

Global Education Governance in the GCC: A UAE-Centric Systematic Review of Global Agendas, Transnational Actors, and Local Agency (2020–2025)

Research Overview

This systematic review examines how global education governance agendas intersect with national reforms in GCC countries, focusing on the UAE (2020–2025). Synthesizing empirical and policy literature, the study analyzes SDG4 influence, transnational actors, privatization dynamics, and national vision strategies shaping localized responses to global education reform pressures.

Purpose of the Study

Over the past decade, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have undergone rapid educational transformation shaped by global education governance frameworks. International agendas such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), UNESCO’s Education 2030 Framework, OECD benchmarking systems, and global university rankings have increasingly influenced national reform trajectories. At the same time, GCC states assert strong national visions emphasizing cultural preservation, economic diversification, and sovereign policy control.

This study investigates the interaction between global education governance and national policy in GCC countries, with a focused analysis of the United Arab Emirates between 2020 and 2025. Specifically, the study addresses three guiding questions:

- (1) How have global education agendas influenced national reforms in GCC countries?
- (2) What role do transnational actors and private providers play in shaping education governance in the UAE and broader GCC?
- (3) How do national vision strategies assert local agency in adapting or mediating global governance pressures?

By situating the UAE within a regional comparative framework, this research contributes to understanding how small, rapidly developing states balance globalization and sovereignty in educational policy design and implementation.

Research Methods

This study employs a systematic review methodology guided by PRISMA 2020 standards. A structured search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories for publications between 2020 and 2025. Keywords included combinations of “GCC education policy,” “SDG4 implementation,” “UAE education reform,” “global education governance,” and “transnational actors in education.”

Inclusion criteria required studies to:

- Focus on GCC countries (with UAE emphasis)
- Examine global education agendas or governance structures
- Be published between 2020–2025
- Include peer-reviewed research, government reports, or international organization documents

Fifteen sources met the inclusion criteria, including peer-reviewed articles, UNESCO and OECD reports, and national strategic documents. Thematic coding was applied to identify patterns related to global policy influence, privatization, governance structures, and national adaptation strategies. Cross-case synthesis enabled comparative insights across GCC states while maintaining the UAE as the central case.

Results and Discussion

Findings reveal that global education governance agendas significantly shape policy direction across the GCC, though implementation varies by context.

First, alignment with SDG4 and international benchmarking frameworks has strongly influenced reform priorities. The UAE and other GCC states participate actively in international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS, using results to drive curriculum reforms, teacher professional development, and accountability systems. In the UAE, national strategies explicitly reference global benchmarks, demonstrating a strong orientation toward international competitiveness and knowledge economy development.

Second, transnational actors and private education providers play a central role in policy implementation, particularly in the UAE. Approximately 80–90% of K–12 students in the UAE attend private schools, many offering international curricula. International branch campuses, foreign curriculum providers, and multinational education companies contribute to shaping governance practices. While this model introduces global expertise and innovation, it also creates regulatory challenges related to quality assurance, equity, and system coherence. GCC states increasingly operate as regulators and coordinators within highly privatized education ecosystems.

Third, despite strong global engagement, GCC governments assert local agency through national vision strategies and cultural policy frameworks. In the UAE, initiatives such as Arabic language preservation policies, moral education curricula, and federal quality standards illustrate deliberate adaptation rather than passive policy adoption. Governance structures—particularly the UAE’s federal–emirate model—allow experimentation at local levels (e.g., Dubai and Abu Dhabi initiatives) while maintaining centralized coordination to ensure policy coherence.

Comparatively, GCC countries share common reform drivers—knowledge economy ambitions, global benchmarking participation, and SDG alignment—but differ in privatization levels and implementation speed. The UAE exhibits the most extensive integration of global and local policy mechanisms, positioning itself as both policy adopter and emerging contributor to global education governance discussions.

The study concludes that GCC education systems operate through a “glocal governance” model: embracing global standards and partnerships while strategically embedding national identity, sovereignty, and policy autonomy. Effective governance in this context requires balancing innovation with regulation, ensuring that global engagement enhances rather than undermines equity and cultural priorities.

Keywords

Global education governance; SDG4; Transnational actors; GCC education reform; Policy localization