



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 7  
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## **The Leading Role of Gulf Higher Education in Achieving Sustainability and Addressing Climate Change**

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### **Abstract**

Globally, higher education (HE) systems are being called on to support worldwide efforts to achieve sustainability and combat climate change. These global trends are also affecting Gulf universities, who are now embracing this new mandate. However, Gulf universities face particular challenges: they are located in countries that are the highest per capita carbon emitters in the world (Hertog & Luciani, 2009). This workshop intends to provide a better understanding of how HE systems and universities in the Gulf region are responding to the global movement of achieving sustainability and overcoming issues of climate change with a focus on how they are adapting to the particularities of their local contexts. It will also contribute to the literature on HE and sustainability, education for sustainable development, universities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and HE's role in climate change. The workshop thus seeks to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to HE in the Gulf and sustainability literature. The workshop will answer the following questions: What are universities in the Gulf doing in terms of education for sustainable development? How can universities in the Gulf help governments to achieve SDGs? How can universities in the Gulf lead in climate action within their societies and/or on the international stage?

## **1. Introduction and Scope of the Workshop**

Higher education (HE) systems in the Gulf region have played a fundamental role in the advancement and development of their people. HE systems in the Gulf region have been characterized by their responsiveness to the needs of their peoples and governments, supporting the growth and development of their countries. These systems have also been responsive to the rapid global changes. In 2015, the emergence of the Global Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, with its 17 specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) resulted in the call for governments around the world to work to achieve sustainable development and combat climate change. Moreover, climate change, which threatens both human beings and the planet, has also been under the microscope with great focus from international organizations and governments.

In terms of education generally and HE specifically, there has recently been a greater focus on concepts related to issues of climate change and sustainability in the form of sustainability education, environmental education, education for sustainable development, and climate change education. Accordingly, HE systems in the Gulf region are now orienting themselves to contribute to the SDG agenda. It is expected that HE systems in the Gulf region will work side-by-side with other systems in activating their role in achieving sustainability and combatting climate change.

However, this is no easy task. Gulf countries' rapid economic development has been largely due to carbon-intensive resource extraction (Al-Badi & AlMubarak, 2019; Salahuddin, Gow & Ozturk, 2015). Studies have found that the per capita oil and gas consumption, and carbon emissions in the Gulf region is "uniquely high" among countries in the region (Hertog and Luciani, 2009). Although governments in the region have all now committed to carbon neutrality and shifting to sustainable sources of energy production, leaders have also doubled down on oil production in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Additionally, the concept of sustainability remains abstract, complex, and multidimensional (Ceulemans et al., 2015; Waas et al., 2011). As an emergent global model, meanings and practices associated with advancing sustainable development vary significantly (Williams & Millington, 2004). Sustainability has become a buzzword that is used by policymakers, scholars, scientists, journalists, and the public alike, due to its impact and significance. Scholars have worried that this will increasingly result in "greenwashing" – meaning commitments to sustainability that are not substantiated by action. These concepts have received significant attention from HE researchers globally but less so in the Gulf region.

With this in mind, this workshop will ask: how are HE systems in the Gulf region at national, regional, and global levels addressing these issues and having an impact on the movement towards sustainability and climate change action? At an institutional level, what roles are universities in the Gulf acting to support their nations and governments in this movement? There is no doubt that HE systems in the region have been entrusted to play a transformative role in sustainability and climate change. This workshop comes as an initiative to map the current efforts and trigger future work, calling for more future-oriented planning for HE systems in the Gulf region and their institutions.

## **2. Objectives**

Overall, this workshop focuses on how HE systems in the Gulf region are handling sustainability and taking action to support their governments and the world in the climate change battle, while also recognizing the difficulties they face and the need for localized solutions relevant to the particularities of the Gulf economies and societies. There will be a focus on some of the projects, initiatives, and movements of HE systems in the Gulf at a broader, national level and at the university institutional level in addressing sustainability and its related topics. The workshop will provide answers to some questions such as: What are universities in the Gulf doing in terms of education on sustainable development? How can universities in the Gulf better help governments in working towards a sustainable future? And, how can universities in the Gulf lead in climate action? The more focused objectives of the workshop include:

- Investigate and analyse how HE systems in the Gulf understand and conceptualize sustainability and climate change.
- Explore how the national HE systems in the Gulf are supporting sustainability efforts and encouraging higher education institutions to take action on sustainability.
- Shed light on the policies, efforts, initiatives, and projects of universities in the Gulf on contributing to global actions of combatting climate change and achieving sustainability
- Pay attention to how universities in the Gulf restructure/redesign their teaching, research, and community services to help in achieving sustainability and the 2030 Agenda.
- Identify the distinct opportunities and challenges faced by HE systems and universities in the Gulf in their role in sustainability.
- Stimulate and encourage collective regional efforts to support universities in the gulf in facing the dangers of climate change and supporting governments to attain sustainability
- Explore the necessary transformation needed for universities in the Gulf to contribute to the sustainable future of the states and the broader context.
- Learn from the experiences of other developed HE systems and universities in achieving sustainability and climate change actions.

## **3. Contribution the workshop will make to the Gulf studies field**

This workshop intends to provide a better understanding of how HE systems and universities in the Gulf region are responding to the global movement of achieving sustainability and overcoming issues of climate change. How HE systems in the Gulf have dealt with the national, regional, and global initiatives of the 2030 Global Agenda by contributing to achieving future sustainability and reducing the impacts of climate change are the main focus. In other words, the workshop will examine how HE systems in the Gulf have responded to the global call for action on sustainability and climate change in their plans, policies, and projects. This will support the framing of what has currently been achieved and will provide future directions to HE systems and universities.

Moreover, navigating the literature and websites of universities in the Gulf, it seems that the role of HE systems and universities as an area of research has received limited attention and thus, this workshop will cover gaps in the literature on HE. There is very little research that has touched on this area of study. This focus will make a contribution to the broader comparative education literature concerned with how HE systems and their

universities in the Gulf region can today have a say and play a transformative role in the global, regional, and national movement towards sustainability and action on climate change. The proposed workshop will also contribute to the literature on HE and sustainability, education for sustainable development, universities and SDGs, and the role of HE in climate change. The workshop thus seeks to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to the HE and sustainability literature within a comparative framework. The empirical contributions will focus on the Gulf region, while the theoretical will have a broader focus. In this workshop, there will also be a concerted attempt to produce published literature on HE in the Gulf and sustainability.

This timely workshop closely follows COP27, when the heads of state, ministers, and negotiators, along with climate activists, mayors, civil society representatives, and chief executive officers met in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt (6–18 November 2022) for the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – COP27 – to work closely and collectively in combatting climate change and achieving sustainability. This workshop seeks to contribute to ongoing sustainability efforts in the Gulf region and initiatives of HE systems in the region will be discussed and framed for more transformative roles. Furthermore, it is envisioned that the workshop will contribute to governments in the Gulf region achieving the SDGs through their HE systems and universities.

Overall, the broad purposes of the workshop are to foster Gulf studies in respect of sustainability and climate change in HE research and to theorize about education for sustainable development in the Gulf region. This workshop will provide an academic platform for the exchange and sharing of ideas, knowledge, and experiences for Gulf-based researchers and outsiders with an interest in the region and HE systems in the Gulf. It is anticipated that this workshop will add to the body of knowledge in HE and sustainability research in general and concerning the Gulf region more specifically.

#### 4. Workshop Agenda\*

	Agenda	Responsible participants
<b>Day 1 (11 July)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshop introduction               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ HE for sustainability and climate change: a theoretical framework</li> <li>○ HE context in the Gulf region</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Workshop directors (Dr. Khalaf Alabri and Dr. Elizabeth Buckner)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Papers</li> </ul>	2 presenters
<b>Day 2 (12 July)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paper</li> </ul>	7 presenters
<b>Day 3 (13 July)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Papers</li> </ul>	6 presenters
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshop conclusion, takeaways, and publication plan</li> </ul>	Workshop directors

\*This is a tentative agenda for the workshop, it does not show timings for coffee/tea breaks, socialization, and other logistics

## 5. Potential paper topics

In this workshop, papers from academics, policymakers, and practitioners interested in the area of HE in the Gulf are welcomed. The following illustrates the expected papers:

- Context of HE systems in the Gulf in relation to supporting sustainability and global climate change actions.
- Case studies on how HE systems in the Gulf respond to sustainability and climate change.
- How universities in the Gulf have engaged with climate change and sustainability.
- Role of HE systems in achieving the SDGs.
- SDG4 and universities in the Gulf.
- Analysis of university plans and policies regarding sustainability and climate change.
- How universities in the Gulf are gearing up their teaching, research, and community engagement towards sustainability and climate change.
- Collective, cooperative, or regional projects on sustainability/climate change between universities in the Gulf.
- Challenges and issues facing HE systems and universities in the Gulf in their efforts to support sustainability and climate change.
- Academic programmes and curriculum for sustainability and climate change.
- Studies on the sustainability of university infrastructure and campus operations.
- Formal, informal, and non-formal learning and teaching approaches to education for sustainability.
- Universities' role in capacity-building and leadership development related to climate change and sustainability.
- Climate change education and education for sustainable development in HE.

## 6. Publication Plan

Out of this workshop and its individual papers, the directors are intending to publish an edited book. This book will enrich the literature on the role of HE systems in the Gulf in achieving sustainability and combatting climate change. Upon approval of this workshop, the directors will use their expertise to start communicating with international publishers to secure a publishing deal.

## References

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