

Review research paper

ARE EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IMPORTANT FOR GENERAL FOUNDATION PROGRAMME STUDENTS?

Zainab Salim Al Ajmi¹, Suleiman Rashid Al Adawi²

¹Military Technological College, Sultanate of Oman

²Middle East College, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Abstract. *Extracurricular activities (ECAs) play a vital role in shaping students' lives. These activities have been embedded in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to complement the curriculum, and augment students' educational experience. In addition, they are organized to stimulate students' interpersonal skills, such as leadership, time-management, and communication skills. This paper aims to explore the perceptions of General Foundation Programme (GFP) students regarding the extracurricular activities (ECA) organized by the Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) of an Omani HEI. It also aims to investigate the role of these activities in enhancing students' English language proficiency and transferable skills. A survey questionnaire was used to collect students' perceptions of extracurricular activities. The results indicate that more than 70% of students participating in this study are satisfied with the ECA. Moreover, the participants in this study claimed that participation in ECAs has supported their academic performance and helped them develop their transferable skills. 30% of the participants showed disinterest in participating in extracurricular activities due to the absence of motivation, being in mixed classes, and the fact that no grades are awarded for these activities. This study was conducted on a small population of GFP students; however, it has important implications for education providers in terms of designing extracurricular activities in line with the learning outcomes and student interests. Future studies conducted on larger populations will yield more concrete results.*

Key words: *Academic performance, Transferable skills, Extracurricular activities, GFP, Learning outcomes, Students' satisfaction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Extracurricular activities are carried out by students voluntarily, and they do not receive any grades for their participation (Singh and Mishra, 2010). Higher education institutions design extracurricular activities to ensure the progression of students' academic performance, and to give social and emotional enrichment (Joseph, 2009). Studies and literature review of extracurricular activities show that students' participation in extracurricular activities has a positive influence on students' academic performance and transferrable skills. According to the vision and mission of the Middle East College

Submitted June 1st, 2023, accepted for publication July 15th, 2023

Corresponding author: Zainab Salim Al Ajmi, Military Technological College, Sultanate of Oman

E-mail: zainab.alajmi@mtc.edu.om

(MEC) that strives to create a creative potential of every individual through education, inquiry, innovation, intercultural engagement, and service. It also aims to create a world that is peaceful and sustainable via pursuing knowledge. MEC organizes different types of academic and non-academic ECA throughout the academic year. The Center for Foundations Studies (CFS) at MEC also organizes various extracurricular activities, such as: GFP Fest, Spelling Bee, public speaking, and Anti Plagiarism Day. These activities all contribute to training students on using their transferable skills, get real work experience and encourage them to enhance both attained knowledge and skills. Thus, the students can apply the knowledge they have gained in the classroom into those ECAs that are organized by the CFS. Masoni (2011) mentions that the positive outcome of the extracurricular activities is that it constitutes better behavior, improved scores, finishing school, and other characteristics that will help them to be productive adults. If these are the benefits of ECA, this will help to develop the institutions and the broader community levels. Bartkus et al. (2012) in their review of the value of participation in ECA suggested an examination on educational outcomes. This study aims to explore the effect of extracurricular activities on GFP students in terms of their academic achievement and their transferable skills. It will also examine students' satisfaction towards the extracurricular activities designed by the Center for Foundation Studies. To achieve these aims, the study will answer these three research questions: 1) Have ECAs contributed to elevating students' academic achievement? 2) Have ECA contributed to develop students' transferable skills? and 3) How do students perceive ECA organised by the Centre for Foundation Studies at MEC?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Extracurricular can be defined as being beyond the usual curriculum of an institution if we consider breaking down the term into the main word and the prefix. The prefix "extra" according to Oxford Learners Dictionary is an adjective that means additional or more than usual. The main word curricular is an adjective derived from curriculum which refers to the teaching, learning, and assessment materials that are included in a course of study (Bartkus et al., 2012). Free online dictionary defines extracurricular activities as "Being outside the regular curriculum of a school or a college". In other words, curricular activities refer to the activities that are designed within the defined curriculum of a certain course or programme. These activities are mandated for students to tackle within their courses and some of the activities are designed to act as assessments that measure students' attainment of the curriculum learning outcomes. On the other hand, extracurricular activities refer to the additional, beyond curricular activities that are done voluntarily by the students. Bartkus et al. (2012) define ECA as activities that are conducted by an institution but take place outside regular classroom time and are not part of a curriculum. Extracurricular activities are not part of the college or university ordinary courses (Dacombe, 2014). In most institutions, these activities are aligned with the courses' learning outcomes. Moreover, Bartkus et al. (2012) mention that ECA must not be assessed or involve a grade or academic credit, so they do not lose the main purpose of ECA.

There are many types of extracurricular activities. They can be categorized or classified according to the context in which they are conducted. In other words, a single activity like *report writing* or *giving a public speech* can be curricular activities if a

certain course teaches and assesses them. They could also be extracurricular activities if they are a kind of voluntary competition organized by an institution. Tenhouse (2003) explains that types of ECA offered in a college or university vary according to the diverse students' interests, specializations, type and size of the institution. ECA can range from students' club activities to national or international intercollegiate competitions. Students can register in clubs they wish and get the opportunities to practice their favorite art, athletics, and cultural activities. Members of these clubs can take over leading positions and manage to invite guest speakers, organize field trips, and study groups (Lawhorn, 2008). The aim of academic clubs is to encourage students and enhance their educational experience by allowing them to practice the topics outside the classrooms. For example, English club allows students to watch documentary films, and organize nations gallery to know about other cultures. Students can also participate in colleges' academic and non-academic competitions. They can be members of the students' council in which they act as students' representatives in front of college administration.

Types of activities also depend on the timing they are organized and held. Belikova (2002:74) described ECAs according to when they occur: "in a time that is free from schoolwork..." Extracurricular activities at MEC are organized in slots that do not clash with students' academic activities such as classes, lectures, or assessments. This guarantees more students participation.

MEC is striving to organize a lot of ECAs at both institutional and departmental levels to help students develop their transferable skills. MEC aligns ECAs with the learning outcomes of the courses when it comes to department-based activities because as Hattie (2008) mentions that students are more likely to participate in activities that supplement what they have learnt in the classroom. Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) explain that one of the purposes of enrolling students in ECA is to enhance what students learn in the classroom in a less formal setting. At the institution level, MEC organizes ECA that align with the general objectives of the institution and ensures that these activities help to equip learners with essential job skills such as professional competence, leadership and teamwork skill, communication skills, digital competences, intercultural competences, community engagement, and lifelong learning, before they graduate. The other purpose of enrolling students in ECA as Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) is achieving institutional goals. Carter et al. (2010) mention that selection of EACs should be done based on two dimensions, students' interest and suitable timing that does not conflict with other requirements, especially their academic study. They also add that selecting the school extracurricular activities to be based on the students' interest and support needs.

2.1. The role of ECA in students' academic achievement

This section will focus on the role of extracurricular activities on the students' academic achievement. Despite the claims and assertions about benefits of ECA in developing students' transferable, social, and other types of skills, ECAs also play a key role in developing students' academic performance. Participation in ECAs that are designed to be aligned with the learning outcomes of the courses will help to elevate students' academic level, which, in return, increases their grade points. Holland and Andre (1987) found in their study that there is a positive impact of extracurricular activities on students' academic achievement. According to Fredricks (2011) and Christison (2013) students who frequently participate in ECAs are more likely to have

better test scores and experience high levels of academic achievements. Gholson (1985) finds a correlation between students' participation in ECA and success in endeavors following high school and college. When ECAs provide students with opportunities to challenge their learning, and alternative ways with different resources to achieve the course's learning outcomes, this will result at better performance in courses and build basis of lifelong learning (Ahmad et al., 2015). A study conducted by Abizada et al. (2020) on the effect of ECA on academic performance in Azerbaijan, has concluded that some types of ECA like fine arts and student clubs have positive effects on students' academic performance. Another study was conducted by Nguyen (2022) to measure the impact of ECA on Vietnamese university students. The study revealed that the goal of the students who have willingly participated in ECA was to improve academic achievement.

Tuzlukova et al. (2020) investigated the role of ECA in enhancing and supporting students' academic performance in GFP in Sultan Qaboos University. Results of this investigation revealed that ECA provide students with ample opportunities to improve their overall English language skills and linguistic competencies. They enhance students' speaking, writing, reading and presentation skills.

2.2. The role of ECA in developing students' transferrable skills

Transferable skills are the skills that higher education students need to perform better in their academic life and beyond. Succi and Canovi (2019) define transferable skills as necessary skills that enhance students' adaptability, flexibility, and employability. Balula et al. (2019) emphasise that development of transferable skills is essential for higher education as these skills are basis for meaningful and lifelong learning. This means that higher education study skills are closely connected to employability skills or work-readiness skills. In the first stages of higher education life, students are required to develop their study skills that will assist them in their studies. In further stages of higher education, it is considered that students should work further on their work-readiness skills to be eligible and ready to join the industry. These transferable skills mentioned above are developed through both academic courses and extracurricular activities. Participation in the extracurricular activities will increase students' communication skills, teamwork, leadership skills, time management and other transferable skills.

Activities that involve oral or written communication skills are more likely to provide students with opportunities to interact with different audience. Group type activities also provide opportunities for students to interact with other students. Students find it difficult to develop their communication skills due to the limited class time and due to feeling timid when presenting in front of other students in the class (Al Adawi & Al Ajmi, 2023). Thus, ECA activities will help the students to become more sociable and easily communicate with both peers and teachers. Al Naeem (2021) investigated the effect of ECAs on Saudi students' communication skills. The study was conducted on 40 of English as a foreign language students in Imam Mohammed Islamic University in Riyadh. The study showed that ECAs were more helpful than classroom activities in improving communication skills.

Another transferable skill that could be developed through ECAs is the leadership skill. Students could practice and develop their leadership skills in group type activities such as project work. Christison (2013) argues that students who participate in extracurricular activities have greater character development, especially in leadership skills. Involvement in extracurricular activities will empower the student and teach them how to guide a group of individuals and it will assist them to manage the group work in a successful way.

Another positive impact of extracurricular activities on students is that it helps them to manage their time in a proper way. This will lead them to perform better and become more productive inside the classroom and beyond. Participation in extracurricular activities can lead to greater character and social development, as well as a stronger sense of the importance of community involvement (Christison, 2013).

3. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to find out whether ECAs conducted for GFP students have helped to develop their academic achievement and helped to enhance their interpersonal skills. The research was also aimed at finding out GFP students’ perceptions towards the ECAs conducted at MEC. It was conducted at the end of the academic year 2022-2023 when all activities of the GFP programme were over. The total number of GFP students at MEC in the last semester of the academic year was 508. The researchers used a random selection method to select the participants of the current study. Total of 102 students from different GFP levels participated in this study. An online survey questionnaire was developed and distributed to the participants. The survey was divided into four parts: background information; impact of ECAs on academic achievement; impact of ECAs on transferable skills; and students’ perceptions of extracurricular activities. The questionnaire survey was distributed to the participants of the study. The collected data will be presented on graphs and charts as shown in the next section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There was 70.6% of the total number of the participants in the ECAs that were organised by CFS in the academic year 2022-2023. Therefore, the study will focus on these participants only.

4.1. Research question 1

Have ECA contributed to elevate students’ academic performance?

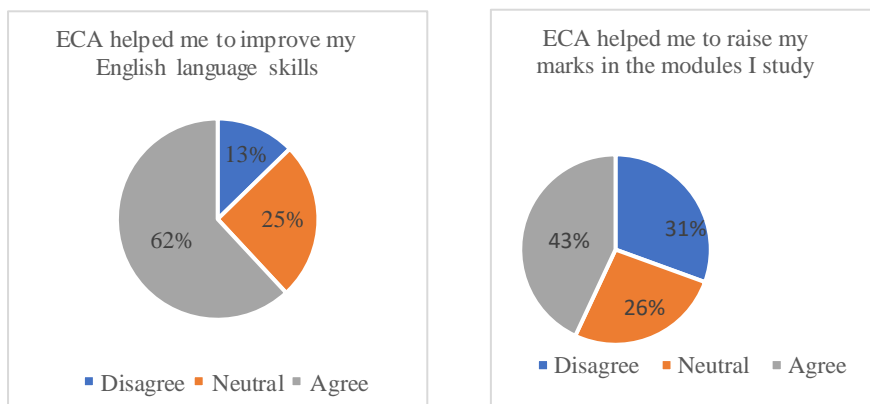


Fig. 1 Contribution of ECA in students’ academic achievement

The first research question asked whether extracurricular activities helped the students to improve their English language skills and raise their marks in the modules they studied as shown in Fig. 1 above. The survey results showed that 62% of students who participated in GFP extracurricular activities confirmed that ECA had a significant impact on their English language proficiency. This could be attributed to the nature of the activities organized by the General Foundation Programme. On the other hand, 25% of the participants remained neutral with regards to the role of ECA in improving students' English language skills. In the context of the role of ECA in improving students' marks in modules they study in GFP, 43% of the students reported that ECA played a role in raising their marks. On the contrary, other students found that ECA did not help them to raise their score in modules they study in GFP. This suggests that the students perceive participation in ECA as elevating their academic level compared to those who do not participate. Overall, these findings align with the arguments of Eccles and Barber (1999), and Silliker and Quirk (1997), who noted a positive association with academic success and involvement in ECA.

4.2. Research question 2

Have ECA contributed to develop students' transferable skills?

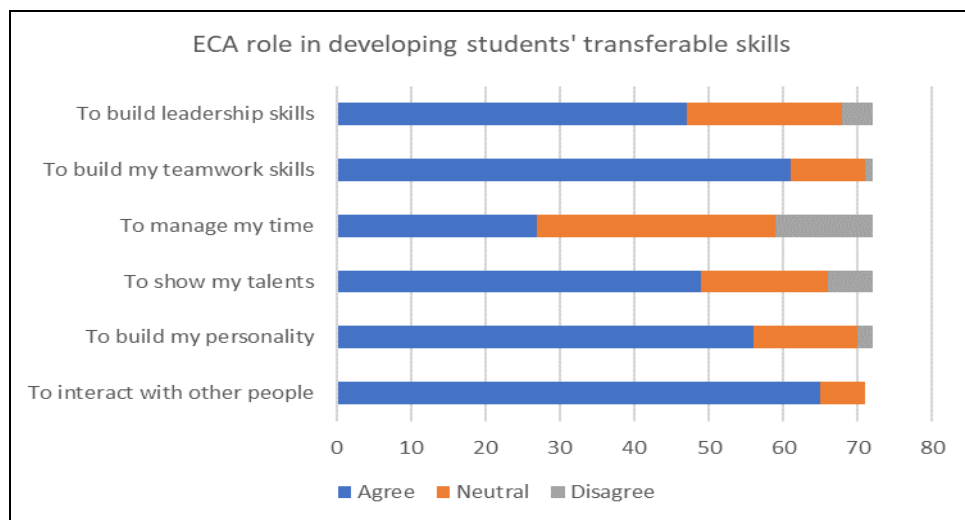


Fig. 2 ECA role in developing students' transferable skills

The results of the second research question show that ECAs have helped to develop all transferable skills mentioned in the survey as shown in Fig. 2 above. Students perceived that taking part in ECA helped them to develop their interaction with other people, teamwork skills, personality building skills, talent showcasing, and leadership skills.

A total of 91.5% of the participants confirmed that ECAs assisted them in using their communication skills to interact with either their peers or other people, such as teachers, competition judges, deans, deputy deans, etc. These results match to a large extent the study conducted by Lubna Naeem (2021), who investigated the positive correlation between students' participation in ECA and their communication skills.

Additionally, 84.7% of students mentioned in their responses to the questionnaire that teamwork is one of the main skills that can be built up through ECAs. Moreover, 65.2% of the participants stated that ECAs helped build their leadership skills. This shows that students will have the competency to lead a group of individuals towards better achievement, as evident in a study conducted by a group of nursing staff (Junaibi et al., 2019) who examined the effectiveness of ECA. They found out that ECA elevate students' cooperative and collaborative prospective whenever a collaborative work occurs. Another study carried out by Sheng and Zhu (2019) revealed that teamwork and leadership are social and personal skills that are acquired by participating in extracurricular activities. Therefore, it positively affects students' academic experience.

Total of 77.7% of the respondents mentioned that ECA helped GFP students build up their personality. These findings suggest that ECAs play a vital role in developing students' personality and helping them to build their personal traits, such as self-esteem and self-confidence, as cited by Charla Lewis (2004). Participation in ECA can motivate students to work towards achieving their academic goals and building social relationships.

Additionally, 68% of participants were able to showcase their talents through participating in ECAs. Engaging in ECAs can potentially benefit students by providing them with opportunities to develop and cultivate their skills and talents and allowing them to compete with their peers. Junaibi et al. (2019) found in their study at Oman College of Health Science that students find ECAs as an opportunity to have fun and display their talents. Sheng and Zhu (2019) found that integrating first-year students in ECA helps them to discover their hobbies and capabilities during the second year of college life.

Results have shown that only 37.5% of the participants could develop their time management skills through ECA. This result indicates that students have poor time management which in turn may affect not only their performance in the ECAs, but their academic performance in general. Scherer et al. (2017) mentioned that students who have poor time management find it difficult to plan their work and this can be a concern for their overall academic performance.

4.3. Research question 3

How do students perceive ECA conducted at MEC?

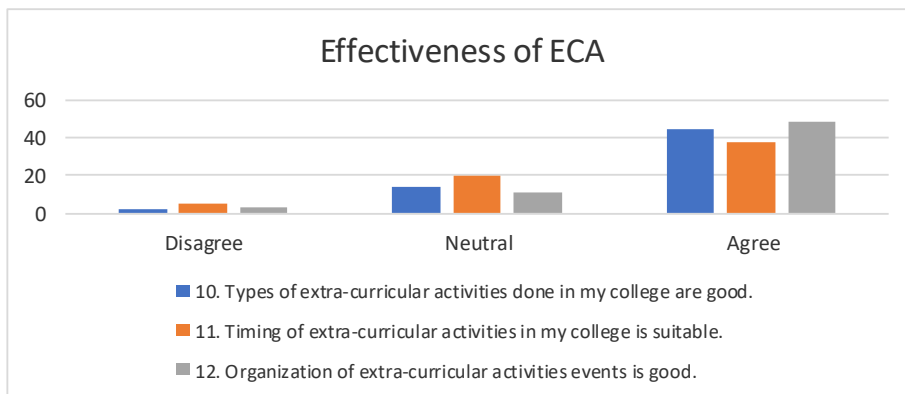


Fig. 3 Effectiveness of ECA

The last research question investigated students' perception towards the ECA conducted at MEC in terms of the types of activities, timing of the activities, and in terms of organisation of the ECAs as shown in Fig. 3 above. The types of activities designed for GFP students at MEC are aligned with the learning outcomes of their courses. Consequently, the results revealed that 72% of the students who participated in this study believed that types of ECA conducted at MEC are good. In the same regard, 65% of the participants of the study perceived the timings of ECA conducted at MEC were suitable. Moreover, 76% of the participants were satisfied with the way ECA were organised. This is because students are not committed to any other academic activities during the ECA. However, scheduling ECAs in a way that does not run against other assessments will assure students' participation in ECA as suggested by Abizada et al. (2020) who claims that students should take part in ECA as long as that does not clash with their scheduled study time.

5, CONCLUSION

This study attempted to explore the GFP students' perceptions of the ECA organized by the CFS at MEC. It also aimed to investigate the role of these activities in enhancing students' English language proficiency and their transferable skills. The results of this study showed that ECAs have helped to develop students' academic achievement. The study also revealed that ECAs contributed to develop students' transferable skills. Moreover, students who participated in this study were satisfied with the ECAs conducted by the CFS at MEC.

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