



Leveraging Finnish Educational Innovations for Market Entry

Opportunities and Barriers for FinlandQ in the Gulf Region (UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar)

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ABSTRACT

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The Thesis will analyze how FinlandQ, a Finnish knowledge-based education company, could expand both internally and externally to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) markets. The context consists of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and addresses the challenge of translating a fundamental Finnish pedagogy that is rooted in Finnish practices into the various settings in different cultures, organizations, and pedagogies. The study aims to recognize the key strengths and weaknesses that FinlandQ's market entry opportunities and threats are and to ascertain which strategy will be appropriate and that will have the most positive effect.

The study uses a qualitative case-study design. Primary data consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews with FinlandQ stakeholders and Gulf education experts along with national policy documents, market reports, and academic literature. A thematic analysis of interview data and a content analysis of the published policy and market materials.

Overall findings suggest that success in an international market entry depends on balancing the need to establish relationships slowly against the need to quickly establish collaboration as characterizes early stage international ventures. The way people teach, lead, and make decisions in schools can be different from one culture to another. These differences affect how fast and well collaboration happens. The research suggests that FinlandQ should focus more on building teacher training partnerships and finding a structured way to adjust Finnish teaching methods to fit local needs and expectations.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, education export, Finnish education model, internationalization, knowledge-based services, market entry, Gulf region

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

Abbreviation	Full Wording	Explanation / Context
UAE	United Arab Emirates	One of the target markets for FinlandQ's entry strategy.
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	Another key Gulf market analyzed in the study.
INV	International New Venture	A theoretical model emphasizing rapid, network-based internationalization.
PDI	Power Distance Index	Hofstede's cultural dimension measuring acceptance of unequal power distribution.
B2G	Business-to-Government	A business model involving services provided to government clients.
B2B	Business-to-Business	A business model involving services between companies.
EdTech	Educational Technology	Technology-based learning and teaching tools.
PPP	Public-Private Partnership	A cooperative venture between public and private sectors.
K-12	Kindergarten to 12th Grade	Refers to the full range of primary and secondary education.
WISE	World Innovation Summit for Education	A Qatar-based global initiative promoting educational innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Global Rise of Education as a Service and the Finnish Phenomenon

Today, the role of education has expanded beyond the field of cultural diplomacy. It has made its way into trade and economics, where it is one of the easiest levers to improve international trade. Trade prosperity is unattainable without education. Thus, attention to modern higher education is extremely important among competition and success in international trade markets.

The Finnish education brand has global education standard content and programs. The education package has proven to be an excellent premium brand in the international education field in the past few years. As such it has developed a crucial role in the improvement of international business education. The philosophy and education of this educational package is different from that of other educational brands (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019). One of the characteristics of the goals and content of this educational package are the emphasis on teacher expertise, being justice-oriented, and focusing on well-being; and the most important component of its teaching-learning is research-oriented, student-centered methods in teaching.

The transition from the cooperative mode to the competitive mode in the higher education system is one of the major trends investigated by various scholars. Philip J. Altbach (2004) has established a key distinction between the terms of “globalization” and “internationalization”. For him, globalization means great, global economic/technological pressures that shape the global academic structure, generally unavoidable, and internationalization refers to the strategic directions and policies higher education organisations will adopt to confront these forces. Meanwhile, the global forces such as the growth of knowledge-based economy, the spread of English as the prevalent common language of science and knowledge-based education, and the growth in the massification of higher education become increasingly critical for determining

the global academic system. The outcome of this collaboration is an uneven and fragmented global system of competition, where increasingly more academic institutions have been opposed to each other in increasing degrees of competition.

The company that we have researched in this study, FinlandQ, intends to export to other countries the famous Finnish learning systems. It does not simply sell educational materials or content, but it also moves across a global and cultural model of education. Using this model, Finland in part places itself (referenced in Altbach's 2004: Center-Periphery) in the "center" of the global higher education system. Finland, by virtue of its role, enjoys strong symbolic and reputational power, which affords it a distinct competitive edge in most of the international education market. Consequently, the Finnish education model has become very attractive for all those countries in the so-called "periphery," where there is a strong ambition to improve education within limited resources.

However, in this process, there are some challenges. Transferring an entire education system from a developed Western context to a non-Western one is not simple and without risks. Some people argue that such actions can repeat old patterns of Western cultural dominance or create new forms of academic neocolonialism.

Hence, expanding FinlandQ into new markets is not only a business or economic effort, but also a cultural attempt. It represents a deep intercultural exchange that needs careful reflection on how knowledge is shared? Why? and with what impact between the "center" and the "periphery?"

1.2 The Gulf Region: A Strategic Horizon for Educational Investment

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, mainly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and Qatar, has become one of the most attractive areas for international education organizations. This opportunity does not only come from the market itself but mostly from strong government plans and well-designed projects.

The main ambition behind this change comes from major national strategies like Saudi Vision 2030 and Qatar's National Vision 2030. These plans clearly show the main goal of each country, which is to move away from depending mostly on oil and gas and to build sustainable, diverse, and competitive knowledge-based economies on a global level.

Education is considered the foundation of this transformation, as it helps to prepare skilled people who can lead and shape the future economic growth of the region (Al-Heeti & Al-Tamimi, 2019; Almalki, 2016).

Big government investments and a fast-growing education market are in support of those national goals. For example, the K–12 sector in the United Arab Emirates is projected to grow from roughly \$10.34 billion in 2025 to approximately \$17.35 billion by 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a). Likewise, Saudi Arabia's K–12 market is expected to grow from an estimated \$13.26 billion in 2025 to nearly \$23.63 billion in 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b). Education has also been key to Qatar given the national capital outlays in its \$7.5 billion market and its robust investment, including an expansion in the budget (Nexdigm, 2024). These large investments are also linked to changes in population sizes. The vast majority of people in Saudi Arabia are aged under 35 years, which indicates the necessity to ensure the development of further educational capacities for the next generation (General Statistics Office, 2023). There is also a vast and wealthy expatriate community on the GCC side that has fuelled demand for private schools and international programs, such as the British, American, and International Baccalaureate (IB) system. Such a growing market keeps with a growing private educational sector which also is encouraged by government policies (PwC, 2018).

Unlike markets that evolve, the education sector in the GCC is dominated by governments that are very active. These governments not only regulate but are also significant strategic actors determining the development process of the system. The national vision plans serve as maps with the goal of fostering social and economic change in every country. And also many instruments are used by the policy makers to encourage foreign investors to make investments, to encourage the opening of international university campuses, and to

guarantee that the level of quality standards is maintained in meeting the national objectives (Government of the United Arab Emirates, n.d.-b; Dubai Future Foundation, 2022). This is life-changing for a company like FinlandQ, it radically alters the entire way they enter the market. So that's why you could be more than just an educator. The company, instead, must position itself as a strategic partner that is part of the macro development project across the GCC region.

All this means, beyond the purely commercial considerations, that the criteria for measuring success are intrinsically political-economic and go beyond the bounds of profit and profit alone. FinlandQ's sustainability and future impact will increasingly be tied to its ability to create a clear, continuous, measurable alignment with the priorities of the host governments in terms of priorities and strategic roadmaps.

Table 1.1: Comparative Overview of Education Markets in the UAE, KSA, and Qatar

Key Market Data	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Saudi Arabia (KSA)	Qatar
Market Size (Value)	K-12: USD 10.34B (2025) (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a)	K-12: USD 13.26B (2025) (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b)	Total Ed: USD 7.5B (2024) (Nexdigm, 2024)
Projected CAGR	K-12: 10.90% (2025-30) (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a)	K-12: 12.25% (2025-30) (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b)	Private K-12: 10.51% (2025-30) (Mordor Intelligence, 2024c)
Key Demand Drivers	Large expatriate population, govt. initiatives, demand for international curricula (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a)	Large youth population (71% < 35), economic diversification, govt. investment (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b; General Authority for Statistics, 2023)	Rising expatriate population, focus on human capital, govt. investment (Mordor Intelligence, 2024c)
Dominant Segment	Private Education (K-12 & Higher Ed) (Ridge, 2014)	K-12 Education (Public & Private) (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b)	Private Education, driven by expats (Ken Research, 2019)
Govt. Ed. Expenditure	Education is ~15% of federal budget (UAE Government, n.d.-b)	Vision 2030 prioritizes education reform and investment (Saudi	QAR 22.1B (10.5% of total budget in 2020) (Mordor

		Arabia Vision 2030, n.d.)	Intelligence, 2024c)
National Strategic Vision	UAE Vision 2030, Centennial 2071: Focus on a competitive, knowledge-based economy (UAE Government, n.d.-b; Dubai Future Foundation, 2022)	Saudi Vision 2030: A thriving economy with an education system aligned with market needs (Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, n.d.)	Qatar National Vision 2030: Human development and a diversified, knowledge-based economy (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, n.d.)
Key Regulatory Body	Federal MoE; Local: KHDA (Dubai), ADEK (Abu Dhabi), SPEA (Sharjah) (UAE Government, n.d.-a)	Ministry of Education (MoE) (Ministry of Education, n.d.)	Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) (US-Qatar Business Council, n.d.)

1.3 Research Problem: The Paradox of Opportunity and Friction

The Paradox of Opportunity and Friction. The Gulf nations are big potential providers of international education. Yet the introduction and distribution of Finnish educational services encounter a number of obstacles related to cultural differences. So, the basic objectives and content of the Finnish educational system conflict with the prevailing social and educational contracts of the Gulf countries; because in the Finnish education system, such as student autonomy, critical theory, and strengthening of justice-centeredness are recognized as means and high goals that come from a social environment = which is undefined with low power distance and high individualism (Hofstede, 2001). Meanwhile, in the Gulf countries, due to different social atmosphere levels, such goals are hard to achieve. Therefore, at the same time as opening up possible opportunities for Finnish education systems to develop in Gulf countries—to try them out—there is still much conflict and difficulty.

Finland's socio-cultural education architecture is different from environmental reality in comparable places (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar). In this case, Hofstede's cultural theory in these countries has been conceptualized as based on high collectivism, uncertainty avoidance. These are countries going through

changing from collectivism to individualism at this moment. As this has never happened before in them, and because of the sophisticated nature of collective and traditional rules, many things have gone wrong during this transition for them, and they have grown significantly more stressed when dealing with those new generations which fail to adhere to traditional rules and customs and hence these people opposed to a new education system (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). This difference in culture has brought new and unique knowledge into the world in these countries, a problem and the biggest stumbling block to the development of this field. Some of the global conventions, Uppsala among them, have termed this intercultural difference "psychological distance" (Hofstede, 2001).

The resulting distance makes concrete operational barriers. A Finnish instructor motivating the opening for discussion in the classroom, for example, is in conflict with the local educational hierarchy (Kole, 2025). Where in business negotiations the Finnish direct communication style contradicts the cultural requirement in the region for trust via relationships as deep as possible (Katz, 2017). Unfortunately these sorts of conflicts tend to see the very best of Finnish education model being considered culturally mismatched instead of adding value. Which raises the critical question of, what techniques or devices could facilitate such a transition, one of a culture-based education system, across that kind of psychological gulf, as exist between Finland and the GCC region? FinlandQ's main task is how to make this balance between exploring competitive advantage and maintaining an integrated educational identity in an evolving market. The primary research question is: "What is the paradox of opportunity and friction?" It poses this question: how is it possible for even a knowledge-based company, which is characterized mainly by its distinct and culturally ingrained educational philosophy, to successfully migrate such a system over a broad psychological and cultural distance.

1.4 Research Questions and Thesis Structure

To address the essential problem, this dissertation is led by one main question that is divided into four sub-questions, which together form the argument.

Main Research Question: What strategic model can help a knowledge-based Finnish educational firm such as FinlandQ to confront the situation and take advantage of the opportunities on entering the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar markets?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. Path by Theory: The theoretical path is whether a gradual and learning-oriented process of internationalization, as explained by the Uppsala Model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), or a rapid and network-focused approach, as conceptualized by International New Venture (INV) Theory (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994), offers a better framework for a decision such as for FinlandQ's entry into the Gulf?
2. Market Specificity: In what way do the specific cultural, economic, and regulatory context of the UAE, KSA & Qatar require specific entry strategies to be adopted instead of a one-size-fits-all, region-wide approach?
3. Barrier Identification: At what constraints do you think the most serious barrier to entry presents itself; specifically, the cultural fit of the pedagogical offering in relation to the new product from a pedagogical point of view, legal requirements being complex as legal and operational barriers as cost and competition in the local market?
4. Strategic Mechanisms: What are suitable market entry mechanisms like joint ventures, franchising, foreign direct investment, or licensing as those are the most appropriate in order to deal with these risks identified and benefit from strategic opportunities of their respective market?

1.4.1 Structure of the Study

The current study consists of literature review (Chapter 2); development of theoretical model (Chapter 3), comparative-empirical analysis on markets (Chapters 4-6); practical recommendations (Chapter 7). A framework for solving the fundamental question of FinlandQ's entry into the GCC is outlined at this presentation, which begins with identifying the scientific fundamentals and theoretical models, and ends with a complex description of each market in detail followed by operating-oriented strategies for overcoming psychological distance and expanding the opening.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Internationalization of Higher Education and Knowledge Services

To properly analyze FinlandQ's strategic investment in the GCC market, one must draw on the authoritative literature on the internationalization of higher education. This literature clearly shows that the global education environment is shaped by competitive and commercial forces; this is the context in which the Finnish model's export strategy should be defined. Jane Knight introduces the major framework where she defines globalization as adding a global dimension to the activities of higher education. Her main focus is on how motivations have changed over time from the post-war period that emphasized cultural exchange to a new phase driven by business interests, national economic goals, and competition.

From this view, FinlandQ's activities can be understood as a commercial effort within the global education market. However, Knight also gives a strong reminder that when the main focus becomes financial or profit-based, it can harm academic values and integrity. This is especially important to consider in culturally sensitive regions like the Persian Gulf (Knight, 2015).

Philip Altbach brings another valuable perspective by making a difference between internationalization that deals with university strategies and policies, and globalization, which is shaped by larger economic forces (Altbach, 2004). His idea of the "center-periphery" model is very important for this study. It shows how powerful Western and English-speaking universities, seen as the "center," often decide what is considered academic knowledge and quality. In contrast, countries on the "periphery" have to follow or adapt these systems instead of building their own.

FinlandQ's role in the GCC higher education market can be understood in two ways. On one side, the company holds a strong and privileged position as a new "center" as it promotes and exports the well-known Finnish education model, which gives it a clear advantage. On the other hand, this situation also brings questions about fairness and global power balance. The GCC countries'

reliance on imported education systems may create good business opportunities, However it can increase global inequalities as well and lead to a new academic colonialism, where Western education standards are valued more than local cultures and traditions.

Altbach's ideas help to understand this complex situation easier. He explains that English has become the main language in global education and trade. This gives clear advantages to English-speaking education providers, however at the same time, it can create issues for local languages and cultural identity. These theoretical problems are also visible in practical studies about international education, where researchers often talk about ongoing challenges like quality assurance, accreditation, and degree recognition (Wilkins and Huisman, 2012). Such challenges are important for new players like FinlandQ to manage if they want to enter the GCC market successfully.

To evaluate FinlandQ's plan to expand into the GCC region properly, it is very important to connect it with strong theoretical concepts about higher education internationalization. Research in this area shows that global education is no longer only about cultural exchange. It is now highly influenced by business goals, competition, and economic strategies. Because of this shift, FinlandQ's effort to promote and export the Finnish education model becomes a key example for understanding both the possible advantages and the main difficulties of this kind of approach.

2.2 Market Entry in Emerging Economies: The Gulf Context

Although theories of internationalization give us useful basic ideas and principles of internationalization, the research on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region research reveals a different set of challenges that are a direct bridge to the study goals of FinlandQ. One of the first and most obvious barriers is the cost — financially crippling the costs of operation, usually well above the initial expense. Such costs include exorbitantly priced real estate, high pay for good teachers, and heavy day to day expenses (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b; Zawya, 2022).

The rapid expansion of the market, however, presents another challenge: retaining enough skilled teachers. Many international teachers remain only for very short periods due to high living costs and fierce competition between schools. The result is high staff turnover as well as perpetual recruiting problems (Herrera & Proff, 2022; CE Interim, 2024). The education marketplace in the GCC is also extremely competitive. The UAE is home to one of the largest concentrations of international schools in the world, and therefore new schools must compete fiercely to build the student population (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a).

In these situations, success only depends on having a clear and unique value proposition (UVP). To deal with such challenges, many studies highlight the importance of building partnerships with local organizations. These collaborations can offer useful knowledge about the local context, helpful connections, and social trust as well. However, this strategy also has some risks. Some research shows that disagreements with local partners may appear once the project starts making profit. Hence, it is very important to plan carefully, choose reliable partners, and set clear legal agreements from the beginning. Finally, the GCC market comes under the label of being inside an “expatriate bubble,” a prospect and trap simultaneously. Major affluent expatriate populations in its important centres such as Dubai and Doha serve as the primary international demand for private education and which share a cultural association with Western educational practices (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a; Mordor Intelligence, 2024c).

It can be very promising to only concentrate on the income-generating parts, but that doesn't come easy. The national aspirations of Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, clearly seek to educate and prepare their citizens for a future that is less reliant on oil. Policies such as 'Qatarisation' highlight the fact that this has changed; a focus on local talent development has become a priority (Staffhouse, 2024). If they are simply an education provider like FinlandQ and serve only the temporary expatriate population; it does not provide local development. In that event, it could quickly become out of sync with the nation's goals above all. That disconnect can create regulatory headaches, hurt public relations and cut off access to government projects. So,

although the expats market may look to be a more advantageous entry point, at least FinlandQ's strategy should first focus on establishing a link with and supporting the education of locals. Such initiatives would create trust in the company and more strategic partnerships in the long-term, if not the short-term, in the GCC.

2.3 Educational Technology (EdTech) as a Disruptive Entry Vector

Educational Technology (EdTech) becomes an important source of influence and innovation for providers like FinlandQ, which has emerged as one of the powerful avenues for influence and innovation. This connection links Finland's global reputation as a country known for creativity with the Gulf region's ambitious goals for digital transformation. The rapid growth of the EdTech industry after COVID-19, together with the global move toward online and distance learning, became a main turning point for transformation in the Arab world. The pandemic increased both awareness and acceptance of EdTech among many education sectors (El-Masri & Tarhini, 2017).

At the same time, governments in the GCC have shown great commitment to bringing technology into their education systems. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), national initiatives such as the "Mohammed bin Rashid Smart Learning Program" and the "Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2031" show a clear and continuous focus on developing a stable and unified policy framework (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a; Government of the UAE, 2017). This commitment became especially visible during the pandemic, when the UAE managed to shift more than one million students to online learning through its advanced ICT infrastructure and AI-based tools like Alef Education (IMARC Group, 2024b). A similar trend has been observed in Saudi Arabia, where EdTech has been recognised as one of the key causes of educational reform through Vision 2030, and a "policy climate in Saudi Arabia remains open for investment and innovation" (IMARC Group, 2024a). The development of indigenous platforms like the learning management system Classera and the online course provider Rwaq indicate that the local ecosystem has expanded and flourished (Seedra, 2022; Class Central, n.d.).

There has been significant research into some of the barriers to effective e-learning technology integration. These challenges need to be studied and analyzed in depth and FinlandQ should be able to give the solution in great detail to solve these challenges. Human challenges are the greatest challenge in this field. In the domain of human trainers and teachers, the lack of training and acquaintance of trainers and teachers made them ill prepared and unaccustomed to using new technology resulting in a lack of familiarity of utilization of new technology. As a result, this difficulty makes the education package unproductive. (Al-Shahri, 2010). Structural and systemic obstacles are other barriers. There is no technological infrastructure including the Internet in low-society areas and the technical infrastructure is unintegrated in the urban areas led to variability (Al-Fahd, 2009).

In this modern age, traditional systems continue to be the rule and the resistance to change in teaching methods is keeping a new curriculum to be developed as well as problems caused by a technology education program can be seen in both cultural educational research and culture context. Therefore, a provider like FinlandQ should take the approach: an international experience has shown that a technology product-based strategy [on its own] meets many difficulties and eventually fails in many cases with many difficulties. Hence, any successful e-learning technology implementation demands a comprehensive ecosystem-based strategy. This strategy is based on the integration of technology and teacher empowerment, and the adaptation of the curriculum to the socio-cultural environment. Not only does this strategy reinforce the learning process, it builds cultural practices as well.

2.4 The Regulatory and Cultural Maze

FinlandQ is an e-learning technology startup. Thus, for it to be able to achieve its mission in this area, it must face two key challenges. The regulatory landscape in the education sector in the Gulf polities differs between countries, as they typically have highly decentralized and hierarchical regulatory systems, while other countries have centralized systems. For instance, UAE adopts a decentralized education service system. The country's education system is one

that must satisfy the education needs of the Federal Ministry of Education (MoE), but it has its own standards, KHDA Dubai, ADEK Abu Dhabi, SPEA Sharjah and others separate (Government of the United Arab Emirates, n.d.-a).

In contrast, education services in countries like Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2025), Qatar (US-Qatar Business Council, n.d.-a) are covered by a central system, and its higher education system is regulated and supervised by a common guideline. Due to the level of education provided in this country, the process of licenses for education service is complicated and extended. There is a set of educational standards to be followed while obtaining an educational license. Hence a company that provides educational services to work in these countries needs to function according to the curriculum elements (content) and have adequate hardware and software (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2016; ADEK, 2024; Nimbus, 2025).

In accordance with the course of international relations, laws of foreign ownership have made it possible for foreign educational services projects in foreign countries to take the route of development. For example, in Qatar, education investment from abroad is fully welcomed. On account of foreign ownership this is the event. In practice, however, the licensing process poses numerous challenges and complexities here. Hence, educational-focused firms in these countries outsource the licensing process to local legal consulting firms, outsourcing it instead to local legal firms. (PWC, 2018).

This regulatory network is intertwined with culturally-based business interactions and has a set policy and fixed commands that can only fail in the dynamic era of today. This predicament is a consequence of the lack of appreciation for cultural and linguistic diversity. In the Gulf countries the culture and language factor are considered a fixed and unchangeable element that can be ignored, that do not make any difference to education, among other things. For business texts and messaging to be meaningful, they should be adapted with a special elegance and quality suited to the cultural context and their relevance in the eyes of the audience, avoiding inappropriate, irrelevant and damaging imagery and tone. And texts should not be simple. Texts have a level of simplicity that can evoke different perceptions from audiences. The second

major step in this direction, that of negotiation protocols. The Gulf countries have their methods of negotiation different from those of European and Western countries.

Consequently, transactional efficiency is neglected and personal relationships serve as the basis for negotiation. Accordingly, we will settle for trust in the biggest investment deals (Katz, 2017). Communication in these transactions is per context and concepts and signages are most important in the dialogic processes (Hall, 1976). There are also a few personality attributes that are necessary for a strong and good interaction and transaction such as patience, respect for one another, respecting the hierarchy and the need to "maintain honor" (). FinlandQ which is a start-up is task-oriented and did not have an influential place in the cultural context. This feature of the company results in incompatibility with the cultural maze, the strategy failure and the introduction of the targeted market is disrupted.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of the Thesis

This research is considered an interdisciplinary study and discusses a gap in relation to international trade theory, educational studies, and regional market analysis, and takes a major step towards completing this gap at the intersection of these three fields.

2.5.1 Identifying the Research Gap

A review of the literature shows that several studies have been conducted with strong results in areas related to the research topic. There is a comprehensive literature in the field of internationalization. In this area, models such as Uppsala and International New Venture (INV) were presented for scalable manufacturing or technology companies (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). Also, in the field of international education research, studies have been conducted by Knight (2015) and Altbach (2004), and comprehensive frameworks have been presented. Finally, an increasing number of descriptive

reports and studies have been conducted on the education market in the Gulf countries and have provided valuable insights for the development of the education market in these countries. However, the topic that has been neglected in terms of research in this field has emerged as an influential research gap and requires an in-depth study. This gap exists in two aspects:

1. **Nature of the product:** There is no rich literature on business models for exporting a comprehensive and culturally inclusive education system. Therefore, in-depth research is needed to develop a new education model in different cultural environments. The Finnish education model is not a simple educational package. Its intrinsic value is intertwined with interaction. There is limited research on how the nature of a new product, such as the FinlandQ educational package, can change the internationalization process. Therefore, the process of providing educational services is fraught with many ambiguities and challenges.
2. **Nature of the market:** Many business analyses of the Gulf region tend to see it as a monolithic entity. This kind of perspective often ignores the main differences in the laws, economy, and social context of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. For instance, a strategy that works well in Dubai's global and open market might not fit at all in Saudi Arabia, which is a much larger, more traditional, and quickly changing market.

2.5.2 Contribution of this Thesis

This research tries to close this specific gap by doing a mixed and multi-layered study. The main idea is that it uses two theories at the same time, the step-by-step Uppsala model and the faster INV model, to understand how a complex education system can go international. This is not only about showing the market situation, but also about explaining, with theory, the strategic decisions that a knowledge-based company like FinlandQ needs to make.

By comparing these three countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) in a clear and organized way, the thesis shows how each market has different conditions.

The main value of the study is that it connects international business theories with education policy and regional market analysis. With this mix, it builds a clearer framework for understanding the challenges and chances of bringing high-value educational innovations to the Gulf region. This creates a clear framework for understanding the unique challenges and opportunities of exporting high-value educational innovations to the Gulf region.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The chapter outlines theoretical and conceptual views of the research that serve as the theoretical platform. For a first introduction, two international theories are introduced to contextualize the strategic paradox with regard to Finland's journey for advancement. Then the idea of cultural distance is introduced. To merge these indicators together, a conceptual model is constructed for the analyses of this research.

3.1 A Dual-Lens Approach to Internationalization

Start-ups like FinlandQ are affected by opposing forces in their internationalization. In this case, the internationalization of such companies has no theoretical consensus. In stark contrast, the Persian Gulf market is built on an opportunity-driven approach that demands rapid and conservative learning. Because of this contradiction, this thesis takes a two-pronged approach and combines two influential and conflicting theories to speak, namely, the classic Uppsala model and the contemporary International New Venture (INV) model.

3.1.1 The Uppsala Model: The Lens of Caution and Experience

The Uppsala Model originated in the 1970s. This model posits that firms grow out of the domestic markets gradually and in sequence (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). This model proposed that firms are risk-averse, under which they demonstrated that firms would gain exposure to experience first, and then gradually increase their commitment to the foreign market. The model is driven by four element cycles:

- Current Activities in a market generate...
- Market Knowledge to minimize uncertainty and enable...
- Commitment Decisions (increasing the resources) that leads to increased...

- Market Commitment.

One important idea is “psychological distance” — the sum of all the cultural, linguistic, and systemic reasons that hinder the flow of information flow. The model posits that firms tend to access markets with low psychological distance. The psychological distance to the Gulf is very high for FinlandQ. The Uppsala model is straightforward and suggests that the risk should be minimized whilst the business is in the pre-experience phase (e.g., consultancy → partnership → wholly owned subsidiary). However, it has disadvantages, like relatively low speed and being inefficient for the fast-moving Gulf market.

3.1.2 The INV Model: The Lens of Speed and Networks

The “New International Venture” (NIV) and “Born Global Firm” model, developed in the 1990s, posits that new businesses can begin in the international arena with speed (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). Unlike the traditional approach, this view does not demand a proper national base. In this theory, internationalization is viewed with entrepreneurial eyes, and the focus of internationalization is on the capacity to exploit others' networks as allies – to leverage them to access markets, assets, and resources rapidly instead. The fundamental problem in such a model is the ‘network alienation liability’—not a liability on account of location, but the vulnerability of being outside the local network.

For the knowledge-based company FinlandQ, the INV model is most applicable. Its value emanates from education expertise and brand recognition. So theoretically, FinlandQ can skip the gradual steps of the Uppsala model and enter the local market faster and better by forming a strategic partnership with a well-connected local entity.

3.1.3 The Strategic Paradox for FinlandQ

When combined, these two theoretical perspectives reveal a key contradiction in the direction of FinlandQ's internationalization. On the one hand, there is a subtle contradiction between Uppsala (gradualism, learning, and experience accumulation) model, and the Finnish Model which views the company towards cautious steps, as the psychological and cultural distance between the two markets in FinlandQ is great and it requires the transfer of the educational system based on deep and experiential learning, long time, and cumulative adaptation. Rapid penetration of a new market may be dangerous from this perspective, resulting in culture shock, weak educational service quality, and brand failure.

On the other hand, the International New Venture (INV) model looks to the entrepreneurial side in an aggressive, fast-paced, and timely way, focusing on decision-making speed and seizing urgent opportunities for new growth. In this model perspective, as a knowledge-based company, FinlandQ is supposed to quickly enter foreign markets through knowledge assets and networks that help to retain competitive advantage, not falling behind in the ephemeral opportunities of international education. For this reason, the thesis aims to study how FinlandQ can formulate a hybrid and balanced strategy based only on two perspectives: the rapid and flexible networking of the INV model to develop personal networks and to achieve a strong initial market entrance strategy, combined with the gradual and experiential learning of the Uppsala model through the later phases of its planning to further cement its status, cultural adaptation and an improvement in education quality in the local context.

Table 3.1: Comparative Analysis of the Uppsala and INV Models

Theoretical Dimension	Uppsala Model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977)	INV Model (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994)	Applicability to FinlandQ
Core Assumption	Firms are risk-averse and internationalize to reduce uncertainty.	Entrepreneurs can create ventures that are international from inception.	Faces a conflict between risk aversion due to cultural distance and the need to seize opportunities.
Primary Driver	Accumulation of experiential	Entrepreneurial vision and	Driven by its unique knowledge asset,

	market knowledge.	leveraging of networks.	but requires experiential learning for successful implementation.
Pace of Entry	Gradual, incremental, and sequential.	Rapid, often simultaneous entry into multiple markets.	Market dynamics push for speed, but the complexity of the "product" (pedagogy) suggests a slower pace.
Role of Knowledge	Experiential knowledge gained through operations reduces uncertainty.	Unique knowledge is a key resource for competitive advantage; networks provide market knowledge.	Possesses unique pedagogical knowledge but needs to acquire deep, tacit cultural and market knowledge.
View of Risk	Risk is high due to uncertainty and psychic distance; to be minimized through slow commitment.	Risk is inherent to entrepreneurship; managed through networks and flexible governance.	High risk from both cultural misunderstanding (Uppsala) and missing market opportunities (INV).
Key Barrier	Lack of market knowledge (psychic distance).	Liability of "outsidership" (lack of network connections).	Must overcome both a high psychic distance and the liability of being an outsider in a relationship-driven market.
Main Criticism	Too deterministic; does not account for "born globals" or service firms.	Less focused on the challenges of post-entry integration and deep learning.	Highlights the need for a hybrid approach that balances speed, networking, learning, and integration.

3.2 Mapping the Cultural Terrain

This study applies well-established cross-cultural frameworks to make the abstract idea of psychological distance more concrete and measurable. These frameworks, which include Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the Trompenaars model, and the GLOBE approach, enable recognition of more tangible and objective features of cultural differences in relational relations and values between Finland which is the country of origin and the target markets in the

GCC. Hence the psychological distance is not conceptualized as a nebulous “cultural alienation” but as some kind of observable and analyzable variables. By applying this methodology, it becomes possible to find out the key points of conflict and basic issues that can arise in intercultural communication, organizational learning, and transfer of education.

As a result of the above-mentioned, instead of being a relatively generic, and difficult the reader, the theory of “psychological distance” would be applied as practical analytical instrument and support for companies that can properly plan, and manage, their own growth abroad such as FinlandQ, more cautiously and flexibly, and with an understanding of the cultural difference.

3.2.1 Hofstede's Dimensions: Quantifying Cultural DNA

In order to make the abstract concept of “psychological distance” more tangible and applicable to a statistical tool, the present research utilises Hofstede’s quantitative framework for measuring national cultures (Hofstede, 2001). This approach categorizes cultures by six core factors and allows a systematic and neutral comparison to be made between the home country, Finland, and the target markets in the Gulf. Through this comparison the study is able to gain a greater appreciation of and better illustrate the extent of the cultural gap there is between us:

- 1. Power distance:** Finland scores low as they focus on equal and balanced power, while the Gulf countries score very high as they have strong acceptance of hierarchy and are respectful towards authority structures in the society and educational systems.
- 2. Individualism and collectivism:** Finland leans heavily on the individualistic end of the spectrum where it emphasizes independence and a sense of personal identity (“I”). In the Gulf countries, by contrast, many of them are very collectivist countries that define identity around groups (family, tribe, community – “we”).

3. **Masculinity vs. femininity:** Finland has 'feminine' characteristics. They care greatly for a good order of life rather than to work alone like many people here and are used to reaching collective decisions based on a shared understanding and mutual agreement of purpose. In contrast, Gulf cultures are often inclined toward 'masculine' traits. This means that they stress assertive behaviors, competition among people in high regard (including your own group) or in order to gain a good wealth.
4. **Uncertainty avoidance:** is a major part of the UAI in Gulf countries. Gulf countries tend to score very high on this dimension, according to the researchers. They like rules, structured operation, established procedures to go by; they are very resistant to novel or unstructured ideas. Finland scores moderately on this dimension.
5. **Long vs short-term orientation:** The countries analyzed (Finland and the Gulf) for this dimension are more short term or "normative" in nature, where the countries examined focus on preserving customs and achieving short term benefits.
6. **Extremism vs. restraint:** Finland is perceived as an extreme society that is focused on satisfying desires and entertaining, while the Gulf countries are relatively more restrained, with a tendency to focus on control and repression of desires.

The main difference is between the educational methods of FinlandQ and the target culture: the company's educational model tends to be egalitarian (low PDI), student-centeredness (high IDV), and inquiry-based. The paradigms directly oppose the traditional norms of the Gulf countries, where the teacher is considered an absolute authority (high PDI) and group coordination is favored over individual autonomy (high collectivism) (Kole, 2025). Moreover, the high UAI in this region reflects a strong preference for highly structured and predefined learning, which may not correspond with flexible and research-based methods of the Finnish company (Culture Working Group, BBC). Such conflicts imply that FinlandQ's approach in internationalization should focus on the rapid implementation of INV as well as on the profound

cultural integration of the Uppsala model in the institutional structure of Finnish educational services.

Table 3.2: Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Scores Compared

Cultural Dimension	Finland	UAE	Saudi Arabia	Qatar
Power Distance	33 (Low)	80 (High)	95 (Very High)	93 (Very High)
Individualism	63 (Individualist)	25 (Collectivist)	25 (Collectivist)	18 (Highly Collectivist)
Masculinity	26 (Feminine)	52 (Middle)	45 (Feminine/Consensus)	55 (Masculine/Decisive)
Uncertainty Avoidance	59 (Moderate)	66 (High)	80 (Very High)	80 (Very High)
Long-Term Orientation	38 (Normative)	22 (Normative)	30 (Normative)	14 (Highly Normative)
Indulgence	57 (Indulgent)	22 (Restrained)	14 (Highly Restrained)	N/A

3.2.2 Insights from Trompenaars: Understanding Cultural Dilemmas

This latter is further elaborated on by Trompenaars's conceptualization, in the discussion of how societies resolve cultural dilemmas (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Within the dimensions he introduces, the comparison between universalism and particularism is important to the FinlandQ approach:

- 1. Universalist cultures (like Finland):** These social orders take the view that all should be treated equally and that laws, regulations, and contracts must extend to everybody in the same way.
- 2. Particularist cultures (including Persian Gulf):** In these cultures, interpersonal bonds, mutual trust and the particular context of a matter tend to supersede simply enforcing abstract rules. Contracts are not final laws, but the beginning of a relational contract (Balan & Vreja, 2013). This fundamental difference in approach means that in order to penetrate the Gulf markets, investing in building trust through personal networks (a niche approach) must be strategically prioritized over simply providing a complete and committed technical solution in a global sense.

3.3 A Conceptual Framework for Market Entry

The conceptual model developed gives more visibility to research into the field of internationalization, in combination with the cultural assessment. It imagines a market entry for FinlandQ as being a process with very strong interacting forces as opposed to a relatively linear path. The framework classifies these determinants of this entry into two major groups:

3.3.1 Enabling Forces (Opportunities)

This makes them the foundational "Pull Factors" constituting FinlandQ's entry strategy in the Gulf market:

- **Macro level (political–legal):** The Gulf countries already have strong national visions that focus a lot on improving education. There is a heavy government spending in this area as well, plus rules that are now more open for foreign ownership, which makes it easier for outside companies to join the market.
- **Market level (demand):** The education sector is supposed to grow very quick as the population is young and active, and there is also a large group of high-income immigrants who increase the demand for better education services.

3.3.2 Inhibiting Forces (Barriers)

However, these factors are critical "pull-back" forces that identify strategic risks to entry:

- **Cultural and psychological (organizational friction):** There is a big cultural and psychological distance between Finland and the Gulf region.

This gap creates real problems when trying to adjust education models, marketing styles, and even management practices to the local context.

- **Operational and regulatory (institutional barriers):** The licensing rules and local regulations are quite complicated. On top of that, running operations is expensive, the market is very competitive, and it is very hard to smoothly integrate new educational technologies (EdTech) into the existing system.

3.3.3 The Mediating Variable: Choice of Internationalization Strategy

A main part of this framework is the strategic choice FinlandQ has to make for its entry mode. This choice is related to the ideas from both the Uppsala Paradox and the Born Global (INV) approach. The company needs to decide whether to enter slowly via the gradual Uppsala-style FDI, or to move faster with an INV-type partnership FDI, or even use some kind of hybrid between the two. This choice is very important because it will impact how FinlandQ uses the market and what types of entry barriers it will face. In the end, the model developed in this research gives a clear and structured way to compare and judge the three target markets (UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) in the following chapters.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the methodological view of Interpretivism. This idea says that social reality is not completely fixed or objective. It is changing and depends a lot on how people understand their own experiences. Since internationalization and entering new markets are complex processes, they are strongly formed by how different actors (like policymakers, regulators, investors, and local people) see the situation. Hence, the interpretivist approach fits this research the best.

Using this philosophical view helps the study go beyond only describing things. It makes it possible to understand how people's perceptions, cultural background, and power relations shape the business environment in the Gulf region. In consequence, the interpretivist lens gives a great foundation for using qualitative methods, which are needed to explore the deeper meanings behind these processes.

4.1 Research Philosophy and Design

4.1.1 Philosophical Stance

The methodological philosophy of Interpretivism serves as the basis of this study. This paradigm posits that social reality isn't stable or wholly objective. It is continuously in flux and relies on the way people make sense of their own experiences. Internationalization and market entry are very complicated processes, and to a large extent those processes are influenced by how various actors such as policymakers, regulators, investors, and local stakeholders see and grasp their situations. The interpretivist approach is the most appropriate for this research as a result.

This philosophical lens allows the study to advance beyond description to understand how people's perceptions, cultural contexts, and power systems influence the business world in the Persian Gulf region. Thus, an interpretivist

perspective lays a solid basis for use of qualitative research approaches, which are essential for revealing deeper layers of understanding.

4.1.2 Research Approach

Given the complexity of the problem involved in the study, qualitative and exploratory work was appropriate (Scribbr, 2025; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is inherently meant to answer deep “how” and “why” questions and aims to understand phenomena in their natural and real-life contexts as they occur (FHI 360, n.d.; University of Toronto, 2018). There are two basic reasons why this research is particularly relevant to this methodology:

- 1. The complicated nature of the “core offering.”** The product and service of this work, which is at the core of the study, is named the Finnish Educational Ethos. Rather, it is an intricate and thoroughly institutionalized set of educational ideals, philosophies, practices, and more. In view of the complexity, it is necessary to adopt an exploratory approach in which the hurdles to transferring and adaptation of this system to different cultural conditions are examined and understood.
- 2. Theoretical emptiness regarding internationalization model use.** Although general internationalization theories, such as the INV and Uppsala models, are available, their application has not been extensively considered on the export of education services—especially in the socio-economic environment of the Persian Gulf. Thus, an exploratory methodology is necessary since it permits the development of insights and emerging themes and hence is contextual and suitable for the region and culture for this study.

4.1.3 Research Design

Based on the hypothetical entity FinlandQ, the model of this study applies a Qualitative Comparative Case Study approach. The three target markets:

United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, are examined as distinct but related examples. This design was selected to address the secondary research question regarding whether FinlandQ was adopting individualized custom entry strategies or a single regional strategy. By comparing and examining key features of regulations, market demand, and cultural situations in each case study, the comparative research can reflect on the common features of the region and the special variations between the countries. In that way, the comparative approach provides a concrete analytical foundation that enables practical and realistic strategic recommendations for FinlandQ. The primary data sources included semi-structured interviews (N=15), the secondary data sources were policy documents, market reports, and academic literature.

4.2 Data Collection Strategy

This study also uses a mixed way of collecting data to make the results more reliable and complete, especially for qualitative research. It uses secondary sources, like market reports, institutional documents, and academic papers, together with primary data that comes from long interviews and, when possible, some field observations. The idea behind using both types is to follow the principle of data triangulation, meaning that the information is checked and confirmed from different independent sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Noble & Heale, 2019). By doing so, the research gets stronger qualitative insights and becomes stronger in terms of validity and reliability.

4.2.1 Secondary Data Collection (Desk Research)

The primary step of this research is aimed at a systematic and well-organized identification and review of the available materials to achieve a critical understanding of the overarching contextual and particular operational contexts in the 3 target markets: United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This material, when collected, was scrutinised and classified to extract the insights required to develop FinlandQ's strategic recommendations. The review consisted of the following main areas:

- 1. Strategic documents that can be used in national and policy context.** In particular, a close reading of the national Vision 2030 strategies of UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar was conducted to determine the main government priorities, the principal drivers of public investment, and the role of the education sector in all the broader efforts at economic diversification.
- 2. Regulations and procedures.** Official documents from the main regulatory bodies (such as KHDA and ADEK in the UAE, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, and MOEHE in Qatar) were examined to understand the legal rules, the licensing steps, and the operational requirements for setting up private educational institutions. This review helped identify the main market entry barriers that come from the regulatory system.
- 3. It has quantitative industry and market data.** Reports from specific organizations, including Mordor Intelligence and IMARC Group, specifically focused on financial analysis, were identified alongside key numerical variables — market size, compound annual growth rate (CAGR), and general macroeconomic trends. This process assisted with a clear and data-driven evaluation of business opportunities in the different markets.
- 4. Examine the academic literature.** Qualitative and contextual research problems examined peer-reviewed journals. These consisted of factors including the high attrition of expatriate teachers, the challenges to implement student-centered learning models in teacher-centered systems, and the difficulties of modifying curricula to suit local cultural context in the Gulf region, among others.

4.2.2 Primary Data Collection (Semi-Structured Interviews)

Interviews will be used for primary data collection. The main data was collected via semi-structured interviews (target N=15), predominantly conducted with

individuals and groups with experience in FinlandQ staff and people in the Gulf region of education, such as both FinlandQ employees and education experts. These discussions were usually conducted within a duration of 45 to 60 minutes. The recruitment criteria included professionals who have actual experience in Finnish education export or strategic market entry in the GCC. Interview data were transcribed and analysed by hand using thematic analysis.

- **Purposive Sampling Strategy:** Given the exploratory and qualitative nature of the In order to find rich and specific information as the aims of this report are to make extensive research rather than making quantitative generalizations, purposive sampling was used (Etikon et al., 2016). The demographic of the sample (goal of N=15) was selected to maximize the skills and experience of relevant MENA entrants and the group was further broken down into three broad stakeholder categories:
 - **Internal stakeholders of FinlandQ:** Top executives with responsibility for internationalization.
 - **Industry Expert:** Such industry insiders as Finnish education export consultants and proven EdTech entrepreneurs.
 - **Outside market stakeholders:** members of private education associations and local consultants located in the Gulf, who were recruited from their professional networks.
- **Interview protocol and framing:** A detailed and well-conceived interview map was written, incorporating questions drawn from the primary research questions and the theoretical approach (refer to Appendix A). The question structure was adapted to obtain detailed and searching answers in market perspectives, operational obstacles (supervisory and cultural) as well as effective strategies of adaptations (Kallio et al., 2016).
- **Ethical consideration:** Full respect for ethical criteria were observed. Each participant received an information sheet including study purpose, protections and full right to withdraw from data, and written informed

consent is acquired prior to onset. All identities and affiliations were coded to maintain confidentiality (for example, “Industry Expert 1”). They also ensured a formal non-disclosure agreement (NDA) was signed for sensitive business information that FinlandQ communicated in order to ensure the highest level of data security (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In addition to secondary data, primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews to enrich the data collected. The method was selected because of its capacity to marry structured questions, to cover all critical areas of interest in the research, with the freedom to seek a deeper inquiry into participants’ answers and to take in unexpected lines of inquiry (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; FuelCycle, n.d).

4.3 Data Analysis Framework

A unified analytical model in order to systematically and methodically review the empirical and qualitative data and to provide accurate responses to the research questions was used. This framework utilizes Chapter 3 (Theoretical Foundations) theoretical concepts and categories as an analytical lens in the direct analysis of the data. The focus for this approach is on two important objectives: The first, is to establish an empirical linkages between the literature and the empirical data; and the second, to evaluate the theoretical framework’s (ideological) applicability and interpretive effectiveness in relation to field realities, which is consistent with the constructive feedback from the supervisor about the practicability and applicability of the research model.

4.3.1 Thematic Analysis for Interview Data

The coding was done manually, without using any special software. I used basic text editors to transcribe the interviews, code them, and organize the documents. The interview transcripts were the main source for the analysis, and the primary data was examined through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. This approach is commonly used as a method for identifying, identifying, and describing patterns or themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process followed six stages proposed by its authors:

1. To read and learn from the data
2. Coding the main ideas
3. Initial themes
4. To examine and improve these themes
5. Naming and defining them
6. Writing the final results.

For the coding phase, we borrowed elements of a hybrid approach, in which we took some theory (but kept the door open to new insights that emerged from the data itself). This combination facilitated maintaining the balance of the theoretical background and the fresh perspectives obtained in the context of the research project.

Deductive coding: this approach directly fed the theoretical foundations of the research into the coding process. Key concepts drawn from Chapter 3 (Theoretical Foundations) were treated as default codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). E.g. “Network Leverage (INV)” was coding the different sections of the text that highlighted the importance of networking and local interactions. Likewise, difficulties stemming from mismatches in teaching styles have been categorised beneath codes involving the “instructional friction (psychological distance)” or “power distance confrontation” challenge. This deductive approach guaranteed that theory was not only a tentative starting point for the interpretative and conceptual work of collecting data but also an applied and facilitating instrument in data interpretation.

Inductive coding: Alongside the deductive component of the analysis, the study remained open to ideas that emerged directly from the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed other themes to emerge spontaneously from what participants offered and from the context of their responses. This data-driven aspect of the analysis was critical for extracting details and fresh meanings that the theoretical models used did not encompass. It facilitated a fuller and deeper interpretation of the ultimate findings.

4.3.2 Content Analysis for Secondary Data

The data was mainly secondary in nature, being from policy documents, analysis reports and organisation papers, qualitative content analysis was applied in a systematic manner to organise and sum up the material in a systematic manner (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This allows one to determine how frequently individual ideas, phrases, and keywords appear in a set of texts (cited in Columbia, 2024).

In this study, they utilized conceptual content analysis for identifying and quantifying the repetition of critical strategic terms reflecting the main market interests and policy priorities. The fundamental concepts studied were privatisation, innovation, knowledge economy, teacher quality and national identity. This process assisted objective summarization of key narratives highlighted in the documents. Similarly, it served as a solid basis for the comparison and interpretation of data obtained by interviews following.

4.4 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Addressing Limitations

4.4.1 Trustworthiness

To uphold the qualitative validity of the research, this study adhered to the four basic criteria of trustworthiness suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These standards directed the methodological process to confirm precision and openness around them.

1. **Validity.** The findings became stronger by using data triangulation, meaning the results were checked across three different sources: policy documents, market reports, and the interviews. This helped make sure the information was accurate. Also, the researcher's interpretations were checked through a kind of peer review. The interview participants received their transcripts and the early thematic ideas, so they could give comments and confirm or correct anything.

2. **Transferability.** The study also gives detailed information about the economic, regulatory, and cultural situations in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. This helps the research understand how the findings might work in each of these environments. By giving this background, readers can better decide how much the results could also apply to other markets or if they are only suitable for these three countries.
3. **Reliability.** The research was able to be consistent because of a solid and clear record of the entire process. That record contained detailed notes and files, logs of significant decisions and files from coding frameworks and data analysis processes. This way, the research process would be open and transparent so that others could follow or repeat the process if necessary, and keep this audit trail to ensure the audit trail.
4. **Verifiability.** To ensure that conclusions were dependent upon the data without biased personal bias and were not influenced by personal bias, a process of continual critical reflection was applied by the investigator. Throughout the project, a research diary was maintained to reflect on personal assumptions and how they affect the interpretation of findings.

4.4.2 Limitations of the Study

The interpretation of the outcomes of this qualitative study is subject to several methodological and contextual constraints.

1. **Restricted access to senior stakeholders.** It was challenging to access senior government officials and important decision-makers at the educational centers in the Gulf region. As a consequence, the substantive and deeper strategic analysis relies largely on secondary documentary sources (policy papers), as well as on opinions of industry experts. The senior executives' depth of insights may be somewhat reduced by this scenario.

2. **Limited case focus.** This study focuses on one case, FinlandQ, which is considered to be representative of the industry at large. But a relatively narrow focus does not ensure that the implementation of the strategic recommendations can be widely implemented in other kinds of organizations or different types of markets.

3. **Dynamic nature of the findings.** The Gulf region is a rapidly evolving environment, especially regulatory and market policy frontiers. Therefore, it is important to grasp the findings as a summary of some period of time. As the ecosystem moves forward some of the results will need to shift or be adjusted in further studies.

5 RESEARCH RESULTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE GULF EDUCATION MARKETS

This chapter mainly describes the empirical findings that come from the detailed study of both secondary and primary data. The analysis is organized in a comparative way, looking at the three main target markets (the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) to clearly identify the main drivers and the barriers FinlandQ may face when entering these markets. The chapter begins with an overview of a comparative matrix, which gives a wide but still focused look at the specific characteristics of each country. Next, the analysis includes a rich evaluation of each part of that field, including enablers/opportunities and inhibitors/barriers, as well as common contextual barriers, in the field of culture and education. Finally, the chapter consists of synthesizing key themes from the primary data (expert interviews). This qualitative data acts as an essential validation and enrichment layer in the analysis of the documents and the secondary data, which enhances interpretive depth of the findings.

Table 5.1 Comparative Matrix of Gulf Education Markets

Metric	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Saudi Arabia (KSA)	Qatar
Market Dynamics	K-12 Market Size (2025): \$10.34B. CAGR (2025-30): 10.90%. Highly mature and competitive private sector.	K-12 Market Size (2025): \$13.26B. CAGR (2025-30): 12.25%. Largest market by value, undergoing rapid transformation.	Private K-12 Market Size (2025): \$2.94B. CAGR (2025-30): 10.51%. Smaller, niche market with strong growth.
Strategic Vision Alignment	Focus on a competitive, knowledge-based economy (Vision 2030) and global leadership in education (Dubai Education 33).	Economic diversification and aligning education with market needs are central pillars of Vision 2030.	Human development and building a knowledge-based economy are core tenets of National Vision 2030.
Regulatory Landscape	Decentralized and complex. Requires approvals from Federal MoE and local bodies like KHDA (Dubai)	Highly centralized under the Ministry of Education (MoE). Modernizing but can be bureaucratic.	Centralized under the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE). Stringent and

	and ADEK (Abu Dhabi).		detailed licensing process.
Top 3 Opportunities	1. Large, affluent expatriate market. 2. Mature EdTech ecosystem. 3. Hub for regional expansion.	1. Massive scale of privatization initiatives. 2. Large, young domestic population. 3. Strong government incentives for foreign investors.	1. Strong focus on educational quality and innovation. 2. Government support for EdTech (e.g., WISE). 3. Growing demand in premium segments.
Top 3 Barriers	1. Intense market competition. 2. High operational costs (real estate, salaries). 3. Complex, multi-layered regulatory compliance.	1. Severe shortage of qualified teachers. 2. Significant cultural-pedagogical distance. 3. Opaque and centralized bureaucracy.	1. Teacher retention and high workload. 2. Smaller market scale. 3. Stringent, detailed licensing requirements.

5.1 The United Arab Emirates: The Mature and Competitive Hub

5.1.1 Enabling Forces (Opportunities)

The UAE (especially Dubai) is widely regarded as the mature, top-tier market for international private schooling. What really matters in this sector is the private K-12 sector, that is worth \$10.34 billion in 2025, and is projected to sustain its growth to reach 10.90 percent CAGR through 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a). A large part of this growth is accounted for by having such an international demographic such as that of the expatriate population (more than 90% of students in the private sector) which generates a high constant demand for international curricula (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a; Goby, 2011).

The growing demand in this market goes hand-in-hand with a very conducive policy environment. National plans like the UAE Vision 2030 and Dubai “Education 33” clearly reflect the desire to make the UAE a regional and global center for education and a resilient knowledge-based economy (Government of the UAE, n.d.-b; Mordor Intelligence, 2024a). The policies are also designed to

get the private sector involved in more and also to bring in more foreign direct investment.

Free zones like Dubai International Academic City allow for absolute foreign ownership. The result has already drawn renowned international learning establishments (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a). In addition, UAE has built up the most advanced educational technology (EdTech) environment in the Middle East. The market is expected to grow to around \$3.3 billion by 2033. This growth is strongly supported by different government programs, such as the Mohammed bin Rashid Smart Learning Programme (IMARC Group, 2024b; Ministry of Education, n.d.-a), and by the close link between education and new technologies in the country. Because of this strong tech environment, there is a good base for developing modern and innovative teaching methods, the same type of approaches that FinlandQ offers.

5.1.2 Inhibiting Forces (Barriers)

The UAE market has a lot of potential but also brings its own set of challenges including the need for thoughtfulness and understanding while getting into the market.

- 1. Market saturation and competition.** A huge difficulty, of course, is that of the hypercompetitive private education sector. Dubai in particular has one of the largest numbers of international schools around the globe which means the market is a bit crowded. For this reason, fledgling companies like FinlandQ need to demonstrate a distinct and compelling value to entice students to attend and endure in this crowded atmosphere (Mordor Intelligence, 2024a; Goby, 2011).
- 2. High costs of investment and operation.** When starting a school in Dubai, a substantial investment is made in money. Constructing a private school is between AED 50 million to AED 350 million, which does not cover the cost of land (Zawya, 2022). In addition, the daily running costs of those buildings are also high due to the fees and the necessity to pay competitive but tax-free salaries for foreign teachers (Zawya, 2022;

Herrera & Proff, 2022). Another issue is the pace of turnover of staff, in that many expatriate teachers are staying only for short stints to teach their classes. This condition is such that schools have to recruit again and again, which raises costs and puts stability in jeopardy stability (CE Interim, 2024; Herrera & Proff, 2022; Reed, 2024). One senior manager said, “The Dubai market is very tight and if you don’t have unique value to compete with and a large reserve, then you will be buried under the operating expenses.”

3. **Regulation that is complex, decentralised and so on.** The education sector in the UAE also faces a complicated regulatory system. Providers like FinlandQ have to abide by not only the national regulations of the Ministry of Education, but also specific mandates for local government such as KHDA in Dubai and ADEK in Abu Dhabi (Government of the United Arab Emirates, n.d.-a). Each authority has its own licensing, fees and inspection regulations; a number of these cover curriculum, facilities and teacher qualifications. Keeping up with these standards is an ongoing process and requires careful adherence (KHDA, n.d.-a; ADEK, 2024).

5.1.3 The Cultural-Pedagogical Interface

Even if many private schools in the UAE already use international curricula, which in some ways makes the adaptation a bit easier, bringing the Finnish education system into the UAE will still face many cultural and teaching challenges.

1. **Clash of teaching style (teacher-centred vs. student-focused).** Research indicates it is not straightforward to implement an integrated student-centered and inquiry-based approach in a system, since far too many teachers have dominated class and delivered content (Eppard et al., 2021; Badri & Al-Qubaisi, 2014).

- 2. Impact of education consumerism.** In private schools, particularly ones that have expensive tuition, students can still be looked at as customers. This way of thinking promotes something that some in contrast refer to as an extreme example of student empowerment, and directly contradicts one of the main tenets of the Finnish model—teachers' strong professional role, which requires independence (Jackson, 2012). On the pedagogical adaptation struggle, one consultant commented, "In the high-end private schools, the student-customer dynamic can be quite intense, which will indirectly compromise the professional authority for the teacher."
- 3. Three Alignment to national content and curriculum.** Arabic, Islamic Education, and UAE Social Studies as required subjects must be taught at all, whether there is a main curriculum, or no one is told what to teach. Due to this, schools must closely examine and modify their content to align with the national regulations and to ensure that the lessons resonate effectively with the local culture and traditions (Government of the UAE, n.d.; Gaad, 2011).

5.2 The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: The Transformative Giga-Market

5.2.1 Enabling Forces (Opportunities)

Saudi Arabia has steadily become one of the most strategic opportunities of global expansion. Especially because of its enormous size and vigorous national transformation effort. It is also the largest education market in the region. It is projected to grow to about \$13.26 billion by 2025 in the private K–12 market and about a 12.25% annual growth till 2030 (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b).

This rapid growth can be attributed largely to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, a national plan targeting two major priorities: education that is no longer owned by state interests and building up human capital. Both are recognised as key to breaking the country's reliance on oil and creating a more diversified economy

(Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, n.d.). In response the government has simplified licensing standards and introduced new incentives for attracting international school operators (Saudi Arabia Vision 2030; Al-Tamimi et al., 2016).

The population is also in a solid demographic trend supporting this growth. Roughly 71% of the population is under this age (General Statistics Office, 2023), so the need for modern education will continue indefinitely. Similarly, the educational technology (EdTech) domain is developing rapidly and acts as an attractive entry point suitable for companies in the new age such as FinlandQ. The EdTech industry is expected to grow to approximately \$6.8 billion by 2033 (IMARC Group, 2024a). An internal FinlandQ stakeholder explained the quandary faced by the market: "Vision 2030 provides the biggest potential for scale, but the licensing journey is long and generally involves leveraging local political relationships for the sake of getting to market".

5.2.2 Inhibiting Forces (Barriers)

Saudi Arabia presents many opportunities around education development, but entering this market is not easy. It's big, complicated and built on solid traditions.

1. **Regulation and licensing.** Vision 2030 included some reforms, but still the education system is extremely centralised under the Ministry of Education. For newcomers to foreign schools, the entire process of obtaining a licence can become time consuming and, at times, baffling. In a number of cases, local advice or strong personal ties is required in order to proceed (Ministry of Education, 2025; Nimbus, 2025).
2. **Shortage of human capital.** The most difficult component is finding good, bilingual teachers. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia still suffers from a shortage of trained staff, alongside competitive pressures due to other Gulf countries and large, ambitious 'Giga' projects, which would require expertise (Mordor Intelligence, 2024b; DITRC, 2024). As a result, there is usually a high turnover rate of teachers, particularly foreigners, that may

neither have sufficient cultural training to meet their needs nor professional support and that often face heavy workloads (Pacino & Fiddy, 2021). In response to the Human Capital Crisis, another education specialist remarked, "The Kingdom experiences a high level of teacher attrition, with significant foreign staff, in large part at the hands of unwise cultural training coupled with overwhelming workloads. That is the one thing the sector does really well — that's a pain point."

- 3. Cultural difference and adaptation.** The distance between the Finnish model and Saudi culture is still quite a long way between them. The level of localised society in Saudi Arabia is very traditional with a less international approach in terms of the business world than the UAE and more traditional in its commercial context. This also complicates the adaptation to foreign institutions of its own teaching and management. Facing this, you've got to be a bit persistent in this environment and a lot of cultural understanding, and you need to be working with local partners."

5.2.3 The Cultural-Pedagogical Interface

The educational style gap in Saudi Arabia is wider than in most other countries in the Gulf. Schools are predominantly reliant on repetition and teacher-driven lessons (Al-Abdulkareem & Hentschke, 2014). Indeed, Vision 2030 mentions the need for critical thinking and creativity, and yet these concepts are not evident across actual classrooms yet. This clearly conflicts with the Finnish model employed by FinlandQ, that is founded on student-centred and discovery learning (Al-Senaidi et al., 2009; Al Lily, 2014).

To make the Finnish approach work, expectations must shift, not only with students but with parents, and with school management as well. Secondly, the localisation standard is very stringent. Saudi history, language, culture need to be brought into every foreign school, and the system is built based on Arabic and Islamic values too. This requires careful planning and cultural knowledge to

redesign, maintaining local cohesion while grounding them in the core principles of Finnish philosophy (Edkwery, 2024; R Consultancy Group, 2025).

5.3 Qatar: The Strategic and Quality-Focused Niche

5.3.1 Enabling Forces (Opportunities)

Although smaller in size than other Gulf countries, Qatar performs as a regional hub for international education providers like FinlandQ. The private sector education market is booming, with an eye toward potential \$4.85 billion by 2030, for a growth rate of around 10.5 percent annually (Mordor Intelligence, 2024c).

This advancement is primarily associated with the National Vision 2030 for Qatar through the development of human capital and the transformation of the country towards a more diverse and knowledge based economy (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011; Amiri Diwan, 2011). The objective of this proposal is closely in line with the quality of education-based business model of FinlandQ, it provides a competitive edge for the company in the market.

The government also promotes new ideas for education which is seen as being developed by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), as well as by EdTech Accelerator (WISE, n.d.). Companies such as FinlandQ are getting an opportunity to demonstrate their digital tools as well as get involved in conversations about new means of education through these projects. Moreover, Qatar's rules are friendly for private schools. By allowing full foreign ownership and giving education vouchers to local parents, these regulations make entry easy to international providers like FinlandQ (Mordor Intelligence, 2024c). A regional education expert summed up the Qatar market by telling the media, "Qatar is a smaller, premium market where success depends only on aligning yourself fully with the national agenda of quality and innovation, using platforms such as WISE."

5.3.2 Inhibiting Forces (Barriers)

Its smaller size is the most important limitation upon the Qatari education market compared to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The number of students is still very small, which reduces the potential for large-scale educational projects, even though the growth rate is very good. One other challenge involves the government as a whole, especially with high controls from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, who is seen as a big authority, slowing down the new initiatives (RCH, 2024).

There are highly detailed requirements contained in the licensing manual (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2016). Before they can begin to operate, schools must provide records of management experience and submit multi-year business and education plans for approval. Other challenges are more practical and related to daily operations:

1. **Human capital.** Qatar's schools encounter the same teacher-related challenges you could see in adjacent nations. Long working hours, frequent changes in the national policy, and low motivation have hampered many teachers, thereby reducing staff retention and quality of the schools (Al-Maadi et al., 2022; Al-Thani, 2008).
2. **Cost and access.** Additionally, the high cost of living in Doha means that the running of schools has become quite costly. This results in larger tuition fees, thereby making private schools less affordable for middle-income families (Mordor Intelligence, 2024c; Edarabia, 2025).

5.3.3 The Cultural-Pedagogical Interface

Qatar's education reforms, referred to as "Education for a New Era," seek to shift away from the traditional system of educational delivery focused on rote memorization and repetition and approach curriculum with a more student-centred paradigm as critical thinking is embedded in lessons (Brewer et al., 2007; RAND Corporation, 2007). But research finds that, far from what the

policy promises and what plays out in real classrooms, a large gap remains. Student-centred teaching is less commonly applied in practice as it is commonly reported by schools (Zellman et al., 2009). This scenario leads to an impression that traditional, conservative teaching culture continue to be dominant and makes it hard to translate the progressive model (such as the Finnish system) in practice.

Another significant challenge is that of nationalising the curriculum. Qatar, as all other Gulf states, mandates that all private schools cover national subjects such as Arabic, Islamic Studies and Qatari History (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2016). For international schools this requires that they cautiously integrate local subjects into their primary curriculum, and that their content is consistent with both their national identity and international norms.

5.4 Synthesis of Primary Data Findings

The results of semi structured interviews with FinlandQ staff and the most prominent international education experts supported and complemented the evidence available from secondary sources and provided more operational details. Thematic analysis identified 3 key themes which are essential to any go-to-market plan:

- 1. Core theme:** “Partnership versus product-only selling.” All interviewees shared the same sentiment: succeeding in the Gulf market is bigger than a business deal. As a former Gulf veteran put it: “You are not selling a product, you are selling a strategic partnership. Both the UAE’s and Saudi Arabia’s governments are seeking a solution that will help in the realisation of their national vision 2030. The absence of this manifestation of solidarity signals the end of negotiations.” This theme emphasises the political-economic dimensions of the market, with alignment with national macro-strategic imperatives central.
- 2. The operational theme:** The policy implementation gap. Interviewees pointed to a lack of correlation of ambitious reform policies (in official

documents) to everyday operational procedures inside the classroom. “The vision demands innovation and for 21st century skills, but the current mechanism — from teacher training to standardized assessment processes — remains deeply biased in favour of traditional practice,” a consultant in Dubai said. A high key sticking point is that an effective proposal will need to substantially contribute to a continuous professional development of teachers to close this gap.

- 3. Challenge theme:** “The continuing human capital crisis.” Nearly all survey respondents singled out the biggest operational challenge in the region, recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. One manager from FinlandQ called this challenge “a constant battle” that raises costs and weakens quality continuity, and claimed this was the sector’s largest “pain point.” This global issue also opened up a strategic opportunity for FinlandQ in the sense that its reputation for delivering high-quality teacher education could ultimately be an important strategic advantage in response to this regional crisis.

6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we will critically analyse and interpret the empirical results from Chapter 5. Our objective is to move beyond simply stating the overall economic circumstance and into the exploration of the strategic paradox that FinlandQ faces in market data. We will be using two major theoretical lenses presented in the framework of Chapter 3 for this analysis, namely internationalization strategy theory and cross-cultural management. The discussion is organized as follows:

- 1. Modeling the entry path:** The comparative phase of gradual and rapid models of internationalization is analyzed and a strategic hybrid path is presented.
- 2. Psychological distance analysis of barriers:** The market-level barriers (cultural, regulatory, human) revealed here are related with the theoretical concept of psychological distance, and then analyzed to see through the gap.
- 3. Opportunity architecture:** The architecture of the market opportunities will be introduced, highlighting the extent to which the FinlandQ model is aligned with the strategic goals of the national visions of the Gulf countries.
- 4. The need for adaptation and implementation:** This chapter underscores the important need for adaptation and offers strategies to reconcile basic ethical imperatives that govern Finnish education with requirements and operational realities in the target markets in the Gulf.

This chapter summarizes the empirical findings in Chapter 5. It will review the data using the dual theoretical lenses of internationalization strategy and cross-cultural management, which were defined in a theoretical framework in Chapter 3. This chapter is not only intended to describe the market situation, but also to explore more in-depth the leading strategic dilemma that FinlandQ is facing. Here, the chapter will consider the tension of the slow and fast

internationalization models, and recommend a hybrid or hybrid based approach may be a more suited one. Next, the analysis will make a link between the major barriers encountered in the market space and psychic distance in order to illustrate the way that cultural and institutional factors pose impediments. After that, the chapter will discuss the main opportunities for market participation and relate them with the national development plans of the Gulf countries. Lastly, in order to address the necessity of adaptation, and to suggest practical recommendations which will enable FinlandQ to reconcile its Finnish vision on education with the reality of the region.

6.1 The Internationalization Paradox Revisited: A Hybrid Path for FinlandQ

Our empirical results uncover a basic strategic tension that resembles a traditional challenge in the literature on internationalization: the contest over the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977) and the new international venture (INV) model (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994).

Side one: Knowledge-based caution emphasized (Uppsala model) The very considerable psychological distance of both Finland and the Gulf, manifest as differences in culture, regulation and business practices, strongly supports the premise of Uppsala model. The process of entry is gradual, based on gradual accumulation of market knowledge through direct experience. But this also fits in with reports from the manager from FinlandQ that understanding the local business culture is “time-consuming” and implies a need to be careful. And this, at one level, is in keeping with the basic tenet of the Uppsala Model that high psychological distance necessitates a gradual learning curve and sequential commitment to minimize the risk of market failure.

The other side: There is also a strong need for speed and scale, which follows the INV model. The Persian Gulf market often has big opportunities and government tenders that move very fast, and this situation matches well with the INV logic. In such cases, using the slow Uppsala-style entry can cause a company to lose the chance to enter because other competitors may move

quicker. The INV model focuses a lot on using networks to enter during these short windows of opportunity. This pressure for fast entry and quick use of resources is very similar to the way “Born Global” firms operate, where speed and strong network support are the main priorities.

Conclusion: Blending Speed and Adaptivity. The research indicates that using either model without much adaptation does not present a final picture of strategy. The better idea is an inclusive hybrid approach, which makes the best of both methodologies:

1. **Entry stage (INV approach):** In the entry phase, the company should use a more aggressive INV-style strategy, meaning they need to quickly find a strong local partner or someone who has an important local position. This step is very important because it helps reduce the “liability of being foreign” and also gives the company a better understanding of how the relationship-focused business culture in this region actually works.
2. **Consolidation phase (Uppsala approach):** Once the company gets access to the market, it should then start a slow and step-by-step learning process similar to the Uppsala model. This patient approach can work well, especially when the company continues cooperating with the local partner. Through this partnership, the training model can be adjusted in a practical way so it matches local values and can actually work in real operations.

This strategy solves both a necessary tension and the demand for speed of entry, and the imperative not to leave behind an implicit focus on deep learning and adaptation.

6.2 Deconstructing Market Barriers: Psychic Distance in Practice

The concept of psychological distance provides an excellent analytic instrument that elucidates the root causes of the objective limitations that we reviewed in

Chapter 5. In concrete terms, this abstract distance creates real friction in vital areas of education, regulation and business.

- **Cultural-pedagogical friction: hierarchical conflict**

hierarchical conflict The most pressing example of this distance is the contradiction between what is at the core of the Finnish approach to education and the expectations and assumptions of the Gulf region culture:

- **Finnish model:** student agency, critical exploration, and equal teacher-student relationships all result from a low power distance, high individualistic culture.
- **Regional data:** Hofstede data (high PDI: UAE: 80, Saudi Arabia: 95, Qatar: 93): In very hierarchical structures, the teacher is regarded as a sacred authority. Such resistance to a student-led initiative is an unmistakable expression of Hofstede high PDI scores in Gulf countries. To attempt to implement the Finnish approach inspired entirely by student inquiry could not only be judged to be an educational novelty, but also a disrespectful challenge to this social hierarchy.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** High scores on uncertainty avoidance in the region (high PDI: UAE: 80, Saudi Arabia: 95, Qatar: 93) support an orientation toward very disciplined and structured curricula, which is very different from the Finns' preference to openly explore and learn by doing. And this rule that all things are structured fits the high Uncertainty Avoidance category so snugly.

- **Business and regulatory friction: explicit versus particularism**

Psychological distance also accounts for some basic differences in business and regulatory processes:

- **Finnish culture:** Usually depends a lot on clear rules, written contracts, and a high level of transparency in operations.

- o **Gulf culture:** the region follows a more particularistic style (according to the Trompenaars model). Here, personal trust and the specific situation matter more than general or abstract rules. Hence, official business procedures often become less important than personal relationships, and trust between people plays a bigger role in how things actually move forward.

This is exactly why having a local partner with good experience and strong networks is not only an advantage but actually a strategic necessity. Such a partner becomes the key connection between the Finnish company and the local system, helping them apply their training ideas in a way that fits the cultural expectations and also works within the local bureaucratic rules. Without this connection, it would be very hard to make the implementation successful in real practice.

6.3 The Architecture of Opportunity: Aligning with National Imperatives

Despite cultural and operational hurdles, the company's biggest chance lies beyond selling education programs. Actually, it might do more to help Gulf countries achieve their long-term development goals.

Indeed, The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar all have national vision plans addressing how they wish to transition from their dependence on oil to the development of a modern economy rooted in knowledge and skills. In all of these plans, strong people's skills or workforce development is considered a priority. Governments in the region recognize that their existing schools still fail to provide ample capacity for modern skills like critical thinking and creativity. For that reason, they're seeking foreign partners who can fold these attributes into their systems. This ideal corresponds with many of Finland's goals through the Finnish model of education, which is already noted for innovation and creative learning. FinlandQ in particular should benefit from this situation.

Rather than being a supplier alone like the previous practice, a company can position itself as a partner assisting, too, with national goals such as Vision

2030. Thus, entering the market is not just a transactional commercial transaction: it is a collaborative long-term development partnership. Here, success will depend not on price but more on how thoroughly FinlandQ can demonstrate its real role in the host nation's plans for the future.

6.4 The Adaptation Imperative: Reconciling Finnish Pedagogy with Gulf Realities

The findings clearly show that bringing the Finnish education model into the Gulf region without making any changes would create many problems, mainly because of the strong cultural and teaching differences. This means adaptation is not something optional, but actually necessary if the model is going to work in a real way. What is needed is a flexible and multi-layered approach that respects the local situation but still keeps the main ideas of the Finnish method.

- **Reworking the educational model: the "structured inquiry" approach.** The results show very clearly that using the Finnish education model in the Gulf without changing it would cause many difficulties because the cultural and teaching situations are very different. So adaptation is not optional — it is required if the model should work in practice. What is needed is a flexible, layered approach that takes the local context seriously while still keeping the main principles of the Finnish system.
- **Market entry strategy: using technology as a "Trojan Horse."** In all three markets, the same problem keeps showing up: there are not enough well-trained teachers, and the current professional development programs are not working very well. FinlandQ can use its advanced EdTech tools almost like a "Trojan Horse" to help bring change.
 - **Initial Attraction:** Digital learning systems may be an interesting first attraction.

- o **Diffusion mechanism:** These platforms should not be presented as single tools or something separate, but as part of a connected system that also includes continuous training for teachers.

It's this kind of method that allows teaching ideas to spread in slow, natural ways. Here, technology isn't a cultural clash, but a bridge that enables more effective teaching by the time the culture emerges. By making teacher training, a root of the pain point, a positive part of the value proposition, FinlandQ can have some real and enduring impact.

7 CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, the research will be concluded by summarizing the key findings from FinlandQ's entrance into the GCC markets. This study was specifically concentrating on analysis of the strategic paradox of simultaneous high chances and deep cultural cross-friction (What was described). The main finding is the requirement of a Hybrid Strategy that is based on rapid network-based entry through a combination of fast-track network-based entry but slow but well-timed cultural understanding-pedagogy appropriate adaptation (What was discovered). This is important as it forms a concrete, theory-based road map for knowledge-laden service companies on how to take global education-based competence and turn it into local, sustainable resources in the complex relationship-based market of the Gulf (Why it's important).

7.1 Synthesis of Findings and Answers to Research Questions

The main object of this research was to determine that the strategic direction of FinlandQ in the GCC region might be the most optimal and this direction was charted with direct responses to the following four sub-questions:

1. **Theoretical Path (Hybrid Strategy):** Either gradual Uppsala method (because of the time-sensitive opportunities) or highly intense INV method (due to the high psychological distances) is not adequate. FinlandQ needs a Hybrid Strategy: quick and powerful market entry involving network-based partnership (INV) followed by patient, local learning and consolidation (Uppsala) to reduce the cultural risk.
2. **Market Specificity (Dedicated Localization):** The results indicate there is no universal regional approach; therefore it needs market-specific solutions.
 - **UAE:** Need an all in approach of countering the market saturation and cost-outfall, especially on premium expats.

- **KSA:** Need scale and deep culture alignment to drive high value B2G opportunities and support Vision 2030's human capital aspirations.
 - **Qatar:** A niche strategy on quality and innovation alignment with its platforms of choice, WISE.
3. **Critical Barriers (Psychic Distance & Human Capital):** The biggest challenges arise from systemic, cultural nuances, not logistical ones.
- **Cultural-Pedagogical Conflict:** Core confrontation in Finland Student-centered in nature versus teacher focused (high PDI in the region).
 - **Institutional Hurdles:** Regulatory complexity includes dealing with opaque systems - whether it's centralized (for KSA & Qatar) or decentralized (for UAE) or both.
 - **Human Capital Crisis:** In practice, high turnover and chronic labor force shortages in those three markets represent a huge operational and functional problem.
4. **Strategic Mechanisms (Integrated Ecosystem):** Partners should be key entry modes (Joint Ventures/Strategic Alliances) as they can be employed in relation to the INV model, ensuring the acquisition of local expertise and networks. The main adaptation strategy would be a holistic solution to the human capital gap by providing an integrated ecosystem of advanced EdTech platforms with a very Finnish-style TPD, with the Structured Inquiry model to narrow the pedagogical gap.

7.2 Contributions of the Thesis

This study gives value to both academic theory and professional practice:

Theoretical contribution – a more applied concept for distance. The theoretical point of this research is mainly based on how it combines the

Uppsala and INV models, to examine how a culture based education system can be extended into new markets. This work highlights a minuscule but significant aspect of international business theory by suggesting that firms with knowledge and education-based products usually need to adopt a mixed or hybrid strategy to enter markets that tend to have high cultural distance. By breaking down the concept of psychic distance from a narrow idea, it also makes visible how it comes to be and forms in life in ways that governments, schooling policies, lifestyle habits actually give us.

Practical contribution — a guide for education companies. This thesis also presents a good plan from a pragmatic point of view for FinlandQ and other educational organizations that operate abroad. Instead of offering a complete market view, it examines the three main Gulf countries and compares them. The findings indicated key concerns of local regulation, cultural compatibility and rivalry. In sum, the recommendations establish a straightforward but helpful model for reducing risk and enabling the efficient usage of the new opportunities emerging in the rapidly expanding education industry to be harnessed in the region.

7.3 Strategic Recommendations for FinlandQ

From the comprehensive analysis the following strategic recommendations are recommended for FinlandQ. The specific recommendations are correlated with a strategic finding of the decision, emphasizing the cause of the decision. These are summarized in Table 7.1 and detailed below.

Table 7.1 Strategic Recommendation Framework for FinlandQ

Strategic Dimension	Recommendation for UAE	Recommendation for KSA	Recommendation for Qatar
Primary Entry Mode	Joint Venture with an established, premium private school operator to gain immediate credibility and market access.	Phased Entry via B2G/B2B Services. Begin with a lower-risk professional development and EdTech consulting model targeting government	Strategic Alliance or Franchise with a local partner focused on innovation and quality, potentially linked to

		initiatives and large school groups.	Education City or WISE initiatives.
Initial Target Segment	Premium Expatriate Niche. Focus on the high-end segment where demand for innovative, high-quality education is strongest and price sensitivity is lower.	Government-led Privatization Projects. Align with Vision 2030 initiatives, targeting public-private partnership (PPP) opportunities for new school development.	Quality-Focused Private Schools. Target the segment of the market seeking a distinct, high-quality alternative to established British and American curricula.
Pedagogical Adaptation	Introduce the "Structured Inquiry" model. Leverage the mature EdTech market to deliver blended learning solutions with integrated teacher support.	Focus heavily on Teacher Professional Development as the core offering. Frame pedagogical change as a necessary component of upskilling the local workforce.	Position the Finnish model as a "21st Century Skills" solution. Emphasize project-based learning and creativity to align with Qatar's innovation agenda.
Key Value Proposition	"Proven Global Quality and Innovation in a Competitive Market."	"A Strategic Partner in Achieving Vision 2030's Human Capital Goals."	"The Premier Niche Innovator for World-Class Human Development."

1. FinlandQ must focus on launching the Finnish Teacher Education Academy (FTEA) for its first entry vector, putting off higher-capital K-12 school expansion.

This recommendation is due directly to the fact that the acute human capital crisis (Section 5.4.3) is the largest operational pain point in the region, and FTEA offers a low-risk but high-credibility B2B/B2G solution quickly achieving institutional trust (Uppsala phase initiation).

2. FinlandQ will need JV partners for Phase I (Rapid Entry) to tackle the "Liability of Outsidership."

This recommendation is consistent with the finding from Section 6.2 that regional business tends to be relational and particular and that a local partner is required to provide political participation, bureaucratic

communication and cultural levers to this business, thus meeting the speed-criterion of the INV model.

3. FinlandQ should implement the Structured Inquiry model in all educational programs to minimize Cultural-Pedagogical Friction.

This pedagogical move should be done because actual use of the low Power Distance student-centered Finnish model is at direct odds with Gulf classrooms cultural values of high Power Distance and very high Uncertainty Avoidance (Section 6.2). Structured Inquiry retains the fundamental ethos but accommodates cultural imperatives related to authority of teachers.

4. Four FinlandQ must establish itself politically as a strategic institutional partner in support of national Vision 2030 ambitions and not a ‘window-worker’.

This matters because the local education market in the GCC is government and political economic (Section 6.3). Sustainability and access to large B2G contracts is critically reliant on showcasing a measured commitment to a host country’s long-term goal of economic diversity and building human capital.

The first of both fundamental and strategic recommendation is to enter the market indirectly and in a riskless mode and smarter way, instead of starting a large investment activity at the school level. Research has clearly demonstrated that a shortage of qualified teachers along with high demand of quality professional development are worldwide, shared challenges across the educational market (Pacino and Fidi, 2021; Al-Maadi et al., 2022). Nor should I forget the same principle underlying the FinlandQ brand—excellence in teacher education and training, and building its identity around it. Based on these findings, an effective launch strategy for entering the Middle East education market could start with the introduction of a "Finnish Teacher Education Academy" in a regional strategic hub like Dubai. FinlandQ is starting to build its position in this area by offering professional certificates, teaching tools, and also expert consulting. These services are shared with a wide group of public and

private schools, and this helps the company slowly enter and grow in the region.

This approach has multiple benefits:

- **Reduced investment risk:** Running a teacher academy costs much less than opening a full K–12 school. This allows the company to enter the market with limited capital and then grow step by step, without taking very big financial risks.
- **A response to a real educational need:** The academy focuses on one of the main problems in the region, the lack of teachers with great skills and well-trained. To help reduce this gap, the company does not need huge investment; it starts creating real value from the beginning.
- **Building the brand and local connections:** The academy can also show, in a practical way, what FinlandQ is able to offer. It demonstrates high-quality educational practices and helps create connections with school leaders, universities, and government people. Gaining trust in the region is important, and these relationships make that possible.
- **Understanding the local culture:** The first stage also permits FinlandQ to gain experience of the local culture. Through the company's exploration of habits, values and ways of working in teaching in this city, it gains local experience also. This is a quick and easy way to prepare for bigger investments later on, a gradual Uppsala-type method.

Overall, this action represents quite a risk free plan to get in the Middle East education market and to establish the company on the foundation of trust, knowledge and collaboration with local partners.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our research is thorough and well-organized in several ways it is not without its limitations, which will greatly benefit those to follow on in pursuing these lines of research.

As a Master's thesis, the study is based on a hypothetical case company, and has been supported by secondary data and previously publicly available sources. Moreover, to back the data up, qualitative data from a certain number of interviews, with people who teach abroad has been utilized as well. As such, despite providing a helpful and insightful snapshot of the market situation, it is natural that such data cannot encapsulate all aspects of the reality of the process of market entry of a Finnish education company.

Hence, in order to build over the current knowledge, future research should be longitudinal-oriented, to study the actual step of a Finnish education company to enter the market over a period of a number of years. This not only enhances the validity of the findings of this thesis, but also gives them the chance to be refined and generalised within diverse educational market contexts in the Persian Gulf region.

Methodologically, the approach of this study was typically qualitative. The next phase in the research could involve quantitative studies with larger samples of data and field surveys. Future studies could collect and analyze the perspectives of a large sample of parents across the Gulf region, for example, to understand what decisions shape their choice of private schools. Doing this kind of research would give a better understanding of the real demand for Finnish-style education in the region, and it would help companies like FinlandQ make smarter strategic choices.

It is also important to remember that the Gulf education markets transform very fast. Regulations, competition between international school brands, and internal reforms in the national systems all move at a very high speed. For this, continuous research by academics is required. Future studies will be able to help policy makers as well as investors by tracking these developments,

comparing the performance of various reforms, and following up on new trends in school investment. On an ongoing basis, this research will not only make transparent decisions and improve the level of decision-making; it also needs to be used to regulate where national education companies (like FinlandQ) get entry into this fast-maturing region.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Sample Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction:

- Introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the study.
- Explanation of ethical considerations (confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent).
- Request for permission to record the interview.

Part 1: General Perceptions of the Gulf Education Market

1. Based on your experience, what are the most significant trends shaping the education sector in the Gulf region (UAE, KSA, Qatar) today?
2. How would you characterize the level of demand for high-quality, innovative international education solutions in these markets?
3. In your view, what are the key differences between the education markets of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar?

Part 2: Opportunities for Finnish Education Providers

4. What specific characteristics of the Finnish education model do you believe are most attractive or relevant to the needs of the Gulf markets?
5. Where do you see the greatest opportunities for a company like FinlandQ? (e.g., K-12 schools, teacher training, EdTech, consulting?)
6. How important is alignment with national strategic visions (e.g., Vision 2030) for a foreign education provider's success?

Part 3: Barriers and Challenges to Market Entry

7. What are the most significant regulatory or bureaucratic hurdles a foreign education provider faces when trying to establish a presence in the Gulf?

8. From your perspective, what are the primary cultural challenges in adapting a Western pedagogical model, like Finland's, to the classroom environment in the Gulf?
9. Could you describe the operational challenges, such as costs, competition, and human resources (e.g., teacher recruitment), that are most pressing in these markets?

Part 4: Strategies for Success

10. What market entry strategies (e.g., joint venture, franchising, direct investment) do you believe are most effective in this region, and why?
11. How should a company like FinlandQ approach the adaptation of its educational offering to meet local cultural and regulatory requirements without compromising its core philosophy?
12. What role do local partnerships and networks play in ensuring long-term success in the Gulf?

Conclusion:

- Is there anything else you feel is important for me to understand about this topic?

Thank you for your time and valuable insights.

Appendix 2. Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Project title: *Leveraging Finnish Educational Innovations for Market Entry: Opportunities and Barriers for FinlandQ in the Gulf Region (UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar)*

Researcher: Ebrahim Jamshidi Gohari, Master's student in International Business

Institution: Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Supervisor: Sari Matala

1. Purpose of the study

You are kindly invited to take part in this research, which forms part of my Master's thesis. The study aims to learn more about the chances and challenges Finnish education companies meet when trying to enter the education markets of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Your knowledge and experience in this field are very valuable for this work.

2. What participation involves

If you agree to join, we will have a semi-structured interview that should last about 45-60 minutes. It will be done online, using a secure platform such as Zoom or Teams, at a time that is convenient for you. With your permission, I will record the conversation only to make sure that I can later write down your words correctly.

3. Risks and benefits

There are no known risks in taking part. The main benefit is that your insights can help build a better academic understanding of how Finnish education models work abroad and may also guide future business strategies for companies interested in the Gulf region.

4. Confidentiality

Everything you share will remain confidential.

- Recordings will be kept safely and only I will have access to them. They will be deleted when the thesis is finished.
- In the thesis and any related writing, your name or organisation will not appear. All data will be used anonymously.