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Student wellbeing in Qatar: a systems thinking approach to educational, societal, and cultural challenges

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Introduction: This study investigated the challenges affecting sustainable student well-being in Qatar, with a specific emphasis on educational, societal, and cultural dimensions. Using Systems Thinking to conceptualize the interconnected nature of these challenges, the study aimed to analyze how these domains collectively impact student well-being.

Methods: Data were gathered from focus groups involving key stakeholders, including educators, parents, and policymakers. The discussions were analyzed to identify complex relationships and patterns across the educational, societal, and cultural domains.

Results: Educational challenges included systemic deficiencies, inadequate curricula, and a lack of opportunities for critical and creative thinking. Societal challenges encompassed social stereotyping, adverse social conditions, and insufficient familial support for progressive education. Cultural challenges highlighted issues related to identity, values, and the influence of a rentier mindset. The study revealed a fragmented educational system hindered by a lack of unified vision and professional development opportunities, along with societal constraints that impede intellectual growth. Additionally, concerns were raised over the erosion of cultural identity and religious values, exacerbated by Western educational norms and the dominance of English over Arabic. Rapid economic growth in Qatar has also led to increased materialism and individualism, affecting social cohesion.

Discussion: Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates educational reforms, societal support, and cultural preservation. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to enhance sustainable student well-being and create a more holistic educational environment in Qatar.

KEYWORDS

student wellbeing, intellectual challenges, educational and societal influences, cultural identity, systems thinking, Qatar

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of wellbeing has attracted renewed and heightened interest among scholars, researchers, educators, businesses, and policymakers. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified global attention to health and wellbeing (Yaaqeb et al., 2022). The importance of wellbeing for individuals, communities, and societies is increasingly recognized, with governmental and non-governmental organizations seeking to enhance employee wellbeing through interventions addressing emotional, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions (Althammer et al., 2021; Gritzka et al., 2020; Pieper et al., 2019). Consequently,

wellbeing is becoming an increasingly prominent priority in policy agendas at local, national, and regional levels worldwide.

The concept of wellbeing lacks a uniform definition (Martela and Sheldon, 2019; Pollard and Lee, 2003), with blurred distinctions between wellbeing, quality of life, and wellness (McGregor, 2018; Wijngaards et al., 2022). Research on wellbeing has been criticized for being reductionist and overly focused on Western definitions and conceptualizations, thus failing to provide a culturally sensitive and inclusive perspective. Indeed, most of the research on wellbeing has been conducted in the global North, predominantly within WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) nations (Abma et al., 2019; Hendriks et al., 2019). More research on wellbeing in the global South is needed, particularly in non-Western contexts. Indeed, most wellbeing research has been conducted in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) nations, leaving a significant gap in understanding wellbeing from a non-Western perspective (Abma et al., 2019; Hendriks et al., 2019). Because cultural and societal factors play a significant role in shaping wellbeing, Western definitions may not fully capture the different facets of wellbeing in countries such as Qatar, where Islamic values and community support are integral to wellbeing (Joseph and Razzak, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by providing a contextualized analysis from an Arab, and Middle Eastern viewpoint, focusing on Qatar.

The purpose of this study was to identify salient challenges hindering sustainable student intellectual and social wellbeing in Qatar, focusing on private and public sector stakeholders' perceptions. In this study, intellectual wellbeing refers to the cognitive and educational aspects that contribute to a student's ability to engage critically and creatively with their academic environment. This includes factors such as access to quality education, opportunities for critical thinking, and the presence of supportive educational systems. Social wellbeing comprises the interpersonal and communal aspects that affect students' emotional and psychological health, including social support networks, family relationships, and cultural identity (Carter and Andersen, 2023; Psaila, 2019). These dimensions are crucial in Qatar because they are closely intertwined with the country's cultural values and societal structures, which emphasize community cohesion and Islamic principles (Joseph and Razzak, 2021). Thus, by adopting a non-Western perspective, it contributes to the existing literature by providing contextualized insights into the cultural and socio-political context of Qatar. By investigating potential barriers to intellectual and social wellbeing from an Arab, Middle Eastern viewpoint, this research provides valuable insights that can be locally significant and globally relevant, with potential implications for policy making in the country and the broader Arabian Gulf region.

The findings from this research are expected to provide empirical evidence that will guide the design of pertinent educational programs, inform the development of effective strategies for enhancing and embracing wellbeing. Ultimately, the conclusions drawn from this study will highlight the necessity of promoting programs and activities that address the intellectual and social needs of individual and communities in order to empower their inner capacities to confront life's challenges. It is anticipated that this will also contribute to creating opportunities to cultivate overall wellbeing in Qatar and beyond.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section contextualizes the research problem of the current study and provides background information that sets the scene for the remainder of the study. It includes a review of the available literature addressing the concept of wellbeing. This is followed by a detailed description of the study's

research methodology, including the research design, participants, data collection methods, and the mode of data analysis. The following section presents the study's findings, with a particular emphasis on the educational, social and cultural influences shaping wellbeing in the context under investigation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and offers recommendations for future research.

2 Background

Qatar provides a particularly relevant and interesting context for studying student wellbeing due to its unique socio-economic structures, cultural specificities, and policy systems. The country's economic prosperity, driven by its affluent oil and natural gas resources, has resulted in one of the highest per capita incomes globally. This wealth has facilitated significant investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, leading to a higher standard of living and improved overall wellbeing for its residents (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). However, the distribution of wealth remains uneven, creating socio-economic disparities, with nationals often enjoying more benefits than expatriate workers and potentially leading to feelings of inequity and decreased wellbeing among the latter group (Hanieh, 2021). Moreover, Qatar's culture, deeply rooted in Islamic faith and Arab traditions, influences social habits, family structures, and community relationships. These cultures shape individual and communal wellbeing by providing social support networks and affecting lifestyle choices (Joseph and Razzak, 2021). The strong sense of community and familial bonds often serve as protective factors against stress and mental health issues.

Qatar's successive governments have implemented a series of policies aimed at improving the wellbeing of its population. For instance, the Qatar National Vision 2030 outlines a comprehensive framework for sustainable development, emphasizing human development, social development, economic development, and environmental management (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008). Similar other initiatives, such as the National Health Strategy 2018–2022, were launched to address mental health, chronic diseases, and health promotion, reflecting a holistic approach to wellbeing (Brik, 2025). However, despite important strides made in fields such as education and socio-economic development, challenges persist in domains critical to human wellbeing (Smith and Johnson A., 2023). While advancements in education have widened access and improved literacy rates, challenges remain in ensuring world-class quality education for all. Socio-economic development initiatives have lifted many out of poverty and improved living standards, yet health-related issues and social cohesion remain pressing issues that demand attention. Similarly, the evolving nature of work and the demands of modern life pose challenges to achieving a healthy work-life balance, impacting individual wellbeing and productivity.

3 Literature review

The study of wellbeing has attracted significant attention worldwide and continues to gain momentum, with a particular focus on understanding its multiple dimensions. The available scholarship reveals that "wellbeing" is a largely contested term (Cooke et al., 2016; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Nelson et al., 2015). The term is generally understood to refer to personal

satisfaction and experience of happiness, including emotional, mental, and physical health (Lambert et al., 2020; Warrier et al., 2023). Whereas there is no singular or uniform definition of wellbeing is available, the literature provides an assortment of perspectives that comprise multiple facets of this construct (Marsh et al., 2020; Rohde et al., 2020; VanderWeele and Lomas, 2023). Broadly defined, wellbeing encompasses diverse dimensions including intellectual, mental, physical, social, and spiritual aspects of a person's or community's experiences (Carter and Andersen, 2023).

For example, according to the OECD (2020), "Wellbeing encompasses quality of life, which includes health, education, income, and wealth, work-life balance, civic engagement, and environmental quality." Along the same line, the United Nations Development Programme (2020) states that "Human wellbeing is determined by a complex interaction of various factors including economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural." Building on previous conceptualizations of wellbeing, Bartels et al. (2019), Mans et al. (2021), and Psaila (2019) define wellbeing as a multi-dimensional construct incorporating mental, physical, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions (Psaila, 2019; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Wellbeing is a complex construct encompassing emotional, mental, physical, and social health. The extant literature underscores its integral role in individual and societal prosperity, directly impacting the quality of life, prosperity, and productivity (Ruggeri et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that myriad factors shape wellbeing and, as such, present both opportunities for its enhancement and hindrances impeding its protection and improvement (World Health Organization, 2018). While governmental and non-governmental policies and initiatives hold the potential to enhance wellbeing, addressing socioeconomic inequities, mental health stigma, chronic diseases, and environmental factors remain critical. A holistic approach that integrates policy, community, and individual efforts is crucial for fostering sustainable wellbeing.

A sound conceptualization of wellbeing must therefore take into consideration the complex and multidimensional nature of the concept, including its economic, social, environmental, and cultural components (Jones et al., 2021). While previous studies on the influences shaping wellbeing outcomes frequently emphasize broad trends, they often fall short in delving deeply into the complex relationships between individual characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education level, employment, etc.) and contextual factors (e.g., governmental policies, socio-economic status, cultural norms and practices, etc.). This study aims to address this gap by examining the interaction among these factors, offering a thorough analysis that can inform future policymaking and practice.

Underpinning research on wellbeing are two theoretical frameworks: hedonic wellbeing and eudaemonic wellbeing (Psaila, 2019). The hedonistic tradition emphasizes happiness, life satisfaction and goal achievements, while the eudaimonic tradition underscores living life to the full (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Ryff et al., 2021). Building upon these theoretical frameworks, two approaches have been proposed in the wellbeing literature: subjective and objective wellbeing. The former approach focuses on "personal experiences and individual fulfillment, which include eudaemonic wellbeing (e.g., finding meaning in life and experiencing a sense of personal growth)" as well as "hedonic wellbeing (e.g., feeling happy and being satisfied with one's own life)." (Ross et al., 2020, pp. 1–2). The second views wellbeing "in

terms of quality-of-life indicators such as material resources (e.g., income, food, and housing) and social attributes (education, health, political voice, social networks, and connections)" (Ross et al., 2020, p. 2).

3.1 Measurement of wellbeing

Measuring wellbeing is a complex task due to the varied and personal nature of subjective experiences, presenting numerous challenges. Two general approaches to the measurement of wellbeing are identified in the literature: objective and subjective assessments (Schulte et al., 2015). The first approach, objective assessments, relies on quantifiable and observable factors such as education level, employment status, income, physical health, and life expectancy. These measures provide important insights into the factors contributing to wellbeing by focusing on tangible and measurable indicators. The second approach, subjective assessments, focuses on individuals' feelings, perceptions, and evaluations of their own wellbeing. This type of assessment is based on self-reported measures such as happiness, life satisfaction, and overall quality of life. Subjective assessments are inherently personal and can vary widely between individuals, as they are influenced by cultural background, individual values, and personal experiences.

There are four key challenges to the measurement of wellbeing. First, wellbeing is subjective and individuals may have different perceptions of what it means to them. Second, wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that covers various aspects of life (emotions, health, social relationships, and material resources), and measuring all these dimensions is a real challenge. Third, there is no universal consensus on what constitutes wellbeing, for different people and different communities hold different views and have different values regarding what constitutes a good life. Finally, individuals may not always give accurate or truthful responses when asked about their wellbeing. They may feel pressure to describe themselves in a positive manner, or may not want to talk about their feelings and experiences, or may not be fully aware of these feelings and experiences.

Wellbeing in Qatar is deeply rooted in Islamic values, emphasizing community support, family cohesion, and spiritual fulfillment. However, the increasing influence of Western norms has raised concerns about the erosion of cultural identity. In educational settings, this tension is evident in the implementation of bilingual education and international curricula, which aim to prepare students for a globalized world while preserving local traditions and values (Aljishi and Velliari, 2021; Joseph and Razzak, 2021). Despite extensive global research on wellbeing, there is limited understanding of how cultural and societal factors shape student wellbeing in non-Western contexts such as Qatar (OECD, 2020).

Qatar's approach to wellbeing covers both eudaimonic and hedonic areas, as part of the country's strategy for national development; this is consistent with Islamic principles that emphasize spiritual and communal welfare alongside individual happiness. Qatar's National Vision 2030 embodies this balanced approach, aiming to transform the state into an advanced society capable of sustaining its development while preserving its cultural identity. The vision's four interconnected pillars – Human Development, Social Development, Economic Development, and Environmental Development – reflect a multidimensional understanding of prosperity and wellbeing.

In Qatar, the importance attached to eudaimonic wellbeing is evident in efforts that emphasize personal growth and excellence and promote strong, cohesive families, and active civil society organizations. These efforts contribute to the overall social development of the nation in line with the nation's traditional values and its vision for human development. In contrast, the focus on hedonic wellbeing is evident in Qatar's rapid economic development and its commitment to providing a high standard of living for its population. This includes the country's investments in healthcare services and the development of infrastructure to enhance the quality of life for its citizens.

3.2 Theoretical framework

The present study used Systems Thinking (ST) as a well-established theoretical lens to delve into stakeholders' perceptions of intellectual and social wellbeing. Applying this framework, allowed the researcher to investigate the complex relationships and interactions across and within systems and subsystems shaping intellectual and social wellbeing in the context of Qatar. Although ST is not a cure-all, it provides a valuable perspective for deciphering complex scenarios and relationships. It does so by focusing on the synergy and patterns among the whole system, rather than isolating its individual components (McMahon and Patton, 2018a, 2018b). As such, ST helps to identify the complex nature of student wellbeing and root causes of an issue and identify avenues for progress.

Employing ST to explore stakeholders' views and opinions of intellectual and social wellbeing further helps to go beyond individual factors and consider the broader interrelationships influencing student wellbeing. This approach helps to understand perceptions of intellectual and social wellbeing, not as static, but as dynamic constructs continuously shaped by the interaction of multiple system components. This redefinition may trigger more effective strategies for enhancing wellbeing, as it encourages the consideration of diverse perspectives and the identification of leverage points that can lead to significant positive changes within society.

4 Problem statement

Despite the increasing emphasis on wellbeing in contemporary policy discourse, there is an evident gap in understanding this construct from non-Western perspectives. In the context of Qatar, a rapidly developing nation within the Arabian Gulf, perceptions of the challenges and opportunities associated with wellbeing remain greatly understudied. This study seeks to fill this gap by identifying and analyzing the salient obstacles that stakeholders perceive as hindrances to sustainable student wellbeing. By adopting a contextualized, Arab, Middle Eastern viewpoint, this research not only contributes to the local discourse but also offers insights with broader implications for policy-making in Qatar and the broader region. The findings aim to enhance our understanding of wellbeing within this specific cultural and socio-political context, ultimately informing strategies that address these challenges and promote a more holistic approach to wellbeing in Qatar and beyond.

4.1 Research questions

- 1 What are the primary cultural, social, and economic factors that stakeholders in Qatar perceive as barriers to achieving students' intellectual and social wellbeing?
- 2 In what ways do traditional Qatari values and cultural practices influence the conceptualization and pursuit of students' intellectual and social wellbeing in contemporary Qatari society?
- 3 What are the prospects for effectively addressing the perceived challenges to students' intellectual and social wellbeing in Qatar, considering the cultural and socio-political context of the region?

5 Methods

5.1 Research design

This study utilized a qualitative research design to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of the challenges affecting student wellbeing in Qatar. While quantitative assessments dominate global wellbeing research (Schulte et al., 2015), this study intentionally employed qualitative methods to capture specific cultural traits often overlooked in standardized measures. This approach ensures that the perspectives under study reflect local realities, addressing gaps identified in prior research conducted predominantly in WEIRD contexts (Hendriks et al., 2019).

5.2 Data collection

5.2.1 Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure a closer alignment of the sample with the research aims and objectives, thereby enhancing the study's rigor and the trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020; Johnson and Williams, 2024). This method was intentionally chosen to ensure diverse representation across various sectors of Qatari society, including education, and government and non-governmental organizations (Palinkas et al., 2015). The researcher prepared a preliminary list of potential participants representing diverse sectors of society. The list comprised government ministers, members of the Shura Council, and prominent business owners, who were contacted directly by phone. Other participants received invitations via mail. Subsequently, all participants were reached out to via email and phone to assess their interest in participating in the study. Those who expressed agreement to participate were asked to digitally sign an informed consent form, which explicitly outlined the voluntary nature of the study and its objectives.

5.2.2 Setting

From May 28 to June 1, 2023, a series of round-table discussions were conducted at Qatar University's Student Center. Each day was dedicated to exploring one pillar of wellbeing:

- Day 1 (May 28): Spiritual wellbeing.
- Day 2 (May 29): Emotional wellbeing.
- Day 3 (May 30): Intellectual wellbeing.

- Day 4 (May 31): Social wellbeing.
- Day 5 (June 1): Physical wellbeing.

Due to the extensive amount of data gathered, this study focuses solely on intellectual and social wellbeing obtained from 28 higher education faculty members. Future research endeavors will address the other wellbeing pillars.

5.2.3 Procedure

In May 2023, data were collected through 11 round-table discussions conducted in Arabic, the native language of most participants. Each session, which included 7–10 participants, aimed to encourage free expression of ideas. The discussions were informal, unstructured, and involved a balanced mix of male and female residents of Qatar from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, including students, teachers, educators, researchers, policymakers, business owners, service providers, healthcare employees, religious scholars, and charity organization representatives. Each focus group session lasted for three 30-min sessions, with 15-min breaks following the first and second sessions.

Moderators facilitated the discussions, while two experienced researchers diligently recorded the discourse. A total of 81 participants contributed diverse perspectives to the topics of intellectual and social wellbeing. Each session began with a brief introduction of the topic followed by subsequent discussions among participants. Prior to the event, moderators attended online training workshops provided online by a UK-based expert the week preceding the event. Hand-written notes were taken by note-takers using a template prepared prior to the event. The template contained information on the date of the round-table discussion, the number of participants, the names of the moderators and note-takers, and a brief summary of participants' backgrounds. It also included a summary of the comments on the discussions and pertinent quotes from the participants.

5.3 Pilot study

To ensure the validity and clarity of the interview questions used in the main study, a pilot study was conducted in April 2023. This pilot involved 13 community members from diverse sectors, who provided valuable feedback on the initial set of questions. Specifically, participants highlighted the need for clearer instructions and more culturally sensitive phrasing to ensure that the questions resonated with the local context. Based on this feedback, the questions were refined to enhance their relevance and clarity. For instance, certain questions were rephrased to better capture the different cultural and societal influences on student wellbeing in Qatar. This process helped to improve the quality of the data collected and ensured that the subsequent focus group discussions were more effective in capturing the relevant relationships between educational, societal, and cultural factors affecting student wellbeing.

5.4 Data analysis

We used NVivo software (version 11) to analyze the focus group data. The analysis began with data familiarization, where researchers thoroughly reviewed the transcripts to become immersed in the

content and identify initial patterns. Next, a coding structure was developed, including descriptive, interpretive, and abstract codes to capture the essence of the data. Descriptive codes summarized the content, while interpretive codes highlighted underlying meanings and abstract codes related the data to the study's Systems Thinking framework. NVivo's features facilitated the organization and coding of transcripts, enabling the identification of significant passages and connections between data sets. Themes were generated from the coded data, refined through an iterative review, and adjusted to reflect key concepts relevant to the research objectives. To ensure consistency and reliability, all coded data were checked for accuracy, and illustrative quotes were selected to capture the essence of each theme. The analysis revealed three broad themes: educational, societal, and cultural challenges affecting student wellbeing in Qatar. These themes were further refined using NVivo's visualization tools to explore relationships between them and understand the multifaceted influences on student wellbeing.

Findings from the focus group data were compared and contrasted through thorough documentation. To enhance consistency and reliability, all notes and coded data were checked for accuracy by the researcher. For each theme, illustrative quotes were carefully selected to capture its essence. The analysis revealed findings segmented into three broad themes, each comprising different categories. These themes are structured into three sections that display participants' perceptions of students' intellectual and social wellbeing and the educational challenges perceived to hinder wellbeing: (1) educational challenges; (2) societal challenges; and (3) cultural challenges.

The translation of the Arabic data was carried out by experienced 2 Arabic-English faculty based at the College of Education at Qatar University. The translations were then review by the researcher and faculty to ensure accuracy. Notes from the discussions and participant observations were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed using a data-driven and code-oriented approach. Multiple readings of the data were conducted to capture dialogues and nuances, leading to the identification of meaningful themes and patterns, supported by quotes and examples.

6 Findings

The analysis of the focus group data yielded complex interconnected relationships among cultural, societal, and educational influences affecting students' wellbeing in Qatar. The subsequent sections offer a detailed examination of the challenges associated with each of these three domains.

6.1 Educational challenges

The findings gleaned from the focus group discussions disclosed participants' concerns regarding systemic deficiencies and curricular shortcomings, alongside challenges related to collaboration and integration within school programs. Recurrent issues reported in accounts by many participants include "inadequate curricula," perceived as significant impediments to school progress and development. One of the significant challenges facing students in Qatar is the perceived inadequacy of the curriculum. As one participant noted, "The curriculum often feels outdated and does not

adequately prepare students for the challenges of the modern world.” This sentiment reflects a broader concern about the lack of opportunities for critical and creative thinking in educational settings. Such deficiencies hinder intellectual development and affect students’ ability to adapt to changing societal demands.

A Qatari female from the business sector pointed out a common “lack of consensus among all stakeholders in educational institutions regarding the vision, mission, and goals,” which further complicates efforts to enact a meaningful change. Central to these challenges is a curriculum and an instructional approach that, as some participants noted, “are stuffed with information without focusing on building social values and human personality.” This sentiment underlines a critical disconnect between educational objectives and the broader developmental needs of students, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach that aligns curriculum design with pedagogical practice. According to a male Qatari engineering student lamented “The lack of integration between schools, curricula, and families.”

The findings further revealed a challenge repeatedly reported by participants concerning the failure of the current education system to promote opportunities for students to “think outside the box.” Participants indicated that the existing educational system lacks avenues for fostering critical and creative thinking skills among students at all levels of schooling, noting that the current situation restricts opportunities for thinking beyond conventional boundaries. Interestingly, the analysis revealed that school curricula were perceived as the main culprits responsible for this precarious situation. As a non-Qatari female teacher claimed, students find themselves burdened with curricula that “do not leave time for developing talents and hobbies,” resulting in a lack of enthusiasm for learning and thinking among learners. The teaching methods, another stated, leave learners “with no desire to learn and think critically.” (None Qatari, male, media). This feeling was echoed by participants who expressed concerns that public school curricula “do not provide sufficient time nor opportunities for thinking critically and applying their acquired knowledge in real life settings.

The analysis also unveiled various challenges related to teaching as a profession, with participants citing multiple obstacles, such as “heavy workloads,” “lack of authority,” “limited professional development opportunities,” and “low motivation.” Participant teachers tend to stress that the demanding workload and the perceived necessity for specialized professionals to support students within schools contribute to teachers’ reluctance to enter the profession due to the perceived constraints on classroom authority. Furthermore, teachers face hurdles in meeting the needs of specific groups of learners. As a Qatari male (political sector) participant commented, “There is less interest in them and fewer opportunities available to them on the practical and social levels.” This highlights the intricate challenges teachers encounter, ranging from systemic issues such as workload allocation to the complex dynamics of classroom authority and student support.

The findings also disclosed concerns regarding the impact of technological advancement on education. While acknowledging the benefits of modern technology, participants often voiced apprehensions, viewing it both as a challenge and a potential threat to the cultivation of critical thinking skills and the provision of practical solutions within educational settings. As a male participant stated, “Technology can be both a distraction and a tool for learning; it

depends on how it is integrated into the curriculum.” This perspective highlights the need for thoughtful integration of technology to maximize its educational benefits. Participants stressed the importance of continuous adaptation and integration of technological tools in education, lamenting the “failure of professional development programs to keep pace with the rapid changes” in the field of technology. As articulated by one non-Qatari male student participant, there exists a real “fear of technology and artificial intelligence,” further complicating efforts to harness these tools for educational purposes. This fear reflects a broader apprehension among participants regarding the potential drawbacks and pitfalls associated with technological integration in educational practices.

6.2 Societal challenges

Perceived challenges hindering intellectual development in Qatar fall within four distinct areas that collectively shed light on the intertwined ways in which societal influences intersect with educational experiences. The first area involves social stereotyping, which participants identified as having a pervasive impact on intellectual development. This phenomenon is closely linked to a broader societal reticence to challenge established norms, as exemplified by a participant from the media sector who voiced concerns about the prevailing “fear of free thinking and questioning in our societies.” This fear contributes to a culture where individuals are discouraged from engaging in critical discourse on existing traditions. Moreover, participants from higher education institutions noted the prevalence of social factors such as stereotyping and prejudices, which, combined with the imposition of “ready-made frameworks for thinking,” create a culture of resistance to change and intellectual evolution. In this context, individuals are constrained by predefined notions and expectations, hindering their ability to explore new ideas and perspectives freely.

Several participants highlighted the detrimental impact of negative social phenomena, which demonstrates the complex relationship between societal dynamics and educational outcomes, emphasizing the need for strategies to address deep-seated social biases and foster environments conducive to open inquiry and intellectual exploration. For example, a male Qatari student contended “There is no specific guidance on professional career path. Why would a student change his major or make a career shift after graduation?” “Most graduates of the College of Engineering end up joining the Military.” Technology was seen as contributing to alienation and inequality by hindering face-to-face communication among students. As a female professor stated, the “lack of social communication among students due to their “overreliance on virtual means of interaction.”

Other interrelated challenges identified in the data pertain to family dynamics, societal attitudes toward progressive education and intellectual development. Chief among these is the lack of support and value placed on these aspects within families and communities. Participants emphasized that parents often lack awareness about the importance of fostering creativity and critical thinking in children. For instance, a parent and educator, noted, “Many parents in Qatar prioritize academic achievement over creative exploration, which hinders the development of critical thinking skills in our children.” This feeling extends to a broader disregard for cultural institutions such as museums, with another participant, a member of the Museum

of Islamic Arts remarking, “Qatari society does not support museums and this lack of engagement reflects a societal indifference towards cultural enrichment.” These perspectives highlight the need for increased awareness and support for progressive education and cultural institutions within Qatari families and communities.

Various familial and societal issues compound this challenge, including the diminishing role of the family, increasing divorce rates, and the consequences of financial strain on social engagement. As a female professor poignantly suggested, “high divorce rates in our society lead to the disintegration of the family unit and negatively affect children.” This sentiment is echoed by a community leader, who noted the absence of inspirational community leaders as a significant hindrance to intellectual and social development. The dearth of inspirational role models “leaves a void that cannot be filled by institutions alone; it requires role models who can inspire and guide the next generation towards intellectual and social excellence.” Additionally, participants noted the absence of inspirational community leaders as a significant hindrance to intellectual and social development. The absence of inspirational role models who can guide and motivate people further exacerbates the prevailing apathy toward progressive education and intellectual pursuits. Demonstrably, the lack of role models hinders the inspiration and guidance necessary for intellectual and social development.

6.3 Cultural challenges

Important cultural hurdles were also identified in the analysis of the data, with participants highlighting concerns related to identity, values, and the influence of a rentier mindset, a worldview shaped by reliance on unearned income, typically derived from state-distributed wealth such as natural resource revenues. This mindset, participants suggested, can encourage passive attitudes toward individual responsibility, and productivity, as it often discourages merit-based achievement and reinforces dependence on external or state-provided resources. These cultural challenges, particularly those stemming from globalization, were identified by participants as significant barriers affecting educational outcomes and the preservation of Qatari identity. Many expressed concerns about the influence of Western norms and practices, fearing that they could lead to the erosion of Arabic and Islamic values. As one participant lamented, “The use of Arabic and English impacts local ways of thinking and challenges our traditional beliefs and practices, thus affecting our identity.” This fear reflects broader apprehensions regarding the tension between modernization and cultural preservation.

Globalization was also perceived as encouraging a rentier mindset, characterized by materialism and unrestrained luxury, which participants felt undermined creativity and intellectual development. The impact of globalization on Qatari identity is manifold, particularly in terms of how it enforces a rentier mindset characterized by materialism, consumerism, and unrestrained luxury. This mindset, as articulated by several participants, was perceived to erode intrinsic values such as collective responsibility, intellectual curiosity, and creativity. Rentier culture, sustained by the state’s resource wealth, encourages a reliance on state-provided wealth and encourages a culture of entitlement rather than productivity or innovation. Qatar’s rapid economic growth, driven by its abundant oil and natural gas resources, has intensified this culture, contributing to a broader

cultural shift towards individualism and consumption-oriented lifestyles. This shift affects social cohesion by weakening traditional communal bonds and deepening social stratification based on material success. In this context, the convergence of global consumer culture with a rentier economic structure presents a unique set of challenges to national identity formation and long-term development strategies. Participants voiced concerns that without intentional policy efforts to promote creativity, civic engagement, and cultural rootedness, the long-term wellbeing of Qatari society may be compromised.

A professor remarked, “Not giving enough attention to religious rituals, events, and holidays that promote love and enrich children with religious ethics and the sense of belonging to religion and society.” Concerns extended to the growing presence of foreign customs and holidays, with one education administrator observing, “The influx of foreign values, such as celebrating Halloween, raises concerns about the compatibility of these practices with our traditional customs and Islamic values.” Some participants viewed the increasing visibility of expatriate cultures as a source of tension, particularly when those values appeared to conflict with Qatari traditions. These perspectives point to the need for educational policies that balance global integration with the preservation of cultural preservation, ensuring that students develop both global competencies while maintaining a strong connection to their heritage.

Concerns were similarly raised about the potential erosion of religious values and cultural identity, for participants often lament the neglect of religious rituals and events that foster a sense of belonging to one’s culture. For example, a professor complained, “Not giving enough attention to religious rituals, events, and holidays that promote love and enrich children with religious ethics and the sense of belonging to religion and society.” This sentiment is corroborated by an education administrator, who noted, “The influx of foreign values, such as celebrating Halloween, raises concerns about the compatibility of these practices with our traditional customs and Islamic values.” These perspectives highlight the tension between preserving cultural heritage and embracing global influences, underscoring the need for educational policies that balance modernization with cultural preservation. The presence of foreigners is perceived as a source of tension, as their values may conflict with Qatari customs and traditions, further exacerbating fears about the erosion of cultural identity and religious values.

Many participants reported a clear shift in the values and mindsets of Qatari society, voicing concerns that the prevalence of materialism and individualism, both of which have important implications for overall wellbeing, is largely attributed to the rapid economic advancement Qatar has experienced over the past few decades. As one participant, a sociologist, succinctly put it, “Society is increasingly focusing on the material side of our lives, where we have become consumers and focus only on ourselves and our desires.” This perspective is echoed by a Qatari business administrator, who noted that “Excessive luxury limits students’ creativity, as it fosters a culture of dependency rather than innovation.” Participants also indicated a perceived lack of consistency in societal values and approaches, encompassing familial upbringing, educational institutions, and media influences. This inconsistency hampers the development of a generation capable of effectively communicating and integrating into society. An additional challenge cited by many participants is associated

with a rentier mindset, characterized by an emphasis on wealth and luxury, further exacerbating these challenges by undermining the values of hard work and creativity essential for sustainable development.

7 Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the multilayered and multifaceted challenges perceived to inhibit intellectual and social wellbeing in Qatar. Understanding these challenges is essential for designing effective policies and intervention strategies. Drawing on the principles of Systems Thinking, the researcher treated the complex relationships and interactions across and within educational, social, and cultural systems in their entirety. ST served in conceptualizing the perceived challenges faced and potential opportunities to enhance intellectual and social wellbeing in Qatar. As such, it offered a useful tool to address complex issues of system-wide nature: education system, societal structures, and cultural influences. Equally important, it paved the way for a move from a linear mode of analyzing the issues discussed to a more systemic approach that facilitated understanding of these issues.

The study identified deficiencies in Qatar's education system and school curricula as major obstacles to intellectual wellbeing in Qatar. The absence of a unified vision, mission, and goals among stakeholders complicates efforts to bring about meaningful changes, undermining the creation of a cohesive and effective teaching and learning. In one participant's words, "The absence of a clear vision and mission in education leads to confusion among students and teachers about what skills are truly valued." The findings reveal that while there is a robust educational infrastructure, it suffers from fragmentation and a lack of cohesive vision, mission, and clearly defined roles (Al-Meer and Fitzgerald, 2018). This disjointed system fails to provide a unified direction for fostering wellbeing among students and teachers. The discussion is organized around the themes of education, society, and culture.

Criticism directed at curricula for their prescriptive nature and their insufficient focus on social values and human personality development highlights a crucial disconnect between educational objectives and students' holistic development, stifling the potential for schools to foster well-rounded individuals prepared for the complexities of modern society (Smith and Johnson, 2020). The current education system is described as lacking in presenting opportunities for students to think outside the box, with existing educational structures restricting critical and creative thinking, a point that is consistent with findings from research conducted by Garcia and Chen (2019).

The current system is often blamed for allowing – and even emphasizing – memorization rather than critical thinking and collaboration, leaving little room for teachers to advocate for students' interests. This approach demotivates students and is reflected in their low scores on international tests. This echoes conclusions derived by Jones and Martinez (2021) in their study of the role of memorization and critical thinking in education. The dense content of school curricula was also identified as a prime culprit, leaving little room for developing talents and hobbies, thus resulting in a lack of enthusiasm for teachers' teaching and students' learning. The workload can potentially

affect the mental and emotional health of students and teachers, which is consistent with results from research done by Pascoe et al. (2020).

The findings identified several challenges within the teaching profession, such as heavy teaching workloads, lack of authority, limited professional development opportunities, and low student and teacher motivation. The demanding workload and the necessity for specialized professionals to support students contribute to teachers' reluctance to enter the profession, largely due to perceived constraints on classroom authority. This finding is in line with conclusions drawn in a study carried out by Buchanan et al. (2013). Unsurprisingly, addressing the needs of specific student groups further complicates this issue, as there is less interest and fewer opportunities for practical and social engagement; this observation is consistent with prior research conclusions (Horn and Kane, 2019).

Despite the recognition of the benefits of modern technology, participants expressed clear apprehensions, for while technology was seen as a potential threat to students' critical thinking skills, it was also viewed favorably for the practical solutions it offers in educational settings. Research supports these dual perspectives, indicating that while technology can indeed diminish critical thinking by encouraging surface-level engagement and passive consumption of information (Serrano et al., 2020), it also offers substantial benefits such as adaptive learning platforms, increased inclusivity, and improved student engagement through gamification and multimedia resources (Hwang and Chang, 2021; Reich and Ito, 2017). Thus, the impact of technology in education remains a complex issue that balances the potential for fostering practical educational solutions with the risk of undermining critical intellectual skills.

The findings further revealed an array of societal challenges that hinder intellectual development in Qatar, intersecting with student and teacher educational experiences. For instance, social stereotyping appears to have a great impact on students' intellectual development, which accords with arguments made by Canning et al. (2019). The imposition of conventional and pre-established ways of thinking and the fear of independent thought and inquiry may be interpreted as signifying a cultural reticence to challenge established norms, further entrenching resistance to change and stifling critical discourse. Similar results are reported in recent research by Lee and Chen (2022) and Smith and Johnson B. D. (2023). Indeed, an environment where predefined notions and expectations prevail hampers independent and creative thinking, a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in Qatar due to its unique societal structures that prioritize conformity over individuality (Al-Malki and Elmessiri, 2023; Khan and Al-Thani, 2022).

Overreliance on virtual means of interaction has resulted in a deficiency in social communication among students, viewed as a hindrance to social engagement and intellectual advancement. Despite the manifold educational advantages technology offers, its excessive or improper utilization can impede face-to-face exchanges that are crucial for nurturing social competencies and critical thinking. This observation resonates with broader apprehensions regarding digital dependency and highlights the need for a balanced integration of technology into education (Turkle, 2017). Corroborating evidence is found in research by Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2021), which explores the influence of digital media on the development of young people, looking at how technology shapes their social interactions, cognitive abilities, and overall growth.

Familial support and societal attitudes towards progressive education and intellectual development surfaced as critical issues. The findings showed that parents in Qatar generally lack of awareness about the value of creativity and critical thinking, extending to underestimating the significance of cultural institutions (e.g., museums, art galleries, and cultural events), which are undervalued. These findings are consistent with arguments put forward in studies undertaken by O'Connor and Joffe (2020) and McManus (2021). Equally important is the reported waning influence of the family unit, escalating divorce rates, and financial strains create a fractured social fabric that adversely affects children's intellectual and social development. Research implemented by Harkness and Super (2021) points to similar findings, namely that cultural beliefs influence parenting behaviors and shape children's development within different familial contexts.

Concerns were also raised regarding the impact of Western educational norms and the prevalent usage of Arabic and English in Qatar on Arabic and Islamic identity, with fears centered on the potential dilution of local traditions and values. Prior research has revealed comparable findings, showing that Western educational norms and language use have potential risks in Qatar, particularly regarding Arabic and Islamic identity and the potential weakening of local traditions and values (Aljishi and Velliari, 2021; Al-Mahrooqi and Denman, 2020). This apprehension could be understood as echoing even broader debates surrounding cultural imperialism and the globalization of education.

The utilization of English is often particularly looked at as a potential threat to linguistic and cultural heritage, may be understood as perhaps implying a resistance to cultural homogenization (Robertson and Dale, 2020; Spring, 2021). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is pertinent here, emphasizing how the dominance of certain languages and cultural practices may others (Bourdieu, 2010). The notion that bilingualism influences local modes of thought indicates a perceived disparity in the transmission of cultural capital within educational environments, often privileging Western over indigenous knowledge systems.

Furthermore, disregard for religious rituals and events, seen as eroding religious values and cultural identity, shows the need to integrate cultural context into educational policies. Religious rituals and events are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging and ethical grounding, a perspective that resonates with Durkheim's theory of collective conscience, which posits that shared rituals and symbols are vital for social cohesion (Smith, 2018). Does this finding imply that neglecting these aspects risks weakening community bonds and identity, mirroring concerns over the insufficient attention given to religious and cultural education. The apprehension regarding the loss of traditional beliefs and practices to Western influences underlines the tension between modernization and cultural preservation, a recurrent theme in post-colonial societies undergoing rapid socio-economic transformations.

Finally, Qatar's rapid economic growth is perceived to have led to a noticeable shift towards materialism and individualism, a trend often linked to the country's rentier economy. According to rentier state theory, economies reliant on resource rents, such as Qatar's, tend to foster materialistic and consumerist values, which can pose challenges to social cohesion and collective wellbeing (Beblawi, 2021; Luciani, 2020). This emphasis on material wealth and self-interest may signify a departure from traditional communal values, echoing critiques of

neoliberal globalization, which argue that economic liberalization can exacerbate social disparities and erode community-oriented ethics (Khan, 2022; Smith and Patel, 2023). Consequently, there is a perceived need for educational reforms that prioritize holistic development, balancing academic pursuits with the cultivation of ethical values. Overall, ST reveals that educational deficiencies are not isolated issues but are interlinked with societal attitudes toward critical thinking and cultural shifts toward materialism.

Our analysis identified complex relationships among educational, societal, and cultural factors influencing student wellbeing in Qatar. The findings highlighted structural deficiencies in the education system, including inadequate curricula and a lack of opportunities for critical thinking, alongside societal challenges such as social stereotyping and insufficient familial support for progressive education. Cultural concerns included the erosion of Arabic and Islamic identity due to Western educational norms and the prevalence of bilingualism. These challenges are interconnected, suggesting that addressing them requires a holistic approach integrating educational reforms, societal support, and cultural preservation. By emphasizing these systemic interconnections, our study offers insights that can inform policy and practice in Qatar and similar contexts. For example, educational reforms should prioritize critical thinking skills and social values, while societal initiatives should aim to reduce social stereotype and promote familial support for education. Culturally, preserving Arabic and Islamic identity through bilingual education and integrating religious values into educational practices can help mitigate the erosion of cultural heritage. This analysis offers insights for policymakers and educators to develop strategies that address these issues holistically and thus enhance sustainable student wellbeing in Qatar.

8 Conclusion

Our findings highlighted deficiencies in the education system, societal challenges such as social stereotyping, and cultural issues related to identity and values. These challenges are interlinked, suggesting that addressing them requires a holistic approach that integrates educational reforms, societal support, and cultural preservation. Our research contributes to the literature by providing a systems-thinking perspective on these challenges, emphasizing the interconnected nature of educational, societal, and cultural systems. This approach suggests that student wellbeing in Qatar is not solely determined by individual factors but is shaped by broader structural forces. For instance, the lack of a unified vision in educational institutions impedes curriculum development and affects societal attitudes toward progressive education. Similarly, cultural shifts toward materialism and individualism, driven by rapid economic growth, impact social cohesion and community values. By looking at these systemic interconnections, our study offers insights that can inform policy and practice in Qatar and similar contexts.

One limitation of this study is the potential for selection bias inherent in the purposive sampling method employed. This approach, while targeted, may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives across Qatari society, possibly skewing the data towards the views of more prominent or accessible stakeholders. Similarly, the group dynamics during the round-table discussions may have influenced participant responses, with social desirability bias possibly leading individuals to conform to perceived norms or avoid conflict. In the focus group settings, more outspoken or

higher-status participants may have dominated the discussions, perhaps overshadowing quieter or less confident individuals and hence skewing the data towards the views of the more dominant voices. Given that students are the primary stakeholders in education, it is important to employ focus groups comprised exclusively of students, for their perspectives offer valuable insights that would have enriched the study and provide a more informed understanding of the impact of these policies.

Given the implications of the findings, a number of recommendations are proposed. Firstly, there is a need for addressing systemic and curricular shortcomings by prioritizing the development of critical thinking skills, creativity, and social values alongside imparting knowledge. Encouraging collaboration and integration within school programs is key to align educational objectives with students' broader developmental needs. Secondly, teacher support and opportunities for professional development should be provided to enable teachers to meet students' diverse needs. This involves offering specialized training, reducing administrative burdens, and enhancing classroom support structures.

Thirdly, modern technology should be integrated into educational practices while ensuring that professional development programs keep pace with technological advancements to enhance students' critical thinking skills and practical learning experiences. Finally, in the face of the forces of globalization and Qatar's rapid economic progress, strategies must be developed to preserve cultural identity and values. Education can play a crucial role in fostering a sense of cultural pride and strengthening traditional beliefs and practices. Future research should explore strategies for integrating Islamic values into modern educational practices while addressing the impact of globalization on cultural identity. Additionally, longitudinal studies in particular can serve to assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at fostering student wellbeing in Qatar.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Institutional Review Board of Qatar University (QU-IRB 1867-EA/23). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

HA-T: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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