



Extracurricular Activities: A Powerful Pedagogical Tool for Improving Saudi Students' Dispositions and Skills in Higher Education

Müfredat Dışı Etkinlikler: Yüksek Öğretimde Suudi Öğrencilerin Beceri ve Yeteneklerini Geliştirmek İçin Güçlü Pedagojik Bir Araç

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify how extracurricular activities (ECAs), is a powerful pedagogical tool for improving female Saudi students' dispositions and skills in higher education. It reports the impact of ECAs on the achievement of Saudi female university students. Furthermore, this study illustrates how culturally acceptable ECAs can be developed to supplement academic programs with reasonable levels of cost and effort. This mixed-methods study involved semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires across three ECAs. The synthesis results indicate that these Saudi Arabian female undergraduates showed improvements in their communication skills, speaking and writing, and psychological well-being. Saudi policymakers and faculty members should consider how to include ECAs for female students as part of the university environment to support and capitalize upon the learning that happens beyond the conventional classroom.

Keywords: Academic achievement, extracurricular activities, higher education, improving learning; Saudi female students.

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, müfredat dışı etkinliklerin kadın Suudi öğrencilerin yükseköğretimdeki beceri ve yeteneklerini geliştirmede ne kadar güçlü pedagojik bir araç olduğunu belirlemektir. Çalışma, müfredat dışı etkinliklerin kadın Suudi öğrencileri üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, akademik programları desteklemek amacıyla makul bir fiyat ve çaba ile kültürel olarak uygun müfredat dışı etkinliklerinin nasıl geliştirilebileceğini de örneklendirmektedir. Karma yöntem kullanılan bu çalışmada, veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme, odak gurup görüşmesi ve de üç farklı müfredat dışı etkinlikle ilgili uygulanan anketle toplanmıştır. Analiz sonuçları, Suudi kadın üniversite öğrencilerinin iletişim, konuşma ve yazma becerileri ile psikolojik durumlarında gelişme olduğunu göstermiştir. Suudi fakülte üyeleri ve eğitimcilerin, Suudi kadın öğrenciler için sınıf dışında gerçekleşen öğrenimi desteklemek amacıyla müfredat dışı etkinlikleri üniversite ortamına entegre etmeleri önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akademik başarı, müfredat dışı etkinlikler, yükseköğretim, öğrenimi geliştirme, Suudi kadın öğrenciler.

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1. Introduction

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) are considered as important physical activities at the educational level, but ECAs are not only confined to the physical activities; it can appear in various forms such as reading books, writing newsletters, playing indoor games, critical discussions of academic material, and many other activities. These

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extracurricular activities can serve as powerful pedagogical tools for improving language skills and academic performance. ECAs can contribute to student success as effective academic and linguistic tools by engaging students in language practices during discussions and indoor games, etc. Reading, writing, and discussions can help improve linguistic skills, as well as academic performance of the students. These benefits of ECAs reveal that ECAs can be a powerful pedagogical tool for improving Saudi students' dispositions and skills in higher education, especially for women in Saudi Arabia.

Women in Saudi Arabia face some social and cultural obstacles when it comes to extracurricular activities (ECAs), especially those related to physical activities. Women do not have same opportunities to express their skills and abilities; therefore, they show low physical performance as compared to males. According to Abu-Zaid and Altinawi (2014), women in Saudi Arabia do not have equal opportunities for education in various disciplines such as law and engineering, until recently they could participate in extracurricular activities only in private schools. ECAs include physical and intellectual abilities, which are not included in the academic curriculum. ECAs have been recognized as essential part of the academic system in order to enhance the students' academic and intellectual abilities. According to Shulruf (2010), Saudi Arabia's higher education system offers limited opportunities for women to participate in ECAs, as compared to the colleges and universities in the western countries (Shulruf, 2010).

Many administrators and educators involved in higher education believe that the value of ECAs for male and female students are similar in terms of contributions to health and lifestyle, personal and psychological development, and improved academic achievement and effort (Shulruf, 2010). Female university students in Saudi Arabia need similar culturally responsive opportunities to exert their energy and talents and to use them as psychological support to improve their general well-being. Currently, most higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia lack access to exercise facilities and other forms of physical activities for women. Offering alternative venues for ECAs in higher education institutions can help female students achieve better academic performance. This paper aims to identify how powerful ECA is as a pedagogical tool for improving female Saudi students' dispositions and skills in higher education. The first section of the study introduces the purpose and nature of the study and explains what research questions will be addressed in the study. The next section describes relevant research material and literature. Later, the study addresses the methodology section and results. The methodology section provides complete information about methods, tools, technologies, and approaches. The article ends with a discussion and conclusion.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to identify the importance of ECAs for female Saudi students. It focuses on the effects of ECAs on female students' learning, involvement in ECAs, its impact on their academic progress, and involvement in social activities. The purpose of this paper is also to analyze the critical issues that affect the usefulness of ECAs on Saudi female students' learning and engagement with academic life.

1.2. Research Questions

The two research questions in this study are:

1. How do ECAs affect Saudi female students' learning?
2. What are the critical issues that affect the usefulness of ECAs on Saudi female students' learning and engagement with academic life?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Extracurricular Activities (ECAs)

ECAs are institution-sponsored activities that are external to the core academic curriculum (Shulruf, 2010). ECA refers to an activity offered outside school hours yet within the college/university setting. Various research studies have demonstrated strong relationships between ECAs and retention in programs and subsequent cognitive, social, and personality development (Scoggen, 1984). More recent research (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005) discusses the possible mediators and moderators of extracurricular activity participation on adolescent development. The review by Feldman and Matjasko (2005) indicates that the associations between school-based activity participation and these outcomes are mostly positive. Another study by Thompson, Clark, Walker, and Whyatt (2013) highlighted that students' experience of higher education comprises not only their academic studies but also their extracurricular activities. Their findings from a mixed-methods research project, explore in detail the nature and value of extracurricular activity engagement

and the significance of institutional schemes encouraging extracurricular activity engagement, from a UK student perspective. Thompson et al., (2013) reveal that many students are actively engaged in a variety of extracurricular activities and recognise their value for employability. Another recent study results show that the peer social networks of adolescents overlap significantly with the particular types of extracurricular activities in which they participate over time (Mahoney, 2014). Processes of selection and socialization that include the use of social aggression appear to regulate changes in activity membership. When both the individual and his/her social network participate in extracurricular activities, the risk of early school dropout is diminished significantly.

Other studies (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Holloway, 2002; Wadley & Williford, 2008) confirm that participation in ECA has a positive impact on the retention of post-secondary students.

Barker and Gump (1964) discuss ECAs ensure involvement in adult civic groups. ECAs assist in accommodating the needs of returning students, strong study skills, and psychological acumen. Wadley and Williford (2008) state that stayers (returning students) participate more in ECAs than leavers (non-returning students). It is also stated that the students who engage in ECAs have higher rates of retention, better GPAs, and good standing (Wang & Shiveley, 2009). Thus, ECAs accommodate the needs of returning students; those entering their second or third year will need strong study skills and psychological acumen to succeed.

Field and Barber (2010) show how participation in ECAs in the educational settings ensures a sense of achievement, attachment, high academic aspiration, and less risky behavior. ECAs provide a way to express talent outside the classroom (Wadley & Williford, 2008). ECAs in some universities include non-credit internships, service learning opportunities, and research projects. Bucknavage and Worrell (2005) investigate the relationship between ECAs and students' outcome variables, such as academic achievement, self-concept, locus of control, delinquency, etc. Hood, Craig, and Ferguson (1992) examine the effect of non-academic activities (e.g., work, watching television, and socializing) and reveal how they are helpful for academic achievement. ECAs include non-credit internships, service learning opportunities, expertise, and employment attributes for the extracurricular engagement, and they ensure life satisfaction and academic benefits (Reinders et al., 2005; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). Therefore, extracurricular work experiences contribute to students' experiential background, practical expertise, and employment attributes.

2.2. Role of ECAs for Marginalized Students

Participation in ECAs can play an important role in involving such marginalized female students in the social and academic activities (Brown, 2000). ECAs have a significant role in eliminating marginalization and stigmatization of female students of minority groups. Poverty and illiteracy declined in 1938 after the discovery of oil. UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) ranked it about 0.03% (Saudi Ministry of Higher Education 2010), which resulted in a redefinition of education, especially the female education. Traditional ECAs like sports and physical activities are not encouraged for females, in Saudi Arabia, except the football team at Effat University in Jeddah.

The researcher, a Saudi educated in North America, served multiple roles in the academic context – as a teacher, mentor, and academic advisor – and observed a number of weaknesses in first-year female students such as poor English communication skills; lack of motivation, poor social skills, a weaker level of focus on goals, and poor time-management skills. Studies, however, have shown a link between ECA participation, academic progress, and personal development (Blomfield & Barber 2010).

3. Method

The mixed-methods approach was used to establish general claims and to enrich the descriptions of these young female students' experiences and development. The researcher designed activities during a two-year appointment at the private university. First year ECAs include participating in a book club and a readers and writers club (see Appendix A), newsletter, blogging. In the following academic year (2011-2012), the researcher introduced a spring camp as an ECA involving a group of 100 to 120 students (see Appendix B). The students in their ECAs designed various outdoor activities such as jogging within the female campus, and indoor competitions such as puzzles and Scrabble.

This study used a questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire assists in identifying the ideas, experiences, and issues (Bulawa & Mhlauli, 2012). A qualitative approach was employed, based on an interpretive paradigm using semi-structured interviews and focus group results. According to Radnor (2002) interpretive research develops a better understanding about perceptions of research participants about this world. This develops understanding without convincing situations artificially for research purposes (Punch 2009, p. 117).

3.1. Sampling Method, Sample Size and Participants

A criteria-based purposeful sampling approach was used in this study. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggest a criteria-based approach for sample units with particular features and criteria with central themes. For this study, a private university in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia was selected (where the medium of instruction was English, and the researcher was teaching several courses). Approximately 200 first-year students taking Writing and Research, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Professional Development and Competencies, Written Communication and Islamic Studies determined the scope of the study.

Out of 200 female students, about 100 participants, undergraduate students from five different colleges were selected. All of the participants filled out the research questionnaire. Out of these 100 female students, 19 volunteered for a semi-structured interview. The remaining students participated only in the questionnaire.

The researcher also formed two focus groups including five students each to identify themes about ECAs and learning experiences. The students (mainly full-time freshmen and sophomores) were mostly Saudi, but there were also a few international students (e.g., Pakistani, Indian, and Palestinian). Their ages range from 18 to 27.

3.2. Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through questionnaire (see Appendix B), focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. The research questionnaire contains both open and close-ended questions in order to collect reliable and cost effective data (Cohen, Manion, & Morris, 2007). The questionnaire was pilot-tested using 30 volunteer students. Using questionnaire ensures clarity of approach and documenting of ideas more effectively (Bell, 1996). Two graduate students administered the questionnaire over two weeks at the end of the semester prior to the final examinations and after the closing of the academic year activities. A semi-structured protocol enabled the interviewer to identify an overall framework of themes to be explored. The interview consisted of questions about how beneficial extracurricular activities were for them and whether their communication skills improved as a result of participating in ECAs.

The researcher met each participant individually for approximately 30 minutes. The interview responses were used to reframe the themes around the two research questions (Nigel, 2010). Two focus groups with five students each were asked about their perceptions and opinions about the advantages, disadvantages, difficulties of ECAs and ways to improve students' involvement. Questions were asked in an interactive group setting where the participants contributed to the development of more questions and themes (Greenbaum, 2000). The discussions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher after the sessions in order to document the responses promptly and accurately. The researcher analyzed the transcripts and looked for common themes about the importance of ECAs in developing students' self-esteem.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis Themes

The themes for the analysis focused on the significance of extracurricular activities for improving the academic performance of women; the importance of extracurricular activities for physical well-being of women; specific extracurricular activities for women; and what type of activities can be used in higher education for women. The researcher, the book club organizer, and the newsletter creator and editor analyzed and identified major themes. Each transcript or information source was read several times to identify recurrent themes related to the research questions. After the themes had been subjected to second-phase coding, they were grouped and summarized in charts; the results were then analyzed and interpreted.

The data were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed. Data triangulation was achieved by including samples of the students' work and projects, as well as the researcher's notes on the students' performances. In addition, two focus group interviews with the students were carried out to elaborate on the findings of the questionnaire (N=100) and interviewer responses were used (n = 19). Anecdotal comments written by students were recorded to support the triangulation.

The quantitative data collected from the spring camp, analyzed through Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS) software. Likert-type scale with Oppenheim's (1992) method was used to discuss frequencies and percentages of the respondents' levels of agreement and disagreement. Chi-square tests were used to determine the data distribution. The data analysis is presented in tables of frequencies and percentages (see Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 below).

4.2. Findings and Results

The findings were based on the interview, questionnaire, focus groups, and document analyses to reflect how ECAs can assist the improvement in health and academic achievement of women. The analyses also reveal that participation in ECAs also played a major role in eliminating the problem of marginalization and stigmatization, with the involvement in academic and social activities.

Participation in reading activity in a book club, writing activities in newsletters, and social involvement in spring camp allowed all the students to improve their language, pedagogical, and academic skills.

4.2.1. Questionnaire Analysis

The questionnaire helps in analysis and evaluation of the data needed to answer to the research questions. The questions were related directly to identify the impact of the extracurricular activities on the life and academic performances of women. The results of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the 52 respondents from the spring camp believed that this ECA improved or enhanced their personality, experiences, skills, knowledge, leadership teamwork skills, energy, motivation, and interests (Table 1). In response to the research question about the proficiency of English, many respondents stated that there was a major improvement in their language proficiency. The questionnaire reflected the critical issue of the usefulness of the ECAs on the academic life of Saudi female students.

The question related to the level of participation in ECAs and the newsletter; why these women participated in university newsletter also assisted in identifying how ECAs affects Saudi female students' learning and what critical issues affect the usefulness of ECAs on Saudi female students' learning and engagement in academic life. The questionnaire also revealed that respondents did not experience improvement in planning and organization. Most participants strongly agreed that the camp activities were related to their academic studies (Table 2).

Table 1

Statistics of the Acquisition Effects of Participating in the Spring Camp (n=52)

| Statement | Response | | | | Mean | χ^2 |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------|----------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | | |
| The activity subject has positively affected my personality. | 42.3% | 51.9% | 5.8% | 0 | 3.37 | 18.5* |
| The activity subject has positively affected my experiences and skills. | 53.8% | 40.4% | 5.8% | 0 | 3.48 | 19.2* |
| The activity has contributed to fighting boredom and academic routine. | 65.4% | 32.7% | 1.9% | 0 | 3.64 | 31.4* |
| The camp has shown students' potential energy. | 71.2% | 28.8% | 0 | 0 | 3.71 | 9.3* |
| The camp had a great influence on raising my spirits and improving my mood. | 80.8% | 15.4% | 3.8% | 0 | 3.77 | 53.7* |
| I have acquired the basic skills for leading the activity in the future. | 50.0% | 38.5% | 9.6% | 0 | 3.37 | 32.8* |
| I have benefited from the activity subject in the field training. | 48.1% | 38.5% | 3.8% | 0 | 3.25 | 20.1* |
| I have difficulty in activity planning and organisation, even after studying the subject. | 9.7% | 19.2% | 44.2% | 0 | 2.12 | 13.4* |
| The programs presented in the camp activity have enriched my knowledge and have developed my spirit of dialogue. | 53.8% | 40.4% | 5.8% | 0 | 3.48 | 19.2* |
| The camp has a clear effect in terms of working with a team spirit. | 71.2% | 26.9% | 1.9% | 0 | 3.69 | 38.3* |
| The activity subject implants ideas and values in an interesting and easy way. | 59.6% | 34.6% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 3.52 | 47.2* |

*Denotes significant at 0.01.

Most of the participants reacted positively to the question "How did you find the experience in relation to improving your social skills?". The students' participation in ECAs provided opportunities to showcase their talents in drawing, designing, communicating and managing social interactions. It also allowed them to produce an informative collection of relevant anecdotes. These are grouped into four categories: empowerment, supplementation of academic studies, improvement of academic skills, and improvement of social skills.

Table 2
Suitability of the Activity Subject (n=52)

| Statement | Response | | | | Mean | χ^2 |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------|----------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | | |
| The inclusion of the activity subject in the camp activity is a good idea. | 61.5% | 17.3% | 15.45% | 5.8% | 3.45 | 38.6** |
| There is a close relationship between the camp and the school activity subject. | 61.5% | 36.5% | 1.9% | 0 | 3.60 | 27.9** |
| The idea of infusing activities by students in a practical and effective way is excellent. | 65.4% | 28.8% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 3.58 | 54.6** |
| The division of the activity work within the groups was fair. | 53.9% | 40.4% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 3.46 | 42.6** |
| The students' distribution in the camp was according to their tendencies and desires. | 53.8% | 40.4% | 5.8% | 0 | 3.48 | 19.2** |
| The course activities included all students. | 55.8% | 32.7% | 11.5% | 0 | 3.44 | 15.3** |
| The concept of the school activity was correctly applied. | 40.4% | 44.2% | 11.5% | 3.8% | 3.21 | 25.69** |
| Time was sufficient for all camp sections. | 53.8% | 28.8% | 13.5% | 3.8% | 3.33 | 29.69** |
| The applied activities were cost-effective. | 30.8% | 36.5% | 26.9% | 5.8% | 2.92 | 11.23** |
| The timing of the school activity subject on Sunday, which is the same day of the university activity, was suitable. | 25.0% | 30.8% | 17.3% | 26.9% | 2.54 | 2.00 |
| The camp location was suitable. | 21.2% | 32.7% | 25.0% | 21.2% | 2.54 | 1.84 |
| The camp included all types of activities. | 61.5% | 38.5% | 0 | 0 | 3.62 | 2.76 |
| The activity book was suitable and inclusive. | 19.2% | 28.8% | 26.9% | 25.0% | 2.42 | 1.01 |

** = 0.005

The answers to the questions “What are the advantages they gained as a result of participating, and how do they feel that there are academic benefits to their participation?” revealed the findings related to how ECAs affect Saudi female students' learning and what critical issues affect the usefulness of ECAs on Saudi female students' learning and engagement with academic life. The quantitative responses (Table 3) indicated teacher–student interactions in the spring camp. The Chi-square results show statistically significant differences between the distribution of opinions and a random distribution of ratings. In addition, students reported that (a) activities aligned with their tendencies and desires, (b) they included all students, (c) time allocated was sufficient, and (d) the concept of the school activities was correctly applied. Applied activities were cost-effective, suitable, and inclusive and students exhibited a positive attitude.

Table 3
Interaction among the Concerned Parties involved in the Spring Camp (n=52)

| Statement | Response | | | | Mean | χ^2 |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------|----------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | | |
| The teacher interacted with you and provided support when necessary. | 44.2% | 48.1% | 5.8% | 1.9% | 3.45 | 37.5** |
| The interaction and attendance of visitors to the camp led to more efficiency in the camp. | 63.5% | 34.6% | 1.9% | 0 | 3.62 | 29.57** |
| The administration helped in the basics of the activity and in the exertion of best efforts. | 23.1% | 21.2% | 28.8% | 26.9% | 2.40 | 0.77 |
| The stipend honorarium presented to participants was suitable in terms of quality and value. | 61.5% | 34.6% | 1.9% | 1.9% | 3.56 | 51.84 |

** = 0.005

The participants stated that participation in the newsletter had a positive impact on their academic performance, and they want to participate in the activities of the newsletter as it enables them to enhance their activities and academic performances. The participants strongly agreed that the camp activities, the peer interactions, and the visitors to the camp constituted to a more efficient and effective experience (Table 4). They also strongly agreed that activities were

interesting and enjoyable. The camp participation was also very effective for all educational institutions at the end of every academic year. This consensus was a reflection of the fact that the camp had a profound effect in terms of attracting visits by the other students on campus. As a result, the opinions of the female students regarding the school activity subject throughout the camp were positive.

Table 4
Female Students' Opinions on the Camp and the Activity (n=52)

| Statement | Response | | | | Mean | χ^2 |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------|----------|
| | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | | |
| I initially expected that the ECAs would be boring before I began. | 11.5% | 32.7% | 28.8% | 26.9% | 2.29 | 5.40 |
| I considered the ECAs interesting and enjoyable after I began to study them. | 65.4% | 25.0% | 7.7% | 1.9% | 3.10 | 51.23** |
| My activity was a reflection of my preference. | 59.6% | 32.7% | 7.7% | 0 | 3.52 | 21.03** |
| My role was effective in establishing the camp. | 61.5% | 32.7% | 1.9% | 3.8% | 3.52 | 49.40** |
| The camp advertisement had a significant effect in attracting visitors. | 71.2% | 25.0% | 3.8% | 0 | 3.67 | 36.90** |
| I cooperated with my group in establishing the camp. | 69.2% | 25.0% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 3.63 | 61.08** |
| The camp concluded in the form that I wished. | 44.2% | 44.2% | 9.6% | 1.9% | 3.31 | 31.38** |
| All students should participate in the camp. | 48.1% | 32.7% | 11.5% | 7.7% | 3.21 | 22.31** |
| The camp should happen at the end of every academic year. | 73.1% | 21.2% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 3.65 | 68.77** |
| I would like to see the camp generalised to all other educational institutions. | 75.0% | 19.2% | 3.8% | 1.9% | 3.67 | 73.07** |
| The camp sections were positive, amusing, and enjoyable. | 65.4% | 32.8% | 1.9% | 0 | 3.63 | 31.42** |

** = 0.005

Some responses reflect improvement while some reveals less improvement. However, a majority (67%) of the students felt that the ECAs had made their academic life more meaningful.

4.2.2. Interview Analysis

The analysis of interview reveals that there is a lack of participation of students in the extracurricular activities. Many respondents replied that they like extracurricular activities, and it has an impact on their academic performance. Involvement in different activities was a good experience for the students. The students' answers to why they participated in the university newsletter identified how significant their participation was because they felt good, and it improved their writing and linguistic abilities. According to one respondent, she felt it would be great to have an article written in the first campus newsletter, and she can even include it in her CV. Another student who participated both in the book club and the newsletter highlighted the community-building aspect of ECAs as it provided her with an opportunity to learn and involve in the activities as what she have read, heard, seen, and learned in general. The student who was most interested in ECAs reiterated her emphasis on expression and skill-building. This clearly reveals that ECAs have a positive impact on the reading and writing skills of students. Improvement in reading and writing skills is directly associated with the improvement in the pedagogical skill for higher education. In Saudi Arabia, pedagogical skills result in creating various problems for the learners due to linguistic problems. One of the students replied that skills such as writing newsletters are very effective as it allowed me "to express my thoughts and reach out to other students in order to improve my professional writing skills..."

Another effective skill tested for the participants was book club participation. Many students revealed their positive perspective for the participation in these activities. It is one of the most effective approaches in order to ensure that

participants generally felt happy about their experiences, and it resulted as a positive impact on them. These students actively participated in the ECAs, and they considered it effective as book club not only enhanced their reading skills, but also provided them with a chance for involvement in critical thinking and critical discussions. One of the interviewees replied that book club participation also had a positive impact on her career development. Many respondents revealed that ECAs improved their academic, linguistic, and personal skills. This resulted in adding a positive aspect to their CV. Participation in ECAs made them more attractive to employers. One of the respondents replied that participation in ECAs was also very effective for her as it developed a high level of improvement. Another respondent accepted that it helped her in improving her GPA. When the students were asked what their level of participation was and how many times they wrote for the newsletter (as well as whether it made a difference to participate), their answers varied, but were generally enthusiastic. When asked if she felt there were academic benefits to her participation, a trilingual student who taught herself to speak two languages (English and Japanese) in addition to her mother tongue (Arabic) said that they felt increase in self-confidence. These short narratives elicited from the focus groups, and the semi-structured interviews regarding student participation in the newsletter and book club strongly indicate the positive impact of the ECAs on female students.

5. Discussion

The results of the questionnaire, interview and observation of focused groups clearly reflect that ECAs play a major role for the improvement of academic performance of Saudi students and also assist in resolving the critical issues that affect their learning and engagement with academic life. Involvement in the ECAs such as book club, newsletter, and spring camp allowed enhancing involvement with the academic learning. With the participation in academic activities such as writing newsletter, the female students had a chance to reflect their social and academic issues and the problems they faced. With the activity of writing newsletters, these female students also got the chance to reflect on various other social, ethical, and religious factors. ECAs can also be said to be favorable for the personal development of female undergraduate students.

The newsletter motivated students to greater personal fulfillment through creative processes; they promoted the idea that 'my work has value' (Tan et al. 2007, p. 235). The results also demonstrated their keen interest in generating a tangible product – the newsletter that became a part of the campus culture. Tan et al., (2007) indicated that in active learning, students become more engaged when the professor is a facilitator, mentor, and coach and when students are evaluated according to their problem-solving skills. The literature supports feedback in this study relating ECAs to cognitive, social, personality development in adulthood, academic results, psychological benefits, and better interpersonal skills.

The participation in book club also enhanced the reading abilities of female students. This activity played a major role by providing opportunities for these female students to increase their vocabulary, enhance their knowledge, improve the process of critical thinking, and writing skills. McCarthy's (2000) conclusion supports that students participating in ECAs have higher GPAs and significantly lower absenteeism (p. 411). Another study found that 'participation in ECA enhances both the intellectual and social development of students' (Rombokas, 1995, p. 21). Olszewski-Kubilius and Lee (2004 a, b) and Bucknavage and Worrell (2005) also supported that ECAs contributed to students' academic achievement.

Participation in the spring camp also assisted in bringing improvement in the social participation of these female Saudi students to actively participate in social involvement. Analysis of data reflected positive self-beliefs, enhanced leadership, responsibility, and a positive socialization process. Jamal (2012) stated, 'Through ECAs students developed goals, objectives...responsibility, sharing, being committed... team spirit' (p. 14). The spring camp was also very effective in helping students understand that how their social roles and involvement in social participation can have a positive impact on learning. For example, the spring camp assisted in involving students from marginalized groups. Marginalized students generally face major problems in academic achievement due to lack of their language proficiency, emotional and psychological problems due to exclusion and marginalization, which affect their academic performance.

The inclusion of all these students assists in improving the academic performance by developing a strong social connection. Holloway's (2002) findings also provide that ECAs support students by 'maintaining, enhancing, and strengthening the student-school connection' (p. 82). The results and findings clearly reveal that ECAs have a major role in enhancing Saudi female students' learning. Participation in reading through a book club, writing activities through newsletters assist in enhancing the pedagogical skills of the majority of students. Reading, writing, and speaking through participation in a book club, newsletter, and spring camp, respectively, has a major role in enhancing

language and academic learning of all students. Thus, ECAs is a very powerful pedagogical tool for improving the disposition and skills of Saudi Female students in higher education.

Research also assisted in identifying the critical issues that are affecting the usefulness of ECAs on Saudi female students' learning and engagement with academic life. These critical issues include problems of social, economic, ethnic, religious, and gender discriminations at the higher education level in Saudi Arabia. The majority of female students show poor academic performance, which is affected by the exclusion in society and exclusion in the academic context. Due to social, cultural, religious, and gender biases, female participants are not allowed to participate in ECAs. The study has demonstrated that ECAs have a positive impact: Hollrah (1999) confirms that ECAs allow students to plan and use their time wisely and efficiently. As indicated by Darling (2005), ECAs foster favorable attitudes toward school and educational aspirations.

The literature indicates ECAs benefits during academic life and career. The findings agree with Jamal's (2012) study of medical students at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia:

The participants acknowledged...communication and managerial skills, teamwork.... They affirmed...respect, sharing, accepting responsibilities, and confidence,.... ECAs promoted a holistic approach...

Otto (1975) and Spady (1970) support the effectiveness of ECAs in later life through improved communication skills, speaking and writing abilities, and psychological well-being. Universities in Saudi Arabia should implement ECAs through effective management proper planning, and must offer workshops and small-group activities for active learning (Stuart et al. 2009). Brown (2000) indicated that ECAs may be particularly important for marginalized or stigmatized students of minority groups. Saudi female students face several restrictions in their society; participation in ECAs ensures active involvement in society.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, ECAs have a positive impact on the academic performance and linguistic skills of the female participants in Saudi Arabia. It also resulted in improving their skills and abilities. Future research on this topic should include a larger sample as this study was limited to a specific group at one university, as well as focusing more on the relationships between gender, academic achievement, and ECAs in Saudi Arabia. It would be beneficial to carry out a longitudinal study to follow up the subsequent life and work achievements of the participants in this study. The three specific ECAs activities included in this study – a book club, a newsletter, and a spring camp in the current study, – and they helped them the participants achieving academic excellence by improving their social, communication, and leadership and linguistic skills.

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Appendix A: Readers and Writers Club (RWC)

The main purpose of the RWC was to encourage students' creative writing in various genres (e.g., poetry, prose, memoirs, and non-fiction), through workshops, and reading and discussing works of English literature. The club gave students the opportunity to enhance English language skills, vocabulary, creativity, writing skills, etc. Club members met on a weekly basis. Activities included:

- students bringing in original work to be critiqued by club members
- vocabulary-building activities
- reading and discussing literature from various genres
- discussing effective techniques used by professional writers

Students were encouraged to write in the genre(s) that interested them and were not required to write in a specific genre if they were not comfortable doing so. All students who successfully finished the prep year were welcome to join the club.

Appendix B: Spring Camp

The spring camp idea was an integral part of the course reading. The chapter was part of the textbook that is mandatory for pre-service teachers. The researcher, who performed the action research on the effects of ECA, tested how moving theory into practice would affect students' learning. Spring camp was a weekday camp involving activities like games, puzzles, outdoor jogging and games, and educational contests and competitions. Questionnaire items around ECA are shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

Questionnaire

- How did you find the experience in relation to improving your English proficiency?
- Why did you participate in the university newsletter?
- How did you find the experience in relation to improving your social skills?
- What was the level of your participation? How many times did you write for the newsletter?
- What are the advantages you gained as a result of participating?
- Do you feel that there are academic benefits to your participation?
- Did it make any difference to participate in the newsletter?
- If you did not participate in the newsletter, why?
- Would you like to participate in a workplace or school newsletter in the future? Why?

Interview Responses

Students' answers to why they participated in the university newsletter identified how significant their participation was:

Interviewee #1... I felt it would be great to have an article written by me in the 'first' campus newsletter... I was so happy ... 'It gave me wings'. I even included this newsletter article in my CV.

Another student who participated in both the book club and the newsletter highlighted the community-building aspect of ECAs:

I have always wanted to be involved in things...I always...benefit others by what I have read, heard, seen, and learned in general.

Interviewee #2, the student who was most interested in ECAs, reiterated her emphasis on expression and skill building:

I participated ...to express my thoughts and reach out to other students... to improve my professional writing skills...

The answers regarding the advantages that participants felt that they had gained as a result of participating show how ECA empowered students. For instance,

Interviewee #3 found that:

The book club made me so enthused to read and present what I read....

Interviewee#4: *When I applied for a summer job...interview committee was impressed with my participation in the book club...*

Interviewee #5: *I always thought that only my GPA would make me attractive to employers... participation in ECAs made me more employable....*

Interviewee#4,a participant in the newsletter said: *Definitely, the more I write the better my English will become....*

Interviewee#7:*It has actually helped me a bit,...However, I didn't sense a high level of improvement (as expected)...*

Most book club participants ($n = 87$) agreed that they were more excited to read than before, which improved their academic performance.

Interviewee #8: *I go online to find good reads based on readers' picks and recommendations It's because of the book club that I became better... I read and zoom...*

When asked how they found the experience in relation to improving their social skills, students' answers were varied. One student highlighted the importance of feedback:

Interviewee #8: *...it felt good to see people giving feedback on what I wrote.*

Another student suggested that it helped boost her confidence:

Interviewee #3: *It has actually boosted my confidence ...to speak up...*

Other students were less positive:

Interviewee #9: *The newsletter ... The readers and writers club nor the book club didn't have a lot of activities on campus....to meet new people or socialise in order to write articles for it.*

Interviewee #5: *I might feel better or more excited some days, but overall I am not willing to share input with other classmates.*

When students were asked what their level of participation was and how many times they wrote for the newsletter (as well as whether it made a difference to participate), their answers varied but were generally enthusiastic.

Interviewee #1: *I wrote just one article, ... because I was not informed ... If I had been informed, I would have definitely written an article and continued to do so in XXX newsletters.*

Interviewee #2: *If I were to put it on a scale of 1-10, I would say 7. I participated as much as I could. I even started a new topic for discussion and I visited the online version almost every day.*

Interviewee 7 of the first newsletter article said:

I moved gradually from writing one article, doing one survey about the food services, arranging one news press (Google conference in Riyadh),

Interviewee #4: *I did not participate in the second newsletter...not because of a lack of interest. I just wasn't informed about it, or else I would have definitely participated.*

Interviewee #2: *It did actually, for me at least... I got this feeling of being involved in something that might have helped others and benefited them. I had my tiny little voice heard in a tiny little way.*

Interviewee #6: *Yes, when I recall the academic and social benefits, I can say that my participation in my university's first newsletter did make a difference....*

Interviewee #3: *Yes, there are benefits. I have included this participation in my CV...*

Interviewee #4: *Yes, I do. Now that I think of it, I may let the instructors involved consider me again....*

Interviewee #9: *I honestly do not know... I was happy and honoured ...*

When asked if she felt there were academic benefits to her participation, a trilingual student who taught herself to speak two languages (English and Japanese) in addition to her mother tongue (Arabic) said:

Interviewee #7: *As a freshman/sophomore at that time, I feel that participating did help grow my self-confidence ... I was able to express my views regarding my university and bring them out to the public.*

Other students said:

Interviewee #2 (originally from India): *I am a person who likes to be involved...So being a part of it is nice... However, I did not realize any personal benefits or advantages....*

Interviewee #8 (from the book club): *I am sure there is some use of things I do in my life, but as of now I just feel that it is more fun than anything else.*

Students' answers also varied with regard to future participation in a workplace or school newsletter:

Interviewee #1: *Yes, it sounds interesting... I have the opportunity to become as creative as possible...I will be considered a responsible and active person!*

Interviewee #6: *Yes... I love writing...I love putting things together, solving puzzles, and making things make sense, not just to me but to everyone around me.*

These short narratives elicited from the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews regarding student participation in the newsletter and book club strongly indicate the positive impact of the ECAs on female students.