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## Deans' perceptions of challenges facing business education in the Arabian Gulf

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### ABSTRACT

The authors' purpose was to investigate the challenges facing business education in the Arabian Gulf countries. The study stems from the need of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) business colleges to explore and tackle the risks arising from the regional and global challenges that jeopardize their role and relevance in the future. A survey was sent to the deans of over 80 GCC business colleges to gauge their perceptions about the challenges facing their colleges. The results identified international accreditation and shortage of qualified faculty as the top challenges. Finally, the authors outline some recommendations for addressing these challenges toward the sustainability and promotion of GCC business education.

### KEYWORDS

Arabian Gulf; business education; faculty shortage; international accreditation

### Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed notable attempts from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which comprise Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to shift from natural resource-based economies to knowledge- and information-based economies. In a knowledge economy, a highly educated and skilled workforce, especially a workforce with university degrees, is necessary (Onlagić & Kurtić, 2016). In this context, business education plays a crucial role in supplying the labor market with trained management talent equipped with functional business knowledge, leadership skills, and an evidence-based decision-making mindset (AACSB International, 2011). To achieve the goal of shifting to a knowledge economy, GCC countries must establish strong education systems capable of building up human capital and creating jobs for their respective nationals (Wiseman, Alromi, & Alshumrani, 2014).

According to Chen and Dahlman (2005), a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy is based on four pillars: investment in education, development of innovation, modernization of the information infrastructure, and creation of a conducive economic environment. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the progress of the six GCC countries on

the four components of a knowledge economy (e.g., Alfaki & Ahmed, 2017; Hossain, 2015; Parceró & Ryan, 2017). These studies have reached the general consensus that despite the considerable progress made by GCC countries in developing their information technology infrastructures, they still need to give more attention to the development of human capital, including skills, education, and training, to promote a more balanced development of their knowledge-based economies. In other words, it is expected that higher education (HE) generally and business education in particular in the GCC countries should play a key role in paving the way for new strategic and managerial innovations, and preparing graduates with management knowledge and skills for becoming successful leaders in the future knowledge-based environment.

In this context, there is a considerable need to identify the main challenges that GCC business colleges face and that threaten their long-term success toward shifting to knowledge-based economies. In the present article, therefore, we explore the current challenges perceived by a range of business college deans from all GCC countries. Furthermore, the paper provides some recommendations for facing these challenges.

We first present a brief overview of HE in the GCC countries is presented, followed by a literature review. In the next section, the methodology employed in the

study is discussed, followed by presentation of the results. Finally, concluding remarks and recommendations are given in the last section.

## Overview of business education in GCC states

### *Recent developments in higher education in GCC states*

Since the turn of the 21st century, the HE system in the GCC region has been shaped by a remarkable growth in the number of institutions, involvement of the private sector, dominance of the American (and Western) university model, and the adoption of new quality assurance and accreditation systems (Buckner, 2011; Madichie, 2015; Vardhan, 2015). The number of HE institutions has increased dramatically over the last two decades. This growth was driven by demographic, cultural, political, and economic factors, as described by Dakhli and El-Zohairy (2013) and Al-Ruwaihi (2017). During this period, the GCC region has witnessed a massive growth in HE and particularly private institutions (Dakhli & El-Zohairy, 2013; Madichie, 2015). It seems that the growth in demand for HE among nationals and expatriates was faster than the expansion of universities and colleges funded by GCC governments. These governments, therefore, have concluded that there is a pressing need to place a greater reliance on the private sector to absorb the excess demand. Additionally, the presence of large expatriate long-term communities in GCC countries contributed significantly to the massive growth in demand for private HE. As most of the expatriate students are unable to enroll in public universities, a large proportion of parents choose to send their children to a nearby private HE institution. This has led to a rapid growth in the number of both public and private universities and colleges that attract hundreds of thousands of students each year. In the UAE, for example, 76 licensed HE institutions are functioning in 2018, a significant increase from the 17 institutions that existed in 2003 (Commission for Academic Accreditation, 2018). During the same period, the number of HE institutions in Saudi Arabia has dramatically increased, from 15 to 68 (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2018).

The attraction of prestigious western universities to set up international branch campuses is another key feature of the GCC HE system. Many integrated academic cities have been developed to host campus branches of numerous Western-based universities (mainly American, Australian, Canadian, French, and British), particularly in the UAE and Qatar. These hubs host renowned institutions like Paris-

Sorbonne University, New York University, INSEAD, Northwestern University, Carnegie Mellon University, and more (Madichie, 2015; Vardhan, 2015). Establishing foreign universities in GCC countries is encouraged by regional governments to not only close the “development gap” by providing HE for nationals and expatriates in the region, but also develop their nonoil revenue sources and create a global image of the region as a center of knowledge production (Madichie, 2015; Romani, 2009). With the growing number of public and private universities and graduates along with hosting international university branch campuses, GCC governments are increasingly concerned about quality assurance of HE programs to improve the employability of recent graduates (Vardhan, 2015). These concerns are reflected in the introduction of different quality assurance procedures, mechanisms, and national accreditation agencies. This is in addition to the emerging culture of international accreditation and ranking in the region, which has resulted in an increase in efforts toward seeking international accreditation at an institutional level, such as Western Association for Schools and Colleges and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and at a disciplinary level, such as Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Historically, GCC universities were not visible in the global university rankings because they emphasized supplying graduates to national labor markets. Now, the situation has changed significantly. Currently, the number of GCC universities appearing in the global university rankings is growing. According to the QS World University Rankings 2019, 20 GCC universities appear in the top 1,000 universities, of which nine are among the top 500. Furthermore, 12 prominent GCC universities were ranked among the top 1,000 research-intensive universities in the World University Rankings 2018, published by Times Higher Education.

Yet, despite the significant developments in current HE in GCC states, many studies and reports have demonstrated that HE in the region is still falling behind expectations and failing to address the needs and aspirations of younger generations (Dakhli & El-Zohairy, 2013; Wiseman et al., 2014). According to Schwab (2018), most of the GCC countries lag behind many other emerging economies in the HE and training index reported in the Global Competitiveness Report 2017–2018. Among 137 countries, the GCC states’ rankings in the HE and training pillar vary greatly. In HE and training, the UAE was ranked first in GCC countries and 36th globally, while Qatar came

in second place among GCC countries and 37th globally, followed by Bahrain (39th), Saudi Arabia (43rd), Oman (71st), and Kuwait (95th).

### Current state of business education in GCC countries

Business education constitutes a significant part of HE worldwide and the GCC region is no exception. The overwhelming majority of these colleges are imitations of American business colleges, and hence the American curriculum is adopted, with English as the main language of instruction (Dakhli & El-Zohairy, 2013; Neal & Finlay, 2008). These colleges are mainly offering undergraduate degrees in business-related fields, in addition to the popular master of business administration program. Additionally, a small number of other graduate degrees are offered in specialized business fields, business executive education, and a doctorate of business administration.

The most recent GCC data on business education characteristics are presented in Table 1. There are nearly 100 universities granting degrees in business in the GCC region, mainly in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with 37 and 36 colleges, respectively. The table also shows that business students account for around 20% of all university students at all GCC countries. This percentage ranges from as high as 41% in Bahrain to only 12% in Kuwait.

The strategy of improving the quality of HE, in addition to the ambition of building world-class universities, led GCC business colleges to align their practices with international standards and pursue international accreditation, particularly AACSB accreditation. Yet, as of 2015, only 7 GCC business colleges were AACSB accredited, nine were in process, and another 17 were AACSB members, planning for future accreditation (Hijazi, 2016). Currently, as shown in Table 1, there are 58 members, of which 15 are accredited, mainly in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, consistent with the dominance of the American model in the region,

there are only 11 members of the European Foundation for Management Development, of which only one university possesses the European Quality Improvement System, the European Foundation for Management Development accreditation. Undoubtedly, the new culture of international accreditation in the region will have a significant impact on the quality of business education through emphasizing assurance of learning and continuous improvement.

Due to the importance of business education in development, the Global Competitiveness Report provides an assessment of the quality of management colleges based on a survey conducted among business leaders on a scale from 1 to 7. The latest country scores and rankings reported in Schwab (2018) are presented in the last column of Table 1. The results testify to the impact of the recent initiatives undertaken by Qatar and the UAE to develop and promote national HE systems. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia fall around the median score. Surprisingly, Kuwait and Oman are still ranked very low, thus indicating the necessity of embarking on a series of major initiatives to reform education systems in general and HE ones in particular.

Recent years have witnessed numerous calls for rethinking and reforming business education in response to globalization and other changes in the global business environment (AACSB International, 2011; Herrington & Arnold, 2013; Nisula & Pekkola, 2018; Schoemaker, 2008). A major rationale behind these calls is that business colleges are producing graduates who are not well prepared for an increasingly complex and turbulent business environment (Glen, Suci, & Baughn, 2014; Nisula & Pekkola, 2018). And as GCC business colleges are imitations of the American model, it is expected that business education in the region will suffer from similar problems (Almoharby, 2008). Furthermore, as emphasized by Dakhli and El-Zohairy (2013), there is a need to assess the drawbacks and risks associated with the

**Table 1.** Business education indicators.

Country	Business Colleges <sup>a</sup>	Business Graduates <sup>a</sup>			AACSB Members (Accredited) <sup>b</sup>	Quality of Management Education (Rank) <sup>c</sup>
		Number	Percentage	Year		
Bahrain	9	1,370	41	2015	7 (1)	4.9 (34)
Saudi Arabia	36	39,299	19	2016	19 (4)	4.4 (52)
Kuwait	5	656	12	2015	5 (2)	3.6 (111)
Oman	8	1,972	21	2016	5 (0)	3.5 (116)
Qatar	2	471	25	2016	1 (1)	5.8 (7)
United Arab Emirates	37	8,528	33	2016	21 (7)	5.5 (15)
GCC	97	52,296	21	—	58 (15)	—

AACSB = Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business; GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council.

<sup>a</sup>Compiled from national statistics centers and university websites.

<sup>b</sup>AACSB website (<https://www.aacsb.edu/membership/listings/all-educational-members>).

<sup>c</sup>Global Competitiveness Report 2017–2018 (Schwab, 2018).

internationalization of HE in general, and business education in particular, notwithstanding its benefits and contribution to the GCC region. Nevertheless, to the best of our information and knowledge, no attempts have been made to investigate the current state of business education and to identify the challenges facing business colleges in the GCC region.

## Literature review

The challenges and obstacles facing business education have received significant attention worldwide over the past two decades, with an increasing number of voices questioning its validity, viability, and relevance in the era of globalization. This attention has been translated into considerable research efforts to identify the main challenges facing business education and to propose strategies to face these challenges (e.g., Cornuel, 2007; Dameron & Durand, 2017, 2018; Thomas, Lorange, & Sheth, 2013). The recent work of Dameron and Durand (2017, 2018) provides a fascinating, comprehensive look at the management education systems in 22 countries across the world, as well as the remarkable trends and challenges in these systems. This is in addition to many other studies investigating the same theme in North America (Davis, 2013; Schoemaker, 2008), Europe (Durand & Dameron, 2008; Pendergast, 2009), Asia (Hall, Agarwal, & Green, 2013; Mahajan, Agrawal, Sharma, & Nangia, 2016), Latin America (Dieck-Assad, 2013), and Africa (Honig & Hjortsø, 2018). We next discuss the major potential challenges facing business education worldwide.

## Globalization

The rapid growth of globalization in the last few decades has created a major challenge for business education (AACSB International, 2011; Bryant, 2013; Cornuel, 2007; Hawawini, 2005). As businesses are becoming increasingly international, competitive companies are increasingly seeking opportunities to go global and enter international markets, and are therefore looking to hire skilled employees who are knowledgeable and can work across borders and cultures (Dieck-Assad, 2013). Altbach and Knight (2007) argued that internationalization forced universities to upgrade their students' international perspectives, enhancing foreign language programs and cross-cultural environments. Therefore, to respond to global business trends, business colleges are increasingly required to assess the needs of their students' future employers and incorporate them in their programs.

Although Hatimi (2018) emphasizes that the HE sector in the Arab world is not very significant in terms of the phenomena of internationalization and globalization, Bhandari and El-Amine (2012) indicate that GCC countries are leading the region in terms of internationalization, in particular the UAE and Qatar through their reform initiatives described previously.

## Shortage of qualified faculty

The shortage of qualified doctoral faculty is one of the critical concerns facing business colleges around the world (Cornuel, 2007; Hawawini, 2005). The strong demand from business colleges for qualified PhD faculty in most business disciplines greatly exceeds the supply of PhDs expected to fill those positions. The inadequate supply of business faculty is mainly due to the considerable opportunity cost of pursuing a doctoral degree for individuals who are currently employed and less likely to sacrifice years of salary at a well-paying job (Gary, Denison, & Bouillon, 2011). To overcome the imbalance between the demand for business education and the supply of PhD-qualified faculty in the short run, many business colleges are forced to rely heavily on professionally qualified rather than academically qualified part-time lecturers, and retired business professionals. However, this approach is likely to generate a new challenge to business colleges, as it creates a dividing line among business faculty and a disconnect between knowledge production and dissemination (Durand & Dameron, 2017). In the long run, however, more students should be encouraged to pursue an academic career in business and enter doctoral programs to meet increasing demand. Cornuel (2007) argued that highly qualified faculty should be offered financial and nonfinancial benefits to encourage them to pursue academic careers in business and join the faculty body.

## International accreditation

International accreditation is viewed as one of the contemporary challenges facing business colleges. International accreditation is recognized and accepted around the world as a distinctive mark of quality (Zammuto, 2008). As such, business colleges should seek accreditation and quality improvement programs to show their commitment to excellence and innovation (Cornuel, 2007). According to Elliott (2013), business colleges use international accreditation to gain some important advantages, including enhanced reputation, expected quality standards, increasing

management efficiencies, and gaining a competitive advantage over their competitors. To gain international accreditation, business colleges need to create significant internal changes, including, among others, reviewing their mission and strategy, internationalization of their full-time faculty members, delivering high-quality research, building strong relationships with the business community and stakeholders, and curriculum restructuring and innovation (Bieker, 2014; Elliott, 2013; Heriot, Franklin, & Austin, 2009).

### **Curriculum integration**

Business colleges worldwide also face another major challenge of incorporating softer skills into their curriculum. In addition to the quantitative management skills and techniques demanded by employers and business students, two types of softer skills are increasingly being demanded: behavioral and societal (Hawawini, 2005). According to Hawawini, “behavioral skills” include a set of entrepreneurial and leadership competencies that managers are expected to acquire and employ, such as the ability to work with others and to communicate effectively. On the other hand, “societal skills” refer to the ability of business graduates to make ethical business decisions taking into account not only the interests of shareholders, but also corporate social responsibility and other stakeholders’ interests. Lack of integration of these skills into the business curriculum will retain the existing gap between the skills provided by business colleges and those demanded by potential employers (Davis, 2013). Undoubtedly, this challenge will lead to a more severe challenge of unemployability of business graduates. In this vein, the GCC business colleges are no exception.

### **Provision of financial resources**

The provision of financial resources is a key challenge to business colleges, particularly the private ones, in many regions around the world (Durand & Dameron, 2017; Hawawini, 2005; Mahajan et al., 2016). Furthermore, governments have started reducing financial support to public HE institutions, which in turn need to search for alternative sources of support (Hawawini, 2005). The Gulf region is no different.

### **Demand for business education**

The demand for business education is high and expected to grow worldwide, despite rising tuition fees

(Durand & Dameron, 2017). The demand for HE in the Gulf region is likely to show similar trends (Hodgson & Clausen, 2012); nevertheless, the demand for business education is expected to decline in favor of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors (Krotova & Krotov, 2018). There are two factors behind such expectations. The first is attributed to the nationalization initiatives issued by GCC countries which aim at creating more jobs for nationals. The government sector, the first choice for business graduates, is saturated with national employees and efforts are being directed to STEM fields for more technical job opportunities for nationals (Krotova & Krotov, 2018). The endeavor of building a knowledge economy represents the second factor for steering nationals toward STEM education (Alfaki & Ahmed, 2017; Wiseman et al., 2014).

In addition to the shift to STEM majors, the rise and acceptance of online and distance programs in the region might add a new strong competitor in the Gulf HE market. As noted by Sebaaly (2018), the UAE and Saudi Arabia have taken substantial steps by accrediting local smart universities such as Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University and the Saudi Electronic University. A few years ago, the UAE Ministry of Education released a list of 105 accredited foreign online universities recommended for UAE students. This is in addition to open universities operating in the region, such as the Open Arab University in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Therefore, although there are quite a number of studies and articles that have addressed the challenges facing business education worldwide, there is no research that identifies such challenges in the Arab region, and particularly in the Gulf region. Thus, the purpose of the present article is to address the challenges facing business colleges in the GCC region from the deans’ perspective.

## **Methods**

### **Research instrument**

An online survey was conducted, based on the overview of business education in the Gulf region and the literature review of potential global and regional challenges presented in the preceding two sections. The questionnaire was developed to gather information about the challenges facing business education in the Gulf region, and consisted of two sections. The first section gathers demographic information about the business college, such as country, date of establishment, type of university, degree awarded in business,

and number of faculty and students in the college. The second section consists of three questions. The first question asks deans to rate the extent to which a list of 15 potential issues actually represents challenges to their respective colleges using a 7-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*lowest*) to 7 (*highest*). The second question aims to identify the business disciplines in which colleges are facing difficulty in hiring qualified faculty. The last question was an open-ended question asking deans to provide any other issues that they perceive as challenges to their colleges or GCC colleges in general.

### Data collection

The target population of this study consisted of business colleges in GCC countries. The target colleges were identified from the websites of Ministries of Education and the contact information of 87 business deans, including email(s) and phone number(s) where available, was collected. The survey was administered online and an invitation was sent via email to the 87 deans to complete the questionnaire. Three reminders were emailed to nonresponding deans at two-week intervals to improve the response rate. To increase the response rate, the nonresponding deans were also contacted via phone and encouraged to participate in the survey. After closing the survey, 47 completed questionnaires were obtained, representing a response rate of 54%. The list of responding colleges included the premier public universities from the six countries that constitute the biggest share of the business education market in the region.

### Data analysis

Due to the descriptive nature of the study and the moderate sample size used, the study relied mainly on descriptive statistical analysis. To further identify the top significant challenges, the one-sample *t* test was employed. Additionally, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used to investigate the differences among the colleges based on various characteristics, including size, type, age, and AACSB accreditation status.

## Results and discussion

### Respondent characteristics

The characteristics of the responding colleges are presented in Table 2. The profile of responding universities reflects a wide coverage of HE in the region, where 70% are from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, 38%

**Table 2.** Characteristics of responding colleges.

	Number (%)		Number (%)
Country		AACSB Accredited	
Saudi Arabia	16 (34)	Yes	11 (23)
United Arab Emirates	17 (36)	No	36 (77)
Oman	7 (15)	Type	
Bahrain	3 (7)	Public	18 (38)
Qatar	2 (4)	Private	29 (62)
Kuwait	2 (4)	Students	
Faculty		Less than 500	8 (17)
Less than 25	10 (21)	500–999	8 (17)
25–49	15 (32)	1,000–1,499	12 (25)
50–74	6 (13)	1,500–1,999	5 (11)
75–99	6 (13)	2,000 or more	14 (30)
100 or more	10 (21)	Establishment	
Degrees offered		Before 1980	10 (21)
Bachelor's	43 (92)	1980–1999	10 (21)
Master's	36 (77)	After 1999	27 (58)
Doctorate	6 (13)		

AACSB = Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

are from public universities, 62% are from private universities, and 58% of respondents represent new universities established in the past two decades. Moreover, around one third of the responding colleges are small, with up to 1,000 students, while 41% are large, with more than 2,000 students. The vast majority (92%) of respondents offer bachelor's degrees in business, more than three quarters offer master's degrees, while only 13% host doctoral programs in business. Of the 47 responding colleges, less than one quarter (23%) have AACSB accreditation.

### Major challenges

Table 3 presents a summary of the perceptions of the responding deans on the challenges facing their colleges. The one-sample *t* test results identified four significant challenges with mean scores above 4 (*p* values are less than .05). Results reported in the last column of Table 3 show that at least half of the responding deans perceive these four issues as major challenges to their respective colleges. The fifth and sixth issues concerning collaboration with industry and competition received mean scores above the average (4.19 and 4.06, respectively), but still not significant. Overall, the rest of the listed issues still represent challenges to around one quarter of the responding colleges, with average scores above 3.2.

To further understand how these challenges vary across universities and colleges with different attributes, the differences in the deans' perceptions of the top six challenges are investigated. Specifically, colleges are divided according to four attributes: university type (public vs. private), accreditation status (AACSB accredited vs. non-AACSB accredited), age (old, before 2000 vs. new, after 1999), and size (small, less than 1,000 students vs. large, at least

**Table 3.** Deans' perception of challenges facing GCC business colleges.

Challenge	M	SD	t	p	Percentage (above average)
International accreditation	4.60	1.963	2.080	.021*	60
Shortage of highly qualified faculty	4.53	1.780	2.049	.023*	57
Attracting good students	4.45	1.755	1.746	.044*	57
Relevance and impact of business research	4.39	1.542	1.721	.046*	50
Industry-college collaboration	4.19	1.583	0.829	.206	47
Competition and reputation	4.06	1.552	0.282	.390	36
Curricula with softer skills	3.98	1.542	-0.096	.538	46
Nationalization policies	3.85	1.876	-0.544	.706	43
Globalization	3.65	1.767	-1.335	.906	33
Employability of graduates	3.53	1.730	-1.855	.965	30
Financial sustainability	3.50	1.941	-1.747	.956	33
Relevance of teaching/learning resources	3.45	1.544	-2.457	.991	23
Demand for business education	3.43	1.778	-2.215	.984	28
Quality of business programs	3.26	1.567	-3.258	.999	23
Growth of nondegree education programs	3.24	1.816	-2.842	.997	26

GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council. The  $df = 46$  for all tests (note that the sample size is 47).

\* $p = .05$ .

**Table 4.** Differences in major challenges among GCC business colleges.

Rank	Challenge	Type			AACSB Accreditation			Age			Size		
		Public (n = 29)	Private (n = 18)	p	Yes (n = 11)	No (n = 36)	p	New (n = 27)	Old (n = 20)	p	Small (n = 16)	Large (n = 31)	p
1	International accreditation	4.28	4.79	.617	4.72	4.18	.467	4.85	4.25	.275	4.31	4.74	.531
2	Shortage of highly qualified faculty	4.72	4.41	.548	4.31	5.27	.114	4.44	4.65	.570	4.00	4.81	.144
3	Attracting good students	3.78	4.86	.057†	4.64	3.82	.171	4.67	4.15	.330	4.56	4.39	.758
4	Relevance and impact of business research	4.17	4.54	.371	4.26	4.82	.345	4.42	4.35	.946	4.00	4.60	.184
5	Industry-college collaboration	3.89	4.38	.226	4.03	4.73	.280	4.15	4.25	.956	4.44	4.06	.346
6	Competition and reputation	3.50	4.41	.065†	4.45	3.94	.287	4.33	3.70	.240	4.06	4.06	.963

AACSB = Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business; GCC = Gulf Cooperation Council.

† $p = .10$ .

1,000 students). Table 4 summarizes the comparison results using the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test.

### International accreditation

International accreditation represents the top challenge to colleges in the region regardless of their various attributes, as shown in Table 4. Overall, private, AACSB-accredited, new, and large colleges showed higher, but insignificant, perceptions of this challenge compared with their counterparts. As Heriot et al. (2009) indicate, international accreditation entails heavy financial and human capital costs. Moreover, as noted earlier, international accreditation necessitates significant internal changes in college practices and activities, including governance, planning, teaching and learning, and research productivity. Such changes are likely to face resistance in the status quo culture dominating Arab education (Alhazemi, Rees, & Hossain, 2013). Although public and old universities do not perceive such requirements as a challenge, they might represent a considerable challenge for private and new universities. Additionally, AACSB-accredited colleges still perceive international accreditation as a major challenge

compared with nonaccredited colleges. This might be justified by the expected work needed to fulfill the commitment to continuous improvement to maintain AACSB accreditation (Bieker, 2014; Farmer & Abdelsamad, 2014).

### Shortage of qualified faculty

Shortage of qualified business faculty was perceived as the second top challenge to surveyed colleges; see Table 3. As shown in Table 4, public, non-AACSB-accredited, old, and large colleges showed higher, but insignificant, concerns about this challenge. Generally, the dearth of qualified faculty is more acute in the GCC region (Jose & Chacko, 2017) than in the other parts of the world. According to Romani (2009), the vast majority of faculty are expatriates and it is unlikely that GCC universities will achieve academic autonomy in the near future without operating effective regional PhD programs. Furthermore, there is a growing demand for highly qualified business faculty with strong research profiles and working experience in internationally accredited colleges. Moreover, there is no tradition of visiting and adjunct faculty in the region either (Ur Rehman, 2015) and, as proposed by



Jose and Chacko (2017), the availability of part-time faculty should be expanded and facilitated. Thus, based on the current state of faculty demand and supply in the region, this challenge is expected to continue for the coming years.

The responding deans indicated that they have experienced difficulty in recruiting faculty in the following subject areas: accounting (64%), finance (51%), human resources (32%), management (30%), management information systems (26%), marketing (23%), and economics (11%). These figures are consistent with the global demand for accounting and finance faculty over the last decade (Boyle, Carpenter, & Hermanson, 2014; Plumlee & Reckers, 2014; Smith & Urquhart, 2018).

### ***Attracting good students, competition, and reputation***

Attracting good students to colleges of business is another challenge worth exploring, as perceived by business deans and shown in Table 3. Competition and reputation form another pertinent challenge. Obviously, these issues are perceived as highly challenging in private universities ( $ps = .057$  and  $.065$ , respectively), as shown in Table 4.

In GCC countries, the vast majority of national and a very small percentage of expatriate students join public universities, and the great majority of students at private universities are recruited from the local expatriate communities (Wilkins, 2011). This is in addition to a small percentage of international students attracted by a few universities in the UAE and Qatar (Bhandari & El-Amine, 2012). Typically, expatriate families send their children to universities in their home countries. However, with the political instability in some neighboring countries in the last few years, expatriate students have diverted to GCC private universities. Nonetheless, with the growing competition among private education providers in GCC countries, declining student enrollment created a potential challenge to private universities (Krotova & Krotov, 2018) and, as noted by Wilkins (2010), some universities facing such a situation had to give up the fight and close down.

Moreover, due to Arab social and cultural norms, high-performing secondary school graduates usually consider medicine and engineering as the top choices. Overall, these factors explain the challenge of attracting good students to business in general and to private universities in particular. Hence, with the growing competition in the higher education market in the region, business colleges are setting marketing

strategies to improve their image, enhance their reputation, and increase their chances of attracting more students. As part of these strategies, most of the business colleges in the GCC region are still keen for, and will continue seeking and maintaining, international accreditation despite all the concerns about the process.

### ***Relevance and impact of business research***

Impactful and relevant business research is the fourth major challenge to business education, as presented in Table 3. As shown in Table 4, there are no significant differences in the deans' perceptions of the degree of this challenge among colleges with various attributes. Nevertheless, private, nonaccredited, and large colleges are likely to perceive this challenge as more serious. The vast majority of GCC universities are teaching oriented, with less focus on research, which is reflected in the marginal presence in the international rankings. However, as Badran (2018) indicated, the priority of research in the Arab region is set on globally demanded fields: energy, water, and food security. This is consistent with the nature and reputation of public GCC universities appearing in the global university rankings. Almansour and Kempner (2017) showed that faculty members in Arab universities perceive motivation and rewards for conducting research and lack of a research infrastructure as among the major challenges in delivering the public good. Additionally, Kalliny and Benmamoun (2014) found that the Arab region has not received considerable attention in the top business journals and emphasize that data collection and synthesis of Arab business research represent major empirical challenges to conducting research in the region. Recently, Ryan and Daly (2019) identified several significant challenges of conducting business and social science research in the UAE, including lack of research support and cultural constraints. The 2013 AACSB accreditation standards (AACSB International, 2013) require that the candidate college should meet a certain degree of high-quality intellectual contributions of all types: discipline-based, applied, and learning and teaching. This is in addition to the expectations regarding the intellectual contributions of business faculty and faculty qualifications to meet the accreditation standards. Clearly, business colleges in teaching-oriented universities might find these standards challenging. Nevertheless, several studies highlight the impact of AACSB accreditation on the research performance of accredited colleges (Elliott, 2013; Ke, Lin, & Tsai, 2016; Miles, Franklin, Grimmer, & Heriot, 2015).

### **Industry–college collaboration**

The AACSB accreditation standards emphasize the importance of building and strengthening links between business colleges and the business community as part of their mission. Although it is not perceived as a major challenge by business deans and was ranked fifth in the list (see Table 3), it is still another challenge for HE at large and business education in particular in the Arab region (Almansour & Kempner, 2017). The activities conducted by business colleges, such as research and consultation, should have an impact on the business community. On the other hand, the business community should be involved in advisory boards, participate in college planning and curriculum design, provide internship opportunities for business students, and support faculty research. As McKellar (2018) pointed out, business engagement is no longer optional and therefore actions should be taken to promote links between business and universities. As presented in Table 4, there are no significant differences among colleges with various attributes. However, it seems that private, non–AACSB-accredited, and small colleges are more concerned about their links with business communities. Most of the public universities in the region have been operating for decades and hence have established ties with the surrounding community, in addition to the privilege of having greater access to government institutions compared with private and newly established colleges.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, deans have commonly cited the quality of education at school level, particularly in English and mathematics, as an additional challenge. English is the official instructional language in all business colleges in the Gulf region, while Arabic is the mother language and the language of instruction, particularly in public schools. As a result, English proficiency levels remain insufficient for university level, which therefore affects the educational outcomes of business students. The language barrier not only is a factor in developing and promoting oral and written communication skills, but also appears to be critical for students' performance in different quantitative courses (Yushau, 2009). Moreover, the mathematics preparation of entrants into colleges of business is a global challenge (Silva, Ghodsi, Hassani, & Abbasirad, 2016). In the GCC region, this challenge might be attributed to the quality of K–12 mathematics education, the quality of those entrants, or the language barrier. Consequently, such a challenge will only be addressed as part of a comprehensive reform of HE in the region.

### **Concluding remarks and recommendations**

In the present article, we have examined the challenges facing business colleges in the GCC region from the deans' perspective. To the best of our knowledge, the article is the first in the area that thoroughly discusses the challenges of business education in the Arab region and offers recommendations to overcome such challenges. In total, 47 of 87 deans participated in the study and identified the major challenges facing their respective colleges. The study identified international accreditation, shortage of highly qualified faculty, attracting good students, and the relevance and impact of business research as the top challenges facing GCC business education. Nevertheless, these four challenges are highly related to many other challenges that were perceived as less important by the responding deans. Hence, addressing these major challenges will contribute to putting GCC business education on the right track.

The study is informative for universities' administrations and key decision makers in policy making in ministries of Higher Education across the Arab world. The study opens up new horizons for professionally managing HE systems in general and business education systems in particular. To address the major challenges brought out by the study, we present several recommendations:

1. International accreditation is fast becoming a survival imperative. University management should take the utmost care in hiring deans for business colleges. In all international accreditations, deans play an important role. Deans heavily rely on management support and sponsorship to fulfill the requirements of the standards laid down by accreditation agencies and to implement their vision. They need a free hand in shaping colleges, which evolve under the leadership of deans. The dean's academic profile, experience of working in reputed universities, exposure to the international accreditation process, and futuristic vision are key ingredients in developing the college. Colleges develop when deans lead by example and faculty members look up to their deans for developing themselves. Second, deans located in the same geographical area should be allowed to interact more actively to figure out common problems and innovative solutions. The practice of deans interacting with their counterparts is highly uncommon in the Arab world because of limited empowerment. So it is recommended that business deans should be hired carefully and then

they should be empowered to run their colleges based on their capabilities. University management should have no or minimum interference in running colleges.

2. Attracting and retaining qualified faculty constitute continuing global challenges. But Arab universities are in a better position to attract qualified faculty if they offer them a conducive research environment, substantially enhanced research funding, and rethinking the teaching load policy. Creating separate research and teaching tracks and separating undergraduate and graduate teaching faculty, already being practiced by many universities, could also help. Leading Arab universities in collaboration with reputed universities in western countries could start dissertation-based doctoral degree programs. A very few universities offer doctoral degree programs in the Arab world as of now and many of them happen to be based on a no or a weak research dissertation. The offering of AACSB-approved postdoctoral bridge programs by a few leading universities in the region can also help address this challenge. Installation of a high-end information technology infrastructure and providing state-of-the-art teaching technologies in evaluation and correction will help attract and retain qualified faculty from across the globe.
3. Competition in business education among universities is becoming stiffer with every passing day and attracting motivated students is becoming a formidable challenge. As far as good and motivated students are concerned, Arab universities are competing with universities across the globe. This challenge can be addressed by entering into collaborations with reputed universities and having credit exchange arrangements. Branch campuses have addressed this challenge to some extent, but much remains to be done. Offering financial aid, teaching assistantships, and work permits can attract students from other countries.
4. Enhanced industry–institution interaction will solve multiple problems like impactful research, developing local studies for classroom discussions, and placing students for real-life work experience in internship programs. As indicated by Khalil (2015), effective internship programs allow students to apply their classroom-based learning to the real world by influencing their adaptability to the workplace, professionalism, communication, teamwork, and career potential. In addition to improving the employability of

business graduates, internship programs will help business colleges in developing partnerships with the business community, and consequently will enhance the impact of the various activities conducted by business colleges in the region. Public universities are doing well, but private universities are facing challenges in getting arrangements with firms in public and private sectors. The local governments also need to do their bit in this direction. Private universities do take up initiatives, but then nonacademic interests cause difficulty in the durability of such arrangements. Both institutions and industry need to engage with each other more often on platforms like stock markets and chambers of commerce. Business college faculty members could take the initiative in this direction and start addressing current business and economic problems through discussion forums and newspaper articles. More importantly, colleges should create communication and actively collaborate with stakeholders and the business community to contribute to the achievement of the national and global agenda, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and building a knowledge economy. It is not to be forgotten that this strategy will bring results in the long run and not immediately.

Business colleges are reported to have advisory boards, but an active and engaged advisory board with proper representation from local industry can do a lot of good to business education. Public universities are seemingly doing better, while private universities appear to be struggling to get engaged members on board. Keeping cultural stereotypes in view, it is advisable to engage young, enthusiastic, and successful entrepreneurs for private universities. Again, deans and faculty members are supposed to play an important role in creating an engaged and effective advisory board. An effective alumni board or association can also be of great help in promoting the college or university in the local community. The visibility of the college or university in events organized by the city administration or local governments can also go a long way in improving industry–institution interaction.

The challenges that are not ranked as highly by the business college deans include curricula with an emphasis on soft skills, localization policy, the impact of globalization on the local education sector, and the employability of graduates. They appear not to be particularly serious challenges as of now. These

challenges will require more intense attention as the region becomes more developed economically and starts attracting and hosting global businesses. Financial sustainability, relevance of teaching and learning resources, demand for business degree educational programs, and maintenance of high-quality business education are ongoing challenges and cannot be ignored or undermined at any point in time. These challenges again indicate that college deans should be hired with the utmost care to address these perennial challenges, along with the major challenges identified in the study.

The study has a number of limitations. First, although the vast majority of the premier public and private universities were among the responding institutions, the nonrespondents list comprised mainly newly established universities. The inclusion of the nonresponding colleges might reveal deeper insights into the challenges of the new private HE sector in the region. Second, the scope of this study is limited to GCC countries, which are quite homogenous on cultural, ethnic, and economic issues. The results will have limited generalizability across the Arab world. Third, the analysis is based on a self-reported questionnaire and this might affect the reliability of the findings.

Further research in identifying challenges in business education in GCC countries can take many promising directions. First, we collected responses from business deans; they could also be collected from university managers (chancellors/presidents/provosts/ chief academic officers) in future research studies. Second, business deans could be asked for solutions to deal with these challenges in another study. Third, this study could be extended across business deans in western, Asian, and European countries to provide a comparison of the major challenges to figure out the global challenges faced by business education.

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