UNESCO Doha Research Conference on
“Enhancing Students Performance in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the Gulf Cooperation Council States (GCC) for Improved Learning Outcomes”
(Qatar, 4-5 March 2015)

CONFERENCE REPORT

Conducted under the QNRF Funded Project on Momentum for Education Beyond 2015: Improving the Quality of Learning Outcomes and Enhancing the Performance of Education Systems in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries
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Conference Report

I. Background and Rationale

There have been substantial regional investments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to reconceptualise national standards that meet the demands of improved education outcomes benchmarked for the 21st century. However, there remain concerns about the quality of national and regional educational inputs and the resulting impact on instruction. Despite the progress made over the past decades in developing educational systems in the GCC, results in quality of learning outcomes are low when compared to other countries at similar income levels.

The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is held every three years and in 2012 more than 510,000 students of 15-years of age from 65 countries took part, including selected GCC States. Over the past decade, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has become the world’s premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems in providing young people with skills to achieve their full potential, and participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy. A study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reveals that students from the GCC attain lower scores in mathematics compared to those from nations that are relatively resource-poor.

More than 70 countries have signed up to take part in the PISA assessment in 2015, which will focus on science. Moreover, the 2013/14 EFA Global Monitoring Report highlights the role of international assessments including PISA, TIMSS, & PIRLS in monitoring learning progress across countries. While the international assessments provide a global measure of whether all children are learning the basics, national assessments complement this measure by monitoring progress within countries towards achieving a wider set of learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2014).

To address the critical question of improving learning outcomes in the GCC, UNESCO Doha is currently engaged in several inter-related processes aimed at assessing national progress in the six EFA goals, and shaping the future education development agenda in GCC countries. To enable this, UNESCO-Doha, in collaboration with Qatar University College of Education, is currently
conducting research entitled, *Momentum for Education beyond 2015 in the GCC*, funded by Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF), to provide a critical analysis of the performance of education systems in the GCC, and provide recommendations for improving the quality of learning outcomes to enable evidence-based decision-making. Phase 3 of the UNESCO research study, “Momentum for Education Beyond 2015” funded by QNRF, aims to examine PISA 2012 results in the GCC in order to enhance student performance in this international assessment. Moreover, phase 4 of the research aims to explore what lessons can Qatar and the GCC States learn from other countries to improve student performance in PISA 2015 and learning outcomes. Given the complementarity of the two research objectives, and to build on the outcomes of the discussions on PISA to learn lessons for improving learning outcomes, UNESCO Doha organized two events, back-to-back on 4 and 5 March 2015. The two-day discussions provided valuable insights on progress achieved in these areas in the GCC, and helped identify challenges, and learn lessons from international and regional experience to inform the way forward to improve learning outcomes.

**II. Conference Aims and Expected Outputs**

The purpose of the two-day Conference with focus on PISA results and learning outcomes was to:

1. Identify what can Qatar and the GCC states learn and adopt from other countries to improve learning outcomes;
2. Reflect on context-specific lessons learned from the PISA experience in the GCC states participating in these assessments to improve learning outcomes;
3. Identify what measures have been taken by the GCC countries to improve learning outcomes and what still needs to be done;
4. Propose recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond.

**III. The expected outputs of the Conference include:**

1. Identification of challenges that need to be addressed to improve the performance of students in upcoming rounds of PISA;
2. Policy and strategic recommendations to improve learning outcomes in the GCC;
3. Knowledge exchange on national, regional, and international lessons learned and effective measures to enhance student performance in PISA in the GCC, thereby reinforcing the performance of education systems in the region; and
4. Establishment of a research network focusing on improvement of learning outcomes in the GCC.
IV. Participants

Around 43 participants from Qatar and abroad attended the conference, including:

- Public education officials from national commissions and ministries of education focusing on learning assessments, PISA, and educational quality from 5 GCC countries including Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, KSA, and UAE;
- Senior policy makers from ministries of education and other departments from 6 Arab countries;
- International and regional experts from USA and France;
- Representatives from regional organizations and centers; and
- Representatives from international agencies and organizations.

V. Conference Organization

The Conference was organized over two working days (please refer to attached conference agenda in Annex):

DAY 1 (4 March)

Objectives

- Identify what can Qatar and the GCC states learn and adopt from other countries to improve learning outcomes; and
- Reflect on context-specific lessons learned from the PISA 2012 experience in the GCC states participating in these assessments.

Organization

The first day comprised of four segments. First, a plenary session with opening remarks by Secretary General of Qatar National Commission, Dr. Hamda Al-Sulaiti and Director UNESCO Doha Dr. Anna Paolini. Also, a joint presentation introducing the project Momentum for Education Beyond 2015: Improving the Quality of Learning Outcomes and Enhancing the Performance of Education Systems in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries with preliminary notes from Kuwait and Qatar Case studies presented by the project LPI, Dr. Faryal Khan and Research Consultant, Dr. Iman Chahine. The final presentation in the first segment focused on Achieving Quality Education through Learning Assessments: The case of GCC States and Yemen by researcher Mrs. Nihan Koselec Blanchy, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO Paris.

The second segment focused on Country-specific highlights of national and international learning assessments (including reflections on PISA 2012 results) from Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and United Arab Emirates. The session was moderated by Dr. Khalil Mahshi, former Director, IIEP.

The third segment was presented by Mr. Tue Halgreen, OECD PISA analyst and was broadcasted through Skype and moderated by Dr. Helen Abadzi, from University of Texas and a former World Bank Education Specialist. The title of the presentation is PISA 2012: What Makes Schools and School Systems Successful.
Day 1 was concluded with the fourth segment, which was structured around focus group discussions guided by the following questions:

1. What are the major challenges of learning outcomes in the GCC?
2. What are lessons learned from the PISA 2012 experience in the GCC states participating in these assessments;
3. What can GCC states learn and adopt from other countries to improve learning outcomes?

DAY 2 (5 March)

Objectives

1. Identify what measures have been taken by the GCC countries to improve learning outcomes and what still needs to be done; and
2. Propose recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond.

Organization

The second day included four segments and focused mainly on several group discussion sessions.

The first segment commenced with a debriefing by a rapporteur on the outcomes of Day One. The second segment was centered on lessons learned from international experience to improve learning outcomes. The segment was presented by Dr. Helen Abadzi, from University of Texas. The third and fourth segments included group discussion moderated by country specific representatives and focused on two questions:

- What steps and measures have been taken to improve learning outcomes with focus on PISA in the GCC?
- What are the plans and future for education and learning outcomes in the GCC?

Day 2 was concluded with policy recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond. The segment was presented and Chaired by Dr. Khalil Mahshi, former Director at IIEP.
VI. Sessions and Proceedings

DAY1 (Wednesday, 4 March 2015)

Plenary session: Segment 1

The plenary session started with opening remarks from Secretary General of Qatar National Commission, Dr. Hamda Al-Sulaiti.

Dr. Hamda Al-Sulaiti focused on fundamental future educational plans bridging between learning and knowledge-based society. She further addressed the need to assess what has been accomplished and to exchange experiences and challenges in order to improve the performance of students and train them to deal with the problems and challenges in the 21st Century.

Dr. Anna Paolini highlighted the importance of finding a common language for dialogue and capitalized on the need to use data as sources of evidence to improve performance and guide reform initiatives. Moreover, Dr. Paolini explained that mobilizing initiatives to ensure quality of education should be a top priority in the region.

The second presentation included a joint presentation introducing the project Momentum for Education Beyond 2015: Improving the Quality of Learning Outcomes and Enhancing the Performance of Education Systems in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries with preliminary notes from Kuwait and Qatar Case studies presented by the project LPI, Dr. Faryal Khan and Research Consultant, Dr. Iman Chahine.

Dr. Khan examined global post-2015 Education Consultations that aim to redefine education vision and principles thus gaining momentum for a new post 2015 Global education agenda that is rights-based with a focus on equity and inclusion, and provision of quality education at all levels (*Sharm el Shaikh Statement, January 2015*). Furthermore, Dr. Khan shared the objectives of the QNRF project in light of EFA post 2015 priorities. Dr. Khan's presentation set the expectations for the PISA conference and proposed a working agenda designed to encourage dialogue to learn lessons from assessment experiences in other countries.

Dr. Chahine discussed analysis of data in assessments of learning outcomes and comparative surveys such as PISA (2012), PIRLS and TIMSS (2011), the UNESCO EFA GMR 2013 and IBE World Data on Education, indicating that average levels of student learning in the GCC countries are low. She also shared preliminary findings for Kuwait and Qatar Case studies that were conducted in the context of improving learning outcomes in the region.

In the third presentation on Achieving Education Quality through Learning Assessments: A focus on GCC States and Yemen, Ms. Nihan Blanchy discussed the quality of education by providing a detailed account of international and national learning assessments. She emphasized the need to use assessment outcomes as a means to improve learning. She also highlighted the disparities in learning opportunities between rich and poor countries, rural and urban areas, and gender related differences noted in international assessments. Ms. Blanchy concluded by emphasizing the need to inform teachers and schools about assessment results, with other accompanying policies (such as
professional development or coaching), is hence essential to inform the day-to-day instruction that occurs in the classroom.

**Plenary Session: Segment 2**

The second segment focused on Country-specific highlights of national and international learning assessments (including reflections on PISA 2012 results) from Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and United Arab Emirates. The session was moderated by Dr. Khalil Mahshi, Former Director, IIEP. (Three countries shared their experience. Bahrain shared its experience as well – UAE, Bahrain, and Oman.)

Dr. Ali AlRasbi from Oman highlighted in his presentation the objectives of the national tests in Sultanate Oman and shared results of Omani students in TIMSS 2009 and 2011 in comparison with their counterparts in the GCC countries. He further discussed national efforts to raise the level of performance of Omani students in international studies.

Mrs. Shaikha Al Zaabi & Dr. Jarrod Hingston from Abu Dhabi ADEC P-12 Policy, Assessment Division highlighted the impact of the school on student achievement and presented the results of Pisa assessments in Abu Dhabi. They further explained that 48% of the variation in achievement in Abu Dhabi’s mathematics results is attributable directly to schools. They also described Abu Dhabi’s school effect as very high compared to most other countries. The presenters shared general findings from PISA 2012 results indicating that there is a higher degree of school effect on student achievement in Abu Dhabi in comparison with many other education systems. They further explained that assumptions about student achievement is higher in private schools are incorrect and that assumptions about student achievement being higher for females (and ‘Girls’ schools) are only correct for reading literacy. Their findings indicate that schools located in high population areas have significantly higher student achievement levels than schools located in remote areas and that schools that establish programs to promote creativity tend to have higher achieving students. They also found that students’ sense of belonging (e.g. a student must be socially and emotionally comfortable) within the school is critical to student attainment.

Dr. Ibrahim Janahi from Bahrain highlighted the differences between evaluation and assessment. He also discussed the role of national and international assessments in informing decision making particularly in relation to learning outcomes. Dr. Janahi further examined the performance of Bahraini students in TIMSS 2011 mathematics and science tests in comparison with their counterparts in other Arab countries and proposed ways to use assessments as tools to enhance instructional support.

**Plenary Session: Segment 3**

In his Skype talk on PISA 2012: What Makes Schools and School Systems Successful, Mr. Tue Halgreen, OECD PISA analyst compared School performance and socio-economic background in Qatar, UAE and Finland. He further explored the relationship between mathematics performance and students' exposure to applied mathematics. By examining PISA 2012 results, the speaker indicated that countries that grant schools autonomy over curricula and assessments tend to perform better in mathematics. He also indicated that expenditure on education makes a difference –only up to a point. He further noted that countries with better performance in mathematics tend to allocate educational resources more equitably. Please see full presentation attached.
Plenary Session: Segment 4 - Group work

Group work session was structured around focus group discussions guided by the following questions:

1. What are the major challenges of learning outcomes in the GCC?

The participants identified the challenges as per the following categories:

**Within schools:**
- Teachers attendance in schools
- Resources inconsistent or not well planned
- Policy inconsistency
- Curriculum does not support the international assessments (content is not relevant)
- Teaching and learning in support of international assessments

**For teachers**
- Teacher from different nationalities hence have different teaching approaches, qualifications and dialects which in turn impact teaching and learning
- Dissatisfaction with the teaching profession
- Work Over load
- Teachers don’t take tests seriously
- Resources are not set up to support international assessments and teachers are not well trained to deliver as expected

**For students**
- Immigration status of students (students are migrating frequently so are at different levels and abilities)
- The issue of language (English or Arabic as a second language) and in terms of dialects
- Early childhood education is not well established in the Gulf and the impact that this is having on PISA results
- PISA doesn’t account for what happens beyond the school (home, literacy, environment, community, cultural behavioral issue, availability of books)
- Students don’t take tests seriously and are not used to international assessments format.

**For Leadership**
- Frequent change in approaches and policies cause instability in the region. For example the language of provision of core subjects has changed over the past decade between English and Arabic hence disrupting teaching and learning, impacting the availability of instructional resources, etc.
- Some countries are not ready to be part of the assessment because they want are still working on building their “Education systems”
- Centralized process of decision making especially in KSA.
- Not clear what needs to be done with the results beyond scores and ranks and this is creating many questions: How to disseminate results to all stakeholders in a positive way that is understood by all? What follows the strategic decision of participating in international tests? etc.
2. What are lessons learned from the PISA 2012 experience in the GCC states participating in these assessments?

The following lessons were extracted:

- Qatar and UAE can learn from each other’s experiences (improvement in learning experience).
- The assessment results and data should be evaluated to inform how to strategize in order to improve performance.
- The disproportionate composition of Qatar and UAE population, having higher percentage of expatriates than residents and how such demographics might skew results. The issue of international schools vs independent schools. PISA sampling process could also impact results.
- There are significant differences in how different schools are performing in PISA. What are some schools doing?
  - More professional development is needed to enhance teachers’ pedagogical knowledge.
  - More regional research is needed to explore measures of successful performance.
  - Reconsidering cognitive approaches to teaching and learning.
  - More regional strategies and approaches to overcome disparities in the quality of teaching.
  - Long term strategy that is implemented consistently; no changes in approach half way through that informs resource development and/or resource requirements.

3. What can GCC states learn and adopt from other countries to improve learning outcomes with a focus on PISA?

The participants proposed the following suggestions:

- Explore ways to motivate students
- Research how other countries improve their results and learning achievements
- Induce learning values
- Enact more equitable distribution of resources
- Develop a culture of accountability
- Collect more data on students’ reading speed and levels
- Use the results to inform and improve the relationship between factors outside of schools that could potentially impact results
- Use the results to improve students’ perception of their national identity
- Help focus learning skills on application of knowledge which raises students’ core skills

DAY 2 (5 March)

Dr. Aziza AlSaadi from Supreme Education Council opened the session with a summary of Day1 work of and listed the challenges faced by students and teacher leadership and school level.

The second segment was centered on lessons learned from international experiences to improve learning outcomes. Dr. Helen Abadzi from University of Texas presented the segment and explored...
findings based on cognitive science to improve learning outcomes, particularly focusing on the importance of language. Dr. Abadzi provided a description of the basics of memory and visual perception of students and explained how the print quality of the examinations could affect the results of the students. She also emphasized the complexity of Arabic language and the need to prepare students in terms of speed, fluency, and understanding of the desired text. She further capitalized on early development of numeracy. Please see Appendix for full presentation for your reference.

The third and fourth segments included group discussion moderated by country specific representatives and focused on two questions:

1. What steps and measures have been taken to improve learning outcomes with focus on PISA in the GCC?

The participants listed the following measures

- Revising curriculum standards and the general framework of the curriculum mode.
- Focusing on the acquisition of basic skills (reading and math) in early childhood.
- Focusing on the suitability of the test materials, the target age group in the form of text and form text and font size / type, and especially in Arabic.
- Paying more attention to special education research.
- Abu Dhabi has created pilot schools to teach students from kindergarten through seventh grade, a bilingual education program applies 21st century skills and focuses on educational resources and creativity.
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has developed a national framework for learning outcomes which illustrates the most important learning outcomes for all levels of education starting from the primary to the secondary levels.
- Sultanate of Oman developed a plan to reform national standards and work is still in progress to cover all academic levels.

2. What are the plans and future for education and learning outcomes in the GCC?

- Based on the results of students in the State of Qatar in international and national assessments in math and science, the language of instruction has been changed from English to Arabic.
- Amendments in the resources for learning as the language of instruction changed from English to Arabic while maintaining the scientific terminology and symbols in Arabic and English.
- Strengthen professional development for teachers.
- Increase awareness among parents of the importance of international tests by activating their role in the boards of trustees.
- Provide more control by the official authorities by enacting accountability measures on the performance of teachers.
- Conduct studies in the region to examine the most important indicators and outputs that contribute to the development of education and learning outcomes through 2015 PISA test results.
Day 2 was concluded with policy recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond. The segment was presented and chaired by Dr. Khalil Mahshi, former Director at IIEP. The talk focused on capitalizing on the results of PISA as indicators of improved performance and not as the goal of learning. Dr. Mahshi further stressed the importance of reform at school level since this is where policies related to improving education quality are translated into action and measurable results. He further highlighted several recommendations on teacher recruitment and support, recommendations on motivating teachers, and the importance of the role of school principals and other education leaders in all these aspects. Based on successful international experiences, he underlined the benefits of having school principals engage teachers and other stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of a school improvement plan.

**VII. Recommendations and Way Forward**

In conclusion, the participants agreed on the following action points:

1. To set goals that will lead to better access to the results of the next study
2. To examine further differential performance across gender and levels of schooling
3. To develop long-term strategies and emphasize security and continuity of existence and work to implement them.
4. To establish fruitful cooperation between the countries to improve the learning experience
5. To create well-structured training for teacher development and growth
6. To explore new ways to motivate students to take the tests seriously
7. To reconsider the potentials of cognitive approaches in teaching and learning
8. To collect more data through opinion surveys and questionnaires and analyze them to gain better understanding of progress of learning in schools
9. To mobilize interest in extra-curricular activities to improve student performance.
10. To strengthen the affiliation of students, teachers, schools and the nation towards an informed citizenship and coexistence.
### Objectives:
1. Identify what can Qatar and the GCC states learn and adopt from other countries to improve learning outcomes;

2. Reflect on context-specific lessons learned from the PISA 2012 experience in the GCC states participating in these assessments.

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<td>8:30-9:00</td>
<td>Registration</td>
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<td>9:00-9:30 am</td>
<td>Opening Session:</td>
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<td>Welcome Remarks by State of Qatar</td>
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<td>Secretary General, National Commission of Qatar</td>
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<td>Opening Remarks</td>
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<td>Introductions</td>
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<td>9:30-10:30 am</td>
<td>Chairperson: Dr. Hamda Al Sulaiti, SG National Commission for Qatar</td>
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<td>Momentum for Education Beyond 2015: Improving the Quality of Learning</td>
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<td>Outcomes and Enhancing the Performance of Education Systems in the Gulf</td>
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<td>Cooperation Council Countries with preliminary findings of the Kuwait</td>
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<td>Dr. Faryal Khan, UNESCO ED Programme Specialist</td>
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<td>Achieving Quality Education Through Learning Assessments: The Case of</td>
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<td>Nihan Koseleci Blanchy</td>
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<td>Researcher, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO</td>
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<td>10:30-11:00 am</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<td>11:00 am-12:00 noon</td>
<td>Chairperson: Mr. Khalil Mahshi</td>
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<td>Country-specific highlights of national and international learning</td>
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<td>assessments (including reflections on PISA 2012 results):</td>
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| 12:00 noon to 1:00 pm | Chairperson: Dr. Helen Abadzi  
PISA 2012: What Makes Schools and School Systems Successful  
_Tue Halgreen, PISA analyst and PISA for School project manager_ By SKYPE OECD  
_Questions and Answers_ |
| 1:00-2:00 pm | Group Work Session 1:  
Questions for discussions:  
What are the major challenges of learning outcomes in the GCC?  
What are lessons learned from the PISA 2012 experience in the GCC states participating in these assessments;  
What can GCC states learn and adopt from other countries to improve learning outcomes with a focus on PISA;  
Report back to Plenary |
| 2:00 pm      | Lunch                                         |

**Thursday 5 March 2015**  
**Working Group Sessions**

**Objectives:**  
1. Identify what measures have been taken by the GCC countries to improve learning outcomes and what still needs to be done.  
2. Propose recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond.

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| 8:30 am-9:00 am | Chairperson: Dr. Aziza Al Saadi, SEC, Qatar  
Outcomes of Day One by Rapporteur |
| 9:00 am- 9:45 am | Lessons learned from international experience to improve learning outcomes  
_Dr. Helen Abadzi, University of Texas_  
Questions and Answers |
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<th>Session Details</th>
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| 9:45 am-10:30 am | Chairperson: Country representative  
Group Work Session 2: What steps and measures have been taken to improve learning outcomes with focus on PISA in the GCC?  
  Group 1  
  Group 2  
  Group 3  
  Group 4 |
| 10:30-10:45 am | Break                                                                            |
| 10:45 am – 12:00 noon | Chairperson: Country representative  
Group Work Session 3:  
What are the plans and future for education and learning outcomes in the GCC?  
  Group 1  
  Group 2  
  Group 3  
  Group 4 |
| 12:00 nn-1:00 pm | Report of group work to plenary session                                          |
| 1:00 pm-2:00 pm | Chairperson: UNESCO  
Policy recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond  
  Khalil Mahshi, Former Director, IIEP  
Wrap up and Next Steps |
| 2:00 pm       | Lunch                                                                           |
Khalil Mahshi, Former Director of UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, wrapping up the policy recommendations to enhance the performance of education systems in GCC countries and to increase success rate of students in PISA 2015 and beyond.

Tue Halgreen of OECD presenting over Skype, “Lessons for GCC for the PISA 2012 Results: What makes schools and school systems successful?”

Photo Gallery

Participants during the group sessions