

Teachers’ perspectives on extra-curricular activities to enhance foundation program language learners’ academic and social performances

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Abstract - Extra-curricular activities have been encouraged to support foundation program students’ positive attitude to learning and their smooth transition into the higher education system with better academic and social performances. This paper discusses the study that explores the potential benefits of foundation program students’ involvement in extracurricular activities from the perspective of teachers who develop, lead and facilitate them at the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. In particular, the study focuses on how teachers perceive the effects of extracurricular activities on student performance in relation to eight key areas, namely development of students’ language skills and academic performance, development of communicative competency, students’ needs and interests, students’ self-esteem and self-confidence, students’ motivation and positive attitudes towards learning, extracurricular activities in the framework of the foundation program curriculum, cross-cultural experiences, and transitional challenges. The results indicate that extracurricular activities play a valuable role in helping foundation program students adjust to higher education environment and function more easily in English. However, more student involvement and additional assistance to students are needed in order to boost their motivation and increase engagement in their own learning experiences.

Keywords: academic and social performances, extracurricular activities, foundation program, Sultan Qaboos University

1. Introduction

Omani high school graduates, similar to their peers around the world, experience multiple challenges adjusting to the higher education system that can affect their progress in English medium academic environment, social and emotional well-being, confidence and self-esteem (Ginosyan & Tuzlukova, 2016). In order to mitigate students' academic transfer and improve their English proficiency, it is crucial to consider the potential of a variety of approaches including extracurricular activities that support students and make their language development more meaningful.

Research on extracurricular activities shows that participation in extracurricular activities is associated with more positive attitudes towards school (Davalos et al., 1999; Marsh 1992; Oliver 1995; Darling, Caldwell & Smith, 2005; Mahoney, 2014), better academic achievement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Silliker & Quirk, 1997; Darling et al., 2005) and higher self-esteem and/or specific self-concepts (Holland & Andre, 1987; Marsh, 1992; Zhang, 2001). Marsh (1992) argues that students' participation in extracurricular activities promoted by school can increase the school engagement, which leads to the development of more positive attitudes towards school and towards learning. Students participating in extracurricular activities exhibit more positive perceptions of school and lower probability of school dropout. This claim is supported by Mahoney and Cairns (1997) who argue that there is a negative correlation between the participation in extracurricular activities and school dropout. According to Davalos et al. (1999), by participating in extracurricular activities, students develop a sense of belonging that positively contributes to their own identity. What is more, participation in extracurricular activities can also increase academic achievement. According to Holland and Andre (1987), there is a positive relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and academic achievement. In a study with 10,944 middle school students, Gerber (1996) demonstrates that participation in extracurricular activities lead to better school performance. In the context of higher education, the study by Broh (2002) demonstrates that participation in extracurricular activities affects students' adjustment and their academic performance, which is associated with an improved grade point average, higher educational aspirations, increased college attendance, and reduced absenteeism. Participation in extracurricular activities seems, also, to be positively related to self-esteem and/or self-concept. In a longitudinal study, Marsh (1992) claims that participation in extracurricular activities contributes to academic achievement and social self-concept.

Clearly, involvement in extracurricular activities can help students to develop peripheral attributes that are essential to classroom performance. The extent that these attributes can be developed can depend on the amount of emphasis an institution places on student engagement in extracurricular activities as well as the amount and types of activities that are offered by the institution (Guest & Schneider, 2003, Seow & Pan, 2014). Much of the emphasis that the students are exposed to comes directly from their teachers. As a part of a multi-level self-examination of their own institution's utilization of extracurricular activities, the authors of this study have researched teacher perception of extracurricular activities offered to the foundation program students at the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman.

The foundation program offered by the Centre for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University aims at preparing admitted students and enabling their smoother and more successful transition and active participation in higher education studies. It is

constructed in the form of learning outcomes for the English language, mathematics, information technology and study skills. For example, in the area of the English language, by the end of the foundation program students should be able to read extensive texts and actively participate in discussions on topics relevant to their studies, paraphrase information, use library resources in preparing talks, speak clearly and confidently, write texts, produce written reports and respond to questions that require critical thinking skills (Learning outcome standards, 2016).

Extracurricular activities have functioned as a branch of student support at the Center for Preparatory Studies since 2011. Although extracurricular activities are often coordinated through Student Services or even through intramural, student-led clubs, the concept of extracurricular activities was adopted by the Centre in order to foster student community and to provide avenues for foundation program students to have additional practice in their English language skills. To this end, all of the events offered by extracurricular activities are conducted in English, and several functions are focused on specific language skills.

Students' primary interaction with extracurricular activities is through clubs that meet at regular intervals (weekly, biweekly, or monthly) and run for an hour and a half each. While the clubs that are available each semester can change, extracurricular activities are offered as thirteen to eighteen clubs each term. The organization and operation of the clubs is overseen by the Student Services Coordinator, a faculty member who directs all of the Student Services functions at the Centre. The clubs are run by teachers, high performing students, and community members of Sultan Qaboos University, all of whom are interviewed and vetted by the extracurricular activities Coordinator. Clubs can be focused on a language skill, or they can be centered on an area of interest for the students. Examples of the extracurricular activities that offer direct language skills practice include Presentation Skills, Speaking, Debate, Storytelling, Movie and Book clubs. There is a wide range of indirect language practice clubs, such as Art, Apps, Game, Business, Chess, Culture, Digital Literacy, Handicrafts, Omani Languages, Toastmasters and Science News clubs. Attendance primarily comes from students within the foundation program, but some clubs host credit students and even participants from the general public. With the dual goal of helping students to have opportunities for social gatherings as well as practice language, many of the clubs are not meant to offer direct assistance with their language development. Additionally, in order to foster natural language development, very few of the clubs are developed to coordinate with the Centre's foundation program curriculum.

This study examines the benefits of extracurricular activities to the students in the standard curriculum of the foundations program offered by the university, as described by the teachers who facilitate extracurricular activities. The goal of the research is to define the benefits of extracurricular activities for students across the foundations program which goal is to maximize the potential of young Omanis and enable them to fully benefit from higher education (Oman Academic Standards, 2010) in order to better utilize them in the future.

2. Method

This study was initiated in January 2019. The first stage of the study was completed in May 2019. The study was constructed within the framework of mixed methods which

naturally complements the traditional quantitative and qualitative research paradigms as described by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and the constructivist paradigm to allow multiple types of data as described by Patton (2002). For the pilot study, the authors determined a core set of questions to approach the phenomenon in question from various angles; thus the study is centered on the following questions:

- What kind of extracurricular activities are currently offered to the foundation program students? In which academic, developmental and historical contexts are they introduced?
- What are the potential benefits of increasing the Omani foundation program students' involvement in extracurricular activities?
- How can extracurricular activities be used to supplement the foundation program curriculum?

The authors developed unstructured interviews and questionnaires in order to obtain as complete an understanding of these situations at the Centre for Preparatory Studies as possible.

The population of the pilot study consisted of eight English language teachers who have developed and facilitated extracurricular activities since these teachers are considered as the stakeholders in the process of defining and implementing the extracurricular activities at the Centre. In the next stage, more stakeholders, namely student facilitators and foundation program students frequently attending extracurricular activities workshops and presentations will be involved.

The pilot study began with unstructured interviews or open conversations with eight teachers who have developed and facilitated extra-curricular activities. Some participants were asked to complete follow-up interviews. After the initial interviews, the participants were sent more detailed, 15-point questionnaires that invited longer responses. All the interviews and discussions were recorded and transcribed. Then all the responses were summarized and arranged into one composite table. The relevant information was highlighted and grouped, after which eight core themes were extracted for the focused exploration of the topic. Specifically, a set of variables emerged from the interview results, which helped to determine the type of relationships between the variables and extracurricular activities.

These themes contrasted students' extracurricular activity involvement against areas of significant challenges or development: (1) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. development of students' language skills and academic performance; (2) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. development of their communicative and sociolinguistic competences; (3) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. students' needs and interests; (4) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. students' self-esteem and self-confidence; (5) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. motivation and positive attitude towards learning; (6) extracurricular activities vs. foundation program curriculum; (7) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. culture; (8) students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. foundation program students' transitional challenges.

3. Results and Discussion

Overall, the interview results corroborate the findings discussed in field literature. Teachers noted increases in engagement, in motivation, and in confidence in students who were more involved in extracurricular activities clubs. The teachers described the

students and their motivations for attending events. They described the students as "not very weak but eager students" whose motivation declines sharply in spring semesters. Students are described as attending events for various reasons: portfolio requirements, social involvement, discovering campus life, and students' intrinsic motivations to improve in their language studies. One respondent pointed out that the degree of Omani student involvement in campus activities is markedly less than that typically found at western universities. The respondents explained as well their own motivations for volunteering to lead extracurricular activities clubs and workshops, which included personal interest, desire to supplement student language learning experiences, and desire to enrich students' time at the university.

As mentioned, the majority of teacher responses were able to be grouped into themes, which are synthesized below.

1) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. development of students' language skills and academic performance

According to the teachers' interviews, there is a direct, positive relationship between students' involvement in extracurricular activities and development of students' language skills, since all extracurricular activities are conducted in English and the students are exposed to various activities outside the classroom with English being a tool and not the goal. The respondents held different perspectives as to the reason for this correlation. These reasons included that (a) students could focus on a task or activity with English as a secondary focus, which helped to increase their competency in English; (b) students could be engaged in their activities for the sake of learning subject matter in English without the distraction of formal assessment, thus removing their need to focus only on what aspects of language learning that they could expect to encounter on a test, which helped the students to broaden their abilities in the language; (c) the students could practice language in a relaxed, natural setting, which better prepared them for using the language in intensive classroom settings; (d) learning English within the scope of their own interests allowed students to be engaged by the incentives towards further development of language skills that some of the clubs naturally provided.

The respondents noted that students who were involved in extracurricular activities tended to exhibit more confidence and display more knowledgeable interactions in class than uninvolved peers. In regards to student academic performance, it was generally believed among the teachers that mostly high achievers showed interest in extracurricular activities involvement from the start. This finding is in line with the claims made by Holland & Andre (1987), Marsh (1992) and Zhang, (2001) that there is a direct relationship between students' engagement in extracurricular activities and their academic performance. As one of the interviewees mentioned, some students participate in extracurricular activities to improve their language skills. In particular, they get involved with fluent English speakers in such language-oriented clubs as the Speaking Club, Culture Club, and the Presentation Skills workshop. Normally, these students tend to perform better on the speaking exam and presentation compared to their peers who are not involved in extracurricular activities. Another respondent noted that sometimes students regularly attend a club because they are intrinsically motivated. To them, the club is the hub that brings together minds that think alike or share common interest. For instance, chess club brings together all chess lovers who do not have the opportunity to practice their hobby while in college. It is noteworthy that these students improve their language skills while doing their favorite activity with the club facilitator

who is a native speaker of English. In other words, students need to communicate in English as the facilitator does not speak Arabic. However, while the qualitative feedback supports the hypothesis that involvement in extracurricular activities improved students' language skills, more quantitative research is needed to determine whether extracurricular activities involvement actively increased student academic performance as well as the degree of improvement of their language skills.

2) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. development of their communicative and sociolinguistic competencies

Responses concerning competency development were less definite, but teachers did recognize that extracurricular activities, such as Speaking Club, Debate Club, Storytelling Club, Culture Club, and Presentation Skills did provide otherwise unavailable opportunities for students to increase their competencies. With all of the clubs being presented in English, students have a natural, low-risk environment to practice formulating their ideas into English and to engage with fluent English speakers. It should be mentioned that some clubs are operating with the goal of developing competencies. For example, Spill the Tea is a club in which the main focus is development of sociolinguistic competency. What is more, the club is only for female students. As the club facilitator explained, female students tend to be really shy in class and as a result, they do not fully participate in class discussions. Each participant chooses a piece of recent news and shares it with members. Because this club is only for female students, participants overcome their shyness and communicate more freely and gain confidence over time. This is positively reflected in their class participation. Overall, teachers noted that extracurricular activities can help students to take their attention off of assignments and grades and place it on their own ability to function within a language.

3) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. students' needs and interests

When asked whether extracurricular activities were meeting students' needs, the respondents provided mixed answers. They identified that a challenge in meeting student needs with extracurricular activities was that all extracurricular activities were offered according to available presenters' interests and perceptions of what the students need. One teacher noted that several of the clubs, namely Spelling Club, Book Club, Film Club, Presentation Skills, and Science News Club, seek to meet what many teachers and students would identify as the students' needs. For instance, because spelling is a common problem among foundation program students, one of the English teachers established the Spelling Club. The club gives participants an opportunity to practice spelling in a fun way.

With regard to interest, it should be noted that most of the clubs emerge from the facilitators' interest who run the club to share their skills and interests with participants as well as create an opportunity for people with common interests to come together. One vivid example is the workshop on virtual reality conducted by a student-facilitator. It was a big success and brought together around 30 participants who were either skillful gamers or beginners who wanted to learn more about virtual reality. However, despite the general belief that some clubs seek to meet what many teachers and students would identify as the students' needs, the consensus among the teachers was that a complete needs analysis should be conducted in order to identify what the students' needs are and how extracurricular activities could address them. Similarly, the students' interests are only able to be addressed through extracurricular activities insofar as they relate

with an available presenter's interests and expertise, thus the options are limited and students' stated interests are not always able to be met.

4) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. students' self-esteem and self-confidence

Teachers unanimously agreed that the students gain a boost in self-esteem and confidence from their involvement in extracurricular activities. They identified the sources of this increase as (a) the chance to socialize and collaborate with a group of peers, (b) the opportunity to pursue their own interests in English, (c) the removal of formal assessment which allows the students to make errors and self-correct on their own, and (d) the chance to develop their skills at a more natural pace than the classroom requires.

Students who can obtain a more confident opinion of their own capabilities will perform better in the classroom environment, and the many benefits of building students' confidence in their own abilities is worth the attention and investment of any language program. This finding corroborates Marsh's (1992) claim that students' engagement in extracurricular activities leads to higher self-esteem. Clubs that were identified as most helpful in this regard included Speaking Club, Presentation Skills Club, and Storytelling Club. These clubs mainly focus development of students' speaking and public speaking skills. They follow the format of interactive workshops and allow students to speak in front of their peers. It was generally observed that those students who attended these workshops gained confidence over time and had higher self-esteem. As one of the informants noted the attendees of the mentioned clubs are some confident language speakers who gain a bit more confidence over time.

5) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. motivation and positive attitude towards learning

Students' increase in motivation and positivity towards learning experiences was also noted unanimously among respondents. This claim is in line with Davalos et al. (1999) who argue that by participating in extracurricular activities, students develop a sense of belonging that positively contributes to their own identity. Two teachers connected the motivational boost provided by extracurricular activities to cross-cultural experiences that the students are likely to have as part of extracurricular activities; one respondent said that extracurricular activities involvement's enmeshed benefits with sociolinguistic competency leads to an increase in the student's intrinsic motivation. Students who are pursuing their interests in the language are more likely to be self-motivated to learn and less likely to depend on external motivators, such as grades, in order to learn the language. The positive attitude is the associated with higher work ethic and an increase in the benefits a student can receive from classroom interactions. One teacher added that the increase in motivation is not always associated with better classroom performance. He mentioned that the productivity boost that students receive "can be demonstrated in different ways, not necessarily in the classroom." To this end, input is needed from the students about their perception of how their involvement in extracurricular activities affect them. This type of data could help extracurricular activities administrators determine which activities would be most beneficial for encouraging students towards better classroom participation and which activities would be more associated with student self-actualization.

6) Extracurricular activities vs. foundation program curriculum

There was a shared belief among respondents that extracurricular activities function as an extension of learning outcomes of the Foundation Program, and that clubs are of

practical value to the program. Because all of the presentations are in English – and because all of the clubs naturally include skills practice whether they are the main focus of the club or not – involvement in extracurricular activities is an immensely valuable resource for the foundation program. However, because of the nature of allowing students to pursue interests through extracurricular activities, there is not currently an effort to offer activities that are based directly on learning outcomes of the foundation program.

Although making all extracurricular activities conform to the foundation program curriculum guidelines and learning outcomes would ultimately present an obstacle to the many benefits that the students enjoy from interest-based pursuits, more can be done to provide support to the curriculum. Currently, there are two extracurricular activities, namely Presentation Skills and Science News Club, whose stated reason for being established is to fill a gap left in the curriculum. These clubs engage students in a wide range of activities that target the reading, speaking and study skills learning outcomes specified by the curriculum document. It was generally observed that students who willingly attend these clubs improve their language skills noticeably, which is not true for those students who attend these clubs to fulfil the requirement of portfolio component of the course or because their teachers recommended attending the club. Undoubtedly, more involvement between extracurricular activities and foundation program learning outcomes can be beneficial for students.

7) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. culture

Teachers noted that extracurricular activities provided students with opportunities for cross-cultural engagement that they could not otherwise obtain through their foundation program courses. Because faculty of the Centre for Preparatory studies is culturally diverse, teachers are encouraged to present their own backgrounds in Culture Club, which holds the distinction of the highest consistent attendance in extracurricular activities. This club provides students with a chance to hear about cultural differences and experience cultural practices and foods from all over the world from presenters who are primary resources themselves. This club is students' favorite and records high attendance. A number of the Centre's teachers delivered a series of fun and engaging presentations showcasing their cultures (American, Russian, Armenian, Belarus, Ukrainian and Romanian, etc.) and each of these sessions attracted 120-200 students. Also, an initiative of inviting renowned citizens and achievers as guest speakers to deliver motivational talks to students was undertaken. Well-known adventurers Nabil Busaidi and Captain Saleh Jabri visited the university for the first time and inspired foundation program students with their astonishing stories. As well as that, Omani Languages Club was developed to encourage students to engage cross-culturally within their own country through study of the minority languages in Oman. These experiences are otherwise not found in foundation program curriculum and are only made available through extracurricular activities; thus, the students' involvement in these clubs offers a unique way to become more culturally aware.

8) Students' involvement in extracurricular activities vs. foundation program students' transitional challenges

Respondents also highlighted extracurricular activities' role in helping students transition to university life. Teachers identified the opportunity to socialize through extracurricular activities was beneficial in helping them to connect with their larger community. One teacher described that “especially first year students need social opportunities to connect with their peers, and the connections that they create are

essential in helping them to navigate the challenges of transitioning into the university.” Many students in their foundation year need a lot of support and guidance to adapt to the new academic settings and student life away from their families. The most common challenge that students face when transitioning to university is coeducation and culture shock. High school education in Oman is gender-segregated and teachers are normally Omanis. This is the reason why students face a range of social and academic challenges when studying in heterogeneous classroom and having teachers from different nationalities. Providing a place for students to make new friends, to be involved in activities that they enjoy, and to receive informal practice in their language development are all points of positive contact that help a student to feel more relaxed, more a part of the university, and more optimistic about the academic experience, all of which leads to a more successful transition from the secondary to the tertiary school environment.

4. Conclusion

Clearly, extracurricular activities play a valuable role in helping first-year students at Sultan Qaboos University adjust to school and function more easily in English. But just as clearly, more involvement in extracurricular activities, especially in the spring semesters, could increase student performance in their courses, boost student motivation, increase student engagement in their own learning experiences and provide additional assistance to students in foundation program curricula. This leads the authors to believe that extracurricular activities constitute a largely untapped resource that presents wide ranging benefits and can prove exceedingly valuable to both teachers and students by inviting them to interact in natural environments outside of the reach of assessment. Therefore, foundation program providers should consider the ways extracurricular activities can supplement and enhance their own curricula.

Future research is needed to determine how to increase involvement of students across the curriculum as well as how to better support the curriculum through extracurricular activities, beginning with an examination of the wider community of stakeholders in extracurricular activities, specifically how the students perceive the impact of their own involvement on their studies.

The practical significance of the proposed research is envisioned in better understanding the impact of extracurricular activities on post-basic students’ adjustment to the academic life and their development, research perspectives on tertiary education in Oman and further establishing connections between the research communities in tertiary education settings. Extracurricular activities suggested by the research findings will provide insights that could inform help improve foundation programs in Oman. The research will also provide an information base on policies and practices related to extracurricular activities at the foundation program at higher education institutions to mitigate students’ adjustment to academic environment, and support their development.

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