

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Students' extracurricular activities programmes: Prospects and challenges in Arabian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) universities

برامج الأنشطة الطلابية اللاصفية: الآفاق والتحديات في جامعات دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي

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### ABSTRACT

This article introduces the prospective benefits of, and anticipated challenges faced by the student extracurricular activities programmes in some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) universities. There is limited data and relatively little research on such programmes, and little reliable information is available on the websites of some of the national universities in the GCC region. For this reason, the study restricted itself to examining two institutions, Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, as case studies. These two universities were chosen due to their significant engagement in student extracurricular activities and their substantial student enrolment numbers. Indeed, the student extracurricular activities programme is a growing section in some GCC universities, with different orientations, foci, and comparative advantages to be found among them. Nonetheless, these programmes may face several expected challenges within the GCC setting due to the disparities in rules, practices, and objectives across different universities. The current study aims to explore the ways in which the two GCC-region universities are effectively integrating their extracurricular activities programmes as essential components of their educational and development policies; the motives of Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in engaging in student extracurricular activities programmes; and consider the challenges these programmes are likely to confront at the two universities. Addressing these study concerns necessitates an explanation of the policies and practices that inform and impact the development of the student extracurricular activities programme as a valuable initiative.

### KEYWORDS

*University student extracurricular activities, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), student organisation, theory of student involvement*

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## ملخص

تقدم هذه الورقة آفاق البرامج الطلابية للأنشطة اللاصفية في بعض جامعات دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي والتحديات المتوقعة التي تواجهها. توجد بيانات محدودة وأبحاث قليلة نسبياً حول هذه البرامج، وتتوفر معلومات موثوقة قليلة على مواقع بعض الجامعات الوطنية في منطقة مجلس التعاون الخليجي. لهذا السبب، اقتصر البحث على دراسة مؤسستين فقط—جامعة قطر وجامعة السلطان قابوس في سلطنة عمان—كحالات دراسية. تم اختيار هاتين الجامعتين بسبب مشاركتهما الكبيرة في الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب وأعداد الطلاب الكبيرة الملتحقين بهما. في الواقع، يعد برنامج الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب قسماً متنامياً في بعض الجامعات الخليجية، مع توجهات مختلفة وتركيزات ومزايا نسبية يمكن العثور عليها في هذه الأنشطة الحيوية. ومع ذلك، قد تواجه هذه البرامج عدة تحديات متوقعة في إطار دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي بسبب التباينات في القواعد والممارسات والأهداف بين الجامعات المختلفة. سؤال البحث الأول: كيف تدمج جامعة قطر وجامعة السلطان قابوس في منطقة الخليج العربي برامج الأنشطة اللاصفية بشكل فعال كأجزاء أساسية من السياسة التعليمية والتنموية؟ السؤال الثاني: ما الذي يحفز جامعة قطر وجامعة السلطان قابوس على الانخراط في برامج الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب؟ السؤال الثالث: ما هي التحديات المتوقعة التي ستواجه هذه البرامج في الجامعتين؟ معالجة هذه المخاوف الدراسية تتطلب توضيح السياسات والممارسات التي تشكل وتؤثر على تطوير برنامج الأنشطة اللاصفية للطلاب كمبادرة مهمة وذات قيمة.

## الكلمات المفتاحية

الأنشطة اللاصفية لطلاب الجامعة، مجلس التعاون العربي الخليجي، المنظمات الطلابية، نظرية مشاركة الطلاب.

## Introduction

University student extracurricular activities are defined in two broad ways: (1) in a traditionally narrow sense as involvement by students on campus, either voluntarily or through the encouragement of their faculties or administrators, in different organisations, associations, programmes, initiatives, or clubs that are distinct from their academic curricular programme; and (2) as any social, physical, or psychological energy devoted by students on campus to the academic experience as a whole (Ahmad et al., 2019; Astin, 1999; Posner, 2009). Therefore, extracurricular activities fluctuate in structure and policy between universities due to variations in each institution's educational and sociocultural priorities, as well as their aims for improving student engagement beyond the classroom. What is apparent from the literature and the two case studies below is that extracurricular activities are no longer considered truly 'extracurricular' in nature and are instead increasingly perceived to be an integral part of the academic experience. As Astin (1999, p. 518) emphasised, "Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience".

Consequently, students' extracurricular activities can now be characterised and coupled with academia because "extracurricular activities are part and parcel of [the] modern day's academic curriculum" (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 41). In fact, extracurricular activities are intended to take place outside of the classroom within the universities' campuses to nurture students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, physical well-being, and personal development (Ahmad et al., 2019; Posner, 2009; Posner & Brodsky, 1992). Furthermore, the student extracurricular activities programme has the capacity to transform students from passive to active agents on the university campus (Veronesi & Gunderman, 2012). Thus, students' extracurricular activities are likely influenced by varying institutional objectives across universities, as these activities may be structured or unstructured regarding functions, domains, participation, and political, cultural, or social orientations and preferences.

## Methodology

The major objective of this study is to present the prospects and discuss the expected challenges likely to confront student extracurricular activities programmes at GCC universities, with a particular emphasis on Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman as case studies. This reflective study is classified as a qualitative analytical study, utilising pre-existing secondary material sourced from books, journal papers, and statements from the official websites of the two universities. Therefore, it was completed primarily through desktop research. This reflective study complies with ethical standards in the design, presentation, analysis, and documentation of data as mandated by scientific research protocols.

## Conceptual and theoretical perspectives

The paramount and perpetual concept used by educational and learning theorists to define and develop the comprehension of student extracurricular activities is 'involvement'. This is because the involvement concept has a likeness with and the capacity to convey what these theorists have conventionally described as 'vigilance' as well as 'time-on-task' (Astin, 1999). However, there is a tendency among critics and other theorists to disarticulate the meaning of 'involvement' from 'vigilance' and 'time-on-task' because these two meanings are too precise for such a broad and all-encompassing notion as 'involvement'. Instead, there is a compelling group of theorists who favour the concept of 'effort,' because it is much narrower and it is more synonymous with the concept of involvement (Astin, 1999). As Astin (1999, p. 519) confirmed, "It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement".

In comparison to the other pedagogical theories, such as that of subject matter, the resource theory and the individualized (or eclectic) approach, Astin (1999) proposed that the most appropriate theory with which to approach student extracurricular activities in universities is the student involvement theory. This is because, first, the student involvement theory argues that "a particular curriculum, to achieve the effects intended, must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development" (Astin, 1999, p. 522). Second, "the most important hypothesis

in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (Astin, 1999, p. 529). Furthermore, the author demonstrated that the student involvement theory has the following five basic postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects.
2. Involvement occurs along a continuum – that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student’s involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that programme.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (Astin, 1999, p. 519)

Hence, the theory of student involvement encourages administrators as well as educators to focus all efforts on what students do rather than concentrating on what they think or feel. Shifting the efforts to what students do is exemplified by two pillars (Astin, 1999): first, is the degree of efforts exerted to encourage and motivate students; and second, is the calculation of time and energy the student allocates to the learning and studying process. Furthermore, the student involvement theory “assumes that student learning and development will not be impressive if educators focus most of their attention on course content, teaching techniques, laboratories, books, and other resources” (Astin, 1999, p. 522).

While other theories focus mainly on developmental outcomes (the *what* of student development), the theory of student involvement is more concerned with the techniques and methods that have the capacity to alleviate inertia, boredom, anxiety, low self-confidence, or other barriers to engagement and accelerate student development (the *how* of student development). This is because the most precious and important factor in advancing student development is the time spent in involvement by the student (Astin, 1999). Therefore, administrators and educators alike, instead of preoccupying themselves with the allocation of tangible fiscal resources, should dedicate themselves to their most significant institutional resource: student time (Astin, 1999). As Astin (1999, p. 523) asserted, “The theory of student involvement explicitly acknowledges that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite”.

The student involvement theory suggests the following areas, forms, places, and programmes for involvement on university campuses: in campus residences, because it provides an opportunity to develop student leadership and athletic activities due to

proximity and accessibility; honors programmes, because they construct faculty-student relationships; student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom; and athletic involvement and student participation on their representative organisation board (Astin, 1999). Therefore, "instructors can be more effective if they focus on the intended outcomes of their pedagogical efforts: achieving maximum student involvement and learning" (Astin, 1999, p. 526). Furthermore, the student involvement theory offers an opportunity to enhance the academic performance of students with academic difficulties (Astin, 1999; Baker, 2008; Fischer, 2007; Hawkins, 2010). This objective can be achieved by investigating the reasons students are distracted from realising their academic potential. Simply put, the theory is useful in understanding the primary objects on which students focus their energies rather than studying and learning (Astin, 1999). In addition, the student involvement theory predicts that students who are involved in extracurricular activities frequently thrive in their exams, continue attending their classes, and develop a better understanding of their abilities and traits (Ahmad et al., 2019).

### **Student extracurricular activities: Prospects**

A student organisation is defined as a well-established entity in the university that registers students in a legitimate extracurricular activity with defined objectives and a recognised structure. It is the most popular locus of participation, taking the initiative in attracting students to participate and get involved in extracurricular activities on university campuses (Kuk et al., 2008). Besides the student organisation, there are different types of clubs and associations on and around university campuses, such as sports, cultural, social, political, debating, photography, and extempore speech clubs (Kuk et al., 2008; Posner & Brodsky, 1992). Furthermore, there are well-established entities developed by the universities to blend or function in parallel with the student organisations to deliver specific and focused services, such as students' representative boards, student employment programmes, and student leadership programmes (Ahmad et al., 2019; Kuk et al., 2008; Posner, 2009; Posner & Brodsky, 1992).

Above all, the leadership programme offered to students as a practical extracurricular activity on campus has the ability to substantially increase the rate of students' participation and engagement in leadership opportunities or behaviours in the near future as well as over time (Posner, 2009). Furthermore, such a programme benefits students and the university alike by creating a culture of responsibility, vitality, service, empowerment, and community (Veronesi & Gunderman, 2012). It is important to note that there is a misconception in evaluating the utility of student organisation by type or function, because there is no organisational type that is either positive or negative for all students (Baker, 2008).

Accordingly, as Gholson (1985) demonstrates, student extracurricular activities generate a positive impact on student success and skills improvement that is projected out into nonacademic settings such as employment; marriage; social, cultural, and political engagement; and other domains. Moreover, it has been shown that students' extracurricular activities are predicted to be a positive factor in improving students' personality, attitudes, and success during and beyond their academic careers (Joekel, 1985; Stephens & Schaben, 2002; Veronesi & Gunderman, 2012). In addition, it has

been concluded that “students who participate in extracurricular activities generally benefit from having better examination results, having higher standardized test scores and higher educational attainment, attending class more regularly and having higher self-concept” (Ahmad et al., 2019, p. 45). Besides, there is an indisputable connection between emotional/social health factors among students on university campuses and their academic performance, and in particular their retention (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

Likewise, students who participate in extracurricular activities develop and foster a sense of community on campus. This community spirit is propelled by academic interactions with peers; deeper interactions with peers; and social and deeper life interactions with faculty/staff (Sriram et al., 2020).

### **Student extracurricular activities: Prospects in the GCC context**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consists of six states: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. These states are commonly identified as ‘rentier states’ because of their vast wealth and profits from oil and gas export (Ewers, 2015). However, in their efforts to make the transition to becoming less oil-dependent, these states are sincerely planning to diversify their economies in order to sustain the wealth and higher income they enjoy. In this, education becomes an essential strategy and not merely a choice (Ewers, 2015), making the subject of the current study a timely one. The GCC states have experienced the sort of changes in their societies that are produced by economic growth, due to the abundance of the natural resources oil and natural gas (Ewers, 2015). In order to reform their economies, the GCC states documented their strategies for reforms and classified them as visions and plans. For example, both the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the Sultanate of Oman’s Vision 2040 emphasise the role of human development and education in transitioning to knowledge-based economies (General Secretariat For Development Planning-Government of State of Qatar, 2008; Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit-Government of Sultanate of Oman, 2021).

For example, at Qatar University, the student activities programmes have gained greater attention and support from the university’s higher administration, in particular from the contemporary student affairs division. It is evident that the university is succeeding in making the student extracurricular activities programme into a viable and highly prioritized part of its educational and developmental policy. This is demonstrated by the wide range and inclusive nature of programmes introduced to enrich students’ university experience at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in parallel with the country’s national vision for 2030. The student affairs division overseeing the student activities programmes consists of different sections and departments that are intended to harmonize and implement the policies and agendas proposed in the national vision document, producing a diversified and vibrant set of programmes and initiatives (Student Activities–Qatar University, 2023). According to the official webpages of the student activities section at Qatar University, student activities include a variety of co-curricular and extracurricular programmes, such as skills development, problem-solving, critical thinking, innovation, entrepreneurship, communication, goal setting, fiscal management, marketing and promotion, and many others (Student Activities–Qatar University, 2023). Likewise, the

mission statement of the student activities section reads: "Serve as [a] catalyst involving students in learning opportunities to make student life at QU interesting, educational, engaging, and memorable" (Student Activities–Qatar University, 2023). Hence, the student activities section at Qatar University holds straightforward objectives, targeting their students by focusing on four thought-provoking components: making the campus and student experience (1) interesting, (2) educational, (3) engaging, and (4) memorable. Moreover, since the student extracurricular activities programme is expected to contribute to the human development that is proposed in the national vision, Qatar University is unequivocally attracted to it and has afforded it the necessary support and consideration to make it sustainable. Furthermore, the introduction of the student leadership and community service programme, which is vital in supporting the student activities programme, states that:

*Student Leadership and Community Service seeks to provide a positive university environment that supports your learning and develops your leadership skills to contribute effectively to both the local and the university community. That is [achieved] by providing volunteering opportunities, training programs, and extracurricular activities that enrich your student experience and contribute to your personal, professional, and academic growth.* (Student Leadership and Community Service–Qatar University, 2023)

In the Sultanate of Oman, the largest and most prominent university is Sultan Qaboos University. Its student activities programme is one of the most vibrant in all the GCC universities. The university's Deanship of Student Affairs is the division responsible for implementing the extracurricular activities programme. However, the office of the Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities is key to advancing the programme. As stated on the division's webpage: "The Office [of Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities] inspires its vision, mission, and goals from the fact that the student is the main pillar of the sustainable development the Sultanate is experiencing" (Sultan Qaboos University, Assistant Dean for Guidance and Students Activities, 2023). As can be seen, the Office of Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities is implementing the proposed sustainable development objectives for the sultanate. Two observations can be made: first, this commitment is supported by various initiatives that are intended to see student extracurricular activities flourish at the university. Second, the aforementioned proposed objectives and their programmes and initiatives clearly reflect the country's national vision for 2040 (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit-Government of Sultanate of Oman, 2021).

According to the official webpages of the student activities section at Sultan Qaboos University, student activities extend to a range of extracurricular domains, such as volunteering, leadership enablement, cultural and sporting activities, religious counselling, and innovation (Sultan Qaboos University, Assistant Dean for Guidance and Student Activities, 2023). Likewise, the mission statement of the Dean of Student Affairs reveals the specific objectives of having a student extracurricular activities programme, stating that "Providing a university environment that contributes to the promotion of the human and community values in the hearts of the students achievements" (Sultan



Qaboos University, D. of S.A., 2023). Simply put, the deanship office holds the upper hand in creating opportunities for enriching student university experiences by acting as a catalyst for student involvement. Thus, the extracurricular activities programme reflects the university's unwavering commitment to human development and the transition to a knowledge-based economy. As a result, the university's ultimate goal is to reach the previously mentioned objectives as well as render them sustainable.

As previously mentioned, relatively little research exists that explores the effectiveness of student extracurricular activities programmes in GCC universities. This study aims to address the research question regarding the presumed challenges associated with such programmes by aligning theoretical and practical perspectives on these challenges, elucidating the significance of student extracurricular activities, and providing explicit recommendations. These proposals aim to illuminate the theoretical strengths and future possibilities of the programmes, seeking to integrate theory and practice. Furthermore, it is essential to identify the anticipated challenges in the execution of student extracurricular activities programmes at GCC institutions. To that purpose, officials and educators at both Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University need to acknowledge the following:

- Identifying the proper concept with which to analyze the effectiveness of their student extracurricular activities programme is the first step, because both the concepts of 'task-on-time' and 'effort' are correlated with the realm of cognitive learning outcomes, while the concept of 'involvement' is related to the realm of the learning process. "[From] the standpoint of the educator, the most important hypothesis in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement" (Astin, 1999, p. 529). Therefore, it is crucial for the student affairs divisions in the universities to distinguish between the learning process and learning outcomes.
- The student affairs divisions should focus on the students' motivation and behaviours rather than the traditional pedagogical approaches such as technique and subject matter. This is because, "according to this [the subject matter] theory, student learning and development depend primarily on exposure to the right subject matter" (Astin, 1999, p. 520), rather than concentrating specifically on the students' motives.
- Administrators and educators in universities should recognise that the student's time is the most precious resource, rather than institutional resources. Despite the abundance of institutional resources, the student's time is limited (Astin, 1999). Making optimal use of it is one of the most productive strategies a university can adopt.
- It is essential to establish consistent rules and processes to assess the student extracurricular activities programme, including all initiatives, departments, and programs, by employing the concept of 'involvement' as the primary criterion for analysis and evaluation (Astin, 1999).
- Given that the student extracurricular activities programme is elective, certain projects and programmes within the programme ought to be rendered



mandatory for students. Moreover, several projects within the extracurricular activities programme might extend into aspects of the academic curriculum. The objective is to connect academic and nonacademic realms by fully utilising the student extracurricular activities programme.

## Conclusion

This study examines the prospective advantages of the extracurricular activities programmes for university students. The emphasis was on how these initiatives could facilitate national transformation by using the potential of students and youth to achieve national objectives. Extracurricular activities at a university may appear inconsequential; yet studies have demonstrated that they are, in fact, a crucial component of national transformation and progress.

Significant focus has been devoted to explaining the most pertinent ideas and the conceptual frameworks of these programmes. A comprehensive argument has been presented on the significance of student engagement theory and the concept of 'involvement'. The study delineates the potential prospects and expected challenges student extracurricular activities programmes may face at two GCC universities. This reflective study explains the extracurricular activities programmes available to students at Qatar University and Sultan Qaboos University in Sultanate of Oman as case studies. Extracurricular activities programmes for students is an evolving aspect of these two GCC universities, distinguished by diverse approaches and relative advantages across universities. Both universities are enacting policies that promote human development and the shift to knowledge-based economies within their student extracurricular activities programmes. In addition, both the universities' policies seem to have originated from the national development visions of each country, which may bolster the feasibility and practicality of such programmes in both institutions.

It behooves administrators and educators to recognise and capitalize on the human resources potential such programmes offer by familiarising themselves with the pertinent theory and engaging in appropriate praxis. The study has offered recommendations for improving the alignment between current extracurricular initiatives and programmes at both universities in the GCC region, and their potential as assessed through revised theoretical and practical perspectives in the literature. These recommendations act as potential deterrents of challenges, expected or unexpected, to the programmes in the near future at either university.

## Ethics statement

The study reported on in this article did not involve human participants and therefore did not require ethics clearance.

## Potential conflict of interests

The author declares no competing or conflicting interests existed in the production of this article.

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