



Conference Review

The 10th Biannual Gulf Comparative Education Society (GCES) 2023 Symposium: A Conference Review

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The 10th Biannual Gulf Comparative Education Society was held in Ras Al Khaimah, UAE, from November 1st to 3rd, 2023. This was the 10th anniversary of the conference in which regional and international scholars, educators, and thinkers in education discussed the latest trends in comparative education in the Arabian/Persian Gulf region.

The conference theme, “Towards Sustainable Education: Global Goals and Local Contexts,” aimed to explore the intersectionality between sustainability in education as discussed in the Sustainable Development Goals and the need for localization within education. The number of attendees totaled 210 including pre-conference workshop participants. The conference featured 80 paper presentations, with two keynote speakers and two highlighted panels. Before the conference, two pre-conference workshops were conducted: (1) Navigating the Publication Landscape by Dr. Tavis Jules and (2) Designing Mixed Methods Research by Dr. Seungah Lee. The three-day conference was sponsored by the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, New York University Abu Dhabi, and United Arab Emirates University.

1. Day One: Global Intersections – Setting the Scene for Sustainable Reform

The first day's theme focused on Global Intersection in Education. In this vein, the first keynote speaker, Professor Mario Novelli of the University of Sussex, provided an overview of recent trends at the nexus of geopolitics, the global economy, and education systems. In his presentation entitled, “Geopolitical Shifts and the Sustainability of Education in the Gulf: A Region in Flux”, Dr. Novelli unpacked issues around what he phrased as “Big D” Development, in which the Global North provides inventions to the Global South to improve education. Beginning with the Education of All Goals of



1990, the Millennium Development Goals of 2000, and the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015, he retraced the development of the current global order from the fall of the Soviet Union to the present. He problematized the prevailing free market solution and how it has transformed education systems to a neoliberal model, resulting in the emergence of the Global Education Industry where education is a commodity designed to improve efficiency. However, he argued that many of these aspirations have failed, as this system has resulted in increased inequality and more exclusivity. As a solution, Dr. Novelli proposed a shift from the prevailing Pax Americana to a Pax Pluralis, a new global development order rooted in human need, environmental justice, and educational sustainability.

Following the keynote, the first highlighted panel unpacked some of these global trends further within the frame of U.S. higher education. This panel, “Tertiary Trajectories: A Bird’s-Eye View of the Impact of the ‘American University’ Model in the Middle East” brought together three senior leaders of American University in the region, Prof. Bruce Ferguson of American University of Iraq Sulaimani, Dr. Jason Ketter of American University of Iraq Baghdad, and Dr. David Schmidt of American University of Ras Al Khaimah, as well as the U.S. Consul General in Dubai, Meghan Gregonis. The panel explored the fundamentals of the U.S. model of higher education and its growth in the region in the last few decades. While the panelists did illustrate how their respective universities are firmly embedded in the context of their communities and the region, they also identified the features that made their institutions American, namely an interdisciplinary liberal arts model with greater flexibility in the course of study. All panelists indicated that this model provides a more inclusive system that provides an employable skillset for its graduates upon entering the labor market. Some of the challenges discussed included rapid growth regarding conscripted control with accrediting bodies and a rapid increase in education costs. Another challenge was bridging the skills gap, especially in the English language, so that students transiting to university would have the necessary language competency to participate in an American university. This is something that the U.S. government supports to create more access and inclusion in higher education. Despite these barriers, American universities in the region are developing innovative ways to address these challenges through innovative practices and collaboration. The importance of collaboration was stressed on several occasions as a central component of the American higher education institutions in the region and one of the elements that facilitate the institutions to fulfill their missions of supporting sustainable development in education across the region.

2. Day Two: Institutional Influences – Shaping Sustainable Education Systems

The second day unpacked some of the theme of day one and continued the conversation at the systems level. The second keynote, entitled “Education Philanthropy Trends in the Gulf: A Case of Multilateralism, Policy Transfer, and South-South Flows” by Dr. Rui Da Silva of the University of Porto, took a deep dive into the current development in the flow of aid from bilateral forms of aid to multistakeholderism. Building on the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Goal’s theoretical assumption that economic growth is the engine to lift people out of poverty, Dr. Da Silva argued that while partnerships help reduce issues of duplication and fragmentation, this often results in “messy partnerships,” as with multiple stakeholders more interests are at stake. The multistakeholderism governance model is one in which multiple stakeholders, such as governments, the corporate sector, civil society organizations, philanthropic organizations, and individuals partake thus replacing the centralist of the nation-states in global governance. This results in different gatekeepers to aid with a lack of transparent process and little accountability. To illustrate this trend, GPE and Education Can’t Wait were utilized as case studies. GPE, established in 2002 by the World Bank as an Education for All Initiative, brings together governments receiving aid, UN agencies, NGOs, foundations, and companies. Through the analysis, it was argued that while appearing collaborative and inclusive, it is mainly imposing discursive factors and beliefs from the Global North. Similarly, Education Can’t Wait brings together similar stakeholders as GPE and focuses on conflict-affected states. While there are collaborative efforts, the structure is reminiscent of the traditional aid architecture, in which selective actors hold most of the power. It also exacerbates a competitive aid environment in which certain individuals and organizations achieve success at the expense of others and grants non-state actors authority to participate in education in emergencies. Dr. Da Silve concluded that this new trend creates policy entrepreneurs, who have the knowledge and resources to inform and steer decisions often outside their purview flowing from the Global North to the Global South in the form of coloniality.

The second highlighted panel built these ideas of increasing stakeholder diversity and equity at the systems and institutional level. Entitled “Sustainable Practices in Building Inclusive Academic Communities: Insights from NYU Abu Dhabi’s ‘Journey of Belonging,’” the panel presented insights into the current practices of the Office of Inclusion and Equity at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Three members of the office, Ms. Fatiah Touray, Ms. Sarah AlZaabi, and Mr. Hasan Johnson, spoke

about how NYUAD has navigated its diverse campus to increase inclusion for students, faculty, and staff on its campus. They stressed the opportunities and tensions with being an American university in a global setting, and how they have tailored the NYU experience to promote the regional values in context and address issues around Western hegemony. Their approach focuses on social, economic, and environmental sustainability so that communities and societies can thrive and continue to exist in a healthy, fair, and equitable way. Approaching the students as future global leaders, they promote skills like critical thinking and listening so that the community can engage in meaningful and sometimes difficult conversations. They highlighted the “Journey of Belonging,” a campus climate survey, that has served as a basis for their programming and training throughout campus. It is through this that students from very diverse backgrounds have been able to come together on one campus and thrive.

3. Day Three: Local Allies: Empowering Lifelong Learners and Educators

The third day unpacked themes around building contextualized and student-centered learning communities. Focusing on the students and educators, the presentations and dialogue stressed the importance of a positive learning environment with a strong student–teacher rapport at the core of learning.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this conference provided a positive environment with insightful and engaging presentations. Specifically poignant to this conference was that it brought together academics, educators, and policymakers at different stages in their careers. This created a space for critical yet supportive feedback with multiple perspectives. As GCES is committed to open-access science, I look forward to the GCES Conference Special Issue of the *Gulf Education and Social Policy Review* due out in a few months.