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Executive Summary

Over the past three decades, GCC countries have transformed their higher education sectors through rapid expansion, private-sector participation, and the establishment of foreign branch campuses as part of broader efforts to shift from oil-based economies toward knowledge-based development. This policy brief examines how these changes have increased educational choice, strengthened international competitiveness, and positioned higher education as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining skilled migrants. National development strategies increasingly place education at the center of efforts to strengthen human capital, innovation, and long-term economic diversification.

The brief highlights the rise of private institutions, transnational education partnerships, and government efforts to strengthen quality assurance through accreditation systems and international benchmarking. It also explores the growing link between higher education and skilled migration: strong educational systems can attract international students, researchers, and professionals, especially when paired with clearer residence and employment pathways. The UAE represents the most advanced example of this approach, combining world-class educational offerings with student visa reforms, Golden Visas, and ambitious plans to become a global education hub. At the same time, the model faces important constraints, including rising education and housing costs, uneven graduate employment prospects, and regional geopolitical uncertainty.

Overall, the brief concludes that higher education has become a central pillar of GCC competitiveness and talent strategy. To sustain this model, governments should complement education reforms with practical support measures: making schooling, student accommodation, and family housing more affordable; improving transport and related infrastructure to reduce indirect costs; aligning residency reforms with labor-market opportunities for graduates; and strengthening incentives for expatriate families and highly skilled migrants. These steps would help ensure that education policy continues to support talent retention, demographic diversification, and post-oil economic transformation across the region.