

What's in it for us? Boosting social inclusion through international students' mobilities into higher institutions in the GCC

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Abstract

This study investigates social inclusion as the catalyst in promoting international student mobilities across diverse countries who opt to study in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Against this backdrop, the study highlights the importance of social inclusion as a language-learning mechanism relevant for Arabic and non-Arabic speakers within formal educational contexts. This study seeks to highlight in themes: (1) the influx of international students as the GCC positions itself as a hub for diversity and opportunities and (2) the salient factors that influence the preferences of international university students to study in the GCC. The study relies on different Higher Education Councils' (HECs) open data to decipher the inclusiveness of international students as a win-win mechanism for social inclusion, language exchange, and possible career opportunities. The findings seem to shed light on the importance of building cooperative interculturality, inclusivity, and opportunities among diverse GCC HEIs stakeholders.

Keywords: *Social inclusion, international students' mobilities, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), GCC region, University students.*

1. Introduction

Global Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) acknowledge the influx of international students into developed and Western countries as a hub for more opportunities and quality education (Akanwa, 2015; Tight, 2022). Moreover, other countries are opening up and welcoming other international students who may not have the privilege of securing admissions or getting international opportunities. Within this context, this study investigates social inclusion as the catalyst in promoting international students' mobilities across diverse countries who opt to study in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Umar, & Rahman, 2023). It was established on May 25, 1981, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and comprises member

countries from Bahrain, Oman, Saudi, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE (Arab News, 2020; Mosly, 2022). Figure 1 represents the demographic population profile of the GCC countries.

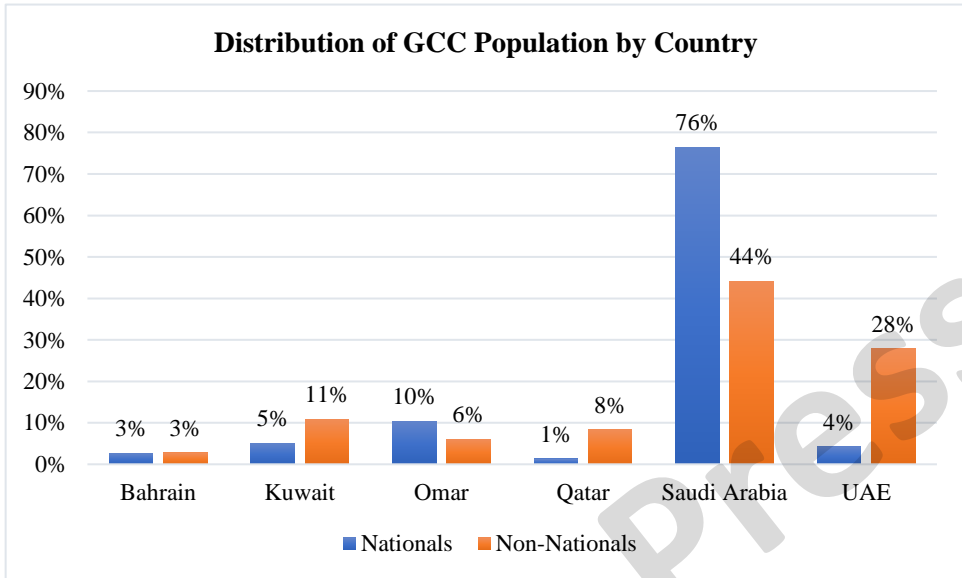


Figure 1: The population by Country in the GCC

The GCC region over the years has positioned itself as a potential hub for higher education for students from within the member states, Arab countries, and other non-Arab countries due to their geographical location, political stability, friendly culture, peace co-existence, and hospitality (Bahgat, 1999; Fida, et.al. 2017). As Dubai (UAE) positions itself as the economic hub of the region (Gulf Today, 2023), it has expanded the number of foreign universities or campuses that have moved from Western countries to the country. It is worth noting that other GCC countries have their share of the robust wave of foreigners or expatriates coming into their countries not just for work or investment, but for education for studying abroad or exchange programmes (Alhalwaki & Hamdan, 2019; Nekhili et al, 2019). Hence, the study dives into higher education within the GCC, tracing the statistical number of international students. Also, noting the prospects for international students who choose to study in the region and the impact of their presence on the institutions they represent in terms of the cultural, social, and language inclusion that occur within this context. The study highlights the importance of social inclusion as a language-learning mechanism relevant for Arabic and non-Arabic speakers within formal educational contexts.

¹ The data presents the most recent available data from the different GCC countries.

1.1 Higher Education Councils in the GCC

The joint educational process which later became HEC was established in 1975 through the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (GCC Archives). It began before the establishment of the GCC which was still under the supervision of the Ministers of Education from the six representative countries. The joint educational action held in March 1985, made resolutions with a specific focus that is relevant to this research, "Equal treatment to the GCC students at the general education stages same as the students of the State where schooling is provided" (GCC Archives). This implies that there should be equality among all GCC nationals and other host students in terms of admission and conduct. This factor is relevant to understanding students' mobility as it provides the enabling platform for social inclusion within the higher education context not just primarily for GCC students but for other non-GCC students. In other words, the equal treatment of students within the GCC indicates the acceptance of other GCC students without preference or bias but on an even level playing ground. Over the years, the HEC according to the Cooperation Council for The Arab States of the Gulf, has introduced new resolutions to cater to student social activities such as organizing camps, theatre festivals, competitions for vocational skills, sporting events, and most significantly, external visits to France in 2014 (GCC Archives).

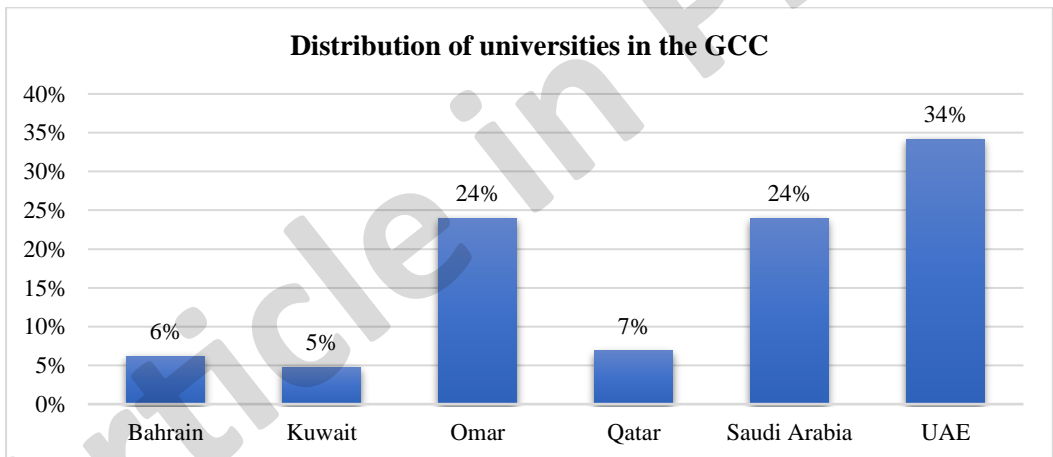


Figure 2: Distribution of HEIs in the GCC. GCC Secretariat General Information Center-Statistical Department, Education in GCC Countries, (2020): <https://dp.marsa.gccstat.org/statistical-domain/education>

2. Literature: Social Inclusion

Social Inclusion (SI) according to O'Donnell et al. (2019, 3) has gained global recognition across many spheres as noted by international organisations such as World Bank reports which assert that "confronting the need for social inclusion will prove vital if we are to meet our goal of building shared prosperity for all people." In other words, social inclusion relates to

accepting people irrespective of where they come from, how they speak, or their accents within a particular workplace environment. According to Piller & Takahashi (2011, 372), SI represents a feeling of belonging, community involvement, and empowerment. Additionally, Yates (2011) confirms that SI reflects a sense of affiliation, acceptance, and the right to be recognized and respected. It goes beyond the set of rules of regulations governing the institution, but the general acceptance of people irrespective of their backgrounds, social status, educational attainment, culture, religion, or other societal stereotypes. Thus, this study seeks to highlight conspicuous policies wherein the different HECs in the GCC Member States promote SI among international students whether as GCC nationals or non-GCC nationals, who choose to travel to study in a particular Member State. In addition, social is reflected in language exchange as the joint educational work held in March 1986 states that “Arabization of higher education and enhancing the GCC trends towards integration and the joint students activities and meetings” (GCC Archives). In other words, since the common and official language is Arabic, there should be a common acceptance of Arabic in communication spaces where students are more comfortable using a language other than English. However, over the years, most private universities in the GCC have incorporated the use of English as the English as Medium of Education (EME) rather than English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). This direction has also increased the choice of study designations of non-Arabic students as they consider language inclusion a paramount factor when considering their preferred GCC country.

3. Methods

The study quantitatively relies on the statistics from open data access on the various GCC HEC websites as reference points and was textually analysed. Also, the study noted instances wherein certain periods were not published, clearly stating the data's unavailability in the public domain. This poses one of the study's limitations due to inaccessible data from the concerned government's portal.

4. Findings and Discussions: Social Inclusion in the GCC

It is worth noting that as Mosly, (2022, 6) affirms that “all six GCC states provide excellent opportunities for further development in education...growth drivers are the GCC states' funding and financial commitments to improving their education sectors.” Similarly, Nekhili et al. (2019, 116) assert that member states of the GCC share a regional vision to make the Arab Gulf a hub for a world-class education.” The section provides data on the educational system for local and international students across the GCC in various HEIs over the years and future visionary goals based on available data in chronological order of Member States. The data represents the number of universities across the GCC with UAE topping the list at 34%

and Kuwait with the lowest at 5%. This is reflected in the position of UAE more significantly Dubai as the choice destination for many international students largely due to its economy, social and language-inclusive, and knowledge-based reputation (Gulf Today, 2023; Huang, 2013; Shukla, 2020).

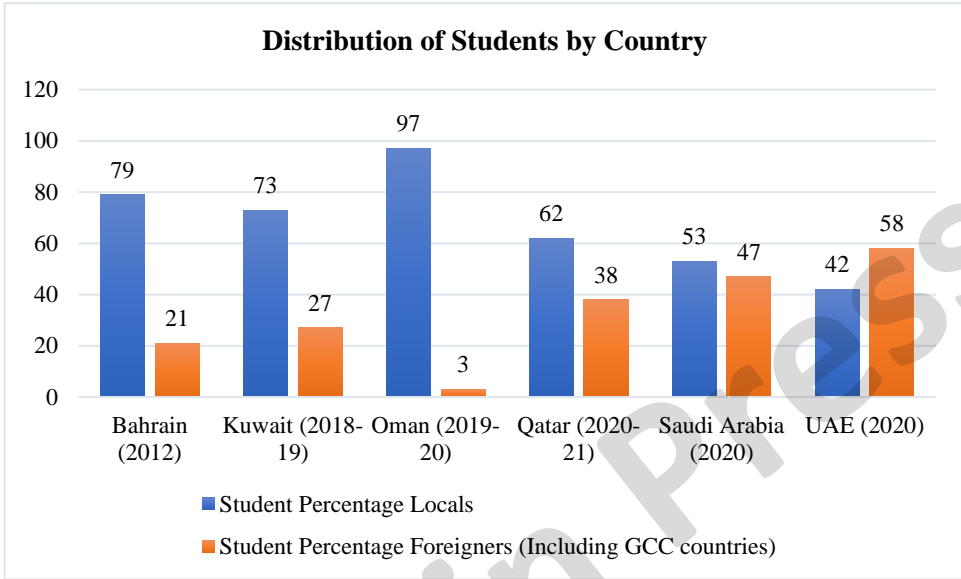


Figure 3: ²*Distribution of Students by Country in HEIs in GCC*

The distribution of students by country shows Omani students comprise significantly 97% of all students than non-Omanis 3% in HEIs. Other GCC countries with more students in HEIs are Bahrainis 79% > non-Bahrainis and Kuwaitis 73% > non-Kuwaitis. While Qatari Students are 62% > 38% non-Qataris and Saudis are slightly 53% > 47% non-Saudis. On the contrary, the UAE tops the list of the highest number of non-Emirati students at 58% > 42% of Emiratis.

4.1. Impact of GCC Economic Visions towards International Students' Mobilities

This study highlights the impact of the GCC Economic Visions as an integrated platform wherein international students can consider themselves inclusive to the region rather than just for education without social integration. Thus, this aids in reinventing the students' experiences. Against the backdrop, the summaries of the collected GCC Economic Visions through the improvement of the educational system are; (1) **Bahrain** – According to Mosly (2022: 5) states that Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 aims to “support and develop talented

² The data presents the most recent available data from the different GCC countries.

youths throughout the course of their education” (The Economic Vision 2030 for Bahrain). Bahrain attracts students from most Arab countries including Iraq, UAE, Qatar, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan as well as other non-Arab countries like the Philippines, India, and Pakistan (Higher Education Council Annual Report 2012; Oxford Business Group, 2015). Bahrain anticipates that over the years will become the study choice destination for most international students due to some noticeable factors. Firstly, the HEC continuously strives for excellence, quality, and international recognition for all students. Secondly, Bahrain is well-positioned for travel around the Gulf. Lastly, the country offers a good lifestyle for overseas students looking for diversity and opportunity (Higher Education Council Annual Report 2012; Nekhili et al., 2019). (2) **Kuwait** – Kuwait’s Vision 2035 aims to improve its education system through a quality higher education programme (GFH, 2020; Mosly, 2022; Oxford Business Group 2016). (3) **Qatar** – Qatar National Vision 2030 aims to build a modern world-class educational system that provides students with an exceptional education that is comparable to what is offered globally. (4) **Oman** – Oman Vision 2040 aims to improve its education system through a quality educational system with shared partnerships for private and government entities (5) **Saudi Arabia** – Saudi Vision 2030 aims to improve equality in education, fundamental learning outcomes, the global ranking of educational institutions, and ensure the alignment of educational outputs with labour market needs. And (6) **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** – In collaboration with Dubai Plan 2021 and Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, aim to improve the quality of education through improved course curriculum and facilities (GFH, 2020; Mosly, 2022).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that social inclusion is a major catalyst in promoting international students’ mobilities across diverse countries who opt to study in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Since the GCC seems to become the choice destination for the labour force, this could be leveraged to boost the influx of international students. Thus, one can appreciate the collective GCC economic visions in inventing international students’ experiences as they have made concrete steps to absorb most of the graduates into the economic labour force (Nekhili et al., 2019). Further studies could be carried out to give an accurate representation of these international students in the GCC labour workforce.

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