

# SESRI Policy Brief

## Shadow Education: Private Tutoring and Education Reform

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*Qatar's intensive efforts to reform its K-12 education system are increasingly undermined by the presence of a large illegal industry in 'shadow education', sustained by widespread reliance on private tutoring for secondary-level and even primary-level students. An estimated one in three secondary students in Qatar rely upon private tutors, creating serious interference with standardized instruction and curriculum delivery, and significantly impairing the state's ability to evaluate and improve education for all. Unregulated private tutors are rapidly inflating their fees, and the enormous household costs of chasing children's education is leaving many families behind.*

For nearly fifteen years, Qatar's K-12 education system has been the subject of intensive reform and development measures, as the state attempts to serve the educational requirements of a diverse and rapidly growing population. National and international examination results have demonstrated moderate improvement in recent years, indicating that reform measures may be succeeding.

However, Qatar hosts a growing 'shadow education' system of unregulated private tutors, who engage in private, non-contractual work, frequently in students' homes. When properly regulated, private tutoring serves an essential function within any developed education system, providing remedial assistance in specific subjects to students who need extra support in particular areas of the curriculum. However, SESRI's research into secondary education in Qatar indicates that more than three-quarters of students who receive private tutoring are tutored in all core subjects, suggesting that tutors are being used inappropriately, as a much broader form of educational outsourcing.

Private tutoring is actually illegal in Qatar: Law 23 of 2015 on the provision of educational services imposes stiff fines and punishment on educational providers

who operate outside of ministry oversight. Unauthorized private tutors are a central focus in the organized government drive to bring all educational service providers under formal regulation. In addition to running afoul of labor laws, lack of oversight for private tuition implies that its educational delivery is unstandardized and therefore undermines the fundamental basis of a national education system.

It becomes extremely difficult to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of an educational structure when instruction is widely privatized. Private supplementary education has a demonstrably negative effect upon school attendance, and thus affects teachers' capacity to deliver a well-designed curriculum within the schools. Although private tutoring can help individual students who are struggling academically, widespread reliance on private tutors can significantly disrupt the proper functioning of the formal education system as a whole, to the disadvantage of students who do not need and/or cannot pay for tutors.

### Use of private tutors in Qatar is increasing

SESRI's research estimates that in 2015 36% of all secondary students in Qatar used private tutors. In other parts of the

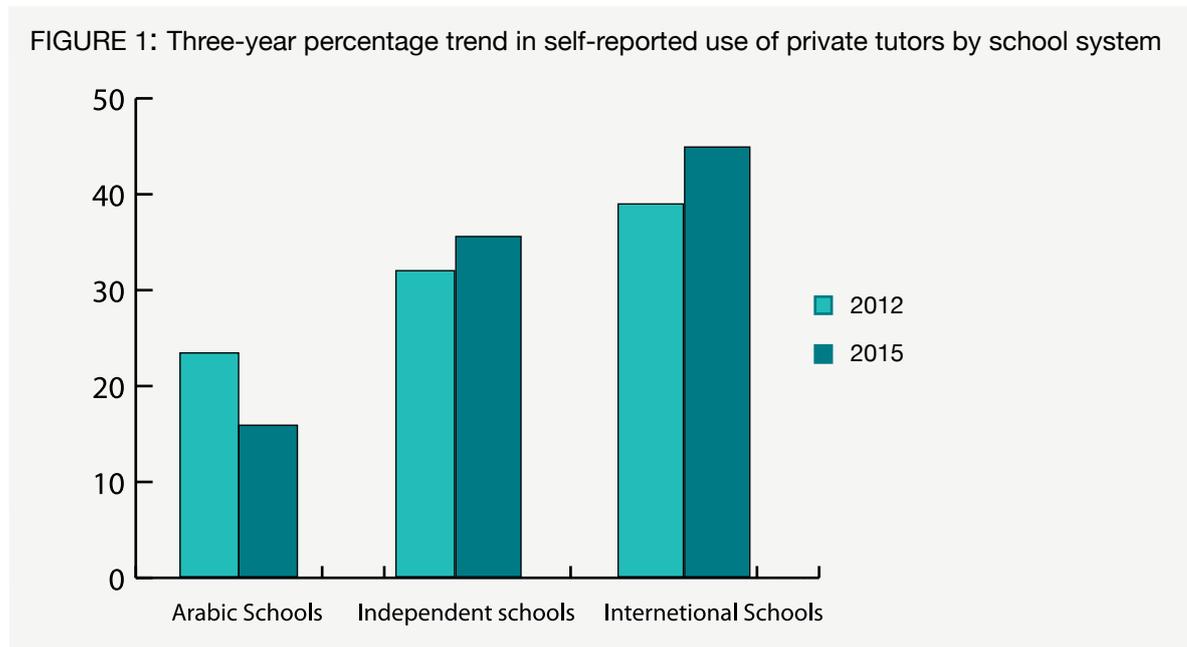
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GCC, the use of tutors may be considerably higher - notably Abu Dhabi, where recent estimates place the use of tutors as high as 47%. Moreover, on going research at SESRI indicates that over the past three years, the use of private tutors in Qatar has increased among all secondary students by only a modest margin of 4% overall and that within the Arabic school system in particular, the use of private tutors has dropped considerably. However, these encouraging findings conceal a range of hidden issues. Nearly one-half of all international school students are privately tutored, in contrast to one-third of independent school students. Moreover, the drop in private tuition among Arabic school students may have less to do with rising academic achievement and instead be driven by steeply rising costs.

## The cost of private tutors is growing explosively

While the overall use of private tutors has increased by only 4% between 2012 and 2015, the cost of engaging a private tutor has risen ten times faster. In 2012, the average annual cost of tutoring for an individual student was QR5085, and nearly one-third of families who engaged private tutors were paying more per child, up to

QR 20,000 per year. By 2015, the average annual cost per child had risen to QR 7200, an increase of over 40%. Moreover, the top end of the cost range has soared: parents were twice as likely in 2015 to report that they were paying QR 20,000 per year for one child, and the highest-paying 5% of parents who engage private tutors are spending between QR30,000 and QR 50,000 annually per child. Simple inflation does not account for rising costs in an unregulated market. Overall CPI (Consumer Price Index) inflation is 20.22% for all education since 2013, but that figure is largely accounted for by disproportionate inflation in the costs of primary (22.64%) and tertiary (28.00%) education. For secondary education, the average household cost has increased by only 11.37% between the 2013 baseline and November 2015, the month of SESRI's most recent education survey. The cost of private tutoring, therefore, is rising at a rate almost four times faster than the inflation of secondary education costs overall. If the existing large cohorts of primary students advance into Qatar's secondary system (instead of, for instance, repatriating over the next five years), total private spending on secondary education could reach extraordinarily high levels.



*The household cost of private tuition has increased by 40% in the past three years*

## Qatari students, especially in international schools, are significantly more likely to rely upon private tutors

The rising costs of secondary education are falling disproportionately upon Qatari parents who enroll their children in Qatar’s international schools. Qatari students attending international schools are the group most likely to use private tutors. Moreover, this group has seen the largest gross increase in private tutor usage over the past three years. Tuition fees at Qatar’s many international schools are significantly more expensive than fees charged by the independent school system. The high incidence of private tutors in the context of international schools represents a significant additional ‘hidden cost’ which runs counter to the perceived desirability of international secondary schooling.

The vast majority of families in Qatar have more than one child: when these costs are extrapolated to include siblings, the household expenditure burden becomes staggering. It is possible that rapidly rising costs are the main force behind the relatively slow rate of increase in private tuition overall; this would suggest that, should these trends continue unchecked, private tuition will become increasingly restricted to the privileged few, rather than accessible to all students based upon strict academic need.

## Link between private tutoring and absences from school

Regular access to private tutors is correlated to higher rates of absenteeism. Since 2012, concerted efforts from the Ministry of Education to define and enforce an attendance policy in Qatar’s schools has brought perceptible improvements in student attendance. Although the Ministry’s Annual School Reports show no change in attendance indicators over the past three years, SESRI’s research suggests that absenteeism is decreasing: following the implementation of the 2012 attendance policy, all students are now 10% more likely to report that they “never” miss a day of school.

However, privately tutored students have been less responsive to the attendance policy. Last year, only 30% of students without private tutors reported regular absences from school, whereas 40% of tutored students are regularly and more frequently absent. High rates of absenteeism place significant strain upon effective curriculum delivery within classrooms, to the disproportionate disadvantage of those students who do attend.

## At-risk students who may truly need extra tutoring are unlikely to have access

When properly regulated, extra tutoring can be vital to students who are struggling academically. The Ministry of Education

FIGURE 2: Rates of cost inflation of secondary education fees vs. private tuition for secondary students

	2012	2013	2015	Change %
Secondary school cost inflation, CPI	—	100.00*	111.37	11.37%
Private tuition average annual cost per student	QR 5085	—	QR 7200	41.59%

*Students with private tutors are more frequently absent from school*

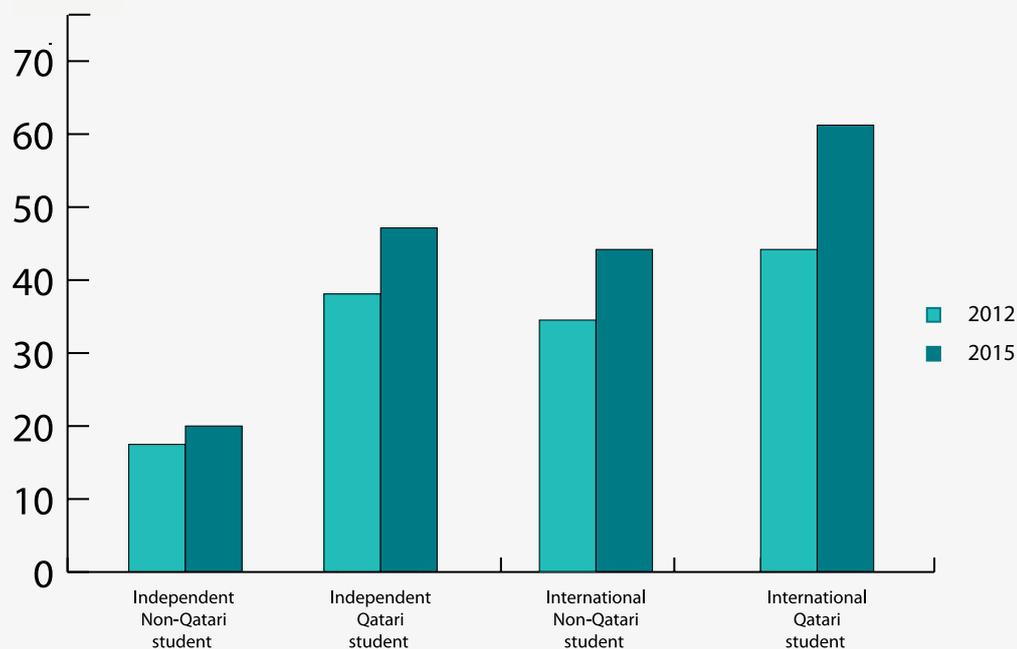
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recognizes the value of tutoring in appropriate contexts, and is currently producing a program of online instructional videos freely available to all students who may need additional support to advance through their classes.

However, SESRI's research suggest a persistent disconnection between students' academic needs and corresponding access

to additional academic support. On average, one in ten secondary students in Qatar self-report that they have been held back for at least one academic year, and this figure has not significantly changed over the past three years. Moreover, fewer than half (45%) of all failed students report that they are also being tutored, a ratio that has not improved between 2012 and 2015.

FIGURE 3: Percentage of international and independent school students using private tuition, by nationality



*Among students who repeat one year of school, fewer than half also have access to private tutoring*

## Directions for policy:

1) Systematic development of regulated tuition industry. The illegality of private tutoring does not appear to be common knowledge in Qatar, and the structurally disruptive effect of a large shadow education sector is not immediately obvious to parents or students. Supplementary education for students in need is best managed through the creation of regulated tutoring centres. Some of these have begun to appear in Qatar, such as Sylvan Learning, Oxford Learning, and London Academy, but there is evidently sufficient demand to support many more.

2) Public awareness. High levels of private tutoring tend to be sustained in part by normalization: the perceived advantage conferred by extra tutoring carries a desirability effect that encourages more parents and students to use tutors, regardless of strict academic need. Parents of schoolchildren should be encouraged to place greater emphasis on the quality of formalized educational delivery, rather than availing themselves of private options.