

# The Possibilities and Chances of Adopting the Sharing Economy Concept in Higher Education in the Gulf Region

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## Abstract

This study sought to establish the possibilities of using the sharing economy concept in institutions of higher education with the aim of improving their operations. The discussion was based on the higher education industry in the Gulf Region, with a focus on the ways that technology can be used to bring out the sharing economy concept. It aimed at establishing the status of higher education in the Gulf region, how the model of sharing economy can be applied to education, the significance of technology in the sharing of educational resources across different geographical locations and among teachers and students, and the benefits of sharing economy in education. In addressing the objectives of this research, a secondary research approach was used. It was considered as being the most ideal due to the fact that a wide range of information could be accessed in a relatively short period of time and on a reduced budget. Based on the findings that were established in the course of this research, relevant recommendations are made.

## Keywords

Higher Education, Sharing Economy, Gulf Region, Universities

## I. Introduction

The doors for higher education are being opened through the empowerment of classrooms sharing services [21,23]. This concept was derived from the sharing economy which is defined as a model whereby the assets that are owned by certain people are rented or borrowed by others [25]. Currently, the concept of the sharing economy is common in classrooms due to technological advancements and increase in both social and formal networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. The shared services in education are also on the rise due to increased access to research studies, books and educational journals on online platforms [23]. Apart from industries and businesses that have benefited from the model, educators and students have the potential to exchange valuable information among one another.

Higher education in the gulf region is currently in high demand since over the last 5 years; it has been marked with an exponential growth in regard to the number of institutions in order to meet the needs of the growing market in the region [6]. The Gulf region is made up of six-member nations namely; Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain and they all make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) [3]. The growth and booming of the private sectors of the nations is the reason behind the increase in demand for education. The population in the nations is constantly rising because of an annual growth rate of 3%. Roughly 60% of the population is under 16 years of age hence the number that is graduating from secondary schools and subsequently needing university training is very high hence the need for effective strategies by the government of the gulf nations [6].

This research has the aim of identifying the possibilities and chances of sharing economy model in higher education in order to meet the rising demands of educational resources. The Gulf region is the subject of the study and is analyzed in terms of higher education enhancement through sharing educational services and

resources through technology.

## II. Research Problem

The gulf region is faced by a growth in the demand for education due to a number of reasons which include; dramatic rise in population, rapid modernization over the last 30 years, increase the number of females that see higher education, security concerns for overseas education for GCC locals and a growing population of expatriates' children in the region [6,12]. Due to these reasons, the gulf region is faced by the challenge of offering quality education to the unmanageable number of students. Expatriates make up half of the population of the gulf region. Although female education has been made a recognized hallmark of modernity in the gulf nations due to modernization, their families rarely permit them to study abroad therefore settle for local universities [28]. So far, the expansion of private higher education institutions has been the most common solution for educational demand in the gulf region in order to ensure quality and relevance of education to market needs. However, not all students can afford private institutions. Therefore the problem to address is that most students lack quality resources, opportunities and relevant study materials in their regions from where they are located. At the same time, they are not able to afford to study in local private universities or study abroad in order to attain quality education. Strategies through which students and their instructors especially those who are operating from the less privileged higher institutions in terms of educational resources can benefit need to be formulated and implemented in order to enhance both studying and teaching. The following research questions are set in order to achieve the aim of this paper:

- What is the status of higher education in the Gulf region?
- How can the model of sharing economy be applied to education?
- What is the significance of technology in the sharing of educational resources across different geographical locations and among teachers and students?
- What are the benefits of sharing economy in education?

## III. Significant of the Study

There are presently numerous shared educational materials in the field of education such as open educational resources. By studying the sharing economy concept, shared open resources in education and the characteristics of education in the gulf region, beneficial results that have with the capability of contributing to the revolution of education not only in the gulf region but also in areas that face similar educational challenges will be achieved.

This study is important because it will show the impact of technology on education and most importantly how higher education institutions can leverage technology use to achieve access to relevant and quality resources for education from different parts of the world. This study has a high potential in not only enabling students and teachers to identify good sources of information but also to enhance networking skills which is a very important factor in determining how further progress can be achieved and the ability of the contacts made to influence for

instance the career of students and teachers. The results of this study may also be beneficial by creating awareness to the people who were not previously aware of the availability of open and free educational resources.

#### IV. Limitation of Study

In order to effectively address this research question, a primary research involving different stakeholders in the higher education sector in the Gulf Region could have been the most ideal research methodology. However, the time and resources that could have been required to facilitate primary research was enormous and thus, a secondary research approach was used. This approach had a number of challenges including the fact that it was challenging to get real-time or updated information regarding the concept of sharing economy in the higher education sector in the Gulf Region.

#### V. Operational Definition

According to [13], the sharing economy entails convenience, trust and a sense of community through technology. The sharing economy is defined in [17] as a socio-economic ecosystem that is built around human and physical resources' sharing. Shared economy can be incorporated in all kinds of sectors as it entails shared creation, shared production, trade, commodities' consumption and shared distribution by people and organizations. It involves sharing of services and resources across all the aspects of the social and economic environment. The following aspects make up the sharing economy; collaborative consumption, exchanging, shared ownership, shared value, co-creation, recycling, redistribution, trade of used goods, lending, renting, borrowing, social media, social enterprise, crowd-funding, user generated content, open data and open sources [17].

The sharing of educational resources on online platforms and making them free is mostly referred to as Open Educational Resources (OER) which is achieved through educational technology [23]. OER refers to the open provision of educational resources through the use of information and communication technologies for the sake of consultation, use and adaptation by a community of users for non-commercial purposes [11]. It is also defined as the provision of resources that are made easily available and accessible because they are free of cost in terms of money and also in terms of the permissions users have with the content that they access which include; the right to reuse, to revise in terms of modifications, remix by combining both original and revised content and redistribute which gives users the right to share copies of the original content, revisions or remixes with other people. Together they are called the 4Rs [15].

Educational technology refers to learning that is enabled through the effective use of technological tools [15]. It is a concept that makes use of various tools such as networking hardware, the media and underlying theoretical perspectives in order to achieve effective application. Educational technology can also be defined as the facilitation of learning and improvement of performance in an ethical manner through the creation, utilization and management of appropriate technological resources and processes [18].

#### VI. Previous Studies

It is mentioned in [23] that educators benefit from sharing and connecting with their colleagues across nations and the world because through open sharing of educational materials, quality classroom resources that engage students more are quickly sourced. Some of the most common platforms that offer free access to quality

learning material include the OER and Creative Commons. The OER offers a digital library that contains educational tools for children from preschool level to students in higher adult education. In Creative Commons, a marketplace is offered and it provides a space whereby creative resources can be shared by individuals for free [20].

It is stated in [22] that Arab countries are no exception to the worldwide trend that involves provision of extended on-campus and off-campus programs. The countries are however new to the concept of sharing economy in regard to education. Institutions in the Gulf region also provide distance education through provision of open education units which is commonly known as distance education mode [28]. Quality however causes much concern therefore success rate of shared services in the region is questionable. The following recommendations were given by [28]; enhancement of quality assurance and accreditation of distance education programs by academics, international and regional organizations.

Students in the Middle East in today's education environment are showing clear preference towards internationally approved educational programs as shown by a 2011 survey conducted showed that 53% of parents interviewed preferred their children gain access to education that is instructed by a western-style curricula [19]. The Gulf region also has found to have high preference for the American model of education [19]. The competence level of English of students from the Middle East region is strong because through open learning platforms on the internet, most of them have had global exposure. In addition to global exposure, there is higher preference for educational materials that are offered in private educational facilities than in public facilities because of the perception of higher quality. The number of private universities in the Middle East especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has increased.

The sharing economy has resulted into an establishment of shared services for educational resources that presents an effective model for achieving increased quality, creation of new capabilities and reduction of costs [8]. The global higher education market is characterized by advancements in information and communication technologies that make institutions in the middle east to reconsider direction in order to be responsive to environmental changes and also to function efficiently and effectively [1,24]. This shows that universities are practicing the concept of sharing resources both internally and externally for the purpose of performance improvements and achievement of cost-effectiveness. The governments of the Gulf nations have focused majorly on expansion of private institutions to the high number of students that demand higher education training due to high population growth [6,9]. It is also their solution to the low quality and to some extent irrelevance to the needs of the market in public universities.

#### VII. Methodology

The approach and strategies of the research is explained in this section. In order to identify the possibilities and the chances of the adoption of the sharing economy model through technology in higher education institutions, this research chose the interpretivism philosophy whereby it is believed that reality or concepts can only be understood through the interpretation of reality [4]. Interpretivism enables a researcher to access and evaluate multi-related realities and the freedom to develop personal structures from interpretations. The research approach involved both qualitative and quantitative data. The collected information was both in numerical and non-numerical form in order to increase its reliability as explained in [2].

The research design is secondary because of the sources of data that were used. The data sources to be used include journal articles, books, reliable websites and reports from the media. The method of data collection was literature review of shared services in education, enhancement of education through technology and education in the gulf region. A literature review ensures that different concepts and aspects of the research topic are covered [14]. The views, suggestions and research studies of different authors are reviewed therefore multiple realities of the research topic are reviewed. The information collected from the literature review is evaluated through exploratory analysis which enables the study to draw a step by step conclusion of the study with regard to the research questions that were set.

## VIII. Results and Analysis

### A. State of Higher Education in Gulf Region

The major characteristic of higher education in the gulf region is high demand for education services [9]. It is predicted that the demand will continue to grow sharply in the coming years. This characteristic is owed to population growth, increase in expatriates and a rise in the importance of high-quality education which drives growth in all sectors [16]. There is an outburst in the growth and establishment of private schools in the gulf region as it is viewed as the solution to the provision of quality education, pedagogical methods and English language skills. On the other hand, the gulf region is also considered to be a provider of tremendous opportunity in education as they are currently focusing on strategic investments in education by offering a dynamic landscape for international educators, developed network for local instructors and government support for scholarships [19]. However the major concern in the higher education sector in all the GCC states is the quality control, frameworks and accountability of the content that is taught in the institutions. The region also has issues in development of higher education curriculum due to previous reliance on imported materials from Egypt, Lebanon and Syria [22]. Seminar-based teachings that are characterized by class discussions and critical thinking are however increasingly becoming common [9,19]. The institutions in the region are also increasingly following the trend in education which involves heavy reliance upon modern technologies and information. The methods of teaching and interaction are increasingly relying upon ICT advancements through the use of software and services such as online university libraries and student networking. Due to educational demand, the region has several branches of leading international universities and most universities have sought partnerships. The focus on quality education is as a result of the need for the higher education to create highly talented workforce since the population in the region is highly characterized by expatriates. As mentioned in [12], the gulf region has a labor nationalization problem hence the need for massive expatriate populations and this can be solved through provision of better education and qualification to gulf region nationals than that of foreigners.

Part of the solution to the high demand for education in the gulf region relies on the exploration of the sharing economy in regard to education which is currently a popular phenomenon. This is because quality educational materials and resources are provided for free by certain companies that run on the online platforms such as the OER [5]. In addition to access to free and easily accessible resources, universities in the region can partner not only with one another and with international universities for example sharing educational technologies. The nationals of the gulf region is in

need of high quality education and market skills in order to meet market demands and be in a position to make most of the nationals employable to most prestigious positions in both public and private sectors that expatriates in the region have.

### B. Application of Sharing Economy Model Through Technology in Gulf Region Institutions

Advancements in technology and innovation have resulted into the evolution of the internet into the most transformational vehicle for information sharing across the world especially through social networking sites [10]. It has given millions of people across the world the ability to transfer information and also many companies have found opportunity in establishing online platforms through which information can be sought. Universities have had arrangements among one another in terms of shared materials, IT and even human resources in order to cut down challenges such as costs [8]. The sharing economy is considered one of the most important concepts in the future of education. The founders of OER initiative are Rice University and Khan Academy. They are supported by various foundations such as Bill and Melinda Gates in order to allow students from various corners of the world to have free access to quality educational resources such as written content and lessons that are made available through video streaming services such as YouTube [26]. Coursera.org is also a commonly run open education service that provides short courses from top universities over the internet for free. However in order to get certification from this platform, students have to pay a very small fee for the processing of the certificate [7].

Flexibility from learning and administration perspective in higher education continues to improve due to innovation in technology as far as higher education is concerned [5]. Technology has enabled the establishment of effective education software and services which are provided to higher institutions by technology firms and suppliers. These services have improved the interaction between students and the faculty, and among students from different regions and different geographical locations in the world and also the interaction of teachers alike. An example of how technology improve sharing of education is shown in Amity University Dubai whereby efforts are in place to give a 24/7 access to students to university networks and learning materials [18]. Educational resources, materials and new content are shared online through cross-border collaboration whereby learners and instructors in different parts of the world communicate in real time hence an empowered student body and faculty [18]. In the Gulf, quality education is mostly perceived to be found in private universities. Although both public and private higher education students would both benefit from shared services, the issue of low quality education and low ability to meet market demands in public universities can highly benefit from shared services in education. The internet offers opportunities for all humanity therefore every student who is enlightened can gain access to additional information outside the classroom through pre-recorded lectures, collaboration and networking with university peers, exchange of relevant educational information and listening to podcasts [17]. There is a high demand for education in the gulf region for both males and females who have graduated from the secondary education. In order to meet the educational demands, the countries have largely supported the expansion of private higher education institutions. However, most students cannot afford to attend the private institutions and this is where the extensive utilization of share educational services and platforms can be undertaken by students in public institutions. Their performance and efficiency can be enhanced

through information seeking and focusing on educational trends from other instructors, students and platforms across the world such as OER and Creative Commons [23].

### C. Benefits of Shared Educational Services in the Region

The key to survival and evolution of higher education such as universities is in collaborative consumption or sharing economy which is characterized by the sharing of knowledge, resources and power by students [27]. Today's university is described as a fertile ground for sharing initiatives due to widespread technology adoption, similar needs, increasing cost of education and extensive social networks. Open online courses, participatory advanced research and teaching materials is the trend in today's higher education which has benefited large numbers in terms of the level of quality education that is accessed [20]. Collaborative consumption of education learning and teaching materials and resources is beneficial to institutions, teachers and students [20,23]. In institutions, shared education improves efficiency, cost and quality through various ways; enhancement of pedagogy and the learning experience of students and reduction in the rate of duplication since sharing of educational resources and materials allows for reuse of content in the sharing platforms. The reputation of an institution can be improved when it actively participates in the provision of free reading and learning resources whose quality have not been compromised [10, 26]. Open educational resources are accessed by many students and instructors therefore the participation of an institution increases the exposure of the institution. Students benefit in two different ways; an increase in student employability and recruitment of future students. Sharing in education builds a technological momentum and opens knowledge access and widens participation of students from different parts of the world due to the power of the internet and the engagement of millions of young people over the world over the internet [27].

Teachers have access to various aspects or concepts of learning materials and they have the opportunity to critically evaluate and carefully source the content to use in their teaching hence costs and time saving [20]. Most teachers use shared education platforms such as OER to access supplementary materials and additional ideas to the content that they have created on their own. An increase in the benefits of collaborative consumption in education is associated to the investment that is made by institutions, teachers on technological platforms that support teaching and learning. This implies that the expertise of each of this group in technology and both the time and money investment for example in educational software determines the extent to which they will benefit from free lessons, books, journal articles or pre-recorded teachings.

The following benefits of shared learning and teaching in OER are outlined in [23].

#### 1. Students

- Students access to open learning experience and interact with different individuals with different knowledge therefore they are equipped with the world's realities
- Network development
- Enhanced national and international peer-to-peer and external collaboration
- Co-creation of learning materials with educators
- Enhanced digital capacity, lifelong learning skills and communications that collectively enhances employability

#### 2. Teachers

- The enhancement of student centered approach to teaching
- Act as role models to encourage access of open sources of learning materials by students
- Enhanced collaboration between individuals, communities and across disciplines both on national and international levels

### IX. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has carried out discussions on the status of higher education in the gulf region, the challenges that are faced and the possibility of the problems being solved by adapting to shared education through technology. The higher education sector in the gulf region is highly demanded due to high population and the need of the nationals to get good positions in the public and private business environment [6,28]. The region is challenged by quality level of education which has made most employees recruit expatriates. Private institutions with quality education are on the rise; however, most students cannot afford them. Technological advancements has made it possible for students, educators and institutions to share free, quality and easily accessible educational resources through platforms such as OER and Cousea. The conclusion of this study is that the face of higher education in the gulf region and the employability of its nationals can be enhanced by adapting to the sharing economy concepts in the education. The region has a chance in improving quality of education in the sharing economy in addition to expansion of private universities. This can be achieved when institutions, educators and students manage the content that they access effectively. The following recommendations are made from this study.

The governments of gulf region need to become involved in supporting online sharing of educational resources by creating awareness of the availability of the resources and enlightening students on the steps to take to access these materials. This should be achieved by making heavier investment in educational technology.

The Teachers and students should be enlightened on ways through which they can take advantage of online resources and OER to access cohesive learning materials as they have high potential for effective learning and instruction. This can be done through training of both students and teachers.

Increased partnerships should be sought with international institutions or governments in order to increase the chances of offering students high quality instruction and materials at discounted fees. The number of scholarships offered by the governments in these regions need to be increased so that the number that are fit for the demanding market needs also increases.

It has been determined from the study that the major concern in higher education in the gulf region is quality of education. The government should revisit the curricula that is in use and establish a committee that is responsible for the establishment of education quality framework to enable integration of quality assurance at all levels of education.

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