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Abstract

This article examines the migration of international students to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states from a comparative perspective. Over the past few decades, the GCC states have made significant investments in their education sector, leading to notable improvements in educational infrastructure and quality, the establishment of new universities and knowledge parks, as well as the emergence of international university branches. Consequently, this transformation has attracted a growing number of international students to the Gulf region, including non-national resident students and foreign students arriving in the Gulf specifically for educational purposes. Student migration entails more than just entering a host country; it also involves university admissions policies, tuition fees, scholarship programs, immigration status and the pathways available for employment after graduation. Therefore, this article delves into the intricate aspects of student migration to the GCC states, shedding light on migration patterns, student compositions, admissions processes, financial considerations and integration into the Gulf labour market. The findings of this study indicate that the GCC states have made some headway in managing international student migration. However, there is still a need for the development of a comprehensive student migration policy that fully capitalises on the benefits of student migration to promote economic development in the Gulf states.

Keywords

International student, foreign student, GCC states, student migration, student migration policy

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the number of students migrating internationally for education has increased manifold. According to some reports, these numbers quadrupled between the late 1970s and 2008 (Beine et al., 2014). From 2002 to 2020, the international student population witnessed an estimated growth from 2 million to 6.3 million. Remarkably, nearly 50% of these students chose to migrate to six Western countries, namely the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Russia, Germany and Australia, following the conventional South-North migratory route.¹ Notably, non-traditional players such as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have also attracted a significant number of international students, Universities in the six GCC states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman) are hosting an increasing number of international students, some of whom are resident students with foreign nationality, while others are foreign students who come to study in the Arab Gulf states. As per the UNESCO statistics, there were more than 310,000 international students enrolled in the tertiary education sector across all the GCC states.² Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority reports that international students comprise 28% of the total students registered in various educational institutions in Dubai.³ In Qatar, the percentage of non-Qatari students enrolled in universities was almost 44% in 2019.⁴

The recent global surge in student migration has been attributed to a multitude of factors (for details, see Gribble, 2008). Developing countries have encountered an upswing in demand for quality education, largely as a result of the increasing population and rising unemployment, thereby forcing many students to seek education abroad. Furthermore, in many developing countries, educational degrees from foreign universities are associated with an improved socio-economic status. Families and students anticipate that foreign study will afford them professional and business advantages. The reduction in transportation costs and advancements in communication technologies have further facilitated the ease of studying abroad. Moreover, developed countries have also pushed for the internationalisation of tertiary education in recent years, seizing the opportunity to actively recruit foreign students from developing countries and capitalise on their domestic higher education system. This proactive approach has become a strategic move for many developed countries to tap into the international higher education student market, generating revenue and addressing skill deficiency (Sidhu, 2011).

However, the reasons for the growth of higher education and the migration of students are somewhat complex in the GCC states. Almost all the GCC states have begun robust diversification programs (Hvidt, 2015). They are pulling weight to develop education, finance, tourism, health and other economic sectors. This desire, in part, is driven by the worry impounded by the existing narrative around oil. The role of traditional fuel sources, especially oil, has been at the centre of debate on Global climate change. In addition, the proponents of the 'peak oil' theory, emphasising oil resources' bell-curve nature, have warned against the complete reliability on oil (Bardi, 2009; Hubbert, 1956). UAE and Bahrain have already crossed the threshold of their resource reserves. Moreover, one can witness an ongoing paradigm shift that has seen a slow yet discernible

global move in transitioning from oil as a traditional fuel source to environmentally friendly sustainable energy sources.

One of the major beneficiaries of this diversification program in the Gulf region is the education sector which has received a massive investment. Among the notable changes in the sector is the establishment of various international university branches (IUBs), otherwise referred to as 'international branch campuses'. As a result of an investment in universities' infrastructures and increased collaboration with IUBs, new educational enclaves are popping up across the region (Becker, 2010). The prime examples are Education City (EC) in Qatar, Dubai Knowledge Village and King Abdullah Economic City in Saudi Arabia. These knowledge enclaves are developing an educated class of both foreign and local students that are expected to fulfil the need for skilled human capital in the respective countries as well as in the region.

Western countries recognise the value of international students as new skilled migrants who contribute to the labour market by bringing with them skills at a relatively low wage (Hawthorne, 2010; Khadria, 2009; Zигuras & Law, 2006). As a result, the most talented and exceptional students gain a competitive advantage in the knowledge economy (Raghuram, 2013). After completing their studies, international students are increasingly inclined to seek temporary or permanent immigration status in Western countries, taking advantage of their liberal immigration policies (Gribble, 2008; Lowell et al., 2004). Existing literature further substantiates that studying abroad significantly enhances the probability of eventually becoming a skilled migrant (Vertovec, 2002). Thus, studying abroad, particularly in developed countries, often serves as a deliberate immigration strategy for many students, facilitated by the immigration policies of the host country (Tremblay, 2005). The GCC states are emulating the traditional knowledge hubs, United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany and France by offering excellent tertiary education facilities. However, they diverge from the global North in their approach to student migration policies. Unlike the Western educational hubs, which provide international students with not only degrees but also seamless entry into the job market and multiple avenues for naturalisation, the GCC states often impose limitations or even lack options for permanent residency for foreign students.

The Gulf migration is characterised as a form of South-South migration because most migrants moving to the Gulf countries come from the global South. This is also true for international students who are mostly of global South origin. Existing Gulf migration literature tends to focus exclusively on labour migration, irregular migration, human trafficking and domestic worker issues (Babar, 2020; Fargues & Shah, 2017; Gardner, 2010; Jureidini & Hassan, 2019; Kamrava & Babar, 2012; Raj & Rahman, 2023; Rajan, 2019, 2020; Rajan & Arokkiaraj, 2022; Rajan & Saxena, 2019). A considerable body of literature explores diverse aspects of Gulf migration; however, the burgeoning student migration to Gulf countries remains inadequately addressed. Consequently, this study endeavours to offer comprehensive insights into this newly emerging phenomenon in the Gulf.

International students can be considered as a distinct category of migrants whose mobility is shaped by the dynamics of the migration process (Van Mol, 2014; Van Mol et al., 2023). From the perspective of temporality and the obligation

to return to one's country of origin after graduation, student migration in the Gulf can be compared to a temporary form of migration. In addition to the transient nature of student migration, the demographics of students in the Gulf are diverse. Moreover, the issues related to student mobility are complex as it involves not only the entry of students to the host country but also the university admission policy, finances, the level of studies and their transition from education to the job market. This article is dedicated to examining international student mobility within the six Arab Gulf states, with a specific focus on the strategies employed by the GCC countries to attract international students and effectively manage their mobility. It also aims to identify the pull factors that entice international students and analyse how these factors align with their motivations. The investigation encompasses various aspects of student migration policies, including admissions, financial considerations, immigration procedures and integration into the Gulf labour market. Essentially, this study is an exploratory endeavour that extensively relies on secondary sources.

This article is structured into four cohesive sections. The initial segment delves into the conceptual complexities related to international student migration, while the subsequent part focuses on the methodology employed. Moving forward, the third section offers a comprehensive analysis of the policies of GCC states concerning international students, involving visa procedures, sponsorship and financial assistance. Lastly, the fourth section, culminating in a concluding segment, examines the experiences and motivations of international students who chose to pursue higher education in select GCC states.

Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

The debates surrounding student mobility encompass a broad spectrum of dimensions, including both micro and macro aspects (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Findlay et al., 2005; Raghuram, 2013; Suter & Jandl, 2008; Weber & Van Mol, 2023). Within the realm of student migration scholarship, an ongoing debate persists regarding the precise definition of international students: Who truly qualifies as an international student? The conventional interpretation of the subject implies that international students are individuals who depart from their country of origin to seek education, encompassing various forms, such as degrees, diplomas and short-term or long-term courses, at a university situated in a foreign nation (for details, see Lane & Bhandari, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2014; Shkoler & Rabenu, 2020). However, some scholars have raised concerns regarding the inability of the existing definition to gauge the nuances of student mobility (Lane & Farrugia, 2022). For instance, Jones argues that there are also domestic students who are living in a host country, speaking another language at home or be unfamiliar with the academic tradition or the education system of the host country (Jones, 2017).

This is, indeed, the case with a significant number of non-citizens enrolled in the universities in GCC states. The current definition fails to account for students who are dependents of foreign expatriates and have either been born or raised in the host country. For this reason, UNESCO employs the term 'internationally mobile student',

which it defines as ‘individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin’.⁵ This definition differentiates between foreign nationals who are already present in their host country and those who travel specifically for educational purposes. In contrast, the GCC states do not differentiate between these two categories of non-national students enrolled in their educational institutions. It should be noted that a substantial number of dependents of semi-skilled and professional migrants are residing and studying in the Gulf for an extended period. These students hold passports from their countries of origin, and their residency permits are tied to the status of the earning members of the families (Rahman, 2015). Consequently, this study considers international students as individuals who have travelled to the Gulf for educational purposes, as well as those who are already residing in the Gulf and pursuing education. We, however, use the terms ‘international students’ and ‘foreign students’ interchangeably in our article. This inclusive approach to international students in the Gulf will reflect on the reality of current Gulf migration and its outcomes.

Scholars have looked into the determinants of global student migration from various perspectives (Geiger & Péroud, 2013; Weber & Van Mol, 2023). They have offered insights into student migration by focusing on key issues such as push and pull factors (Findlay, 2011) and cultural adjustment (Wang, 2008). Furthermore, due to the relatively marginal consideration of student migration in the theoretical framework of global migration (Thomas, 2017), some scholars advocate for more comprehensive and in-depth analyses (King & Raghuram, 2013). The conventional pull and push factors associated with international student migration include better employment opportunities, higher salaries, benefits for their dependents as well as unpleasant economic and political conditions in the country of origin (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Lu et al., 2009). Tijmen Weber and Christof Van Mol argue that the differences in international student migration flows can be explained by differences in development between sending and receiving countries (Weber & Van Mol, 2023). T. Weber and C. Van Mol work with migration transition theories (de Haas et al., 2019, 2020; Skeldon, 2012; Zelinsky, 1971), which predict that the relationship between development and migration ‘is complex and fundamentally non-linear’ (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 56).

Several factors related to motivation to study abroad have been identified in recent literature (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Tokas et al., 2022), such as the desire to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures and improve language skills (Kahanec & Kralikova, 2011); the possibilities of improved labour market outcomes from an overseas higher education; and the readiness of the host countries to provide skilled workers entry to the local economies (Beine et al., 2014; Chiswick & Miller, 2011). The growth of higher education globally, coupled with the publication of institutional rankings, has led to increased awareness regarding the varying quality of higher education systems between the West and other parts of the globe. Such disparities, along with the significance attributed to attending prestigious institutions in Western countries, have been contributing factors to the mobility of students (Abbott & Silles, 2016; Perkins & Neumayer, 2014). Through a case study of international students in the USA, Alberts and Hazen identify three categories of factors that

motivate students to stay in the United States or return home on completion of their degrees: professional (career advancements, immigration policy), societal (e.g., comfortability, cultural attachments, community feelings) and personal factors (e.g., family ties, family obligations) (Alberts & Hazen, 2005).

In addition, scholars have developed an aspiration and desire model to explain student mobility (Carling & Collins, 2018; Huang & Ren, 2023; Wu & Hou, 2023). Nestled within the intersection of non-economic and economic factors lies the discourse on aspiration and desire, extensively utilised terms in migration scholarship yet devoid of a proper theoretical framework in the realm of international student mobility. While migration theories identify the drivers that prompt mobility, they often concentrate on the structural forces at play. In contrast, a focus on aspiration and desire sheds light on the personal, psychological and social factors and their relations to the opportunity migration may accrue (Carling & Collins, 2018). Scholarly discussions regard aspiration not as a rigid mechanism of motivation but rather as a dynamic process responsive to each individual's unique circumstances (Huang & Ren, 2023; Wu & Hou, 2023). Wu and Hou have introduced a conceptual framework of 'aspirations on the go' to capture the contradiction between the aspirations before migrating and the realities experienced in the host country. Additionally, aspiration incorporates a temporal dimension that aids in comprehending and explaining how international students view the impact of their decision to migrate on their future trajectory and their identity (Tran, 2016). In this regard, the object of desire for international students is not merely the degree itself; instead, they seek what it symbolises in relation to the social, cultural, educational and future opportunities associated with international education, as well as the opportunities the degree bestows (Collins et al., 2014; Nam & Jiang, 2021)

Imaginarities and social networks play vital roles in shaping desires. Media representations of migration as a common and desirable practice, coupled with the idea of a globalised world, evoke a sense of interconnectedness and foster a want to migrate. Furthermore, individuals' self-perception and decision-making are significantly influenced by their social circle, leading to a considerably higher likelihood of developing a similar migration desire when peers and family members have pursued education abroad.

Scholars have also coined a concept, 'mobility capital', otherwise referred to as 'mobility habitus' to encapsulate the emerging trend of youth mobility culture (King et al., 2016). As implied by the term mobility capital, the act of mobility itself offers incentives in terms of exposure and international experience, enabling students to augment their skills and social status (Moriarty et al., 2015). This capital becomes highly sought after as increased mobility leads to the acquisition of more knowledge, the establishment of new networks and the expansion of existing ones, all of which can be leveraged in future decision-making and social skill development (Bourdieu, 1986; Brooks & Waters, 2010).

In contrast to the conventional two-step migration process, wherein international students depart from their home countries and immediately obtain permanent residency after completing their education in another country, the multi-step migration approach involves international students progressing through several stages of temporary residency. This intricate process integrates periods of studying and working

(Brunner, 2021; Wright et al., 2016). In this system, international students who successfully secure admission and complete their studies at an eligible higher education institution may work temporarily on a post-study work permit. During this time-frame, individuals who obtain enough qualifying work experience can then receive permanent residency and, in due course, attain citizenship. Multi-step migration is also referred to as 'step-wise migration' (Conway, 1980) and 'staggered migration' (Robertson, 2014). Scholars have observed that when students move across different categories, it heightens their vulnerability to becoming trapped in a state of limbo (Dennler, 2022). These concepts play a vital role in understanding the mobility pattern of international students, as the retention of international students in the Gulf depends on their ability to transition from one visa category to another. However, the multi-step migration process does not entirely align with the context of GCC states. This is primarily because the ultimate objective of two-step and multi-step processes, which is a permanent settlement, is not applicable in the case of GCC states due to the absence of a properly defined policy for naturalisation.

In terms of costs and benefits of student migration for home and host countries, Gribble (2008) summarises that the receiving countries stand to benefit substantially from the migration of international students, primarily from the revenue generated through the fees paid by international students and the subsequent availability of locally qualified skilled migrants following graduation (Gribble, 2008). Thus, the contributions made by the mobility of international students are substantial to the economy of the host countries. Sending countries have traditionally viewed the loss of students as having a detrimental effect because it depletes an already scarce resource (Nunn, 2005). Nunn argues that the contribution of academic labour is crucial to the development of a country's capacity to train other vital professionals who will help build institutions and develop social and human capacity (Nunn, 2005). As a result, the migration of significant numbers of students and scholars may result in a significant loss for the sending country.

We identify several discourses in student migration scholarship (Liu-Farrer, 2009; Sidhu, 2011). For instance, Gracia Liu-Farrer (2009) reports two distinct discourses in international student migration: brain drain and the use of the 'side door' to import unskilled labour. Brain drain is commonly used to describe the migration of skilled and professional personnel from developing countries to developed countries (Miyagiwa, 1991). With the growth in a knowledge-based economy globally, developed countries have progressively relied upon international student mobility to recruit highly skilled workers (Hawthorne, 2005; Tremblay, 2005). The term 'side-door' is often employed in the discourse surrounding cheap labour in Japan, where international students, especially those from China studying the language, are predominantly perceived as migrants seeking low-cost employment opportunities within Japan (Liu-Farrer, 2009, p. 181). Nevertheless, scholars have observed that this is also the case in other countries in the global North (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Lu et al., 2009; Sidhu, 2011; Thomas, 2017). However, Gulf region provides a distinct experience compared to the global North concerning the perception of international students as a source of inexpensive labour.

Another discourse that requires attention is the one linking student migrants to diplomatic relations, 'cash cows' and talent or marginal workers (Sidhu, 2011).

The development of diplomatic ties occurs when developed countries undertake various scholarship programs for developing countries as part of their education assistance efforts. Educational exchanges and international student programs are considered a facet of public diplomacy (Dolinkiy, 2014; Goirizelaia, 2020; Lima, 2007). Student migration is also situated within the prevailing neoliberal logic that has radically transformed the higher education landscape in many developed countries (Thomas, 2017). The concept of the 'neoliberal university' is often used to refer to how a market-driven agenda and its values are changing the priorities and practices of university life (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). Universities in Western countries use overseas students as cash cows by internationalising and increasing their presence on their campuses. Some reports suggest that income generated from international students' tuition fees in the UK, amounted to almost 25.8 billion euros (Hillman, 2021). In 2014–2015, international students contributed to more than 14% of all university revenues in the UK.⁶

At the policy level, there is an increasing propensity among developed countries to view international students as prospective high-skilled migrants, suggesting a nexus between education and migration (Baas, 2019; Finn, 2010; Gopal, 2014; Hawthorne, 2010; Lasanowski, 2009). Some developed countries like Australia, New Zealand, the USA, the UK and Canada have introduced policies making it easier for international students who have studied in the country to become permanent residents. In the context of this policy framework, studies examining states' immigration policies suggest that states design their migration policies across two complementary factors, which Sidhu refers to as 'two-step migration' (Sidhu, 2011). These factors aim to attract international students and retain them after their studies (Baas, 2010; Beine et al., 2014; Hawthorne, 2014; Liu-Farrer, 2011). Notably, Anita Gopal (2014) highlights Canada's immigration policy as an example, which is specifically tailored to enable students to study, work and ultimately achieve citizenship within the country.

Thus, existing literature offers us rich theoretical insights into various aspects of student migration, including the determinants, motivations and perspectives of student migration research, current discourses, student migration policy and the benefits that such migration generates for host countries. In most cases, however, researchers have referred to international student migration to the global North. Drawing on current theoretical insights into student migration to the global North, we reflect on the experience of foreign students in the Gulf states, which are considered to be part of the global South.

Research Methods

Studying international student mobility in the Gulf region is a challenging task, primarily due to insufficient available public data. While some GCC states publish statistics about international students in their annual education reports, others do not. Furthermore, the practice of GCC states of not differentiating between dependents of migrants enrolled in tertiary educational institutions and international students who come to the region for study purposes makes it difficult to draw a clear picture of

international student mobility in the region. In addition, there are no clear guidelines on the study-to-job transition process in the region. Most research on student mobility uses data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) on the global flow of tertiary-level students; however, no data exist on Kuwait. Considering the dearth of research on Gulf student migration, and the paucity of macro-level data, including surveys and government statistics, this study takes an exploratory approach to mapping out international student migration in the GCC states.

As an exploratory study, this research draws upon secondary and primary sources. Our main source of information is secondary data, which we collected through surveys of existing literature, such as books, journal articles, research reports, government websites, international and national organisations that keep records on international students, graduate dissertations, national and regional newspapers published in English and vernacular languages in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The study has focused on student mobility in the GCC states, examining migration policies and foreign student trends. We used several keywords for online literature searches such as student mobility, foreign student, GCC states and migration policy, aiming to retrieve all relevant sources on the topic. By carefully reviewing a diverse range of materials, we extracted statistical information regarding the stocks and inflows of international student mobility in the Gulf region. We accessed the respective ministry websites, where we found pertinent information which we cross-referenced with the available UNESCO UIS data. The decision to employ UNESCO data for our analysis stemmed from its consistency, covering the last two decades comprehensively. In contrast, the data available on the ministry websites lacked uniformity, with varying years of availability, hindering a coherent analysis. Furthermore, relying solely on official data would have provided an incomplete overview of the international student demography.

To enrich our research, we sought additional insights beyond statistical data. We thoroughly examined the university websites of major public and private institutions across each GCC state, meticulously studying their policies related to international students. Moreover, to gain further clarity on various aspects, such as visa regulations, scholarships, accommodation and study-to-job transfer policies, we contacted some public universities in each GCC state through email communication. Public and private universities have provided us with a wealth of information on admission procedures, immigration policies, scholarships, accommodation, spouse sponsorship policies and other relevant information. Most university websites delineate information for international students, which allowed us to retrieve some facts and figures.

Having spent over four years as a foreign student in Qatar, one of the authors brings invaluable first-hand insight to shed light on the perspective of a foreign student in the region. When conducting this research, the author has been able to draw upon his personal experiences of studying in two public universities, as well as interactions with other foreign students in Qatar and other Gulf countries. His exposure to the Gulf student migration and professional networks made us aware of patterns of student migration, student immigration policy, admission and retention policy, financial arrangements for students, spouse policy and the challenges foreign students face in everyday life in the GCC states. As a result of his

access to foreign student networks in the region and their social media platforms, we were able to obtain valuable information that would be difficult to gain through formal discussions with interview schedules. Even though we acknowledge the importance of first-hand data for comparative research in the region, we are restrained by the lack of access to physical fieldwork in the region. Despite this, our diverse sources of information enable us to gain adequate insight into international student migration in the region as a whole.

The International Student Migration Context in the GCC States

The Gulf region is home to one of the largest migrant populations (Fargues & Shah, 2017). The oil boom and the subsequent development have attracted a large number of foreign workers across all the GCC states. In 2020, citizens accounted for only around 48% of the Gulf population,⁷ while in UAE and Qatar, the percentage of non-nationals accounted for more than 80%. Although most migrants in the region are single migrant labourers, there is a significant number of migrants who are living in the Gulf with their families. Notably, there are more than three million migrant children, comprising almost 25% of the total youth population in the region (Kipples & Ridge, 2019).

In the context of tertiary education, dependents of migrants go to various private and public education institutions in their country of residence in the Gulf. In addition to that, a new discernible pattern has emerged. A significant number of international students are coming to the GCC states to pursue educational degrees, enhancing the multicultural and diverse educational landscape. This, along with the youth citizenry, has led to increased enrolment of international students in universities across the region. Table 1 presents the number of foreign students enrolled in tertiary education in each GCC country. In comparison to other GCC countries, Qatar and UAE have witnessed a significant surge in the number of international students. In the span of nine years, Qatar's international student

Table 1. Inbound Internationally Mobile Students in Each GCC Country.^a

Year	Bahrain	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
2012	–	–	7,154	46,566	54,162
2013	–	2,568	8,509	62,143	59,227
2014	5,039	3,108	10,078	71,773	64,119
2015	5,397	3,571	10,509	71,773	73,445
2016	5,128	3,878	10,788	79,854	77,463
2017	5,616	3,044	11,034	78,344	–
2018	6,040	3,263	11,515	73,977	–
2019	6,678	3,384	12,332	73,216	225,339
2020	6,192	3,493	13,712	69,005	215,975
2021	5,976	3,502	15,392	63,417	–

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Retrieved on July 5, 2023, from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

^aData for Kuwait are not available.

population grew from 7,154 to 15,392, while in Dubai, the numbers soared from 54,162 to 215,972. As GCC states' education statistics do not differentiate between dependents of migrants and international students who relocate to the region for educational purposes, determining the composition of international students becomes challenging. The provided data includes both the dependents of migrants and those who travel to pursue degrees.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a correlation between the number of migrants in the country and the number of international students enrolled. As the data suggest, the higher the number of migrant populations, the greater the percentage of international students in the country. In Qatar and the UAE, where migrants constitute more than 80% of the total population, their inbound mobility rate, that is, the percentage of total tertiary enrolment rate of international students, is 38% and 70% respectively. In contrast, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia have seen a slow increase in the number of international students. Their inbound mobility rate is a mere 11.7%, 3.1% and 4.0% due to the comparatively low percentage of the migrant population.⁸

In terms of numbers, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates account for the largest share of foreign student enrolments in public and private universities, while Oman and Bahrain have the lowest enrolment. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest enrolment rates due to its large migrant population. Furthermore, the country has a greater number of tertiary educational institutions, both public and private universities, compared to other GCC countries. As a result of a relatively high percentage of migrant residents, the UAE ranks highest when it comes to international student enrolment. Historically, the UAE has been a pivotal hub for maritime trade, attracting a significant number of foreign populations even before the era of oil prosperity (Onley & Nonneman, 2020).

On the other hand, the low number of international students in Oman, Qatar and Bahrain can be attributed to their small population. While the demography of international students in Oman, Qatar and Kuwait is largely composed of dependents of migrants from South Asia and the MENA region, students from the Gulf region constitute the majority of international students in Bahrain. The number of international students enrolled in tertiary educational institutions in Bahrain is estimated to be around 6,000.⁹ Unlike, other GCC states where official statistics are available on the enrolment of international students in their universities, the available official data in Bahrain hardly provide any information on tertiary education. The estimated number is obtained from a report by Bahrain's Secretary General of the Higher Education Council and the UIS. In the case of Kuwait, there is barely any publicly available data that includes the total number of international students enrolled in the university. The Ministry statistics only mentions non-Kuwaiti students registered in the first and second semesters, which is insufficient for obtaining a clear understanding of the demography of international students in the region.

International student mobility in the Gulf region is also affected by global trends. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on international student migration, including visa suspensions, bans on international flights and closure of educational institutions. However, some reports suggest that contrary to expectations, the decline in student mobility was not as severe as expected (Mason, 2021).

The UNESCO data show a slight decrease in the overall number of international students in the Gulf region (Table 1). In 2019, approximately 320,949 international students were enrolled across GCC states, and in 2020, the number went down to 308,377, which is almost 4% less than the previous year. Specifically, Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia witnessed a dip in the total number of international students, while Qatar experienced an increase of almost 10%. Globally, the GCC's average decline of 4% was minimal compared to traditional education hubs such as the United States, Canada and the UK, where the decline in the total number of enrolled international students was over 10% (Mason, 2021).

Like other countries worldwide, the GCC states imposed stringent restrictions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, including the temporary closure of all public and private educational institutions until they transitioned to online learning. Most GCC countries swiftly shifted to online learning, providing students with access to tools like Adobe Connect, Blackboard system, CISCO Webex, etc., for virtual education. This situation gave international students the option to either return to their home countries or stay in their host countries. Some universities required students to vacate university accommodations and urged international students to travel back, while other universities such as those in Qatar, for instance, allowed international students to remain in their dormitories. The instructions to leave primarily impacted students who came to the GCC for study purposes. Additionally, some international students staying in EC dormitories shared that they received free daily meals during the initial lockdown phases, vaccination doses and complete care for COVID-19-positive students.

The growing population of international students places a considerable strain on the educational infrastructure and resources of the GCC states. The rising demand for quality education requires a proactive response from the GCC states, resulting in significant investments in the education sector over the past couple of decades. Figure 1 shows the percentage of GDP spent on the education sector. The expenditure on education serves various purposes, including developing

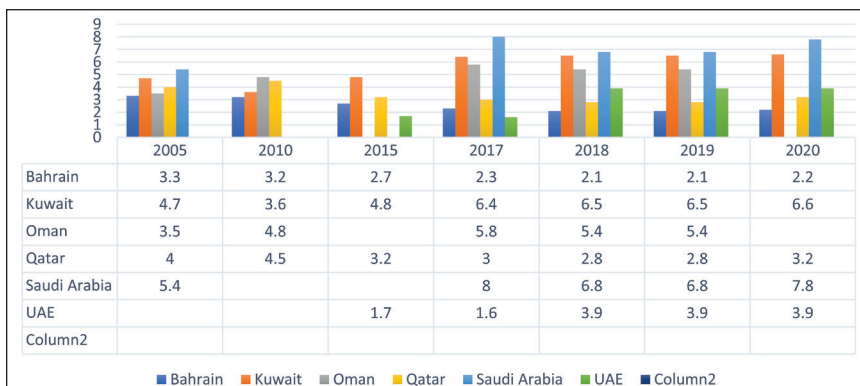


Figure 1. Government Expenditure on Education, Total (% of GDP).

Source: Compiled from The World Bank Data, 2020. Retrieved on December 21, 2022, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?end=2021&locations=SA-OM-KW-BH-AE-QA&start=1991&view=chart>

educational infrastructure to host international branches of leading universities and recruiting qualified foreign faculties capable of delivering an enriching learning experience to international as well as local students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The investment in the education sector also focuses on developing curriculum and training programs that match the global standards all while focusing on the specific needs and aspirations of the region's students.

A significant portion of the investment in the education sector goes into ensuring free education to citizens and covering education expenses for those planning to study abroad. In contrast, international students do not receive free education, albeit they receive various scholarships and loans to study at universities. In terms of primary and secondary education, although a significant number of international students go to private schools, such as international and community schools, some students study in public schools. In public schools, the majority of students are citizens, but non-nationals are also enrolled. While schooling for citizens is free, international national students usually need to pay the registration fee, as is the case in the UAE. At the tertiary level, all international students either need to secure available financial aid or cover their education expenses.

International Students in the GCC States

International Students in the UAE

In tandem with the Global trend, the UAE has increased funding in the education sector in the last couple of years. In 2021, it spent 3.1% of its total GDP on education. Much of this spending is directed towards providing cutting-edge infrastructure to universities. The thrust of the UAE's investment in the education sector has two fundamental aims, to enhance the capacity of its educational institutions so that they are at par with leading international universities in research and development, and second and most importantly, to present the image of the country as a favourable destination for international students. The effort has been a success so far. According to UIS, the country hosts almost 216,000 international students, and its inbound mobility rate is 70.3, the highest in the Middle East region.¹⁰

The UAE's desire to become a regional education hub has led to the establishment of two major knowledge complexes, Dubai International Academic City and Dubai Knowledge Park. These two educational enclaves together host around 27 higher educational institutions strategically designed to shape the UAE's identity as the epicentre of talent development within the region. Comprehensively, they offer students an array of entrepreneurship opportunities, human resource management training and other vocational courses. This substantial investment facilitates the country's ability to attract international universities and companies, including renowned branches of esteemed international higher education institutes such as the University of Birmingham, University of Manchester, Murdoch University, Heriot-Watt University, Middlesex University, University of Wollongong and others. Likewise, Abu Dhabi also hosts prestigious institutions such as Sorbonne University and New York University. As per the latest reports

Table 2. International Students in the UAE by Region of Origin.

Regions of Origin	2016*
Arab states	42,532
Central & Eastern Europe	1,033
Central Asia	956
East Asia & Pacific	1,602
Latin America & Caribbean	374
North America & Western Europe	3,972
South & West Asia	21,614
Sub-Saharan Africa	4,966

Source: UNESCO, UIS. Retrieved on July 5, 2023, from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

*Data are only available for 2016.

from UAE's Ministry of Education, the country has no fewer than 74 higher education institutions.¹¹

Establishing IUBs has boosted the country's inbound student mobility rate. A noteworthy fact is that foreigners comprise a substantial proportion of the student population, amounting to approximately 90% in institutions located within Dubai Knowledge Park and Dubai International Academic City.¹² The demographic composition of international students in the UAE is presented in Table 2. Although the student body exhibits considerable diversity, students originating from Arab countries represent 50% of the overall international student population. Conversely, Indian students account for approximately 20% of the total international student population. To meet the education demands of the sizeable population of the Indian diaspora, the UAE also hosts two prominent Indian universities' branches Birla Institute of Technology and Science and Amity University in Dubai International Academic City.

Given the considerably high living and education expenses in the UAE, the country offers a range of financial aid options to support international students in covering their tuition fees and other necessary costs. Aside from these scholarships, the government has streamlined the student visa process, allowing international students to obtain visas through the sponsorship of their university throughout the duration of their study. To retain talented individuals, the country has facilitated the extension of residence permits for international students after graduation. In 2019, the government introduced a Golden visa scheme which grants eligible students a residence permit valid for five to ten years without requiring sponsorship or renewal. Furthermore, the Golden Visa allows students to sponsor their dependents, provided they possess the necessary financial means and suitable accommodation.¹³ In a way, the UAE's 'Golden Visa program' is an innovative approach to retaining foreign students for labour market integration.

International Students in Qatar

Qatar's educational sector has experienced unparalleled growth, surpassing other regional counterparts in terms of educational infrastructural development.

Table 3. International Students in Qatar by Region of Origin.

Regions of Origin	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arab states	7,646	7,805	8,145	8,625	9,238	10,241
Central & Eastern Europe	90	107	110	104	140	134
Central Asia	6	16	16	18	36	64
East Asia & Pacific	301	2,832	276	350	413	488
Latin America & Caribbean	16	26	17	26	27	38
North America & Western Europe	513	530	538	528	557	612
South & West Asia	1,766	1,810	1,979	2,140	2,697	3,145
Sub-Saharan Africa	364	365	402	433	475	508

Source: UNESCO, UIS. Retrieved on July 5, 2023, from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

Over the past decade, the education system has risen exponentially. In 2020, the government expenditure on education was 3.2% of the total GDP, a large chunk of which was invested in enhancing the quality of several home-grown universities such as Qatar University, Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, the University of Doha for Science and Technology and Hamad Bin Khalifa University. Qatar, however, focuses on attracting international students through its renowned Education City complex, which is home to several prestigious American university branches. This ambitious endeavour, akin to the educational initiatives in the UAE, has attracted numerous international students to Qatar seeking to pursue degrees in IUBs. According to UNESCO statistics, the number of internationally mobile students in the country is more than 15,000.¹⁴

Table 3 illustrates that Qatar has experienced a remarkable surge in the number of international students in the last five years. As per Qatar's 2019 statistics and planning report, 44% non-Qataris were enrolled across various universities in the country.¹⁵ In contrast, they represent 70% of enrolled students at Hamad Bin Khalifa University and 38% of total students at Qatar University (Gayatri, 2022).¹⁶ The majority of international students in Qatar are from other Arab states, with a smaller proportion hailing from South Asia, North America, Europe and other regions. Additionally, there has been a consistent increase in the number of students from Central Asia over the past five years. Unlike other GCC countries, where students from sub-Saharan African countries constitute a significant part of international students, their number is quite small in Qatar.

The country has branded itself as a favourable destination for international students looking to travel to the United States for tertiary education. Qatar not only offers a world-class educational standard at the leading US university branches, but also provides students with an extensive range of financial assistance, which is typically challenging to obtain within the United States. Most financial aids, either

Table 4. Non-Governmental Scholarships in Qatar.

Organisation	Scholarship	Eligibility	Source
Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD)	Qatar scholarship	International students	https://www.qatarscholarships.qa/en-US/about-us/
Alfardan Group	Tariqi scholarship	International students	https://tariqi.alfardan.com.qa/
Education Above All (EAA)	Qatar scholarship programme	Long-term residents	https://admin.educationaboveall.org/our-work/our-projects/qatar-scholarship-programme-residents-qatar
Qatar Foundation	Financial aid need-based loan	International students	https://www.qf.org.qa/education/higher-education/financial-aid
Qatar Foundation	Qatar foundation merit scholarship	International students	https://www.qf.org.qa/education/higher-education/financial-aid

Source: Compiled by authors from different online sources.

through universities or through non-governmental organisations, usually cover students' tuition and living expenses.¹⁷ Qatar University and Hamad Bin Khalifa University also offer scholarships to international students, exempting them from paying tuition and housing fees and providing them with a monthly allowance.¹⁸ In addition to university scholarships, other private entities also provide grants and financial aid to international students. Table 4 presents a comprehensive compilation of non-governmental aid available in Qatar. International students who travel to Qatar for study purpose can avail of scholarships during the admission process or once they have started their studies.

Since its selection as the 2022 FIFA world cup host in 2010, Qatar has brought many changes to its immigration policies, which has increased its inbound student mobility. As per Qatar's immigration policies, the responsibility of securing entry visas for students is with the university that admits them. Upon their arrival, universities process new international students' residency permits for a year which are renewed at the end of the year.

The residence permit of international students under university sponsorship does not allow them to work outside of the university. They may, however, work part-time on university campuses. While Qatar University does not offer sponsorship to international students once they have graduated, Qatar Foundation allows graduating students to extend their residence permit for up to a year after graduation to help them transition to the labour. Besides enriching Qatar's economy with the home grown talents, this move also helps the country attract other international students.

International Students in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has the largest migrant population, although its ratio of the migrant to citizen population is lower than most GCC states. In 2020, the government's spending of 8% of its GDP on the education sector made it the highest in the region, more than that of the United States, the UK, Canada and Australia. The investment aims to develop educational infrastructure, enhance teaching standards and attract international students. One of the ways the country has made itself attractive to international students is by providing low-cost education. Additionally, universities across the Saudi Arabia provide several partial and fully funded scholarships.

Although premier Islamic institutions such as the Islamic University of Medina and Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca have been attracting international students from Muslim countries, the number of international students seeking to attain degrees in the STEM fields has steadily increased lately due to the establishment of several institutions such as King Abdulaziz University, King Fahad University of Petroleum and others. At least 31 Saudi universities are included in the Q.S. Arab Region University Ranking, of which 23 are counted among the top 100, while King Abdulaziz University tops the list.¹⁹ By investing significantly in state-of-the-art research in the STEM fields, the country has created a local hub for global international student mobility in the region. Almost 60,000 international students now represent 4% of total tertiary students.²⁰

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has successfully capitalised on its identity as the birth place of Islam to attract students from Muslim-majority countries. The demographic composition of international students in Saudi Arabia is presented in Table 5, revealing a notable presence of students hailing primarily from the Arab region and the Indian subcontinent. Specifically, these students originate from Yemen, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Pakistan, Indonesia and Lebanon. Moreover, the country also hosts the greatest number of international students originating from sub-Saharan African countries. Notably, there has been a slight

Table 5. International Students in Saudi Arabia by Region of Origin.

Region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arab states	42,372	41,615	39,453	48,872	44,101	37,053
Central & Eastern Europe	2,099	2,073	1,969	951	1,042	877
Central Asia	1,444	1,434	1,243	582	642	636
East Asia & Pacific	5,798	5,717	5,382	4,151	4,280	4,881
Latin America & Caribbean	849	801	758	128	170	70
North America & Western Europe	2,552	2,529	2,372	1,573	1,664	1,532
South & West Asia	9,924	9,649	8,990	5,936	5,880	6,195
Sub-Saharan Africa	13,812	13,600	12,936	8,350	8,471	9,267

Source: UNESCO, UIS. Retrieved on July 5, 2023, from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

decline in the overall number of international students in Saudi Arabia since 2016. Probably one of the factors contributing to this decline is the establishment of branch campuses from internationally renowned universities in neighbouring countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

Unlike traditional education hubs in the Global North, where students are required to independently apply for a visa upon receiving acceptance to a university, international students in Saudi Arabia are relieved of this responsibility. Instead, it is typically the university itself that undertakes the processing of visa applications for accepted international students. Subsequently, upon receiving approval from the ministry, students are required to visit the Saudi embassy in their home country to obtain a visa endorsement on their passports. The country also issues 'short-term' and 'long-term' residency visas, especially for students and researchers who wish to pursue higher studies under the 'Study in Saudi Arabia' initiative.²¹

Similar to other migrants in Saudi Arabia who arrive on a temporary migration scheme under a sponsor, international students' residency permit is tied to their universities. University sponsorship does not permit students to work full time. Nevertheless, the country has established a pathway for ambitious students to remain in Saudi Arabia upon completing their studies on the condition that they secure employment. In essence, universities play a pivotal role in attracting and facilitating the residency of international students in Saudi Arabia.

International Students in Bahrain

In contrast to the resource-rich nations of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's economy does not rely primarily on oil revenues. Bahrain, being the first country to experience resource depletion, has undertaken policy recalibrations to transition its hydrocarbon-based economy into a knowledge-based one. This endeavour places significant emphasis on the education sector, as the government recognises the vital role of an educated Bahraini youth community in achieving Bahrain Vision 2030. Unlike Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have oriented their policies to attract international students, Bahrain's education policies cater primarily to its own population. As per Bahrain Vision 2030, '...education and training need to be relevant to the requirements of Bahrain and its economy, delivered to the highest possible quality standards, and accessible based on ability and merit'.²² Consequently, the country's investment focuses on building an educational ecosystem that trains and empowers Bahraini individuals. According to the latest World Bank data, Bahrain spends around 2.3% of its GDP on the education sector, the lowest expenditure in the region.²³

The primary focus of most universities in Bahrain is to attract local and other students coming from the GCC states. International students from outside the Arab region face significant eligibility hurdles when applying to the country's public universities. For instance, one of the public universities, the University of Bahrain admit international students who possess valid residency permits in the country. This requirement can only be met if the international student is either a citizen of a GCC state or a dependent of an expatriate currently residing in Bahrain.^{24,25} For this reason, Bahraini nationals constitute the majority of enrolled students in Bahraini universities.

Table 6. International Students in Bahrain by Region of Origin.

Region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arab states	3,748	4,127	4,445	5,006	4,600	4,558
Central & Eastern Europe	23	24	16	12	16	14
Central Asia	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)
East Asia & Pacific	33	76	65	60	87	84
Latin America & Caribbean	2	39	4	2	3	8
North America & Western Europe	298	228	286	310	311	294
South & West Asia	973	1,072	1,181	1,262	1,140	977
Sub-Saharan Africa	22	20	23	22	32	38

Source: UNESCO, UIS. Retrieved on July 5, 2023, from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

Nevertheless, the number of international students studying in Bahraini universities has gradually increased over the years. In 2018, around 6,000 international students studied various degree programs in Bahrain, as shown in Table 6.²⁶ Most of these students receive residency sponsorship and financial aid from their universities. At the American University of Bahrain (AUB), for instance, a staff member informed us about their university's provision of a 25% scholarship against the tuition fee to international students who are in financial need. The admission committee at reported that they do not sponsor students once they graduate from the university. In contrast, an alumnus of AUB informed us that he received two extra years of residence permit after his graduation, which helped him find a job in the country. Even though the residency laws are not clearly defined, it appears that Bahrain does not always enforce strict rules against the extension of student visas after graduation.

International Students in Kuwait

Among Gulf countries, Kuwait has the second highest expenditure on education after Saudi Arabia. Considering that more than one-third of the Kuwaiti population comprises youth under the age of 25, it is no surprise that the country spends around 6.6% of its GDP on education.²⁷ While the government has invested heavily in the education sector in the last decade, most of the investment goes to primary and secondary education. Kuwait has two major public institutions, Kuwait University and Public Authority for Applied Education and Training. Kuwait has also established private universities in collaboration with a few international universities, such as Algonquin College Canada, the American University of Kuwait and the Maastricht School of Management in the Netherlands. The majority of international students in the country originate from South Asia, the Gulf region and Africa. Around 6,863 other GCC states' citizens are enrolled in Kuwait's public schools and 1,960 in higher education institutes. In the academic year 2021/22 academic session, Kuwait University admitted 1,872

non-Kuwaiti students in the first semester.^{28,29} However, it is not clear through available public data whether these numbers reflect international students travelling to Kuwait primarily for studies or non-Kuwaiti students already in the country. Similar to other GCC countries, the universities in Kuwait apply for a visa on behalf of international students. Furthermore, most international students studying in Kuwait are on full scholarships. In addition the Ministry of Education offers scholarships that include annual return tickets, stipends and housing.

International Students in Oman

With an expenditure of almost 5% of its total GDP, Oman's education sector has shown remarkable development in the last couple of decades. The journey of Oman's education sector commenced with only three schools in the 1970s. Today, there are around 30 higher education institutes. While Oman has not actively pursued the establishment of IUBs, it has invested heavily in growing the capacity of its local universities. Currently, 35,000 students are enrolled in private universities, of which around 3% are non-Omani, including dependents of migrants and international students. In the academic year 2019/20, Omani public and private institutes for higher education enrolled 940 new non-Omani students.³⁰ Table 7 provides a breakdown of student demography in Oman. Similar to other GCC countries, international students from the Arab region constitute the majority of international students in the country. The flow of internationally mobile students in Oman has remained steady in the last five years.

Despite not employing the strategy to host IUBs, Oman has shown its desire to attract international students through policy reforms (Yenigün & Al Maani, 2022). Primary among them is extending visas to more than 103 countries for a short trip to Oman. Such a move paves the way for international students to travel to Oman and interact with their prospective universities in-person. Like other universities in the region, Omani universities take the responsibility of issuing visas for international students once they receive admission. Through our communication with a few students in an Omani university, we learned that international students in Oman could get up to three years of visa extension after graduation depending on

Table 7. International Students in Oman by Region of Origin.

Regions of Origin	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arab states	2,160	1,778	1,809	1,939	2,061	2,171
Central & Eastern Europe	22	18	15	13	14	15
Central Asia	8	8	7	7	3	2
East Asia & Pacific	26	23	28	22	34	29
Latin America & Caribbean	7	2	2	4	5	6
North America & Western Europe	53	43	46	49	55	64
South & West Asia	1,361	961	1,113	1,114	1,100	1,008
Sub-Saharan Africa	236	209	242	235	213	203

Source: UNESCO, UIS. Retrieved on July 5, 2023, from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

their contract with their respective universities. However, this may not be the official policy.

While the universities provide financial aid and partial scholarships for international students, there is also a government-funded program called 'The Omani Programme for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation' for international students³¹. It is worth noting that this program exclusively caters to students hailing from countries that have friendly relations with Oman. The initiative provides coverage for tuition fees applicable to public higher education institutions. Undoubtedly, Oman has embarked on an ambitious educational development journey. Nonetheless, there is currently a lack of evidence demonstrating the country's intention to position itself as a prominent destination for international students.

Motivations for Student Migration to the GCC States

The factors contributing to student migration to the Gulf states are complex and merit in-depth analysis. Based on our discussions with foreign students, we have found three primary motivations: financial benefits, proximity to home and familiarity with the culture, and the prospect of finding employment after graduation. Financial benefits consistently emerged as a recurring theme in our conversations with students throughout the region. GCC states offer full scholarships to international students. Most of the international students we interacted with reported that they were receiving full scholarships, which covered their tuition and accommodation costs. Moreover, students enrolled at a Kuwaiti and a Qatari university informed us that they also received monthly stipends in addition to full scholarships. However, this may not apply to international students who already possess residency permits or are dependents of expatriates.

Furthermore, the presence of IUBs has also increased inbound student mobility. A female international student, currently enrolled at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCU), shared with us her parents' desire for her to pursue studies at an American university. However, they held reservations about her going to the United States, primarily due to the associated educational expenses. Consequently, VCU in Qatar presented a compelling opportunity for them, as it not only offered proximity to her home but also awarded her a scholarship in partnership with Qatar Foundation (QF) which covered the entirety of her tuition expenses. Moreover, she was given the opportunity to engage in a part-time student job within the university campus. Some international students studying at IUBs in Qatar and UAE told us that they would have mostly relied on education loans had they travelled to the United States or the UK to study. Hence, their decision to come to the Gulf region alleviated concerns surrounding exorbitant university fees as well as cultural compatibility issues.

One of the primary factors that motivates international students to come to the Gulf is their familiarity with the region's culture and religious values. The Gulf region's adherence to Islamic and Arab norms particularly attracts students from Muslim countries, who constitute most of the diverse international student body. At the Islamic University of Madinah, students emphasised that their pursuit of a degree in Madinah stemmed from the city's significant role in the Islamic

tradition. Similarly, international students in Qatar expressed that travelling for religious pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam, is more convenient for them.

The linguistic and cultural similarities between the Gulf region and neighbouring Arab countries make the Gulf an ideal destination for Arab international students. Likewise, students from South Asia, particularly, India and Pakistan, also find the region appealing. Over the years, the presence of a substantial number of South Asian migrants has given the region a distinct subcontinental character. Although the GCC states adopt an Arab-oriented outlook, the reality is that public life exhibits remarkable diversity. It is not uncommon to come across a Pakistani, Egyptian, Indian and Bengali restaurant situated side by side or to observe a Qatari, Omani, Persian and Pakistani enjoying *karak* tea or Indian tea at a local café. This unique blend of cultures makes the Gulf a home away from home for international students from the region and the wider Muslim world.

The prospect of landing a job in one of the Gulf states also plays a significant role in facilitating international student migration to the region. The region's ongoing developmental and diversification projects necessitate an academic culture that favours degree programs that directly relate to the economy. Furthermore, the degree programs that IUBs and local universities focus on in the Gulf are mostly related to the STEM and business fields. The impetus of these programs is to train a technologically sound workforce that could push forward developmental projects. Since the local human capital (citizens) is yet to achieve the level that can compete with available cheap expatriates or significantly speed up the developmental process, GCC states tend to absorb the international talents they nurture in their countries. Hence, international students view the opportunity to study in the Gulf as a smooth pathway to getting a decent job in the region.

We have also observed a certain degree of influence exerted by universities on the Gulf markets. Specifically, graduates from these universities assume managerial roles in economic sectors. For instance, VCU, which was established almost two decades ago in Qatar, confers degrees in fine arts and graphic design. The arts and design market in Qatar is significantly driven by VCU graduates. Nevertheless, further investigation is warranted to determine if this trend persists across other sectors as well.

Furthermore, we encountered several instances where international students expressed that their decision to pursue studies in the Gulf was influenced by the fact that their siblings or friends were either currently enrolled or had previously graduated from institutions in the region. This phenomenon bears a resemblance to the principles proposed by migrant network theories, which posit that migrants, once established in their host country, serve as catalysts for subsequent migration (Rahman, 2015). However, comprehensive research is necessary to ascertain the extent to which migrant network theory can account for international student mobility within the region.

In addition to these primary factors, various other reasons have emerged. Obtaining student visas in developed countries proves to be a burdensome and protracted process for students, entailing financial obligations with the added risk of visa denial. Conversely, universities in the GCC states assume the

responsibility of securing visas for international students. As we engaged in conversations with international students, they informed us that the visa process was effortless for them as they were exempt from applying for themselves. Furthermore, the allure of lower crime rates and a secure environment in the GCC countries constitute added attraction for many international students.

Conclusion

This article has explored the background to the growth of student migration to the GCC states with a focus on the composition of international students, educational and admission policies, financial cost and assistance, and finally, pathways for long-term settlement after studies. It has been argued that the increase in international student migration to the GCC states is concomitant with the ongoing economic diversification programs in the region. The 'National Visions' of GCC states have emphasised the need to diversify their oil-based economy towards a knowledge-based economy where the thrust has been upon research and development. In accordance with their National Visions, the GCC states have made substantial investments in the education sector, aiming to foster economic diversification over the course of several decades. These investments have yielded notable enhancements in infrastructure and the quality of education. Additionally, various knowledge parks have been established, which host several IUBs, culminating in a surge of foreign students enrolling in educational institutions across the Arab Gulf states in recent decades. As a consequence, universities have opened their doors to a growing population of local and foreign students, effectively serving as a gateway to attract highly skilled migrants. These developments serve two main purposes. Firstly, to train the local youth population, thereby preparing the nationals for a knowledge economy. Secondly, to attract the best international talents, thereby meeting the labour market deficit with a culturally compatible labour force ready to contribute to national development.

As a major destination for low and high-skilled migrants, the GCC states have crafted their migration policies to attract migrants of all classes and maintain migration flows in a circular manner where the market demand determines the entry, stay and exit of migrants. Furthermore, recognising the significance of economic diversification, the GCC states have also acknowledged the potential role of international students in driving this diversification initiative. The responses of the Gulf states to the need for foreign students have been varied. Some countries like Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman are hesitant to fully open their higher educational institutions to foreign students. In contrast, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have adopted a more pragmatic approach. The later countries have undertaken significant measures to achieve economic diversification, primarily through the development of their education sectors. In this context, foreign students are considered an integral part of their developmental journey, and each country embraces this integration to varying degrees.

The growth in the number of foreign students, whether existing international residents or students who travel to the Gulf for higher education, reflects the fact

that there is an increasing acceptance of foreign students in the Arab Gulf society albeit the policy for inviting foreign students varies from one country to another. Not only do these states differ in their approaches to attracting foreign students, but they also exhibit differences in how they aim to retain and integrate them into their labour markets. The article has reported that some countries and their universities offer visa extensions to foreign students after graduation allowing them to conduct job searches; however, the respective policies are not consistent across the Gulf. There is an absence of a finely tuned foreign student retention policy in the region. While the imperatives of foreign students for economic diversification and labour market integration have often been discussed in policy discourses, a comprehensive policy framework for retaining and integrating them into the national labour market has yet to be developed in all GCC states.

In contrast to low-skilled migrants, refugees and dependent migrants, who are often perceived by states as liabilities, student migrants are regarded as a potential solution. They are seen as capable of diversifying the job market, creating new opportunities for everyone and enhancing economic productivity and competitiveness within national economies. The Gulf states have a structural reliance on foreign human resources. They cannot simply eliminate their dependence on foreign manpower if they intend to achieve and sustain economic prosperity at the current pace. Given the significant investment of the GCC states in foreign students, it becomes crucial to retain and integrate these students into the local labour market rather than lose them to the job markets of other countries. In the long run, the Gulf states stand to gain substantial benefits from a well-crafted student migration policy.

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