

Research Article

Cite this article: Albusaidi, S., Alabri, K., Chinnathambi, K., & Al Masruri, S. (2025). How are the policy initiatives being enacted to strengthen regional higher education in the GCC received and implemented?. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 17, e2025339. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2025.17.339>

Received May 9, 2025

Accepted June 28, 2025

Published Online July 19, 2025

Keywords: Regionalism, regional cooperation, policy initiatives, academic staff, decentralisation, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), higher education

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How are the policy initiatives being enacted to strengthen regional higher education in the GCC received and implemented?

Saud Albusaidi , Khalaf Alabri , Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi , Shamsa Al Masruri

Abstract

Background/purpose. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have witnessed many developments in various fields due to their commitment to unity and cooperation. The GCC has launched initiatives inspired by the European Universities Initiative to support regional higher education. These initiatives include establishing networks and associations, promoting collaboration, and developing joint programs. The expected benefits include improved educational quality and international collaboration, and competitiveness. Research also reveals challenges and tensions that arise when implementing policies within regions. This study aims to explore the perceptions of academic staff on the impact of implementing regional policy initiatives on their practices and collaborations in HEIs in the GCC.

Materials/methods. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the diverse perspectives of academic staff. Using criterion sampling, participants were selected based on their roles and responsibilities related to policy engagement. Six in-depth interviews, with a qualitative survey, were conducted to examine how regional policy initiatives influence day-to-day academic practices. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results. The findings reveal challenges, including geopolitical tensions, institutional autonomy constraints, and varying educational standards, that hinder regional progress.

Conclusion. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of bridging the gaps between senior management and low-power stakeholders, including staff members and students, for more effective policymaking and implementation at higher education institutions (HEIs) within the GCC.

1. Introduction

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have witnessed significant development in various fields due to their commitment to unity and cooperation. Since the establishment of the GCC in the early 1980s, cooperation in the education sector has been prioritised by emphasising educational partnerships between GCC countries and creating numerous initiatives to promote academic development and regional integration. Since the establishment of the GCC, the countries in the region have undergone numerous significant social, political, and economic transformations that have impacted their higher education systems (Mosly, 2022). In this paper, 'region' and 'regionalism' are used to refer to the international relations perspectives, policy coordination and knowledge exchange present among GCC higher education institutions (HEIs).

The educational initiatives introduced through GCC cooperation aim to improve the quality of education, promote internationalisation, and enhance global competitiveness (Gulf Finance House, 2020). However, despite this optimism, previous studies have highlighted ongoing challenges, including political tensions, limitations on institutional autonomy, and variations in academic standards, all of which affect the implementation and effectiveness of regional policies (Aldossari, 2021; Jafar & Knight, 2020).

Despite the existing literature, a clear gap remains in understanding how academic staff—key to implementing policies and fostering regional collaboration within HEIs—perceive and put these policy initiatives into practice. Most studies to date have focused on policy frameworks or institutional perspectives, paying little attention to the experiences and attitudes of academic staff on the ground. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring how academic staff in GCC universities perceive the impact of regional policy initiatives on their teaching, research, and collaboration.

While GCC countries have taken steps to promote educational cooperation, these efforts unfold within a context still shaped by political, economic, and social challenges. Ongoing disparities in academic standards and tensions between local cultural values and global educational models continue to affect the cohesion and effectiveness of regional higher education policies (Aldossari, 2021; Jafar & Knight, 2020).

Accordingly, the research examines the following question: How are the policy initiatives aimed at enhancing regional higher education in the GCC experienced and enacted by academic staff? Answering this question is crucial for identifying barriers and enablers to effective regional integration, as well as for informing future policy development. This research paper examines the efforts and challenges associated with promoting higher education in the GCC through regional policies. It critically examines the perceptions of academic staff regarding policy initiatives in GCC HEIs.

2. Theoretical Framework

Theories of regionalism and nationalism serve as the frameworks adopted by this study to understand regional cooperation in the GCC, with a focus on higher education.

2.1. Regionalism

Neofunctionalism theory emphasises the importance of political and economic cooperation among states that extends beyond national boundaries. Sociologist Ernst B. Haas (1958, cited in Haas, 2020) emphasises the importance of regional integration, with a particular focus on European integration. He believed in spillover effect; integration in one sector will eventually lead to integration in other related areas. Following Ernst B. Haas, Lindberg and Scheingold (1971), and Keohane and Nye (1973) stressed regional integration, highlighting the role of supranational institutions, political actors, and integration in regions beyond Europe. These entities are non-state actors and key

decision-makers for the region because they are autonomous bodies and not controlled by any government. This implies that nations compromise their priorities to achieve broader integration or common goals. GCC has been significantly influenced by the European Union in many areas. This involves economic exchanges, political alliances, and social networks (Risse, 2007). The framework that Newfunctionalists provide helps us understand how regionalism operates.

2.1.1. Regionalism and Higher Education in the GCC

Regional cooperation begins in specialised areas, such as education, focusing on the internationalisation of education. Such a process is evident in GCC's attempt to establish a Unified Educational Framework, which is mostly influenced by or borrowed from Western educational institutions. This process is known as the internationalisation of higher education. According to Knight (2004), internationalisation is "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 11). Referring to the international growth of higher education and globalisation, Badry and Willoughby (2016) identified the following two processes:

(1) The increasing intensity in the flow of students, faculty and educational administrators across international borders, (2) The tendency for this commerce to create similar educational institutions through: (a) the adoption of Western models of higher education as benchmarks; and (b) the acceptance of Western quality assessment standards to measure educational outputs (Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

The transition towards the internationalisation of higher educational institutions, the influence of international components, and regional integration are examples of regionalism in higher education in the GCC. Therefore, in this study, internationalisation will be assumed to mean the process of integrating international mechanisms, such as university partnerships, quality assurance, research support, benchmarking, and student mobility, into the higher education system of a country that is part of the GCC. Vardhan (2015) shows in his study how GCC countries have undergone changes in higher education:

Among the 167 universities and HEIs reviewed for the present study, the number of private universities/institutions was 103. Among these private universities, as many as 70 have either partnerships or collaborations with an international university or are branch campuses of international universities. These countries have different stages of international collaborations, with the majority of the source countries being the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, and India. These universities variously represent the modes and mobility stages of internationalisation (Vardhan, 2015).

Ahmed and Rao (2011) explain that "the HE sector's international market foray is also similar to the 'classical' sequence of multinational corporation (MNC) business entry: exporting, licensing and franchising, joint ventures, and wholly owned subsidiaries" (as cited in Vardhan, 2015, p. 3). This implies the transition of the educational sector into the educational industry due to internationalisation. Consequently, higher educational institutions in the GCC countries implement the policies and strategies of their international partners to meet international standards and procedures. In Oman, six universities are affiliated with universities in the United Kingdom, and two universities are affiliated with universities in the United States, with a focus on developing human capital, promoting a knowledge economy, and modernising education (Vardhan, 2015). These international collaborations show the internationalisation of higher education in Oman.

In the context of the GCC, a shared Arab identity, encompassing aspects such as religion, culture, and language, plays a vital role in fostering regional integration, particularly in sectors like higher education. The establishment of Education City (Qatar), Dubai International Academic City (Dubai),

and Knowledge Village (Dubai) are examples of world-renowned universities in their established hubs in the GCC. These hubs host institutions like Northwestern University, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Wollongong, Heriot-Watt University of Scotland, Paris Sorbonne, and New York University.

2.2. Nationalism

Intergovernmentalism theory explains how sovereign states prioritise national interests when making decisions and how these interests influence broader integration. This is particularly relevant to the role that national interests could play in shaping policies and curricula related to higher education. Theorists such as Moravcsik (2013), Wiener et al. (2019), and O'Donnell et al. (1986) highlight the significance of national interests and their both positive and negative impacts on regional integration. The framework that emerges from these theorists helps us understand how regionalism is shaped by nationalism, the nation's goals and policies, and the challenges they pose during the process of regional integration.

2.2.1. Nationalism and Higher Education in the GCC

National interests play an important role in shaping higher education and regional integration in the GCC. Member countries of the GCC have invested a significant amount of money in education. According to Economy Middle East (2023), Saudi Arabia has spent approximately \$50 billion of its budget to achieve its 2030 Saudi Vision. The UAE Ministry of Education (2021) also highlights that the UAE has invested a substantial amount of money in advancing its educational sector, guided by national interests. Oman, according to Oxford Business Group (2023), has assigned \$5 billion towards the development of its higher education, focusing on Oman Vision 2040. These investments are driven by national interests, which are directly in conflict with or hinder the progress of the common goals of the GCC. In addition, national interests also serve to preserve cultural identity, economic freedom, and autonomy of the sovereign state. Therefore, taking control over education and educational policies is pivotal for any nation.

In conclusion, theories related to regionalism and nationalism, such as neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, provide a framework for understanding how the coexistence of these two contradictory ideas creates tension in regional cooperation within higher education in the GCC. Against this backdrop, the participants' resistance to and support for policy initiatives, as well as the tension that emerges in conflicting areas related to higher education in the GCC, are examined.

3. Literature Review

The GCC is committed to fostering unity and cooperation in multiple sectors, including higher education. Over the years, the region has undergone significant social, political, and economic transformations, leading to substantial advancements in higher education (Mosly, 2022). Mosly (2022) discusses how the GCC, established in 1981, has consistently prioritised educational cooperation, particularly through the creation of various committees and a comprehensive joint action plan for higher education. By 1996, most member states had established Ministries of Higher Education, and a Ministerial Committee had been formed to oversee collaborative efforts. In 2019, GCC governments allocated an average of 13% of their total expenditures to education budgets (Gulf Finance House, 2020), and this trend continued into 2022. A major factor driving this educational focus is the population, which is growing at an annual rate of 2.3% (GFH, 2020). In response, GCC states are improving their educational systems to meet societal needs, fostering greater student enrollment and progress in technology-driven education (Mosly, 2022).

3.1. Potential benefits of regional policies

Drawing inspiration from programmes such as the European Universities Initiative (Jafar & Knight, 2020), the GCC has created policy initiatives to strengthen regional higher education, such as establishing a university network, a university alliance (GCCSG, 2023) and the Gulf Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (GNQAHE) (Karakhanyan et al., 2019). Such initiatives are expected to facilitate collaboration, student and faculty exchange, and joint research programmes between universities in Oman and across the GCC region (Alsinani, 2017; Jafar & Knight, 2020). Furthermore, they are expected to promote the development of joint and dual-degree programmes and shared online and distance-learning offerings, as well as to leverage shared resources and expertise to improve educational quality and international competitiveness (Alsinani, 2017; Jafar & Knight, 2020).

Regional cooperation programmes in the GCC are expected to strengthen partnerships between universities in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and the broader Middle East (Badry & Willoughby, 2016). Institutions are expected to develop joint research centres and labs that focus on regionally relevant topics (e.g., privatisation, citizenship, logistics, and management) and to facilitate faculty and student exchange programmes to foster cross-cultural learning and knowledge sharing (Mohamad & Boyd, 2022). Additionally, investment in regional centres of excellence has been made (Tadros, 2015). Such investments are expected to identify and support the development of specialised research and education hubs by building on the strengths of existing institutions. This would provide targeted funding and resources to these centers to elevate their global standing and competitiveness. Such regional centers are also expected to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing with universities across the GCC. Digital transformation has also been promoted in higher education (Al Fadhel et al., 2022; Al-Farsi, 2022). This involves investing in digital infrastructure and technologies to support more effective online and hybrid learning models, as well as developing regional online course platforms and virtual exchange programs (Alqahtani, 2018). In addition, common digital credentialing and transcripts have been implemented to facilitate student mobility (Younas & Al Wahaibi, 2023).

3.2. Potential challenges within the GCC

Jafar and Knight (2020) discuss the significant differences in the approaches to higher education among Arab states in the region. The differences among Arab states include the uneven spread of literacy and education. Some countries, such as Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, benefited from early education access and the spread of newspapers, fostering informed citizens and civil societies. In contrast, Gulf states have maintained more traditional values, although they have made significant strides in increasing access to higher education through partnerships with Western universities. In addition, wealth distribution varies greatly; while oil-rich Gulf states prosper, other Arab states are among the least developed in the world. For example, Sudan ranked 165th and Yemen, 168th on the UNDP's Human Development Index in 2016, whereas Qatar (33rd), Saudi Arabia (38th), and the United Arab Emirates (42nd) ranked much higher (UNDP, 2016).

In addition, despite the strengths identified in the region, several tensions and challenges arise in strengthening regional higher education initiatives in Oman and the region overall, which are often overlooked. One of them is the geopolitical tensions. The GCC and the Middle East overall encompass longstanding political and ideological conflicts between countries, which can bar effective regional collaboration on higher education. For example, the tensions between countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar may inhibit the establishment of truly inclusive regional programmes and initiatives (Kaddorah, 2022; Partrick, 2011). Walsh (2022) explores regionalism in terms of students' mobility within and outside the GCC. He highlighted an increase from 3.1% to 4.3% in the number of students from Arab states studying outside their home countries, with 0.8% enrolled in GCC HEIs and 0.6% enrolled in other Arab states. These numbers indicate that 145,133 students were studying in the GCC, and 15,246 were studying in other GCC countries. Although this suggests low regional mobility,

it indicates an established connection between educational systems and student mobility within the GCC (Walsh, 2022). Student mobility in the GCC was affected by political issues, such as the blockade. A reported 340 Qatari students were affected, in addition to 706 GCC students studying at Qatari HEIs who were required to return to their home countries (Al-Sharq, 2019).

Universities in the GCC and across the Middle East often face constraints on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The latter is “perceived as the institutions’ right to make independent decisions (financial, academic, etc.) without external interference” and its absence can hinder their ability to engage in cross-border collaboration, innovation and sustainability (Aldossari, 2021, p. 41). Autonomy is key in policy initiatives to strengthen regional higher education, create world-class universities, become globally competitive, promote universities’ ability to meet new demands, increase their ability to operate independently and foster stronger connections with their regional and local industries (Aldossari, 2021; Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Etomaru et al., 2016). Critically, concerns about preserving national sovereignty “limited by degrees of mistrust” (Partrick, 2011, p. 3) and a related focus on Western security partners and control over higher education systems may make some governments reluctant to embrace regional integration efforts (Aldossari, 2021).

In addition, the quality and standards of higher education vary across countries in the Middle East, which may make establishing common benchmarks and facilitating seamless student and faculty mobility challenging. Differences in curriculum, instructional language (Arabic or English), and recognition of accreditation or qualifications can create barriers to regional integration. This begins with the massification of HEIs across GCC countries (Hayes & Al’Abri, 2019). The issue of massification is two-fold. First, many graduates became perpetual job seekers, as the job market could not accommodate all of them. Although this high number of graduates seemed integral to countries’ strategic plans and visions of feeding the industry with local experts, as in Bahrain and Oman (Hayes & Al’Abri, 2019). The second issue is the poor quality of these HEIs, according to audit teams, as seen again in Bahrain and Oman. In addition to the high rate of unemployed graduates in Oman, several HEIs were not accredited as they failed to meet the standards of the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQA). Some of these institutions have undergone, or will undergo, an institutional standards reassessment. In terms of regionalism, this can cause issues within the GCC, as in 2010, Kuwait announced that it would stop recognising Bahrain as a regional provider of HE qualifications due to the quality of the graduate programmes in Bahrain (Hayes & Al’Abri, 2019).

3.3. Current GCC affairs

The GCC region is emerging as a significant player in higher education, although the educational spaces of Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States seem to be the most prominent and are considered prestigious in the GCC higher education context (see Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). Nations, particularly in the Global South, have been establishing cross-border ties with other nations within their regions, recognising the growth of regional spaces that extend beyond national boundaries and promoting cross-border collaboration and integration (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). According to Chankseliani and Sopromadze (2023), the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was identified by the surveyed universities in the Caucasus and Central Asia as a region of importance for higher education collaborations. Furthermore, every participating policymaker either stated a desire to become a member of the European Space Agency or positioned the European higher education system as part of the EHEA. The language barrier was one issue that surfaced in the surveys and interviews conducted by Chankseliani and Sopromadze (2023). Another challenge was the need for diligence when receiving foreign finances, which could create internal instability or problems. Policymakers also noted that policy changes led to increased paperwork, stricter quality assurance procedures, and a system that continued to restrict academic freedom (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). In the GCC, universities are seeking partnerships and links with international

institutions, particularly in Anglosphere countries (Al'Abri, 2015; Albusaidi, 2022, 2024). This led to the adoption of international standards “which are used to enter HE and are utilised for student assessment at almost all HEIs in Oman”, claims Albusaidi (2024, p. 18). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and IELTS exams are two examples of these standards, which catalyse the internationalisation agenda. However, the outcomes of these partnerships, particularly the adoption of international standards, raise concerns about their alignment with the region's cultural, religious, and academic values (Albusaidi, 2024). The emphasis on Western standards and practices risks undermining local identities and priorities, producing a disconnect between institutions' educational objectives and their communities' unique needs. As GCC countries assert and attempt to improve their positions in global higher education through international collaboration, tensions arise between Western educational standards and the need to maintain local cultural and academic values, ensuring the education system remains relevant to societal needs.

GCC countries have rapidly expanded their higher education systems by adopting Western models, particularly from the US and the UK (Badry & Willoughby, 2016). The UAE, in particular, has experienced significant growth in private universities. While reforms have improved access to education for demographic groups such as women and expatriates, the institutions focus more on professional skills than research (Badry & Willoughby, 2016). Quality control and regulation remain challenges, and reforms have often depended on foreign expertise (Badry & Willoughby, 2016). These changes may not adequately address local needs or support long-term objectives, such as building a knowledge economy or preserving cultural identity.

The growth of higher education in the Gulf states creates tension between national interests and international needs (nationalism and internationalism) (Romani, 2009). While new universities could help strengthen nations' political control, increasing privatisation limits the state's ability to manage these institutions, especially in terms of hiring staff, where the push to hire local workers conflicts with the need for foreign faculty as local workers cannot meet the demands of the expanding universities (Romani, 2009). This creates a paradox as building world-class universities for national development depends on foreign expertise (Romani, 2009). This reliance on foreign staff is likely to last 10 to 15 years, or until local faculty are trained and PhD programs are established to replace foreign workers.

In addition, the expansion of higher education in the Gulf states may cause regional disparities, particularly in countries like Egypt. Egyptian universities have lost their competitive edge, attracting fewer local and foreign students (Romani, 2009). As Gulf universities gain influence, they may attract more talented Egyptians, increasing the ‘brain drain’ and leaving other students behind due to economic and political challenges (Romani, 2009). Other Arab countries face similar problems. If the Gulf continues to advance academically, the divide between stronger and weaker nations could deepen, creating an ‘academic buffer zone’ that isolates struggling countries and intensifies their social and political crises (Romani, 2009).

3.4. Conclusion and research gap

Regional policy initiatives in GCC HEIs are increasingly driving standardisation and collaboration efforts. However, the complexity of higher education policy implementation in the GCC remains underexplored, particularly from the perspective of academic staff. While significant investments have been made in regional educational initiatives, such as GNQAHE, Ejada (a performance management system for employees), and teachers' licensing systems, a research gap remains in understanding the nuanced institutional dynamics and lived experiences of academic staff navigating these transformative policies. This work seeks to address this gap by investigating their experiences, thereby providing insights into the complex processes of policy implementation within GCC HEIs. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do academic staff members at HEIs in the GCC perceive regional policy initiatives?

1.1. What are their perceptions of the impact of these policy initiatives on their everyday practices within HEIs?

1.2. What are their perceptions of the impact of these policy initiatives on their collaboration and knowledge exchange practices?

4. Methodology

This study adopts the interpretive paradigm. It emphasises that multiple socially constructed realities can be interpreted differently, which supports the researchers' interest in understanding various interpretations of reality from the perspectives of academic staff at HEIs across the GCC (Al Hajri, 2023; Cohen et al., 2018; Merriam, 2002). This paradigm aligns with the qualitative research approach, featuring a phenomenological design where the unique and personal experiences of participants are emphasised (Merriam, 2015). It focuses on understanding how the participants interpret and make sense of their experiences within their contexts (Merriam, 2015). To utilise this, semi-structured interviews and a qualitative survey were used for data collection.

4.1. Data collection tool and procedures

Two tools were utilised to collect in-depth data: semi-structured interviews (Appendix I) and a qualitative survey (Appendix II). The Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe for clarification and elaboration and achieve “an in-depth investigation of each unique individual’s perspectives and opinions” (Albusaidi, 2024, p. 53). Interviews were conducted to identify discursive tensions within the context of policy texts related to higher education. The qualitative survey aimed to gather deeper insights into staff perceptions regarding the benefits, experiences, and challenges associated with implementing regional policies (see Grieve et al., 2021). This approach was chosen due to the limited number of staff expressing interest in one-on-one interviews, and to provide staff with a safe space to share experiences (Moulding et al, 2024), as well as to achieve diversity and enhance the robustness of the findings. By examining the participants' experiences, this study aimed to understand how policies are interpreted, implemented, and potentially resisted or reshaped at the individual level, providing insights into the complex interplay between policy directives and the lived experiences of academic staff.

To address concerns regarding the validity and trustworthiness of the instruments, several strategies were employed throughout the study. The questions were developed based on a comprehensive literature review, which helped identify the key areas and focus of the research. The initial draft of the questions was reviewed by individuals holding PhDs and specialising in qualitative research. A pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection, resulting in several revisions to enhance clarity and relevance. During each interview, the researchers also adapted the questions to align with the natural flow of the conversation, thereby enhancing the depth and authenticity of the responses (Albusaidi, 2024). Additionally, the researchers collaboratively reviewed the construction of themes to cross-check and validate the data interpretation. They also maintained reflexive journals to document assumptions and decisions made throughout the research process. This practice facilitated transparency, encouraged critical self-examination, and helped minimise potential biases, thereby enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the study.

A call for participants was distributed via LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and direct contact with individuals who work on policymaking and policy implementation. Before data collection, all participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the measures in place to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was conducted on

MS Teams to minimise distractions and encourage open dialogue. The eleven questions on the qualitative survey were in English, and all were answered in English.

4.2. Sampling

The participants, who were recruited purposively, were academic staff members of various nationalities from HEIs across the GCC. Their availability and willingness to participate were considered (Atif et al., 2020), as well as whether they "have experienced the central phenomenon or key concept being explored in the study" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 176). Criterion sampling was employed in this study, with participants selected based on their roles, responsibilities, or involvement in policymaking or policy implementation, to enable an in-depth exploration of issues central to the study's objectives. Staff members who were not involved in policymaking or implementation, and who did not hold leadership positions or roles, were excluded from the study. Additionally, individuals without prior experience working in the GCC region or this specific geographic context were also excluded.

Invitations were sent to academic staff in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar (no response). A few staff members who met the criteria expressed interest in the topic. Ultimately, six in-depth interviews were conducted for this study (see Table 1), each lasting between 30 and 50 minutes. Four of the interviews were conducted in English, while the remaining two were conducted in Arabic. Three staff members participated in the qualitative survey: James, Ali, and Fatima.

Table 1. Pseudonyms and details of the participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Qualification	HE experiences	Experienced GCC policy initiatives	Current position
Raya	Oman	MA holder	>8 years	Yes	Lecturer at an HEI in Oman
Saif	Libya	PhD holder	>20 years	Yes	Now a lecturer at an HEI in the UK
Abdo	Bahrain	PhD holder	>15 years	Yes	Head of Teacher Preparation Programmes at an HEI in Bahrain
Maya	Egypt	PhD holder	>15 years	Yes	Dean of an HEI in Oman
Safa	Oman	PhD holder	>20 years	Yes	Previously Head of Section at an Omani HEI
Salim	UK	MA holder	>20 years	Yes	Lecturer at an HEI in Oman
James	USA	MA holder	>10 years	Yes	Lecturer at an HEI in Saudi Arabia
Ali	India	MA holder	>12 years	Yes	Lecturer at an HEI in the UAE
Fatima	Kuwait	MA holder	>7 years	Yes	Lecturer at an HEI in Kuwait

All participants showed interest in participating in this study. Raya and Salim, though academic staff members at a HEI in Oman, have also worked in the UK and have reflected on how the Omani and UK/European education systems differ in policy implementation. Their data, including Safa's,

Fatima's, and Ali's, were included because they provided insights into unique challenges and how policy implementation in their context can create imbalanced power relations. Their interviews, although conducted at an individual level, highlighted the gap between how they and high-profile stakeholders perceive policy initiatives and their implementation.

Although Saif is not in the GCC, his interview data was included due to his profound and critical insights. He is from the Middle East, where many countries share the Arabic language and common Islamic cultural values. His perspectives contextualise the results of this study more broadly and diverge from those of faculty employed within the GCC and who hold job contracts.

Abdo and Maya are high-profile stakeholders. Abdo is in charge of the Teacher Education Department and has been involved in several policy initiatives related to the GCC and higher education. He has also been responsible for implementing and monitoring these policies. Maya, similarly, is in a position to create, execute, and monitor policies in a HEI. She has been involved in exchange programs, professional development initiatives, and accreditation processes throughout the GCC.

4.3. Data analysis

After transcribing the recorded interviews, the researchers adopted the six stages of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012) to analyse both interview and qualitative survey data. Researchers initially familiarised themselves with the data to generate initial codes. This was followed by searching for and developing themes through grouping codes. Later, themes were refined and given specific names. Generating themes and renaming them was an iterative process that proceeded alongside the production and shaping of this research to fit into a coherent narrative. Table 2 presents an example of the analytical process, illustrating how initial codes were grouped to form themes.

Table 2. The process from codes to themes

Codes	Themes	Excerpt
Quality, Institutional goals, Vision, Regional Initiatives	Aspirational regionalism: Negotiating educational integration	<i>The benefits are enormous. I think you know it's the collaboration... Bringing together regional, national, and. I suppose you are familiar with local, national, and regional perspectives. That promotes inclusivity. (Salim, Interview)</i>
Power Dynamics, Collaboration, Benchmarking, Institutional autonomy, National cooperation	Institutional autonomy and regional integration	<i>As a member of the curriculum committee, whenever we develop any programme, we must do so locally, regionally and internationally. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)</i>
Cooperation Barriers, Structural Barriers, Contextual Misalignment	Institutional complexities and barriers to policy implementation	<i>The local population may or may not agree with the directives of the larger region. (Salim, Interview)</i>
Resistance to Change, Systemic Burden, Institutional Pressure, Toxic Environment		<i>What's happening at the university doesn't feel like that freedom exists. I mean, we are basically being told to do what we are instructed. (Safa, Interview, Translation)</i>

5. Results

This study critically examines the policy initiatives within HEIs in the GCC, focusing on the underlying issues that affect the implementation and effectiveness of these policies through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and a qualitative survey. This section presents the findings in direct response to the main research question and its two sub-questions, organised according to the key themes identified through the data analysis.

The findings reveal an attempt to construct a transnational educational space in the GCC characterised by ambitious integration goals. However, complex organisational, cultural and systemic barriers inhibit this effort. The process is more nuanced and challenging than straightforward policy implementation, involving negotiations of power, identity, and institutional practices.

5.1. Aspirational regionalism: Negotiating educational integration

The data show that most participants expressed positive and strong support for regional policy initiatives, such as “the licensing, which is the teacher licensing” (Abdo, Interview), the “Omani Association for Quality...[of] Higher Education and the Gulf Network for Quality... [of] Higher Education” (Maya, Interview), the “UAE National Qualifications Framework (QFEmirates)” (Ali, Survey) and the “Ejada” (Raya, Interview). These initiatives appear to support collaboration, quality, and standardisation across the GCC, as well as quality assurance.

I personally support these initiatives and advocate for their enhancement. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

So, mainly, it's a quality approach to ensure there's equity and justice. It ensures that everyone is working towards the institution's objectives, aims, and learning objectives. (Raya, Interview)

the benefits are enormous. I think you know it's the collaboration... Bringing together regional, national, and, I guess you know, local, national and regional perspectives that promote inclusivity. (Salim, Interview)

The participants' perspectives also capture the evolving processes of regional space construction, in which institutional stakeholders negotiate and establish transnational educational borders. This reflects a developing regional identity that surpasses traditional national boundaries, demonstrating how bottom-up attitudes contribute to regional space development.

They're being updated almost every month, with a new initiative or policy introduced. I think that the local institution aligns itself in that way. With local, the local identity is somewhat met. I mean, it's quite flexible. (Salim, Interview)

These initiatives have encouraged more outcome-based teaching and assessment methods in my classes. They have also guided my research focus toward regional educational challenges and policy impacts. (Fatima, Survey)

Nevertheless, the findings reveal that low-profile stakeholders are overlooked.

In my opinion, we often overlook the quality of the students we have, meaning we don't always take them into account when trying to keep pace with other countries in this field of development. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

On the other hand, the importance of unified standards is also emphasised.

There must be unified standards (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

Such initiatives also aim to shift the focus among Gulf countries regarding education. For example, as you know, there are global rankings of countries based on their education levels. Some countries have high education standards, while others have lower levels in both higher education and general education. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

The demand for consistent standards is perceived as a crucial component of regional space production. This ambition, within the GCC, is consistent with the wider transnational higher

education policies observed in other regional contexts, such as the European HE sectors, where standardisation is a major tool for institutional integration and mobility.

The goal of the Bahraini University, as I said, it was a quality audit, and I was really happy to do this audit because I wanted to see what other GCC countries are doing regarding quality practices and their audit system. (Maya, Interview)

If there can be a unified license across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, it would be fantastic. This would apply to the members of the countries, allowing for easy mobility between them and comfortable work. On another note, for example, regarding the quality of education, a student graduating with a bachelor's degree from Bahrain who wishes to pursue graduate studies in the UAE, Oman, or another country should find it easy to move between the countries. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

This provides insight into the spatial techniques employed by GCC higher education institutions and reveals the roles that mobility and flexible credentialing play in shaping regional learning environments. It also highlights the tensions between national specificity and regional harmony, as the findings reveal concerns about the practical challenges of implementing these initiatives.

Educational systems vary from one country to another. If we strive to narrow these differences, it could facilitate the implementation of these initiatives. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

It is also important to maintain institutional flexibility, as each university has its own history, mission, and operational dynamics. The most effective policies are those that offer room for contextual adaptation while upholding core standards. (Ali, Survey)

One critical dimension related to these initiatives is that they come from Western contexts.

We still rely on Western curricula, and even in our educational policies, we adopt these Western educational strategies as they are, without adapting them to our context. We need to modify them to fit the Omani context, which is an Arab Islamic setting. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

The literature highlights the significant challenges and complexities involved in harmonising diverse educational systems and standards (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Smeplass & Schmees, 2024). This study affirms that the complexities of regional space formation and harmonising educational systems across different countries can impede the implementation of regional policies.

5.2. Negotiating institutional transformation and professional adaptation

The impact of regional policy initiatives on everyday practices within HEIs is noticeable. This study's findings illustrate the complex dynamics of institutional practices within regional higher education spaces, revealing that these initiatives influence curriculum development, teaching practices, and everyday procedures. On the one hand, this indicates that regional policies encourage a broader perspective in program development by incorporating local, regional, and international standards (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). This perspective represents a mechanism of regional space production where institutional boundaries are dynamically negotiated and reshaped.

As a member of the curriculum committee, whenever we develop any programme, we must do so locally, regionally, and internationally. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

The organisation is going through a vast amount of change... to participate in and keep abreast of those changes. (Salim, Interview)

Additionally, the results highlight benchmarking practices against those of other institutions.

We are trying to imitate these programs, and I see this as a great opportunity for knowledge exchange and initiative sharing. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

This practice of benchmarking reveals the complex processes of knowledge circulation within regional educational spaces. Ostensibly, it enables institutions to adopt best practices from across the region, thereby enhancing the quality of education and promoting a culture of continuous improvement.

It's a continuous process that involves people, as well as institutions within our own organisation. Every year, we make improvements, implement developments, and adopt better policies. We're improving on our procedures. (Maya, Interview)

On the other hand, this practice exposes the power dynamics of knowledge transfer, raising the issue of uncritical mimicry (Al Furqani & Lomer, 2024), where benchmarking is perceived as a process of “imitating” “نقلد” (Abdo, Interview).

We adopt these Western educational strategies as they are, without adapting them to our context. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

In addition, the implementation of regional policy initiatives reveals significant additional pressures on academic staff within HEIs, where these initiatives are perceived as a burden and time-consuming (Maya, Safa, Salim, Ali, & James).

They're doing administrative work and teaching long hours. It's a lot on their shoulders. They have lives, and they are expected to work on the weekend just to meet all those deadlines. (Maya, Interview)

It has become a burden, as if I am being required to do it. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

There's a mountain of paperwork and administration involved in going out and familiarising oneself with these policies, which sucks a lot of time and attention away from teaching and planning for the lesson. (Salim, Interview)

This observation highlights the complex spatial reconfiguration of academic work where teaching staff are increasingly assigned administrative duties and pressures that surpass their academic responsibilities. This represents a critical intersection between regional policy implementation and individuals' professional experiences. The pressure to internalise institutional needs occurs simultaneously with the potential erosion of academic autonomy and creative potential. Staff are no longer mere policy implementers; they are active participants in institutional reform, negotiating complicated compromises between organisational expectations and their personal and professional skills.

5.3. Institutional autonomy and regional integration

Regional policy initiatives also have a profound impact on national cooperation among HEIs. The findings reveal collaborative efforts to develop unified standards and programmes.

We attempted to find a solution among the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, exploring the possibility of licensing membership. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

This demonstrates an attempt to create a cohesive educational framework across the GCC to facilitate greater mobility and cooperation among institutions. However, the findings also reveal challenges in achieving this level of cooperation.

There is difficulty in coordination between universities, because each university has different goals and programmes. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

Each university has its own history, mission, and operational dynamics. (Ali, Survey)

Differences in institutional goals and programmes can inhibit effective collaboration and entail significant efforts to align diverse elements. The contextual nuances in standard implementation and regional policy initiatives, including the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, are another concern. Put differently, the findings reveal bottom-up resistance to homogenisation and the implementation of regional policies.

In Oman... here the emphasis is on governance and management. We want to make sure that there is a clear borderline between the Board of Trustees, the Board of Directors, and the College Council, or the university councils, and the role of the Dean and the role of... the VC. (Maya, Interview)

Despite potential willingness for national cooperation, as observed in other contexts (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023), these findings show that an alignment with local standards and practices is essential.

As long as these standards are integrated into these projects or initiatives, they should be aligned with local standards and practices. (Maya, Interview)

Tailoring these policies to respect local values and governance structures is essential for effective integration. (Fatima, Survey)

This assertion of local standards, despite the nature and importance of integration, may create challenges.

5.4. Institutional complexities and barriers to policy implementation

5.4.1. Resistance dynamics

Despite the positive perceptions and potential benefits of regional policy initiatives, several challenges and concerns remain. The data reveal a resistance to change among top management and teaching staff.

There may also be resistance to change from some faculty members or officials in certain positions. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

Still, you get, of course, resistance from people doing any change or implementing any new good practices. You will encounter resistance, and again, you'll have to try to convince everyone of the benefits of implementing new projects. (Maya, Interview)

The local population may or may not agree with the directives of the larger region. (Salim, Interview)

This resistance could also reflect limited awareness of policies and their benefits:

Some people would say, 'I don't know.' Some people say, 'What do you mean?' What is quality assurance? Do you mean by...? What do we do with this? How does it help us, and what will it do to us? (Saif, Interview)

A large segment of the education community, including teachers and students, remains under the illusion regarding the topic of Quality Assurance. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

This resistance can stem from many factors, including interests in the work required or the policy itself, or fear of losing control or lack of awareness (Maya, Fatima & Abdo, interviews).

Others resist due to unclear implementation strategies or increased workload (Fatima, Survey)

The level of engagement varies depending on how effectively the initiatives are introduced and supported. When there is adequate training, resources, and leadership support, the response is usually positive and proactive. (Ali, Survey)

5.4.2. Contextual adaptation challenges

Another significant challenge is the limitation and variance in resources and infrastructure in different countries.

Resources vary from one country to another, and infrastructure varies accordingly. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

There is no additional time or resources allotted. (James, Survey)

These disparities can hinder the implementation of standardised policies and programmes as institutions with fewer resources may struggle to meet the agreed-upon standards. In addition, the findings emphasise that “each country has its own context of where they want to emphasise these practices and standards in relation, you know, to its own context” (Maya, Interview). This reveals a complex balance between standardisation and contextual adaptation.

The vision they brought to us was based on their own experience, like, for example, as if they were prepared for the UK, for America, for Europe. So, the context will be.... So, when you bring this and you want to implement it to Oman or Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, there will be a clash between these policies and the context... you are trying to implement them in... So, the main challenge is context, that the initiative and the policy must be applicable. And it must align with the context and cultural traditions. (Saif, Interview)

We need to modify them to fit the Omani context, which is an Arab Islamic setting. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

These findings reflect concerns regarding policy transplantation and the adoption of Western educational standards, highlighting the tension between international standards and local cultural contexts (Albusaidi, 2024; Badry & Willoughby, 2016; Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023).

5.4.3. Organisational power architectures

The findings reveal remarkable concerns regarding the hierarchical power structures within HEIs when new initiatives are implemented. Participants emphasised the persistent nature of power struggles while reflecting on regional policy initiatives.

Who's going to be in a ruling situation and who will be able to give rules to those below them and in control? (Raya, Interview).

The regional director... directives can often be seen as coming in and replacing the national or local level. (Salim, Interview)

This highlights a competitive environment where there is "control" rather than "collaboration" (Raya & Safa, Interview).

The power of centralised control mechanisms and limited individual and institutional autonomy also create challenges.

Balancing academic freedom with national directives can be a complex task. (Ali, Survey)

I have no power over the material. I've never had any chance to, like, design my own material or assign my methodology. I was given a material along with a teacher's plan. I just followed that plan. (Saif, Interview)

What's happening at the university doesn't feel like that freedom exists. I mean, we are basically being told to do what we are instructed. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

We've all got a limited amount of attention, and when we allocate a large percentage of that or a considerable percentage of that attention into familiarising ourselves with policy documents, whether they're on a regional level, national, or a national level, that takes up a lot of attention, and that's certainly a challenge. (Salim, Interview)

This superior–inferior dynamic creates a toxic work culture that hinders collective efforts towards common goals. This also suggests a gap between what people say they want and how they work together.

5.4.4. Leadership and cultural interfaces

The findings also demonstrate organisational challenges to cultural factors as participants state that:

Arab culture is one of the main reasons. Then, provide the rules and regulations or bylaws. you want to give to the institution instead of just giving it from the status of authority, give it from the status of 'let's work together towards this. (Raya, Interview)

Each branch operates based on its own needs, such as using textbooks, which is a well-known and non-problematic approach, of course. However, unfortunately, the person running the meeting did not accept the discussion or differing opinions. (Safa, Interview, Translation)

These deeply ingrained cultural norms influence leadership styles and organisational behaviours. The emphasis on hierarchical control and status, particularly when implementing initiatives, can hinder the adoption of more inclusive and collaborative leadership models. This cultural issue

presents a vital challenge to the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Although some interviewees, such as Maya and Abdo, assert that HEIs have autonomy, the centralised leadership model within HEIs, as described by Raya and Maya, limits academic freedom and institutional autonomy. These findings indicate a top-down approach to decision-making that excludes significant stakeholders from a meaningful institutional governance process (Al-Issa & Al-Najjar, 2022).

Avoid central leadership... (Raya, Interview)

Convincing, on a personal level, faculty members and leaders, as well as deans and quality managers, to work on such projects. (Maya, Interview)

It's a government organisation, and it's a government policy that also directs the old man's participation in the regional GCC initiative. (Salim, Interview)

In addition, enacting formal validation frameworks, multi-level approval mechanisms and quality assurance protocols can further undermine institutional flexibility.

We... have formats and templates that we fill out for these programmes to be approved by the university. (Abdo, Interview, Translation)

Bureaucratic delays have also hindered timely collaboration and implementation. (Fatime, Survey)

Because of the bureaucratic nature of universities, it can take time. (James, Survey)

Another challenge has been related to compliance and documentation requirements. Ensuring that all collaborative initiatives align with the regulatory frameworks of bodies ... often requires extensive documentation, approvals, and audits. (Ali, Survey)

This lack of autonomy presents a serious barrier to innovation and critical thinking within HEIs. Although academic freedom is essential to fostering an environment where new ideas and approaches can flourish, the findings suggest that “there are still violations of academic freedom in the Middle East” (Aldossari, 2021, p. 18).

6. Discussion

This study critically examined regional HE policy initiatives within the GCC. It revealed the complex social and political production processes that are characterised by multifaceted institutional negotiation, resistance and strategic adaptation in approaching the idea of regional educational spaces (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023).

6.1. Aspirational regionalism, yet with institutional and cultural challenges

The participants’ positive perceptions align with previous observations about regional higher education initiatives, which suggest that such initiatives can improve the quality of education and promote regional integration (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023; Jafar & Knight, 2020). However, the findings also illuminate the complex dynamics between a willingness to pursue regional cooperation and localised institutional practices when regional policies are implemented (Jafar & Knight, 2020; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Salam et al., 2024; Smeplass & Schmees, 2024). This aligns with Chankseliani and Sopromadze’s findings that immediate regional spaces in Asia are “still in the process of formation, and participants saw considerable potential in collaborating with neighbouring countries to advance common interests in higher education and research” (2023, p. 8).

The findings show that regional policy initiatives are complex processes of institutional negotiation rather than straightforward one-way implementations. The literature highlights the significant challenges and complexities involved in harmonising diverse educational systems and standards (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Smeplass & Schmees, 2024). This study affirms that the complexities of regional space formation and harmonising educational systems across different countries can impede the implementation of regional policies.

Although academic freedom is essential to fostering an environment where new ideas and approaches can flourish, the findings suggest that “there are still violations of academic freedom in the Middle East” (Aldossari, 2021, p. 18). The centralised control constraining this freedom can produce a rigid and unresponsive organisational structure. This issue reflects broader regional challenges in the Middle East, where academic freedom is often limited by political and ideological factors. In addition, Chankseliani and Sopromadze (2023, p. 8) noted that “while cross-border influences have been intensifying and higher education has often been seen as borderless, higher education remains deeply entrenched in national contexts”. This suggests that transnational cooperation within the region is impeded by diverse institutional goals, national governance models and control over HEIs.

The Omani HE system, for example, has been predominantly ideological (Al-Issa & Al-Najjar, 2022). The cultural context within GCC HEIs reflects broader societal norms, where traditional values mean authority and control are often prioritised over participatory governance. This cultural barrier can stymie efforts to implement policy initiatives that require collective support and cooperation. For example, the reluctance to embrace distributed leadership models, as presented in Section 5.4.4, can be traced to cultural resistance to decentralised power. This cultural issue reflects what Al-Dalahmehh et al. (2024) observed in Saudi Arabia, where “wasta” and “majlis” are essential for navigating Gulf management practices:

Wasta—a system of networking, influence, and personal connections—plays a key role in facilitating business transactions and decision-making processes. It reflects the importance of relationships, where trust and loyalty often determine access to opportunities and resources. The majlis (GCC), a traditional council for consultation and decision-making, is another cultural institution that exemplifies how community participation and collective deliberation are central to leadership in the Gulf. (Al-Dalahmehh et al., 2024, p. 133)

6.2. Culture and power dynamics play a significant role

Furthermore, the findings challenge conventional assumptions about regional policy implementation and suggest the need for a more sophisticated, context-sensitive approach. The findings indicate that successful regional higher education initiatives should prioritise contextual adaptation, transparent communication strategies, and flexible implementation frameworks, and should recognise and respect institutional diversity. Jafar and Knight (2020) observed the negative impact of high-authority stakeholders or ministries on HEI efforts in Arab countries.

In many Arab countries, the majority of higher education institutions are public and owned by the state. They are regulated and funded by the ministries of higher education... Hence, there is political influence on both institutions and quality assurance bodies, which can have a negative impact on efforts to increase greater collaboration. (Jafar & Knight, 2020, p. 14)

The “control” rather than “collaboration” perspective discussed in Section 5.4.3, which suggests a superior-inferior dynamic, creates a toxic work culture that hinders collective efforts toward common goals. This also reveals a gap between what people say they want and how they work together. Leaders often discuss teamwork, but in reality, they are often more concerned with power (Al-Dalahmehh et al., 2024; Scott-Jackson & Michie, 2017). The findings indicate that many workplaces are more concerned with competition than cooperation. Instead of working together towards a common goal, people focus on protecting their positions and controlling others. They worry that someone else might take their job or power. Therefore, although the culture encourages teamwork, as Islamic values show, the workplace feels more like a battle for control. Managers want to demonstrate their authority, and workers below them are more concerned with survival than with helping the entire group succeed. Therefore, the idea of faculties working together falls apart because they are more focused on their safety and status than on the team’s success. Overall, this power struggle in the form of hierarchical control, competitive rather than collaborative approaches

and the fear of losing status or influence is not unique to HEIs but mirrors the broader geopolitical tensions and complexities in the Middle East (see Al-Dalahmehh et al., 2024). As regional powers strive for influence and control, HEIs compete for authority, often at the expense of organisational harmony and effectiveness. These findings challenge the potential benefits of regional policy initiatives, such as facilitating collaboration and establishing exchange and joint programmes between universities across the GCC, as highlighted by Alsinani (2017) and Jafar and Knight (2020).

6.3. Agency and resistance reconfigure policy implementation

This study contributes to understanding regional space formation in HE by exposing the complex mechanisms of policy translation. The observed pattern, discussed in Section 5.2, suggests a nuanced reconfiguration of academic space where the traditional boundaries between administrative and academic work become increasingly blurred. This dynamic emphasises the human dimension of regional educational reforms, revealing how macro-level policy initiatives are perceived, experienced and communicated through individual professional practices. However, the findings demonstrate that institutional actors are not passive recipients of policy but active agents who strategically navigate, interpret and, sometimes, resist regional initiatives (Khan et al., 2024). Their agency manifests as resistance strategies, institutional defensive mechanisms and contextual adaptation (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023; Khan et al., 2024).

The observed resistance is not merely unreceptivity or insensitivity but a complex institutional response to potential changes to established practices (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023; Khan et al., 2024). As identified in the data, staff concerns stem from multiple sources, including the fear of losing institutional identity, a lack of clarity about policy benefits and the potential erosion of local governance models. This aligns with the findings of a recent study that "in GCC countries, individuals and organizations often exhibit resistance to change, preferring to adhere to familiar and established practices" (Khan et al., 2024, p. 14). Similar resistance has been observed at a micro level, where Romanowski and Karkouti (2021, p. 9) found that "another issue to consider when implementing any borrowed pedagogical approach like PBL in the GCC or similar contexts is faculty and student resistance". This resistance to change at both the organisational and individual levels not only echoes systematic challenges to regional policy initiatives and integration, but should not be perceived as a burden or difficulty to overcome, as resistance could be due to a lack of awareness of such initiatives. Nonetheless, resistance can sometimes be a vital mechanism for institutional self-preservation and strategic negotiation.

6.4. Tension between global standards and local contexts

A delicate balance between national uniqueness and regional cooperation characterises the governance dimension emerging from this study. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of integrating regional initiatives and local standards, revealing their desire for a nuanced approach to transnational educational collaboration. As the findings show, benchmarking is taking place, but it suggests a form of institutional isomorphism, where institutions adopt or copy practices not to achieve pedagogical or quality improvement but to demonstrate their compliance with regional and international standards, a problem that has been observed in the GCC (Al Furqani & Lomer, 2024; Badry & Willoughby, 2016). The findings discussed in Section 5.4.2 reflect concerns regarding policy transplantation and the adoption of Western educational standards, highlighting the tension between international standards and local cultural contexts (Albusaidi, 2024; Badry & Willoughby, 2016; Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023).

Westernization in GCC higher education has gone further by relying on Western faculty and administrators to implement and lead their reforms. This dependence on Westerners started with private universities and spread to public institutions at all levels. For example, most reforms of the primary and

secondary educational system were developed and supervised by external partnerships and Western consultants. (Badry & Willoughby, 2016, p. 208)

By exposing how local education contexts resist or negotiate Western-derived standards, this research not only reveals the complex dynamic of education policy transfer but also challenges existing findings (see Badry & Willoughby, 2016) and illuminates the challenges of educational policy implementation.

7. Conclusion

This study critically examined regional HE policy initiatives within the GCC. It highlighted the intricate socio-political dynamics involved in shaping regional educational spaces, marked by complex institutional negotiations, resistance to change, and deliberate strategic adaptations (Chankseliani & Sopromadze, 2023). The findings uncover the complexity between the willingness to pursue regional cooperation and localised institutional practices when regional policies are implemented (Jafar & Knight, 2020; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Salam et al., 2024; Smeplass & Schmees, 2024).

Overall, this study offers a critical examination of the complex processes influencing regional higher education policy implementation. It demonstrates that educational transformation is not a linear process of implementation but a dynamic, negotiated activity where institutional, individual and regional interests continuously interact and are reconfigured. This study contributes to broader discussions of transnational educational governance and affirms the need for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to regional collaboration.

8. Suggestions and recommendations

This study calls for enhancing institutional autonomy and academic freedom by reducing centralised control and granting institutions greater autonomy in decision-making processes. This would allow departments and individuals the opportunity to engage in activities and participate in shaping decisions.

Additionally, this study advocates for promoting a culturally sensitive governance model that aligns with local values while fostering effective leadership. This approach would help institutions ensure inclusivity and respect for cultural norms, while also building a culture of trust with traditional authorities (e.g., Majlis).

Furthermore, aligning regional policies with the local context is essential to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of policy implementation. Institutions should conduct thorough contextual analyses before implementing policies to understand local cultural and political dynamics. This would enable institutions to adapt international standards to local needs and avoid issues associated with policy transplantation.

Finally, low-power stakeholders should be engaged in the policy development process to ensure that their needs and perspectives are considered.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors have read and approved the final version of the article before publication.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding. This study was funded by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Ibra branch, under the Internal Research Grant (IRG) scheme.

Ethical Approval. The authors declare that approval from each participant was obtained before collecting data.

Data Availability Statement. The data used in this research is confidential and thus cannot be shared with third parties.

Acknowledgements. The authors want to express their deepest gratitude to the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), Ibra branch, for the support received to make this study a success.

The use of AI. During the preparation of this work, the authors used Calude-3.5, ChatGPT and Assistant Poe in order to enhance the literature review process and analyse and interpret the qualitative data deeply and accurately to enrich the overall quality of the research. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendix I. Interview Questions

Study Title: "How are the policy initiatives being enacted to strengthen regional higher education in the GCC received and implemented?"

Opening Questions:

Can you tell me about your role and experience working in higher education in your country?

How does your work in higher education relate to broader regional or GCC-led initiatives?

Are you familiar with any regional initiatives in HE led by the GCC?

Which initiatives are you most familiar with?

What is your perspective on their goals and impact?

The GCC has introduced several regional initiatives to improve collaboration and quality in higher education, such as the university network and Quality Assurance programs. Could you share your awareness or experience with these efforts?

أُسئلة الافتتاح:

ما طبيعة عملك وخبرتك في العمل في التعليم العالي في بلدك؟

ما هو فهمك العام للمبادرات الإقليمية في التعليم العالي التي تقودها دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي، مثل شبكة الجامعات، وتحالف

الجامعات، ومبادرات ضمان الجودة في التعليم العالي؟

Perceptions of Policy Initiatives (RQ1):

3. From your perspective, what are the main goals and objectives of these regional policy initiatives?

4. How do you perceive the potential benefits or advantages of such regional collaboration and integration efforts?

5. What are some of the challenges or concerns you have regarding the implementation and impact of such initiatives?

تصورات المبادرات السياسية:

من وجهة نظرك، ما الأهداف والغايات الرئيسية لهذه المبادرات السياسية الإقليمية؟

كيف ترى الفوائد أو المزايا المحتملة لمثل هذه الجهود الإقليمية للتعاون والاندماج؟

ما هي بعض التحديات أو المخاوف بشأن تنفيذ وتأثير هذه المبادرات؟

Impact on Everyday Practices (RQ1.1):

6. In what ways, if any, have these regional initiatives influenced or changed your everyday teaching, research, or administrative practices within your institution?

7. Have you had opportunities to participate in regional exchange programs, joint research projects, or other collaborative activities facilitated by these initiatives? If so, can you describe your experiences?

8. What kinds of support or resources from your institution or the regional bodies would be helpful in better aligning your work with the goals of these initiatives?

التأثير على الممارسات اليومية:
كيف أثرت هذه المبادرات الإقليمية أو غيرت ممارساتك اليومية في التدريس أو البحث أو الإدارة داخل مؤسستك؟
هل سنحت لك الفرص للمشاركة في برامج التبادل الإقليمي، أو المشاريع البحثية المشتركة، أو الأنشطة التعاونية الأخرى التي تسهلها هذه المبادرات؟ إذا كان الأمر كذلك، هل يمكنك وصف تجاربك؟
ما أنواع الدعم أو الموارد من مؤسستك أو الهيئات الإقليمية التي ستكون مفيدة في تحقيق توافق أفضل بين عملك وأهداف هذه المبادرات؟

Impact on National Cooperation (RQ1.2):

9. How do you perceive the relationship or balance between these regional initiatives and your institution's national priorities or policies?

10. In your view, do these regional efforts complement or conflict with national higher education strategies and goals in your country? Can you provide examples?

11. What are your thoughts on the role of national sovereignty and autonomy in higher education, in the context of increasing regional integration and collaboration?

التأثير على التعاون الوطني:
كيف ترى العلاقة أو التوازن بين هذه المبادرات الإقليمية وأولويات أو سياسات مؤسستك الوطنية؟
في رأيك، هل تكمل هذه الجهود الإقليمية أو تتعارض مع استراتيجيات وأهداف التعليم العالي الوطنية في بلدك؟ هل يمكنك تقديم أمثلة؟
ما أفكارك حول دور السيادة الوطنية والاستقلالية في التعليم العالي، في سياق زيادة الاندماج والتعاون الإقليمي؟

Closing Questions:

12. Overall, what do you see as the main opportunities and challenges in strengthening regional higher education cooperation in the GCC?

13. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your perspectives on these regional policy initiatives?

أسئلة ختامية:
بشكل عام، ما هي الفرص والتحديات الرئيسية في تعزيز التعاون الإقليمي في التعليم العالي في دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي؟
هل هناك أي شيء آخر تود إضافته بخصوص وجهات نظرك حول هذه المبادرات السياسية الإقليمية؟

Appendix II. Qualitative Survey

Regional higher education initiatives in the GCC region

We are conducting research on regional higher education initiatives in the GCC region, exploring the opportunities and challenges that shape policy implementation.

Study Title: "How are the policy initiatives being enacted to strengthen regional higher education in the GCC received and implemented?"

Abstract

Background/purpose. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have witnessed many developments in various fields due to their commitment to unity and cooperation. The GCC has launched initiatives inspired by the European Universities Initiative to support regional higher education. These initiatives include establishing networks and associations, promoting collaboration, and developing joint programs. The expected benefits include improved educational quality and international collaboration, and competitiveness. Research also shows challenges and tensions when implementing policies within regions. This study aims to explore the

perceptions of academic staff on the impact of implementing regional policy initiatives on their practices and collaborations in HEIs in the GCC.

Materials/methods. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the diverse perspectives of academic staff. Using criterion sampling, participants were selected based on their roles and responsibilities related to policy engagement. Six in-depth interviews were conducted to examine how regional policy initiatives influence day-to-day academic practices. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Looking for:

- Higher education professionals
- Policy makers
- Academic leaders
- Education experts

Your privacy is protected:

- All data will be anonymized
- Information used solely for research purposes
- No personal details shared

P.S.: You must have worked for a higher education institution within the GCC.

1. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Prefer not to say
2. Nationality
3. Where have you been working in higher education in the GCC?
4. Number of years of experience in higher education?
5. Can you describe your experiences with regional higher education policy initiatives within your institution?
6. How have these policy initiatives influenced your daily teaching, research, or administrative responsibilities?
7. What challenges or opportunities have you encountered when engaging with regional collaboration programs or policies?
8. In your opinion, how effectively are these initiatives received by faculty members and staff across your institution?
9. How do you perceive the level of support or resistance from colleagues and administration toward regional higher education policies?
10. Can you share any examples of how regional policies have impacted student and faculty mobility or exchange programs?
11. What factors do you believe facilitate or hinder the successful implementation of regional higher education initiatives?
12. How do you think regional policies align with the unique cultural, institutional, or national contexts of your university?
13. What suggestions do you have for improving the way regional higher education policies are enacted and communicated within your institution?
14. From your perspective, what are the key ways to enhance regional cooperation and ensure these initiatives benefit the academic community?