspires to make Malaysia the Asian hub for education and the preferred choice for global education. Its distinctive form of commercialized identities is constructed by its capitalizing on its strategic location within Asia and engaging in multiple forms of TNHE (Bailey & Milligan, 2019).

As its minister, Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohammad, in the Prime Minister's Department (Economy) describes: "We already have at least 10 renowned foreign universities with branch campuses in Malaysia, such as Monash University, University of Nottingham, Heriot-Watt University, Reading University, Curtin University and Xiamen University. We can leverage on their worldwide branding. Their presence here is a testament of their confidence in the country (De Costa et al., 2021). In addition to the top branch campuses in Malaysia, there are hundreds of local private universities that offer joint as well as 3+0-degree programs by means of partnership with leading Western universities (e.g., the Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland). Five of its public HE institutions are currently in the "QS World University Rankings 202". The minister adds, "[A] weak ringgit translates to lower cost of study, compared to Europe and the United States of America (US) where most of the top universities are located".

In contrast, the Singapore government aspires to make its country an 'education and knowledge hub' through its "Temasek model" (i.e., investing deeply in transnational universities and talented students). It has established transnational partnerships with top western universities such as Yale-NUS (Yale University and the National University of Singapore), Duke University and Imperial College. The government also introduced capacity-building policies to push local HE institutions to compete for global rankings.

Under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Chinese government is building an education hub that is both helping the country play a more responsible role in the TNHE market and portraying China's image as a global education hub. The country, through world-class institutions, is opening horizons for both local and international students today (Paul & Long, 2016). At the heart of these endeavors is "a set of joint higher education provisions cooperatively run by Chinese educational institutions and foreign educational institutions" (De Costa et al., 2020). One distinctive example is the establishment of The China Europe International Business School (CEIBS). This school was formed under an agreement between the Chinese and a few European governments, with the intention of contributing to the development of Chinese economy and training leaders to work across the world.

The Program Director of CEIBS, Lydia Price, describes the branding strategies of the school as follows: "We are essentially China-driven but the recruitments for students happen through various international forums and co-branding initiatives" (Price, 2021). These co-branding initiatives, as she explains, include: (i) TABS (Top Asia Business Schools); this means that through cooperation CEIBS will attempt to recruit the best faculty members and talented students worldwide; (ii) membership of a range of international organizations that will allow its alumni to co-attend events and exchange ideas; and (iii) a range of exchange programs for students.

What is common in the above examples of branding in TNHE in Malaysia, Singapore and China is the association with Western forms of education and English medium instruction (EMI) policies. These efforts are believed to help each country gain and sustain a competitive advantage

while portraying its image and identity in the minds of its consumers. Among other things, for these countries, EMI-oriented TNHE policies seem to index their commitment to global competition. English seems to play pivotal role in the processes of branding their transnational education systems (Barnawi, 2017). Furthermore, elements such as EMI, Western forms of education, joint degrees, international university rankings, and geographical locations signify "added value that can be exchanged with other forms of capital" (Del Percio, 2016).

The relationship between these elements "are taken as indexes of, and entrances to, the social imaginaries that the brand's image, essence, or personality affords" (Nakassis, 2013). In other words, universities, in collaboration with their governments, gain visibility and position themselves distinctively in the global market through "a range of materially sensible object-signs" (Nakassis, 2013) such as transnational partnership, EMI, international university rankings, and joint degrees. McKinley, Rose, and Zhou (2021) observation is quite convincing that: "In the process, it is inevitable that the push between the creation of distinctiveness on the one hand, and a sense of the ability to collaborate, on the other hand, creates tensions, which impact the very process of branding and the subsequent identity that countries [as well as universities] try to create. (p. 2)

In the context of neoliberal doctrine which emphasizes self-interest, profit generation, individual entrepreneurial freedom, and competition among rivals over resources and prestige (Barnawi, 2017), branding becomes a challenging and a controversial process. Market uncertainties coupled with different socio-materials and economic interests can always (re)shape relationships between rivals. As an illustration: after operating in Singapore for 14 years, the "Chicago Booth Graduate School of Business moved to Hong Kong to position itself closer to an anticipated Chinese market" (Wu & Xia, 2017). What is more, "a significant surprise announcement came in 2021—Yale-NUS College, a partnership between Yale University and the National University of Singapore, will cease to operate after 2025" (Wu & Xia, 2017).

Strikingly, the decision came from the NUS side, which had initially invited Yale University, an élite Western institution, to have its (NUS's) image branded and improved. Although reasons for the closure are still controversial, factors such as rising meritocracy, anti-élitist sentiment and finances were widely cited in media outlets such as *Yale Daily News* (Saunders, 1997) and *East Asia Forum*. At the time of writing, in December 2021, NUS wants to rebrand itself as 'The New College' by promising its consumers (e.g., students) that it will adhere to the curriculum of the Yale-NUS liberal arts model. It is within the discussions that branding was examined in transnational EMI-oriented universities across the six Arabian Gulf countries, which were historically formed in order to have a unified education system and language (i.e., Arabic), plus unified cultural, social, economic, ideological, and political values.

- *The pulse of EMI-oriented TNHE in the Arabian Gulf*

The six Arabian GCC countries were formed back in 1985 to develop harmonized regulations in areas such as education, language (i.e., Arabic as an official language) and trade as well as to establish a socio-economic and political bond that could protect the region (Goldenberg & Dalton, 2015). Nevertheless, over the last two decades these six countries witnessed several socioeconomic, cultural, ideological and epistemological upheavals. These included the "global financial crisis of 2008", "China's market crash of 2015", and "recent tumbling of the oil prices in the world market," as argued by Barnawi (2017)

"[These upheavals] have necessitated the creation of New and far-reaching cuts in education, scholarship programs, social services and welfare subsidies; …New directions to…attract foreign direct investments in sectors that sustain domestic economic growth,...a New emerging desire for the Englishization, internationalization, privatization and 'mallification' of universities – the establishment of state-of-the-art building facilities in order to attract more students and to encourage corporate bodies to invest inside campuses…and English medium of instruction programs at all levels; New high increases in the number of Western educational institutions as well as international corporate agencies appearing in the Gulf region. (Graan, 2013)

In this context, access to English and EMI alongside Western forms of education have become key concerns for governments in the region. The debates over transnational EMI-oriented policies "have been framed by neoliberal capitalist perspectives, in which the view of English as linguistic,

economic and cultural capital is primarily tied to employability and economic mobility" as well as nation-building (Barnawi, 2017). Consequently, the governments, in collaboration with their universities, in these six countries have undertaken several branding initiatives in transnational EMI education to secure the future of their nations.

The above discussions reveal that there is rarely any explicit exploration of branding *per se* in relation to transnational EMI-oriented universities in the past research literature. To address this research gap, this study also explored how universities in the GCC region made use of transnational EMI-oriented education to imagine and represent themselves and their rivals and at the same time claim uniqueness of their programs as branded commodities. to answer such a question, it was necessary to sketch the pulse of EMI-oriented TNHE in the region.

Methodology

This study attempts to address two key questions: (i) how universities in the GCC make use of transnational EMI education to imagine and represent both themselves and their rivals, and (ii) the forms of branding strategies that they craft to claim uniqueness of their academic programs. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze all types of branding initiatives in TNHE in the region. Instead, it is through the analysis of policy documents, promotional materials (e.g., slogans), local media outlets, and official speeches that I examine examples of major branding initiatives undertaken by universities in each country.

These major branding initiatives are: (a) the mania for ranking among the universities in Saudi Arabia; (b) Qatar Foundation Education City in Qatar; (c) free global education zones in the United Arab Emirates; (d) benchmarking academic programs in the Omani TNHE; (e) building a regional hub for quality TNHE in Bahrain; and (f) benchmarking and rebranding strategies in HE in Kuwait. While this study, I gathered the data at several sources and spaces, as stated above. All the texts were written in English. I have chosen those major initiatives as data because they iconize the multiple discourses, genres, and practices of branding within and across the region. Importantly, they are all situated in the context of branding in TNHE. Together, I treat them as a research site "which has its own history, stakeholders, audience, actors, consumers, partners, authorities, activities, rules and regulations, and complexities" (Barnawi, 2017).

Indeed, the different actors, audiences, consumers, and authorities involved in those branding initiatives have multiple interests, goals, objectives, and agendas. Considering this, I employed "a thematic analysis" to analyze and discuss the data of this study. "Thematic analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for seeking to understand… [certain research phenomena] ...across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Once of the distinctive features "of thematic analysis is its flexibility to be used within a wide range of" data (e.g., policy documents, promotional materials, and local media outlets) (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

In particular, the above-mentioned major branding initiatives are analyzed based on the running themes discussed in literature review sections (Evans, 2013). These running themes are language and branding; competitive identity in transnational higher education; university global outlook; and EMI-oriented universities. The findings of the study demonstrate these branding initiatives construed as references that portrayed the image of each country in the global, HE markets. Collectively, these initiatives depict multiple narratives and genres about the visibilities for the English medium instruction oriented TNHE sector and their sign values in the region.

Results

1. Saudi Arabia: International university rankings as branding strategies

Although Saudi Arabia has no international branch campuses, the branding in its contemporary TNHE context is predominantly felt through the feverish competition in the international university rankings. This has been orchestrated in two ways. First, under Saudi Vision 2030, introduced in 2016, the government demanded that five of "its local universities be among the top 200 universities in the world by 2020" (Barnawi, 2021). Second, more recently, ambitious Human Capability Development Program, launched by His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Al-Saud, two key goals have been articulated: (i) six local universities are compelled to be among the top 200 universities in the world by 2025, and (ii) scientific publications are to be increased by 120 percent (see *The Human Capability Development Program* 2021 for more details).

These national capacity-building goals and agenda have unitedly created fierce competition among local universities in attracting global brands to their academic programs. They have now been aggressively engaging with Western universities in different transnational activities. These activities include, among other endeavors: obtaining international accreditations for their academic programs; collaborating with Nobel laureates in different scholarly works (i.e., scientific publications); signing memoranda of understanding with top-ranked international universities from Australia, the UK and USA; building international advisory boards within their universities; and benchmarking their academic programs with Western institutions. Collectively, these efforts are logistically, legally, and financially supported by the government as well as by local media outlets as a way of creating a distinctive identity for the TNHE system in the country.

As an illustration: King Abdulaziz University (KAU) has been ranked #1 in the Arab World in 2021–2022 based on 'The Times Higher Education Arab University Rankings 2021'. The same university has also been ranked #44 in the Best Global University-US News and #190 in the World University Rankings 2022. Three of its academic departments are ranked ahead of academic departments at Harvard and Stanford, according to the Best Global University-US News. KAU's mechanical engineering department is ranked #2 in the world; its electronics and power department is ranked #17 in the world; and its chemical department is ranked #8 in the world. Such distinctive features achieved by KAU are widely covered in local media outlets including TV (e.g., Saudi Airshow – Al Ekhbariya Channel) and leading local newspapers (e.g., the *Saudi Gazette*, and *Okaz* Newspaper).

The *Saudi Gazette* covers the local university ranking news as follows: "Fifteen Saudi universities have realized a national achievement through their advancement according to the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2022, developing by more than 50% compared with the 2021 ranking when 10 universities progressed on the list. The ranking results showed the progress of 11 Saudi universities compared to their ranking last year, where King Abdulaziz University ranked 190th, while King Saud University and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals ranked 351st. The rankings, for the first time, saw the entry of University of Hail among the best 400 universities and University of Tabuk among the best 500 universities. Ranking indicators showed that Saudi Arabia, with its modern system of research and innovation, is considered the first at the global level in terms of improvement of citation of research outcomes with 35%. This reflected positively on the ranking of Saudi universities and contributed to a big improvement in their rankings. (*Saudi Gazette*: *THE 2022: 15 Saudi* universities rank among best at world, Arab levels *THE 2022: 15 Saudi universities rank among best at world, Arab levels - Saudi Gazette)*

In the light of this, the Saudi government enables TV channels and regulates the branding of local HE in the public sphere. At the same time, local TVs and leading newspapers, as channels of media discourse, are employed as sites of branding practices to legitimize and communicate the existence and essence of transnational EMI-oriented universities in the country. In effect, EMI has given these universities the means to penetrate the policy infrastructure of the contemporary Saudi TNHE context.

2. Qatar Education Foundation (QEF): Performative branding in TNHE

The punchline of the Qatar Educational Foundation is "Bringing world-class education to Qatar's doorstep" (QEF). In 1995, the Qatari government established the Qatar Foundation (QF) to upskill its nation through world-class education in four domains: Education, Science, Research and Community Development. After more than two decades, the QF has decided to rescale its primary mission by building a unique world-class academic hub for the region and beyond, in collaboration with top eight international universities. To this end, it has made a commitment to preserving local culture, values, and heritage, while fostering a progressive society that could meet local, regional, and global challenges. These world-class universities are from the US, France, the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: *Branch campuses of international universities at QF*

No	Name	Country	No	Name	Country
1	Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar	USA	5	HEC Paris in Qatar	France
2	Virginia Commonwealth University	USA	6	University College London Qatar	UK
3	Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar	USA	7	Dutch Stenden University in Qatar	Netherlands
4	Northwestern University in Qatar	USA	8	Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar	USA

Notably, the association of Qatar with world-class universities is "an index of the attributes" endorsed to the country's HE images in the global HE market (Graan, 2013; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Nakassis, 2013). In addition, the QF employs other branding strategies to claim its uniqueness and belongingness to the global HE markets on the one hand and to attract foreign students, teachers, researchers, and consultants on the other. The Ivy League universities from various geographical locations and specializations, including medicine, law, business, engineering, economics, the arts, education, and the sciences are portrayed as distinctive features of the QF's imaged identity. The presence of Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), the only local university, within the city signifies its testimony to preserving local culture and fostering a progressive society.

These TNHE activities are, all in all, performed in and through the English language. English is adopted as a means of instruction across those universities. English is reinterpreted as an essential economic tool that may allow consumers (i.e., local, and international students) to gain admission into those Ivy League Universities and then pursue their self-branding endeavors and dreams, as implied in the extracts below. It is construed as a tool that regulates consumer engagement with the TNHE of QF.

Apply once, study everywhere

After gaining admission into our universities, students have the unique opportunity to cross-register for classes at other branch campuses and pursue joint minors and certificates, which consist of taking classes with professors from different universities.
Qatar Education Foundation, 2021, para# 1)

International degree, regional culture

By studying at any of our branch campuses in Qatar, our students receive a Western education in a Middle Eastern setting, obtaining the same degree as that of the university's main campus.

(Qatar Education Foundation, 2021, para# 2)

With 'apply once, study everywhere', the QF seems to differentiate itself from other competitors in the region and sell its transnational EMI-oriented programs worldwide. Embedded in the aforementioned statement is also what Nakassis (2013) calls "the performativity of the brand". The brand's performativity is a function of its being cited: the ways in which (fractions of) brands are reanimated, or cited, while being reflexively marked as reanimations or citations" (p. 624). In the context of QF, the performativity of the brand manifests through enabling consumers to increase the value of studying at QF by earning international, joint degrees, gaining regional culture and being able to "cross-register for classes at other campuses" (QF).

It also occurs through statements such as "western education in the Middle East" and "the same degree as that of the university's main campus" (QF) which are employed as indexical and iconic components through which consumers find "a common relation of coevalness and contiguity" (Nakassis, 2012) *UAE Branding of TNHE: Building educational zones*

The branding of TNHE in the UAE takes place through the concept of free education zones that are distributed across its seven emirates.

Free zones are typically designed around one business industry category and offer several incentives to attract international investment and prompt commercial activity, such as purpose-built facilities, 100% ownership, tax exemption, and no restriction on profit or capital repatriation. Significantly, foreign education providers operating within free zones are exempt from the federal regulations that the UAE government has put in place to regulate and oversee the quality of the fast growing, non-federal higher education sector. (Nguyen, Ta, & Nguyen, 2017)

At the time of writing (December 2021), the UAE is seen as the country that hosts the greatest number of transnational branch campuses in the HE markets across the world. It hosts 31 foreign branch campuses from countries including India, the USA, Switzerland, Ireland, Russia, Morocco, Austria, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, France, the UK, and Australia, and in so doing its objectives are to: upskill its citizens; cater the growing needs of its expatriate community; attract investors, teachers and students across the world; and transform the HE landscapes in the region.

These commitments are succinctly captured in the official website of one of its largest free zones, Dubai International Academic City, where the branding is an activity:

Robust academic ecosystem

Dubai International Academic City plays a key role in enabling, advancing, and promoting Dubai's position on the regional and global education scale. Bringing leading international and regional universities from Australia, UK, India, and other parts of the globe to Dubai, offering advanced educational facilities and constantly developing the UAE's higher education sector (https://diacedu.ae/)

Collectively, the presence of 31 international campuses from different parts of the world has brought about diverse forms of HE orientations and characteristics as well as policies, curricula, pedagogies, and practices within which EMI is key. (Interestingly, even the 700-year-old Université Paris-Sorbonne of France is competing against its rivals, such as New York University, by offering EMI degrees in the crowded UAE market.) Those 31 international branch campuses, together with the EMI degrees which they offer, are strategically used by the UAE government to: attract investors; dominate the TNHE market in the region; and strengthen its identity and "increase self-respect" (Moilanen, 2015).

The idea of educational zones indicates that the UAE government is attempting to brand the image of its HE system through cosmopolitan and diverse forms of education within which English is the shared language. By means of the presence of the 31 international institutions from different geographical locations, the UAE government is attempting to portray the intrinsic qualities of its EMI-oriented HE system to national and international audiences. It is also attempting to create "unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide [its HE system] with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences" (Hillman et al., 2021). In the process, EMI is constantly promoted and idealized across those international branch campuses, in order to attract local and global consumers.

3. Omani TNHE: Branding through benchmarking academic programs

Oman does not have international branch campuses. Instead, its branding in TNHE predominantly occurs through strategies such as: benchmarking curricula as well as academic programs with Western institutions; signing memoranda of understanding with top-ranked global HE institutions; recruiting international students and teachers; and purchasing international training products and services for their institutions. As Braun and Clarke (2006) describes, "the government feels that such modes of [TNHE] business will help the country achieve the following: (1) transfer know-how to the country, (2) create more job opportunities for Omani citizens and (3) preserve local culture and heritage while enhancing local systems" . These goals are realized through Western (predominantly UK and USA) forms and standards of education.

As an illustration: The Modern College of Business and Science in Oman has benchmarked its programs with two USA-based establishments: Franklin University and Amsel University. The National Automotive Higher Institute (NAHI) in Oman has benchmarked its program with the UK-based Institute for Motor Industries (Abouraia & Othman, 2017). There are also several private universities that have benchmarked their programs with international universities. Examples include German University of Technology in Oman with RWTH Aachen University in Germany; the Arab Open University with the UK Open University; and A'Sharqiyah University with Texas Technological Oklahoma State University.

It is through the aforementioned models of branding strategies that Omani universities are able to "offer dual degrees and, collaborating with international universities to design and deliver their academic programs, make validation agreements and seek international accreditations" (Barnawi, 2021). Together, these efforts enable Omani universities to implement English in

education policy throughout their academic programs (Al-Ani, 2017). HE institutions in Oman see the benchmarking of their academic programs with renowned Western universities and the signing of memoranda of understanding as effective branding strategies through which they can construct their images as transnational HE institutions within and across the region. Altogether, the government sees that such branding strategies coupled with EMI policy can add a list of values to the contemporary Omani TNHE. These added values include attracting foreign investors; building local capacity through Western forms of education; and constructing the overall image of the country's HE system.

4. TNHE in Bahrain: Branding through building a regional hub for quality

The NHE strategy states: "The vision is to position Bahrain as a regional hub for quality higher education, producing graduates with the skills, knowledge and behaviors required to succeed in the global knowledge economy while contributing to the sustainable and competitive growth of Bahrain." (Echalar, Lima, & Oliveira, 2020). This 'National Strategy for Higher Education and Skills' sets out the direction and imagination of building a distinctive form of TNHE in Bahrain, through which Bahraini citizens may get a world-class education and compete both locally and globally.

Such efforts, as Barnawi (2017) outlines, [have]sparked a strong desire and competition for (1) imported Western pre-packaged products, goods and services into the country, (2) constantly preparing students for job market need and (3) the internationalization of education through adopting an English medium instruction policy, curricula, pedagogies and practice. (p. 158). It is evident today in that all four public universities in Bahrain have been making tremendous efforts to brand their academic programs by means of benchmarking their curricula, syllabuses, and course materials with top international universities in the UK and North America, as well as attracting international teachers and consultants.

Besides, there are over 15 private universities— some international and others owned by local investors—which are operating in forms such as "offshore campuses, twinning or franchising arraignments and satellite campuses" (Karolak, 2012) across the country. As an illustration, in 2016 the British University of Bahrain established a partnership with the University of Salford in the UK to offer degrees in different disciplines. In its official website, it markets its uniqueness to consumers in the region as follows: Students in Bahrain and the surrounding region have the option to study for a University of Salford degree in Bahrain. So, whether you want to achieve your British degree at home or away, the University of Salford gives you options to achieve your study goals. Through our unique partnership, you can study for a number of University of Salford degrees at the British University Bahrain (Study in Bahrain | University of Salford)

Likewise, the Applied Science University (ASU) in Bahrain benchmarked its programs with London South Bank and Cardiff Metropolitan universities to provide joint degrees in different disciplines of engineering. This partnership was happily endorsed by officials from London South Bank University on their website as follows:

This exciting partnership will help create the type of learning environment we value most at LSBU – one that is vibrant and global, challenging, and supportive, of high standing and well resourced. By developing the sense of global citizenship and the understanding among our students of this new, interconnected world, ASU and LSBU will graduate leaders of the future and help create wealth generation for both our countries (www.lsbu.ac.uk/ about-us/news/engineering-applied-science-university-bahrain)

The Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Development of ASU also rejoiced in this partnership as follows: "We have approval from the Higher Education Council. This really is going in the right direction. This will be the start of bringing students from everywhere – from Africa, Asia and India, as well as from the Arab region" (www.lsbu.ac.uk/ about-us/news/engineering-applied-science-university-bahrain) Collectively, Western forms of education, which often take place through EMI, are seen as a strategic effort in nation branding as well as formulating "national identity as a branded commodity" in Bahrain.

Importantly, these branding efforts (e.g., EMI, partnership with top Western universities, etc.) are construed as a soft power through which the image of Bahrain is created, and at the same time

a market niche is built in the region. This was evident in its National Higher Education Strategy (2014–2024) which boldly stated that "[o]ur strategy comes at a time of increased regional competition and increased skills demands for employers. Our universities must rise to the challenges. The strategy provides a strong strategic focus and a framework for developing excellence in a vibrant sector within the GCC. (National Higher Education Strategy, 2014–2024)

5. TNHE in Kuwait: Benchmarking and associations of local institutions' names with Western universities

In Kuwait, branding in TNHE predominantly takes place through benchmarking academic programs with top international universities; seeking international accreditation; and associating local institutions with Western names. The purpose behind these efforts are "to prove the international quality of [their] programs and recruit more students" (Barnawi, 2017), which in turn have created fierce competition among the four state-supported HE institutions and ten private universities across the country. Table 2 lays out the types of universities in Kuwait.

Table 2: *HE institutions in Kuwait*

University	Type	University	Type	University	Type
Kuwait University	Public	American University of Kuwait (AUK)	Private	American University of the Middle East	Private
The College of Basic Education	Public	Gulf University for Science and Technology	Private	American College of the Middle East	Private
Higher Institute for Theater Arts	Public	Kuwait-Maastricht Business School	Private	Kuwait International Law School	Private
Higher Institute of Music Arts	Public	Box Hill College Kuwait	Private	Algonquin Canadian College of Kuwait	Private
Arab Open University	Private	Australian College of Kuwait	Private		

HE institutions (public and private) are competing among themselves to provide internationally recognized EMI-oriented programs, in collaboration with top international universities. Through their websites, these universities use different marketing techniques to promote academic programs. Their efforts include Western-based curricula, international accreditation, and joint degrees.

For instance, in its official website, The American University of Kuwait announces that its language program is accredited by a prestigious US-based accreditation body, the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), and states that it will uphold the CEA Standards in language education until August 2024. While engaging with different branding efforts (e.g., benchmarking academic programs, international accreditation, etc.), universities in Kuwait see such a set of brand tokens as ways of representing their values and global images. EMI-oriented programs are viewed as an essential economic tool that can regulate their ability to participate in the global, HE markets and promote themselves. The associations of the names of local universities with Western HE institutions (e.g., Box Hill College Kuwait, Australian College of Kuwait, etc.) imply two branding purposes: (i) to distinguish one university from another and (ii) to allow each university to exhibit its adherence to Western programs, curricula, and practices. Consequently, English, as the language of TNHE market, has become "firmly embedded in the structures of competition" (De Costa et al., 2020) among HE institutions in the country.

Discussion

The above findings have revealed that transnational EMI-oriented universities within and across the six Arabian Gulf countries are undertaking different branding strategies to sell their academic programs to different groups of consumers (e.g., local and international students, teachers, etc.) in today's competitive global HE markets. This begs the question of how we can collectively understand these different branding efforts occurring in the region alongside their overall consequences relating to the Arabian Gulf union in building its competitive identity (Anholt, 2007).

There is a constellation of TNHE models in the region that could increase regional competitiveness in the global HE markets. It is argued that different branding efforts undertaken within and across universities in the region, in collaboration with their governments, need to be read through the lens of what is termed as the *Arabian Gulf educational imagination* to understand the overall consequences to the Gulf union as well as the conditions in which they are seeking distinctiveness and specific representational identities in the global HE markets.

It is important that we need to conceptualize this very regional range of branding efforts as a collective imperative rather than a matter of a competition enacted by an individual government or university to obtain a global outlook. Hence, *the Arabian Gulf educational imagination* can be defined as the ways in which HE, language of instruction, knowledge and schooling may be understood, imagined, enacted, and justified by the governments and universities of the six countries in the region, and how educators, policy arbiters, and consumers in the region engage in meaning-making about HE as a site for building local capacity as well as the imagined future.

Notably, the collective governments in the Arabian Gulf, in collaboration with their local universities, predominantly see Euro-American forms of HE charged with English medium instruction, as a proxy for addressing recent epistemological, ideological, social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals facing the region. Through different forms of logistic, financial, and legal supports (e.g., free education zones, opening branch campuses, international rankings, etc.), these governments construe English medium instruction-oriented TNHE policies as strategic efforts for envisioning an ambitious 'imagined future' (Goldenberg & Dalton, 2015).

Intellectual values and identifications of HE bodies in the region are (re)presented through Euro-American forms of education, and English only mentalities. Those very forms of HE are in turn used as a means of economic engagement with global HE institutions through which the HE bodies of the region attract investors, international students, teachers, researchers, and consultants to the region. These forms of HE are also used within and across the six countries to commodify their differences and build market niche around them. It is through such "a new modality of (neo)liberal" (Graan, 2013) policy conversions that English, as a language of the global market economy, together with Western-only mentalities, may penetrate intellectual infrastructures of HE in the region. This further legitimates the questions of determining the overall consequences of branding efforts in the region, and whose interests are best served by them.

As shown in the previous sections, HE bodies, with support from their governments within and across the six Arabian Gulf countries, have been using different branding efforts to (i) claim uniqueness of their EMI-oriented education systems and (ii) at the same time attract local/foreign students, teachers, researchers, consultants, and investors. These efforts have allowed them to be exposed to various international HE systems, curricula, programs, and degrees. In this context, I t can be argued that those different branding efforts discussed in the previous sections are intertwined with neoliberal English language education policies and endeavors, which constantly and even aggressively emphasize self-interest, profit generation, and competitiveness (Barnawi, 2017; Chun, 2017). For this reason, they seem to be creating a collusion of conflicting interests and objectives among the different players in the region: namely, the governments, the local and international universities, and the students. Below I elaborate on these issues.

The primary objectives of the Arab Bureau of Education for the Arabian Gulf countries read as follows: "to contribute to the unification of the member states and its people by providing collaboration among them and developing collective efforts and methods of cooperation in its areas of interest, and increasing the effectiveness of the educational systems to meet the needs of development in the region."(Al Habib, 2021) Paradoxically, the governments in the region today are acting as competitive agents as well as enterprise associations in branding their nations through English medium instruction-oriented HE systems and attracting foreign investors (e.g., the UAE's free education zones, the Qatar Foundation, and Saudi Arabia's international university rankings).

In effect, the neoliberally driven efforts of these HE policies could militate against the collective interests of the region, which seek to promote cooperation, coordination, and integration in HE between the six countries. The efforts made could result in governments in the region representing and imagining each other as rivals instead of as collaborators aiming to secure various regional interests, including joint educational work. What is more, instead of offering education (including

language-in education policies) that could lead to nation-building in the region, local universities are competing among themselves in such areas as international university rankings (as in the case of Saudi Arabia); attracting international students and investors (as in the cases of Qatar and UAE); and benchmarking academic programs and establishing partnership with Western universities (as in the cases of Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait).

In effect, these efforts are giving all necessary means and endorsements to English and English medium instruction policies to invade the HE systems of the region while providing breeding grounds for Western universities and investors to hard-sell every possible means of securing their financial interests. By way of illustration, the Sorbonne-Paris University, mentioned above, is offering degrees in English in the UAE with generous financial support from the UAE government. This begs two key questions, as Phan (2016) states: (i) "why a French university [is] endorsing English-medium education while being proud to promote French-medium and French education internationally", and (ii) why the university's heritage of over 760 years "has not been able to resist the international role of English". Potential answers to those questions could include the point that the branding and commercializing of its programs via English language is seen as the only way of attracting more consumers (i.e., students, teachers, etc.) and securing financial resources.

The appropriation of English language by HE institutions in the region seems to offer foreign students as well as Gulf citizens with a good command of English, access to different Western programs/degrees and future employment. However, students with a poor command of English continue to suffer and be denied access to English-medium HE systems in their own country. Additionally, the wholehearted promotion of English and English-medium education policies seems to be turning HE in the region into "a baroque arsenal, a valuable economic and political cargo for the sellers/exporters but of little educational value to purchasers/importers"(Findlow, 2006).

English, and EMI policies, are framed in terms of economic exchange in the region. EMI policies are seen by HE institutions in the region as a way of claiming intrinsic qualities, while also portraying themselves as being on a global scale. As De Costa et al. (2020) succinctly describe, placing universities at the global scale could bring about "prestige and monetary gain to both the universities and the nation hosting the institution; thus, … an institutional interest also becomes a national one" (p. 3). At the same time, such efforts could drain local intellectual efforts and resources as local universities represent and imagine each other as rivals in the branding of their own specific academic programs.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this context, "the global spread of EMI is perpetuating the stereotype that having a Western-style education is superior and something that is necessary for a successful future" as Galloway, Numajiri, and Rees (2020) convincingly argued. Branding in transnational EMI-oriented universities in the Arabian Gulf seems to create a western hegemony in the region and offers privilege to the players (i.e., governments, universities, teachers, students, and investors) who have engaged in and endorsed English and EMI policies and practices. Worse, transnational university branding efforts in both English and non-English speaking societies are often replete with logics and ethics of a neoliberal free market ideologies that value fierce competition, self-interests, self-reliance, and profit generation.

These branding efforts could also create a hostile community in each educational context. Moreover, students, teachers, universities, investors, and governments might face an increasingly competitive environment, which will further make it difficult to differentiate their EMI programs in today's volatile global higher education market. Furthermore, some local/native people might be 'excluded from accessing the TNHE opportunities' across the GCC region due to language barriers (i.e., English language requirements such TOEFL or IELTS) (Barnawi, 2017). This suggests that transnational MI-oriented policies could inevitably bring about educational inequalities and social class in the region.

Although this paper attempted to offer a new theoretical lens into the contemporary scholarship of EMI, further ethnographic studies are needed; studies that help us investigate (i) the pull factors of branding in TNHE, and (ii) how different branding initiatives in language education can contribute to class structures within nation states, inequalities between students, and neo-colonialism.

Notes on contributors

Osman Z. Barnawi is an associate professor at the Royal Commission Colleges and Institutes, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia. His research interests include the intersection(s) of language and political economy, social and education policy studies, the cultural politics of education, multilingual and multicultural studies, second language writing, and transnational education. His works appear in journals such as Language and Education, Critical Studies in Education, and Australian Review of Applied Linguistics. He is the founding editor of Global South Perspectives on TESOL (Book Series: Routledge-Taylor and Francis Group). His recent books are TESOL and the cult of speed in the age of neoliberal mobility (Routledge, 2020), Neoliberalism and English Language Education Policies in the Arabian (Routledge, 2018), and Writing Centers in the Higher Education Landscape of the Arabian Gulf (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

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