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Communication

Cultural Heritage, Education and Capacity Building across the Gulf Arab States: Mapping Recent Developments

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Abstract

The last few decades have seen a surge in cultural heritage projects across the GCC states. These states have distinct characteristics that shape the interplay between cultural heritage, nation branding, and identity formation. This paper provides a brief report on each Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state, mapping recent cultural heritage education initiatives, which include awareness of the need to preserve cultural heritage; national identity and values; and training and capacity-building in professional skills relevant to heritage and culture. Given that these initiatives are relatively new, the goal is not to evaluate their impact but to provide a preliminary overview of notable changes in this area. It draws upon official ministry documents, announcements, and state visions. A few striking examples include Saudi Arabia 8000 establishing new cultural scholarships for Saudi students to attend international universities; the United Arab Emirates also updated its curricula with cultural education in 2023; and in 2021, Qatar mandated that all schools must teach Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Qatari History. The findings indicate a noticeable increase in State-led local education and capacity-building within the arts and cultural scene, some of which seem to grant the population greater cultural agency.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; heritage education; cultural policy; nation branding; national identity; GCC

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a regional organization that includes six Middle Eastern countries—Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Typically, more attention is paid to GCC initiatives aimed at coordinating and strengthening relations across a variety of fields, including commerce, economic and financial affairs, customs, and communications, rather than education and culture [1,2]. The GCC Charter (art. 4), however, equally states that one of the objectives of the GCC is not only to strengthen regional cooperation, but also to form "regulations in the area of culture." In many ways, this has led to increased cultural exchange and artistic production, as well as greater interest in cultural heritage policies for preservation and safeguarding [3,4].

This "special interest" in culture and the arts has also been reflected in cultural tourism initiatives, as GCC states have turned to the tourism industry, leading to each city aspiring to become a different "cultural hub" [1,5]. This is also evidenced in heritage-safeguarding activities. In fact, over the last few decades, the GCC has witnessed a surge in cultural heritage projects in the Arab Gulf states. Examples of this surge include

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the opening up of museums, such as the Zayed National Museum in 2025, the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2017, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (expected to open in 2026), the National Museum of Qatar in 2019; as well as cultural centers, such as Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Centre, which is one of the world's largest cultural complexes; and UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such as the Cultural Landscape of Al-Faw, inscribed in 2024, and Al-Ahsa Oasis, which is the largest in the world [6,7]. Other examples include the Al Zubara Archaeological Site in Qatar, inscribed in 2013, and the Al-Khor Al-Adaid natural reserve in Qatar, which is currently on UNESCO's tentative list, as well as the "Land of Frankincense" in Oman in the Salalah area, which was inscribed by Oman in 2000, among many others.

This paper aims to map the most recent cultural heritage initiatives throughout the GCC states and the way they reflect on education policies, as well as to identify the rationale behind them. Cultural heritage education initiatives include the following: awareness of the need to preserve cultural heritage; national identity and values; and training and capacity-building in professional skills relevant to heritage and culture.

This study is a small part of a larger foresight study on social and cultural changes in Qatar and the wider region. More specifically, the aim of our paper is not to evaluate the impact of such initiatives, but rather to provide a broad preliminary overview of key changes in the cultural and educational landscape in GCC states. Drawing on official ministry documents, announcements, and state visions and initiatives, it examines the latest developments across the GCC states. This paper illustrates that, to varying degrees, there has been a surge in local education and capacity-building initiatives within the art and entertainment sector. A few striking examples include Saudi Arabia introducing art to second-year high school students in 2021 and, in 2022, distributing 8000 musical instruments to schools alongside training programs for teachers as well as new cultural scholarships for Saudi students to attend international universities; the United Arab Emirates also updated and enriched its curricula with cultural education in 2023; and Qatar in 2021 mandated that all private and public schools teach Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Qatari History.

The preliminary findings of this research are mixed. On the one hand, it seems that these educational initiatives have had some impact on communities' capacity-building that could lead to greater cultural agency. On the other hand, cultural and educational policies remain state-centric, and opportunities for communities to participate in cultural governance remain limited.

In terms of structure, the first part of the paper frames the discussion through a literature review and background on international heritage discourses in law and policy, followed by contextualizing this within the GCC. The second part of the paper provides an updated overview of heritage capacity-building and education in each GCC country.

2. Literature Review

Much of the literature on cultural heritage in the Arabian Gulf states has been subsumed under the Middle East. The majority of Middle Eastern countries experienced direct colonial rule, resulting in conflicts and violent clashes in a complex post-colonial nation-building process. The legacy of European colonialism has directly shaped the sociopolitical structures and heritage policies in the Arab world, since these countries were the dominant powers until the 20th century [8–10]. Unlike many other Middle Eastern countries, Gulf States were not directly colonized but maintained varying forms of political relationships with Britain. While Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE became protectorates, Saudi Arabia and Oman entered into distinct relationships with Britain without officially becoming protectorates [11,12]. Protectorates are systems in which tribes

residing in the Arabian Peninsula became parties to protective treaties with Western powers, with the British maintaining significant colonial control in the region [13]. Another key factor that distinguished the GCC from the wider Middle East was the discovery of oil and natural gas, which sparked rapid development and urbanization from the 1970s onward. Apart from differences in colonial experience and hydrocarbon resources, there are three key characteristics that distinguish the Arabian Peninsula from the rest of the Middle East: rentier states, monarchy and tribalism, and large expatriate subpopulations [14]. These factors have played a critical role in the unique dynamics between cultural heritage, nation-branding and identity formation, both internally within national borders and on the global stage.

Research in the area of heritage law in the Arab region is overall scarce. A few authors have explored questions related to heritage in the GCC, as part of the broader Arab region [15], while others focus on museum and heritage sites within their national contexts [16–20]. There are also other works that explore cultural production in the GCC [4] including festivals or specific social and cultural events [21–23]; as well as cultural heritage education and pedagogy in the GCC [24–27]. The literature generally explores the complex dynamics of global presence and soft power, national branding, economic diversification through heritage tourism, as well as internal issues of consolidation of monarchic power, tribal recognition and national identity formation. Wakefield [28], for example, dives into the tensions and connections between autochthonous and transnational franchised heritage. Through the UAE context, she opens up a window into how these parallel paths converge and diverge to create hybrid heritage in non-Western contexts that broadly informs the wider picture on how heritage operates as a global phenomenon [28]. Likewise, others highlight the state's central role and how heritage projects serve as key sites to solidify and legitimize the monarchy [14].

Taking one step back, international heritage discourses pivot around the concept of "culture," which is in and by itself a multifaceted notion [29,30]. Tangible heritage is generally associated with cultural property and includes buildings, monuments, and sites, as well as artworks and manuscripts [31]. Intangible heritage, on the other hand, is a more fluid concept and comprises a large variety of elements such as folklore, songs, dances, performances, traditions, rituals and culinary experiences [32–34]. These "types" of heritage are inextricably linked and are preconditions of one another, as well as part of the right of communities and individuals to access cultural spaces as provided in international agreements. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in particular recognizes that everyone has the right to participate in cultural life (Article 15(1)(a)). To date, four GCC States are parties to this agreement: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman (United Nations Treaty Collection). In addition, in its General Comment on Article 15, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has emphasized the importance of individuals' and communities' right to access and enjoy cultural heritage [34].

References to "education" and "heritage" also appear in all GCC Constitutions (the Qatari, Kuwaiti, Bahraini, Emirati and Omani Constitutions, and the Saudi Basic law)—with education being referred to as a value of vital significance [33]. The Kuwaiti Constitution for instance states that "education is a cornerstone in social advancement" (art. 13); the Omani Constitution states that "education is a cornerstone for the progress of the Society" (art. 13); the Qatari Constitution states that it is "one of the basic pillars of social progress" (art. 25); and the Emirati Constitution states that it is "a fundamental factor for the progress of the society" (art. 17). A commitment to education also appears in the Saudi Basic law, which states that "the State shall provide public education and shall commit itself to the eradication of illiteracy" (art. 30).

The GCC States have been collaborating with UNESCO since the 1970s. Qatar joined UNESCO in 1972, shortly after establishing independence, and has collaborated with the organization extensively since then. Doha is also home to UNESCO's Regional Office for the GCC and Yemen [35]. Oman was the first GCC state to be elected to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 1989 [36], followed by Kuwait in 2003 [37], Bahrain in 2007 [38], United Arab Emirates in 2009 [39], Qatar in 2011 [40] and Saudi Arabia in 2019 [41].

Another notable development was UNESCO's recognition of the state of Palestine in 2011. This led to a 22% reduction in the organization's budget following the suspension of US funding. The US had passed a national law in the 1990s stating that if Palestine were included, it would immediately withdraw their funding. At this point, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, wife of the then Emir of Qatar, pledged to increase her support of education activities. This was reported as part of Qatar's rising role on the global stage [35]. Most recently, Saudi Arabia chaired the 45th UNESCO World Heritage Committee [42], while the United Arab Emirates was elected to UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage for the term 2024–2028 [43].

In addition, collaboration in cultural matters has become even more important, firstly because of the flourishing art market in GCC countries—investing in cultural production, and attracting high-end foreign buyers interested in expensive artworks [4]—and secondly because of the need to fight against transnational crime, especially the illicit trafficking of artworks and antiquities. The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East region [44] have accentuated the already existing phenomena of illicit excavation and looting [45]. Estimates of income from illicit trade range between $225 million to $3 billion annually [46], and even higher estimates have been provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [47]. So far, all GCC States have ratified the 1970 Convention on illicit trafficking, [48] with the most recent one being the UAE in 2017. GCC States, on the other hand, are still not parties to the UNIDROIT 1995 Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Objects.

At the global level, both Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been spearheading efforts to support the diffusion and representation of Arab heritage, including documentary heritage [49], as well as fighting against illicit trafficking of manuscripts. The Qatar National Library (QNL), in particular, has been instrumental in a project called "Supporting Documentary Heritage Preservation in the Arab Region" [50]. This 18-month project aims to provide capacity-building workshops for practitioners of documentary heritage preservation [50]. Following this, the Memory of the World Regional Committee for the Arab world was established in 2025 [49].

The national visions of GCC countries emphasize identity, culture, and heritage preservation. For example, the Qatar National Vision 2030 states that its educational goal is driven by equipping citizens with "a solid grounding in Qatari moral and ethical values, traditions and cultural heritage," and that its social structure goals aim to "preserve Qatar's national heritage and enhance Arab and Islamic values and identity"[51]. The Saudi Vision 2030 also states in detail that the Kingdom will strive to preserve its national identity and the Arabic language [52]. In addition, the vision emphasizes restoring and internationally recognizing cultural sites in the state that reflect national, Arab, Islamic, and ancient heritage [52]. It also calls for making these sites publicly accessible through the establishment of "world-class museums" and cultural events designed to celebrate and showcase the country's historical legacy and its enduring role in global civilization [52]. These objectives stated in the GCC visions align with the promotion of national and cultural values in the field of education in order to create "knowledge-based societies" [53]. Moreover, these align fully with GCC states' own constitutional commitments. The Saudi Basic Law, for example, states that "education aims at the inculcation

of the Islamic creed in the young generation and the development of their knowledge and skills so that they may become useful members of society who love their homeland and take pride in its history". Likewise, as per the Bahraini Constitution, article 7, "the law regulates care for religious and national instruction in the various stages and forms of education, and at all stages is concerned to develop the citizen's personality and his pride in his Arabism".

The emphasis on heritage, education, Islamic values and national pride in Gulf Constitutions arguably originates in the historic attachment to ideologies of Islamism and pan-Arabism [54]. In the modern context, nonetheless, it arguably reflects the acute interest of GCC states in maintaining their cultural and national identities, while diversifying their economies from hydrocarbons. To this end, GCC countries have been actively engaging with UNESCO and other regional cultural organizations (such as ICESCO and ALECSO). They have been especially active not only in terms of safeguarding of tangible heritage, but also intangible heritage, nominating selected cultural practices for inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Examples of elements inscribed on the list include Arabic coffee, majlis culture, certain sword dances such as the Saudi *alardah alnajdiyah*, the Omani irrigation system (*aflaj*) and the dance of the Oman Dhofari valleys, falconry, types of weaving, *henna* practices and rituals, Arabic calligraphy, and camel racing [55]. Another key driver of cultural and identity preservation in the national visions is the presence of large expatriate populations—an aspect that is especially significant for Qatar and the UAE, whose nationals make up a minority in the larger population [56].

3. Methodology

This paper takes an exploratory approach, drawing on publicly available gray literature. The main targeted online searches were conducted between September and December 2025, with some searches for checking and reinforcement in the process of editing and revision thereafter. For each GCC state, we searched governmental or semi-governmental institutions for official documents, such as visions or roadmaps, or official announcements through news releases, as well as documents from international organizations, particularly UNESCO country strategies. The main search terms were "culture," "heritage," and "education," along with different combinations of these terms with the GCC country name. We included any developments from 2018 onwards, coinciding with the establishment of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and the launch of the UAE's Cultural Agenda 2031 (while some initiatives or details are included before 2018 for background context). We also looked at legal texts at the international and domestic level, including the GCC Constitutions, and key international agreements concluded under the auspices of UNESCO (the UN Specialised Agency for Education, Science and Culture).

We included in the research findings, initiatives related to cultural heritage education and capacity-building, from kindergarten to higher education and professional training. This covers projects, initiatives and policies aimed at students, teachers and young professionals. This includes national policies and strategies related to cultural heritage education, curriculum and classroom teaching, extracurricular activities (such as competitions, camps, festivals and school events), teacher training, and higher education programs and scholarships. Within capacity-building, we included professional training for the heritage sector, such as conservation and museum management, as well as tourism-related training, given the close connection between heritage and tourism in the region's economic diversification strategies. Cultural events aimed at the general public were included only insofar as they had a clear educational purpose or link to

schools. Initiatives that focus solely on museums and heritage sites are discussed in the background and the literature review as context. This is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Themes and mode of initiative.

Theme	Mode of Initiative
Cultural heritage education (awareness, identity and values)	Policy and strategy
	Curriculum and teaching
	Extracurricular activities
	Teacher training
	Higher education and scholarships
Sector capacity-building (professional skills training)	Policy and strategy
	Professional heritage training
	Tourism workforce training

The definitions of "cultural heritage" and "education" in the social sciences remain very broad and contested terms [57]. For the purposes of this research, the authors distinguish between the following two inter-related domains: cultural heritage education and capacity-building. This can be summarized as:

1. Cultural heritage education:
    a. Awareness of heritage.
    b. National identity and values.
2. Sector capacity-building:
    a. Professional skills training.

Cultural heritage education in a broad sense comprises educational activities that raise awareness of the need to preserve cultural heritage in general [57]. In the context of the European Union (EU), heritage education also corresponds to "offer [ing] opportunities to engage in experiences to learn new concepts and skills" and is an area on which the EU has developed significant action (EU Commission) [58]. This type of education corresponds to all types of education and awareness raising about cultural heritage—noting, however, that the latter is also an extremely broad term, defined by UNESCO as "the legacy of physical artifacts, traditions, and practices that are passed down through generations within a community" and "encompasses both tangible elements, such as monuments and artworks, and intangible aspects like folklore and rituals" [59,60]. The second sub-category under cultural heritage education is being educated about one's own national identity and values. This type of education is especially relevant to national cultural policies and typically targets younger generations, boosting the sense of national cultural identity. Interestingly, the connection between heritage, education and national pride also appears in the Gulf Constitutions. For instance, Article 13 of the Omani Constitution of 1996/2011, is entitled "Cultural Principles" and states that among other things that "the State shall provide public education, work to combat illiteracy, and encourage the establishment of private schools and institutes under its supervision in accordance with the provisions of the Law" and that "the State shall foster and preserve the national heritage, encourage the sciences, arts, literature, scientific research and assist in their dissemination" [61].

The second domain is sector capacity-building, in the sense of training and development of professional skills relevant to heritage and culture. The aim of such activities in the context of tangible heritage is usually twofold: firstly, to prevent crimes related to heritage, such as theft, looting, illicit excavations, and the illicit trafficking of antiquities

[62]; and secondly, to promote cultural tourism and boost the economy. For example, UNESCO and other stakeholders, such as ICOM, ICOMOS and other local and regional stakeholders, are organizing training and educational activities in the context of the mechanisms established under UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property ("1970 UNESCO Convention") [63], and it is estimated that around 1000 professionals have been trained [64]. This is because, in accordance with the Convention, states should promote educational measures to "help communities appreciate the value of heritage" and prevent illicit activities that affect it [65]. These two domains correspond to the two themes in Table 1.

4. Limitations

There are limitations to this approach. Firstly, searches were only conducted in English. In the GCC context, the vast majority of official documents and announcements are published in English and Arabic; the Gulf states are famous for launching, announcing and officially publishing ambitious and detailed roadmaps and initiatives in English and Arabic due to the diversity among local populations. However, indeed, there are exceptions, and Arabic-only documents would have been missed in this search. We do not believe, however, that this would be a major cause for concern, as both official and commercial media are published in English and Arabic, and any significant event would have been covered by both. Secondly, relying only on state sources and announcements only gives us one part of the equation. Therefore, triangulation of data from multiple sources and cross-references is required to gain a better understanding of the initiative and its impact in practice.

5. Results: Cultural Heritage Education and Capacity-Building

Each of the GCC states has recently invested significantly in education, heritage and local capacity-building. The next section will highlight some key initiatives in each state.

5.1. Saudi Arabia

The largest of all Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, in 2018 established a distinct Ministry of Culture; previously, it was combined with the Ministry of Media. In 2019, the Ministry of Culture launched its vision and roadmap, where it outlined its six roles: leading the sector in terms of laws and policies, developing the institutional ecosystem, enabling regulations, becoming a bridge to the world showcasing Saudi culture, recognizing and nurturing local talent, and preserving Saudi heritage and culture [66]. As part of the latter role, the Ministry has announced the first Cultural Scholarship Program that "offers high-quality education in cultural and arts disciplines at prestigious international universities" [67]. This is also in line with the Saudi vision, which states that culturally engaged citizens "positively impact academic achievement in schools" [66].

To achieve these lofty goals, the Cultural Capacity Development Strategy was launched with the support of the Ministry of the Saudi Vision Realisation Program. The body, a collaboration between the Saudi Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, aims to develop cultural capabilities across all educational levels on the 16 cultural subsectors that span a variety of cultural artefacts, including museums, films, literature, and natural heritage, fashion, and culinary arts [66]. To this end, in 2022, the Ministry of Culture distributed 8000 musical instruments to 100 public and international schools for extracurricular activities alongside several qualification and training programs for teachers. There has been an emphasis on three subjects: Arabic language, social studies, and art education. Moreover, in 2021 the Ministry of Education introduced

art to second-year high school students for the first time, and since then there has been a gradual introduction of subjects related to the 16 subgroups from kindergarten, alongside an Optimal Investment Program to train and develop high-quality teacher capacity [68]. There is a separate fund to train teachers in theater and performing arts, as well as specialized training for students with disabilities [68]. In 2023, arts training programs were delivered to 9086 kindergarten teachers [69]. There has also been an increase in extracurricular activities related to arts and culture. Illustrative examples include a student competition on Saudi intangible cultural heritage, for example, which involved 3465 students across different levels of public education; "little explorer" initiatives to raise awareness on and show the importance of archaeological excavations; a virtual visual arts competition that involved 3847 students; and virtual programs that provide art education introducing art from Saudi Arabia and global civilizations throughout history [68].

Schools also actively took part in international and national days. According to the Ministry's report, in 2023, 1.8 million students participated in various activities associated with World Heritage Day, and 43,000 schools celebrated the National Founding Day [69]. Each year, Saudi Arabia promotes a specific cultural theme. The year 2021 was named the Year of Arabic Calligraphy and 2022 the Year of Saudi Coffee, while 2023 was the Year of Arabic Poetry [70]. Throughout the year, schools actively participated in various related activities, with the report estimating that 3.5 million students engaged in the Year of Saudi Coffee. This was alongside school excursions to numerous archeological sites in the country and its burgeoning scene of mobile and stationary museums and exhibitions [69].

In terms of higher education, 853 academic programs based on arts and culture were initiated between 2019 and 2021. Over this period, the applicants for the disciplines in arts and culture in the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Scholarship Program increased from 414 in 2019 to 1355 in 2021. Similarly, interest in fields such as tourism, hospitality, the arts, visual production, and culinary studies has also grown substantially [71]. In 2021 alone, 38,156 students, 70% of whom were women, graduated in cultural majors from local higher education institutes [68]. In 2023, 185 students were sent abroad through the Cultural Scholarship Program, with 66% pursuing bachelor's, 30% master's, and 4% doctoral degrees. Additionally, the Al Ula Scholarship supported 248 students in their studies in the following fields in line with the labor market needs: Hospitality, Tourism, Urban Design, Arts, History, Museums, and Archeology [69].

5.2. Qatar

Due to the majority expatriate population of multiple nationalities, the current education sector in Qatar is highly fragmented. There are Arabic-medium governmental schools, which cater mainly to local Qataris and certain populations of other Arabs [56,72,73]. There are private schools catering mainly to the wide variety of expatriate populations, such as English-medium American and British schools, as well as many others, including French, Finnish, Japanese, and Indian schools. In between, there are other schools, such as private, Arabic-medium schools that emphasize more of an Islamic ethos; Qatar Foundation schools that are English-medium, private schools, but still cater mainly for the Qatari population; as well as schools that offer the International Baccalaureate curriculum [74].

Qatar embarked on major educational reforms at the start of the 21st century, known as "Education for a New Era". This primarily included privatization, decentralization, and English-medium instruction for governmental schools. However, this was perceived by the wider community as an assault on traditional Arabic cultural traditions

and customs. Moreover, the various issues in the practical management and implementation of these policies led to widespread dissatisfaction, resulting in the reversal of the policy reforms in 2012 [75]. Since then, there has been a gradual and noticeable shift in educational policy towards the promotion and maintenance of Qatari and Arab traditions, customs, and culture—as illustrated, for example, by the invention and marketing of cultural symbols such as the "Desert Rose"—which is also the basis of the architectural design of the new National Museum of Qatar.

With respect to heritage-related education and training, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education "regulates and supports high-quality learning" that is in sync with "national values" [76]. The Ministry also offers cultural programs aimed at nurturing artistic and cultural skills among students. One such initiative is the "Little Calligrapher" program. It was launched in partnership with the "Arabic Calligraphy Academy." This program is designed to introduce students to the art of Arabic calligraphy. The program helps to foster a sense of cultural identity and artistic expression [77]. The Ministry has also prepared summer camps for Qatari students. The camp focuses on improving language skills and cultural understanding in countries such as France, Japan, and China. Participants will engage in language courses, cultural activities, and visits to historical sites [78]. For instance, 11 Qatari students joined a summer camp in Beijing and Hangzhou, an initiative that is part of the broader "Expansion of Foreign Language Teaching in Government Schools" project, which aims to strengthen students' language skills and global cultural awareness through experiential learning [78]. Moreover, to enrich the libraries and support the broader cultural education efforts, the "State Award Ceremony for Child Literature" event was held in 2022 to encourage writers to "produce high-level works in the fields of children's literature and arts" [79].

In 2021, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education updated its "Academic Policy on Compulsory Subjects" and mandated the teaching of Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Qatari History to all schools in Qatar—public and private. This policy is particularly noteworthy because it marked the first instance in which private schools were mandated to include Arabic and Islamic Studies in the curriculum for kindergarten students [80]. The policy also encouraged schools to organize cultural events to help students develop a more holistic understanding of Qatar's culture and history. To enhance cultural heritage education, the policy states that non-Muslim students—who do not take Islamic Studies—should nonetheless be introduced to Islamic religion, values, and ethics through content integrated into other subjects, such as Qatar History, and through school activities [80]. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education is responsible for monitoring and ensuring the effective implementation of this policy across both public and private schools.

Furthermore, each year in December, leading up to Qatar National Day on the 18th, Darb al Saai, is hosted. Darb al Saai is a week-long festival popular amongst citizens and residents that "aims to develop children's skills and enhance their connection to Qatari heritage" by combining "entertainment and education" [81]. Salient exhibits in the festival include theatrical performances, traditional musical instruments, and falconry [82].

The method of combining education with children's development is also seen in the production of a Garangao song by the Qatar National Bank (QNB) Group. Garangao, a beloved Ramadan tradition among children in Qatar, is preserved and exhibited through the production of the song [83]. The lyrics to the song are also published online by ISL, a private school in Doha, to educate students about the national tradition and the way it is practiced in contemporary times [84].

Qatar Foundation (QF) has made significant efforts to strengthen cultural education among younger generations. Through initiatives like teaching music tied to Qatari her-

itage, QF emphasizes the role of music in enhancing students' cultural identity and social connections. One crucial aspect of cultural heritage education is the preservation and celebration of the Arabic language, for which QF has initiated multiple programs. For example, in collaboration with QF's publishing house, Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press (HBKU Press), and Siraj, a Pre-university Education Initiative, QF launched a children's Arabic book titled "Yaseen's Kite," in an effort to "instil ethical and cultural values" [85]. QF also launched initiatives that connected music with cultural heritage through projects such as recording traditional Qatari songs with QF school students to celebrate local heritage [86]. As mentioned in the previous section, QNL has also been instrumental in building capacity and training in the area of heritage, and has organized, in collaboration with the International Federation of Libraries Association, a series of events focusing on prevention of illicit trafficking of cultural objects [49]. An illustrative example in this respect is the Himaya project, which is specifically aimed at preventing the theft of manuscripts [87,88].

QF also emphasizes the role of sports, and QF schools integrate cultural activities, such as sports weeks tied to global events like the AFC Asian Cup, to deepen students' global awareness while keeping them connected to their own cultural roots [89]. In 2023, Qatar Foundation launched Nibras, an educational initiative that integrates values in curricula by using practical training [90]. Integrated within Qatar Foundation, the Education Development Institute (EDI) supports curriculum development and professional training to build "leadership capacity of educators across Qatar" [91].

In 2024, the Ministry of Education launched the "My values draw my identity" project [92]. The initiative is geared towards children in primary schools and provides a framework for teachers to integrate value-based learning for students, especially those in private schools. By grounding activity-based learning with local values, this initiative aims to "achieve a balance between preserving our traditions and keeping pace with global developments" [92]. A notable example of learning within this project is the Aseel Initiative to strengthen Islamic and national identity [92]. The nature of these initiatives indicates the foundational aim of connecting local Qatari and Islamic values to broader concerns shared by students of all backgrounds in schools in Qatar.

Some universities in Education City provide academic coaching and resources for cultural heritage in Qatar. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCUq), for example, which is an Art school by nature, aims to "blend the innovative spirit and high standards of (the) Richmond campus with the bold originality and deep traditions of Qatar" [93]. Other universities like Northwestern Qatar also continue to provide many courses on museum studies, Gulf poetry and Literature, and art in Qatar, while Georgetown University in Qatar (GUQ) also runs a Master's in Arts, Heritage, and Cultural Diplomacy. To this, one can add the fact that research projects in heritage, urban studies and architecture, and conservation are also growing [94,95], as well as in other fields, connecting cultural heritage with other areas of research such as women's studies and sustainable development [94,96].

5.3. United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE Ministry of Education promotes cultural education through programs such as enrichment camps organized in collaboration with 50 federal and local entities. These camps offer a wide range of workshops, including those focused on culture and arts, notably the "certified cultural tour guide program" and "the culture of tolerance stream," which offers practical learning experiences that emphasize cultural awareness and tolerance [97]. These efforts are further reinforced through various initiatives like the "Year of Tolerance" programs, which promote cross-cultural dialogue, hospitality,

and respect for Emirati heritage, which are integrated at various levels of society, including all educational institutions in the UAE [98]. Additionally, initiatives like "Masterpieces" were introduced, collaborating with local and international partners "to develop and refine the students' talents and abilities in the arts and cultural fields" [99].

The Sharjah Institute for Heritage (SIH) plays a crucial role in promoting cultural education beyond the traditional school system. It offers academic qualifications and training to "improve capacity and performance in the practice of conservation projects" [100]. As part of its 2021 annual plan, SIH introduced multiple events, activities, training courses, and professional education programs like the Diploma in Cultural Heritage, Manuscript Restoration and Maintenance, Museum Management, and Urban Heritage [101].

In 2021, the Department of Culture and Tourism—Abu Dhabi (DCT–Abu Dhabi)—collaborated with the Ministry of Education to develop an interactive educational resource focused on Al Ain, a UNESCO World Heritage site known for its Bronze and Iron Age archeological remains. Published in Arabic and English, it is a resource designed to be used in public and private schools that teach the Ministry's curriculum, enhancing students' awareness of global heritage more broadly, as well as preservation [102].

In 2023, the Ministry of Education partnered with the Cultural Programmes and Heritage Festivals Committee to enhance the curricula with more cultural heritage values and topics, including Emirati culture, folklore, and Nabati poetry [103]. The partnership concentrates on several key areas, including promoting Nabati poetry, organizing cultural trips to festivals and book fairs, producing educational materials, hosting student competitions to foster creative talent, and providing support to educational institutions at both the local and federal levels. According to the Ministry, the agreement's goal is to underscore the position of the UAE as a leading center of educational, cultural, and heritage standing in the Middle East [103]. Overall, they hope that it will bolster students' national identity, sense of belonging to the country, pride in their heritage, and help preserve moral virtues and positive behavior.

Similarly to Qatar, with a large expatriate population, there are many private schools with alternative national curricula. However, even in the case of private schools, the Ministry recently emphasized that schools must promote and teach Emirati culture, with penalties for schools that violate these principles [104]. All schools, including private institutions, must adhere to nine principles, which include only having the UAE flag, pictures of Emirati rulers only, and no other figures or symbols, exclusively performing the national anthem, and observing local traditions, customs, and values [104].

To consolidate various initiatives, the UAE introduced the Cultural Agenda 2031—the nation's first comprehensive strategy for the cultural sector, which outlined seven strategic objectives and seventy-five initiatives to be implemented between 2018 and 2031 [105]. A key part of the strategy is the integration of tangible and intangible heritage in curricula, and the training and development required to support all aspects of the cultural sector. Using this as a guide, a Cultural and Creative Industries Strategy 2021–2031 was also launched. One of the strategic indicators in this is the number of teaching hours for arts creativity from K-12, and the number of graduates of the cultural and creative industries who are employed after two years of graduation [106].

5.4. Oman

Oman launched its 2040 tourism strategy, announcing plans to double its international visitors over the next two decades [107]. It is committed to cultural heritage preservation, particularly by focusing on creating an educational curriculum that takes Oman's unique heritage into account and reinforces national and religious values to

counterbalance the forces of globalization [108]. Sultan Qaboos University—one of Oman's most prestigious universities—created a Department of Art Education with the primary aim of training art teachers for all grade levels throughout the country [109].

Oman Tourism Development Company (OMRAN), which was formed in 2005, serves as the executive arm of the Sultanate and is responsible for completing the objectives laid out in the 2040 National Tourism Strategy. They launched the Environmental, Social, and Governance Framework in 2024, emphasizing sustainable development and tourism closely aligned with the Oman Vision 2040 [110]. As part of this initiative, OMRAN launched the *Future Investment Pioneers* program, a 12-week training course designed to build students' entrepreneurial and analytical abilities. It introduced them to the fundamentals of developing products, forming business partnerships, assessing investment opportunities, and understanding innovation and profitability within the tourism sector [111]. Additionally, for high schools, they also partnered with Global Travel and Tourism Partnership (GTTP) to offer students "hands-on experience and invaluable insights into the world of tourism" [112]. They also established a program, particularly for people with special needs, to encourage diversity in this employment sector [113]. At the college level, they have a *Masarat* program, currently in its second edition, that provides Omani youth with training and employment opportunities in sync with the country's strategic national goals regarding tourism [114]. OMRAN also has a summer camp that brought together 50 high school students to "a two-week programme aimed at providing real-world exposure to the tourism sector and introducing them to its dynamic and diverse career paths" [115].

Yet despite the rich heritage available in Oman, Peak et al. [109] argue that Oman faces challenges in art education, including limited institutions, low levels of art literacy, and a lack of crucial elements in art education curricula. They further note that compared to other Gulf countries such as Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, Oman's contemporary art sphere is considered less developed. The UNESCO country strategy for Oman 2019–2023 did not specifically mention the term "cultural heritage *education*," although heritage and identity were mentioned throughout. Education was only discussed in relation to sustainability through Green Schools and Sustainable Development Goal targets [116]. Even above with OMRAN, education and training are linked to the tourism industry more broadly, rather than cultivating talent in the arts and heritage fields, as other GCC states are doing.

5.5. Bahrain

In Bahrain's latest National Statement of Commitment to UNESCO, the focus is mainly on enhancing the educational sector through empowering teachers and improving the curriculum, accessibility, electronic educational solutions, and sustainability of the sector as a whole [117]. Relative to the other GCC countries, the focus is less on culture, and more on the economic preparedness for the country's Economic National Vision 2030. Nonetheless, Bahrain, in its Global Education Monitor Report, demonstrates a clear commitment to respecting its religious and national pan-Arab norms on the regulatory level of designing textbooks as well as inspections, when it comes to the non-state actors in education [117]. While the ministry's effort is focused on modernizing the educational system through digitalization and capacity-building, there are two projects that tackle the cultural part of the student experience. The first one, "Updating Cultural Programs to Improve Citizenship and Values in Schools," aims at promoting and integrating human rights within the schooling ecosystem [117]. The second one is part of a regional competition launched by the UAE, called the "Arab Reading Challenge" which began in 2016. This competition aims to encourage Arab students to connect more with

their language [118]. In 2018, this competition attracted more than 50,000 students in Bahrain (up from 18,000 in its first year) [119]. Similarly to Oman, Bahrain's Country Programme Document (2025–2029) does not mention cultural heritage education. Instead, it highlights mainly curricula reform and capacity-building in the educational system [120].

It is important to note that the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage (ARC-WH), based in Bahrain, was established in 2012. It ensures heritage sites are identified and delivers several executive courses and workshops [121]. The same institute has also initiated many international collaborations, including with the Al Khalifa Academy for Diplomatic Studies, aiming at capacity-building in the area of cultural diplomacy and conservation [122], with the University of Bahrain [123], and the German University of Technology in Oman [124].

5.6. Kuwait

The current efforts of Kuwait's Ministry of Education are directed towards further development of the system itself, including its curriculum, student preparedness for the job market, and the sustainability of the system as a whole. Thus, the Minister recently announced a partnership with OECD to achieve this ambition [125]. Nonetheless, the integration of cultural values is present in the ministry's list of annual activities. Several of these relate to the promotion of reading in Arabic, such as the Arab Reading Challenge [118]. Another project is the National Championship for Debate in Arabic for high school students [124]. These two events showcase an interest in strengthening students' connection to their language and identity.

In terms of music, and coinciding with the National Day celebrations, several musical events took place in schools. For example, the National Concert for Jahra Educational Orchestra, "Kuwait is Glory and Pride," [124] took place in 2024. Other forms of cultural arts, such as Sadu crafts, were also showcased across all six educational districts and private schools during an event called "Naqshat Al Sadu." This exhibition was attended by judges from the World Crafts Council in order to evaluate Kuwait's readiness to be a global creative city in the Sadu craft. The displayed textile artwork was all made by 8th graders. The main crafted pattern—called Al-Raqam—is part of Kuwait's art heritage and is included in the art education curriculum for this grade [125].

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In recent years, there has been a concerted effort across the GCC countries, to varying degrees, to play a more active role in the international heritage discourse at the global level. These policies and strategies appear to have a twofold objective, sitting at the two edges of an imaginary spectrum.

On the one hand, cultural and educational initiatives across the GCC aim to showcase that GCC States are modern states that are ready to play an even more important role in the sphere of culture and education. As products of economic diversification, these initiatives are arguably elements of cultural and national-branding strategies, possibly also nation-building [4], demonstrating GCC States' capacity for excellence in cultural heritage safeguarding. In the area of the art and entertainment sector, this is evidenced by the mushrooming of art institutions and museums throughout the GCC that are influenced or designed by famous Western architects (such as the National Museum of Qatar, designed by Jean Nouvel) and the opening up of galleries exhibiting famous western artworks, along with museums such as Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi that are the fruit of strong international cooperation and cultural diplomacy. These initiatives are clearly demonstrating that GCC States can play an important role in

cultural cooperation, which has been especially evident in the case of Qatar and its efforts to boost the cultural and artistic sector, along with capacity-building in heritage education. In the sphere of education, too, a parallel could be drawn with the functioning of modern international schools that operate on the basis of alternative national curricula of the highest quality, aiming to accommodate large numbers of highly skilled expats (typically with American, English, or international curricula and IB degrees). The same is illustrated by the functioning of international branch campuses that attract top institutions globally throughout the GCC, especially Qatar (such as Georgetown University Qatar and Northwestern University in Education City).

On the other hand, local understanding of heritage and education has been emphasized, highlighting the need to maintain the Arabic language and social values. It may be in fact easily observed that heritage priorities across the GCC are not only aimed at opening up to international markets and showcasing modernity, but also promoting and maintaining *Khaleeji* traditions, customs, symbols, and local culture, and ultimately national pride. In the sphere of education, this is also demonstrated by the large number of initiatives aimed at preserving and boosting the Arabic language and, more generally, by the insistence on preserving Islamic and Arabic values in national curricula, and at times also in scholarships. In the sphere of heritage, Gulf societies' interest in safeguarding their own cultural identities has been evident, especially with regard to cultural tourism and engagement with UNESCO initiatives. This is, for instance, demonstrated by the increased interest in UNESCO-nominated elements of intangible heritage across the Gulf —such as camel racing, pearl diving, henna, *majlis,* and *camel-herding* traditions. These two strands should not be seen as contradictory but as a continuous negotiation and dialogue between globalization, development and cultural sustainability.

In addressing both objectives, it may be easily observed that GCC States remain state-centric. The form of governance of GCC States undoubtedly plays a role in this respect. Centralized cultural governance impacts the enjoyment of the right to education and cultural rights. State-centric cultural governance privileges consultation with experts, including foreign experts, rather than concerned citizens or local communities, and there is little understanding of the processes behind such consultation. Heritage design, and the surge of monumental cultural heritage projects that involve star-architecture, exemplify this remark. An exception to the rule may be the inclusion of concerns related to intangible heritage, since community participation is a requirement under the 2003 UNESCO Convention.

Preliminary findings in our research suggest that educational policies and priorities, such as reforming education curricula or reinforcing capacity-building in the area of education and culture, are identified by government officials and state entities, excluding citizens and community participation. In other words, the key actors defining, designing and implementing the relevant policies and curricula seem to be either national government agencies in GCC States—such as, for instance, the respective Ministries of Culture and Ministries of Education and Higher Education—or entities that enjoy a certain degree of autonomy yet are directly affiliated with the state. This research did not explore the role of informal participatory mechanisms in Gulf States—such as, for example, consultative majlis consisting of GCC citizens. Non-state cultural actors, however, and in particular those representing communities and minorities in the GCC, do not appear in the making of educational and cultural heritage policies.

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