The Impact of the Western Liberal Arts Education in the MENA Region:
A Case Study

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Abstract
This study focuses on the development of the millennial generation within the liberal arts education setting. It has been demonstrated that the values of different generations periodically change. It is the university's duty to articulate the distinctive sociological, ideological, and psychological variations of each generation in order to provide the most viable educational system. Follow-up researches in different educational systems should be conducted regularly in order to incorporate new data from the rapidly changing millennial generation. This particular research focuses on understanding student development models that adequately demonstrate the effectiveness of a liberal arts education within the MENA region. The emphasis of this paper is on Arab students within transnational settings, focusing on the American University in Cairo and the American University of Kuwait.

Keywords: Arab, millennial, learning outcome, liberal arts education, transnational

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Introduction

To have an effective educational system, institutions should meet the needs of the community and the current generation. The university structure should be adjusted and developed according to the rapidly changing needs of prospective students, but this is often neglected in Liberal arts universities in transnational settings (Lowery, 2016). Hence, the student is obliged to accommodate to the pre-structured educational settings. Globalization is the catalyst that altered the way in which higher educational institutions develop in order to satisfy new generational needs (Chopp, Frost, & Weiss, 2013). Globalization has intensely impacted the millennial generation; it started in the early 1980's and continues until the present era. This generation is heavily influenced by the diverse hyperactive digital culture, which causes them to stray away from their cultural roots (Park, 2013, p.118).

This study provides a better understanding of the effectiveness of the Western liberal arts model of higher education within transnational university settings. It primarily focuses on examining the pedagogies of student learning outcomes, and comparing the learning experience of undergraduate junior and senior students from the American University in Cairo (AUC) and the American University of Kuwait (AUK).

The purpose of this study is to aid in developing a better understanding of the liberal arts educational system by integrating the cultural aspects and beliefs of the MENA area. In order to clearly illustrate the integration and bridging of gaps between American ideology and Arab student identity, it behooves researchers to study both AUC and AUK. Both universities are international educational institutions in national contexts. They follow international systems; have local and international students, as well as faculty. Being in such a diverse environment allows each student to acquire knowledge in various ways. The main concern of the present research is to examine the effects of studying in a western liberal arts educational system on the daily lives of upper classmen; one wonders, is it beneficial or not. Besides this, further investigation attempts to reach a consensus on how students interpret the liberal arts education system itself. The study is organized to answer the following questions:

1. How is the liberal arts model of education interpreted by junior and senior students who attend AUC and AUK?
2. How does the Western liberal arts education model impact the development of students within the MENA region, as exemplified by AUC and AUK?

This study will thus allow for a better understanding of the current liberal arts educational institution present in AUC and AUK in order to provide the best educational atmosphere for this generation. Consequently, we will be able to alter and create a better educational format that will benefit the upper-class students in their daily lives through what they learn at the university. This does not necessitate that it is only limited to the material covered inside classrooms. The liberal arts education also emphasizes learning through extra-curricular activities, as students are known to learn from their peers as they learn from their professors.

Literature Review

The liberal arts educational model will be stated while focusing on the millennials generation and the emerging of the liberal arts educational system and its impact on the millennials generation. Subsequently, a more in-depth study will be conducted on two different institutions in the Arab region adopting a transnational educational system through the liberal arts education. Thereafter, an analysis will be provided of the process of policy borrowing in terms of borrowing and lending of various perspectives in varied contexts from within the educational exchange. Finally, the theory of the seven principles of good practice by Chickering and Gamson will be implemented to improve the undergraduate education of good learning and teaching process.

Liberal Arts Approach

The liberal arts approach structures the mindset of students so that they develop into critical thinkers, a vital necessity for any free society. Accordingly, a liberal arts education cannot be defined as a form of knowledge and learning that is acquired solely from books; rather, it must be deeply intertwined with the individual's thoughts, ideas and individual concepts. Likewise, such an educational experience should also include serious reflection on personal experiences (Paino, 2014).

The Liberal Arts approach seeks different implementations of education through both academic and extra-curricular endeavors. Currently, the Liberal Arts curriculum has developed into a more in-depth interdisciplinary coursework that includes fields such as the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and formal sciences. By being exposed to and involved in activities specifically relevant to career preference, the liberal arts methodology also shapes the student into an individual prepared to work in various work sectors (Logan & Curry, 2014).

Critical thinking is recognized as the key factor of a liberal arts education. It encourages students to refine their ability to think through the process of deep inquiry into ambiguous and complex topics, and attempts to guide students to resolve challenges. This is accomplished by assessing, clarifying and integrating evidence. Critical thinking supports student learning, which ultimately prepares them for workforce exposure. Critical thinking is self-guided, self-trained and self-observed. Furthermore, liberal arts colleges place an emphasis on development of the intellectual capacity of each students individual decisions. It is also essential to highlight the moral aspect of the students' individuality by incorporating developmental tools that help enhance moral character. Moral character does not imply the authority of a particular code of ethics, but instead it refers to the development of propensities and qualities that strengthen moral conduct independently.

The dynamics of extra-curricular activities strengthen the social learning paradigms of the student's educational outcome. For example, a number of colleges offer a variety of leadership programs to enhance student education by referring and linking them to people who intellectually benefit them in their particular field (Chopp, Frost, & Weiss, 2013).

Millennials

Millennials constitute the generation that was born from the early 1980's to the early 2000's (Park, 2013). They also fall under the name of Generation 'Y'. However, Generation 'X' they are the generation that is preceding the Millennials. The Generation 'X' and Generation 'Y' division specifically differentiates between the unique demographic and societal upbringing of each generation. The nature of the developmental surroundings changed drastically from generation 'X' to generation 'Y'; the latter generation (Y), possessed a different nurture environment which created supportive social relations for its constituents. (Bolton et al., 2013).

The Liberal Arts Education and Millennials

Generation 'Y' does not believe in individualism and they depend on teamwork to deal with various issues. They provide a lot of diverse ideas that would suit different situations; this proves their leadership and dependence on the new school of thought. The features definitely place this generation under great pressure as their expectations heighten to unprecedented levels (Woodall, 2004). The characteristics of a liberal arts education enable the millennial generation to be almost anyone based on the form of education given to them using the liberal arts system along with the programs provided in helping to shape their teaching and learning strategy. The seven criteria that characterize Generation 'Y' are special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured and achieving. (Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010, p. 285). They are notably more resourceful than the previous generation 'X' due to the fact that there are various research tools available that make the new ideas they produce credible as it has a solid base. Furthermore, the millennial generation's confidence stems from its immense contribution to its own society (Woodall, 2004). In order to effectively educate different generations, by meeting their respectively unique standards, there is a need to innovate diverse educational strategies. As for the millennial generation, new educational methodologies are clearly necessary. The earlier generation of educators is clearly different than the millennial generation; hence, educators must have clear understanding of the technological adaptation of the millennials (McAlister, 2009).

Transnational Education within a Liberal Arts Education

Transnational education highly depends on a rationality enlivened by the acts of transnational partnerships that always look to grow their business sectors by achieving clients' needs across nations (Francois, Avoseh, & Griswold, 2016). Students associated with a transnational educational program are foreseen to adjust to educational modules and instructional practices directed by organizations that are intentionally going to be within their nations of origin. The method of transnational higher education does not merely focus only on conveying the information; it also emphasizes diverse philosophical aspects, which introduces new ideas alongside the educational implications that current definitions neglect to catch. Educational projects can exist through perspectives, which can be philosophical or educational, with a focus on the method through which the message is conveyed. Transnational education includes activities and practices that go beyond national limits. It refers to the possibility of exchange over nations with no barriers or limits (Francois, Avoseh, & Griswold, 2016).

The American University in Cairo

The American University in Cairo (AUC), founded in 1919, is a not-for-profit research based liberal arts institution of higher education that focuses on research as well as contributing to the overall Egyptian community in various fields. Charles A. Watson, the founding president, hoped to establish an English-language university based on the elevated expectations of its pioneers. The Egyptian community was seeking through the development of individuals, who would be eager to carry on AUC's mission to the diverse communities (The American University in Cairo, 2016).

AUC's extensive and rigorous programs aid overall student wellbeing and encourage intellectual freedom of the mind. The core curriculum at the American University in Cairo (AUC) lies in the Liberal Arts education. The goal of the liberal arts educational system is to guarantee that all students, regardless of their major, have a strong understanding of the traditional liberal arts and sciences.

The American University of Kuwait

The American University of Kuwait (AUK) is a private higher educational liberal arts institution founded in 2003. AUK is a young comprehensive and co-educational university that fosters excellence in knowledge and skills that represents an American model of education. The language of instruction at AUK is English. Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, an Ivy League School, and AUK have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that encourages the student, staff and faculty community to cooperate in projects by their advisory and consultations. AUK has earned its first accreditation by Dartmouth in 2006 and was re-accredited recently by the Private Universities Council (PUC)–Ministry of Higher Education in Kuwait–in June 2015.

AUK embraces its students by developing life-long learners who are well-rounded in society and encourages them to be critical thinkers, innovators and leaders of the community. The curriculum provided to the students at AUK is expansive with in-depth studies from different colleges within the university.

Policy Borrowing

Policy borrowing in education is a phenomenon used to transfer academic reform from one country to another, articulating a professional educational strength and importing the best practices (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). In other words, policy borrowing is a form of educational transfer—with some adaptations—that occurs from one country to another with a keen focus on the best curriculum and practices. To exchange and properly implement an educational model from one system to another is not expected to be successful nor fruitful unless certain factors are taken into consideration.

The Seven Principles of Good Practice by Chickering and Gamson

The Seven Principles of Good Practice in undergraduate education, by Chickering and Gamson, are guidelines for students and faculty members to follow in order to

improve learning and teaching techniques in primary, secondary and higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). Implementation of these principles helps emphasize the significance of faculty members, students and staff in incorporating different tactics that improve student development in addition to cultivating student personal identity.

Chickering (1993) proposed seven factors that aid identity formation: competence development, emotion management, and movement from autonomy towards interdependence, development of mature interpersonal relationships, identity establishment, purpose development, and integrity development. Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles were selected for improving the liberal arts education by offering an exceptionally precise approach to "improving teaching and learning given that a robust base of research undergirds these principles" (Sorcinelli, 1991). The seven principles of good practice pertain to the encouragement of student-faculty contact, development of reciprocity and cooperation among students, encouragement of active learning, faculty giving prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations and respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Research Setting

This research focuses on higher educational universities in the Middle East. The American University in Cairo, established in 1919, is an English- language university. It is accredited in Egypt by the Ministry of Higher Education and accredited in the United States by the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges. It is the focal point of developing a person's social and cultural existence in the Arab world, particularly Egypt. With a diverse faculty and student body on campus, AUC contains around 60 different nationalities. AUC has formed a society of long lasting learning, leaders and many services to enhance student experience. It is devoted to making critical commitments to the Egyptian community and maintains the standards of scholarly opportunity. The American University of Kuwait (AUK), established in 2003, is also an English medium university. AUK received its accreditation in 2006 from the Private University Council. This university provides its students with a well-rounded education that enhances overall knowledge and skills. AUK enriches Kuwaiti society by encouraging its students to be lifelong learners and leaders, and to always enhance their critical thinking skills.

AUC and AUK have one common feature regarding the student body. In the two universities, the student body is composed of individuals from various social and cultural backgrounds. While some are foreigners, others are local; as each student has their own customs and traditions, this constitutes the very diversity of the campus and the educational experience. Besides the diversity due to foreign students, the locals also come from different areas within the country; some are from suburbs while others are from the city. When it comes to spotting differences, the main factor of concern would be that the students joining AUC and AUK go through an overwhelming phase where they learn about the university and become familiar with not only academic matters, but also student life.

Research Method

A qualitative research approach was primarily used in this study to understand the reasons underlying diverging student perspectives. A semi-structured interview protocol, containing open-ended questions, was utilized to measure the effectiveness of the liberal arts education system on Middle Eastern students, specifically those enrolled in AUC and AUK. Interviews were prepared, analyzed and conducted thoroughly through the data with consideration. This was accomplished by decoding and sorting data gathered from the interviews. Interviews revolved around the liberal arts education and the interviewee was given the freedom to express personal opinion and educational experience. Additionally, broad questions that lead to in-depth and detailed topic discussions were included. The interviewee would speak and express their own thoughts and feeling with no constraints at all. Interviews followed a particular sequence, consisting of 7 questions centered on transnational universities— AUC and AUK —in the Middle East (Appendix A). Questions began with testing participants understanding of liberal arts to following a more specific experience and exposure of the interviewee.

After this act of introspection, I selected a proper approach to begin with. I started by transcribing all the interviews of students from AUC and AUK; then I highlighted the similarities and differences between both universities. Afterwards, I analyzed the common major theme that students from both universities discussed, and discovered how just because they are all studying a liberal arts education system they have similar and corresponding opinions and ideologies. Subsequently, I looked into the different themes and was able to merge the similar opinions from student's interviews in both institutions in the theme that best illustrates it. I thereby started collecting the responses of AUC and AUK students into the answers of the research questions.

Findings

While hearing the responses of the interviewees, I was able to link themes that were stated by the students from the two different institutions. Each session took place in a conference room in the library or a private room. The session, depending on the information the student provided, took a maximum of an hour. Towards the final interviews, I compiled data that worked with the themes. The objective was to accumulate data that supports the objective of the research via analysis, theories and interviews.

The themes I have selected resonate with the collected data along with the qualitative research methods that were implemented.

Major Themes

Major Theme One: Unpreparedness of Faculty in Liberal Arts Education

High expectations are not fulfilled unless students and faculty effectively communicate and interact to improve the educational experience for the student. In response to this issue, Chickering and Gamson responded with principle one— encouragement of student-faculty contact—and principle six—communicates high expectations (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). Anna Neumann affirmed that

understanding faculty members and their academic learning is imperative in light of the fact that the essential action to be taken by the faculty is to designate, share, and implement professional knowledge and curriculum that will help enhance student development (Neumann, 2009).

Interacting with faculty members improves students' intellectual perspectives. Regarding principle six, it is important to hold high expectations because to expect more is to receive more. Faculty members cannot (or should not) be hired at a university merely to occupy the number of places needed for a particular department or major. The faculty is a vital element that enables and supports student ability to obtain an enriching educational experience. Neumann (2009) noticed that the idea of scholarly learning—synthesis of learning, teaching and researching through higher education—ought to be connected as a focal point for higher education to contemplating the work of the faculty.

Major Theme Two: Awareness of Liberal Arts Education

Students are often not aware of the purpose of a liberal arts education since, as freshman, they lack an understanding of the importance of taking liberal arts courses. As mentioned by an AUC student, the Advising Center is expected to explain this:

As reported by Bloom in 1987, at the point when an undergraduate student enters the university, the student feels confusion because of the vast range of courses offered by the particular departments or the advising center. Also, there seems to be no agreement or harmony within the university, and no official direction about what the student ought to learn (Bloom, 1987). This demonstrates that students held high expectations upon entering the university.

Major Theme Three: Apply Theory to Practice

It is very beneficial for students to be exposed to a variety of learning techniques that enhance their abilities both as undergraduate student and graduate students. Liberal arts courses serve to expand student knowledge; however this effect fades away because active learning techniques were not applied, according to an AUK student.

Subsequently, the third principle corresponds with student perspectives and states that undergraduate students don't learn by sitting in a classroom while passively collecting information from faculty members, memorizing discussions and chapters, and merely regurgitating answers.

Major Theme Four: Lack of Implementation

Faculty will not succeed if knowledge is not properly transmitted to the student, especially if there is no proper time management nor utilization of variety of active learning techniques. Evidence is demonstrated by Chickering and Gasmon in two principles that coincide with one another. The third principle is encouragement of active learning where students are more involved if stimulated by the usage of different learning methods. Emphasizes Time on Task is the fifth principle. There is no viable replacement for time on tasks. It is essential for students and professionals to realize how to utilize one's time. It is necessary to teach time management to all

undergraduate students. Assigning reasonable time means productive learning for students and sufficient teaching for faculty members.

Major Theme Five: Understanding One's Quality and Value

A liberal arts education includes three values in order to achieve one's maximum capacity; it "involves an experience of intrinsic value, the development of formal skills and capacities, and a recognition of greater purpose and service to others, including a modest overestimation of one's abilities" (Roche, 2010). Due to the myriads of available courses and unique exposure in classes, student understanding greatly expands through liberal arts courses.

Major Theme Six: Diversity in Course Options

Liberal arts education courses provide a diversity of disciplines. It respects and serves the different talents of students since students differ in abilities. Diversity in course options allows student to broaden their intellectual horizon with courses that spark personal interest. Regarding the core curriculum model, particular courses are offered that are general in degree and meet essential and wide ranged goals. This approach assumes that distribution alone is insufficient. Instead, particular courses ought to be customized to give a more rational and reliable learning background, and to also take into consideration the integration of subjects along different disciplines in significantly more detailed than a dissemination prerequisite (Boyer and Kaplan, 1994). Latzer (2004) contends that the demands of the students and the need of certain faculty members to teach within their disciplines has urged the failure of the core curriculum because students often seek the faculty member with the style of their preference.

Minor Themes

Minor Theme One: Diversity among students

Knowledge exchange and cooperation amongst students is very essential. Learning improves when students collaborate in groups, presentations and discussions. A good model of learning actualizes when more cooperation and participation occurs rather than aggressive and enclosed behavior. Sharing one's own particular thoughts and reacting to others' responses develops and strengthens understanding.

According to Khmelkov and Hallinan in 1999, it has been discovered that ethnic diversity within a classroom increases interaction amongst people of different ethnicities and races Despite the possibility that the young students do not necessarily form friendships through such interactions, contact within the classroom, and positive encounters during cooperative assignments, may be sufficient to enhance students' states of mind (van Geel & Vedder, 2011). The effects of student interaction on the educational experience are quite obvious.

Minor Theme Two: Global phenomena versus student's welfare

Students have certain expectations when applying to a university. They tend to believe that they will receive a high quality of education that will elevate and develop

their educational capabilities and points of strength. Some student responses from the interviews reflected that this was the initial conception students had of their education in the university; this was also how they imagined to benefit from the educational system after graduation. Several students highlighted that they were surprised—after exposure during courses and spending years in the university—that the institution focuses on the market needs over the individuality of each student. According to Chickering and Gamson, the above findings fall under principle six. Principle six clearly demonstrates the expectations of students from freshmen to seniors.

The results of the qualitative study, in the form of thematic responses to the interview's open-ended questions, are presented in the graphs below.
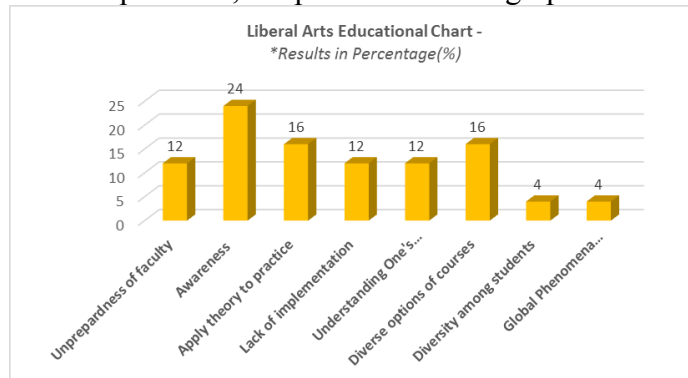

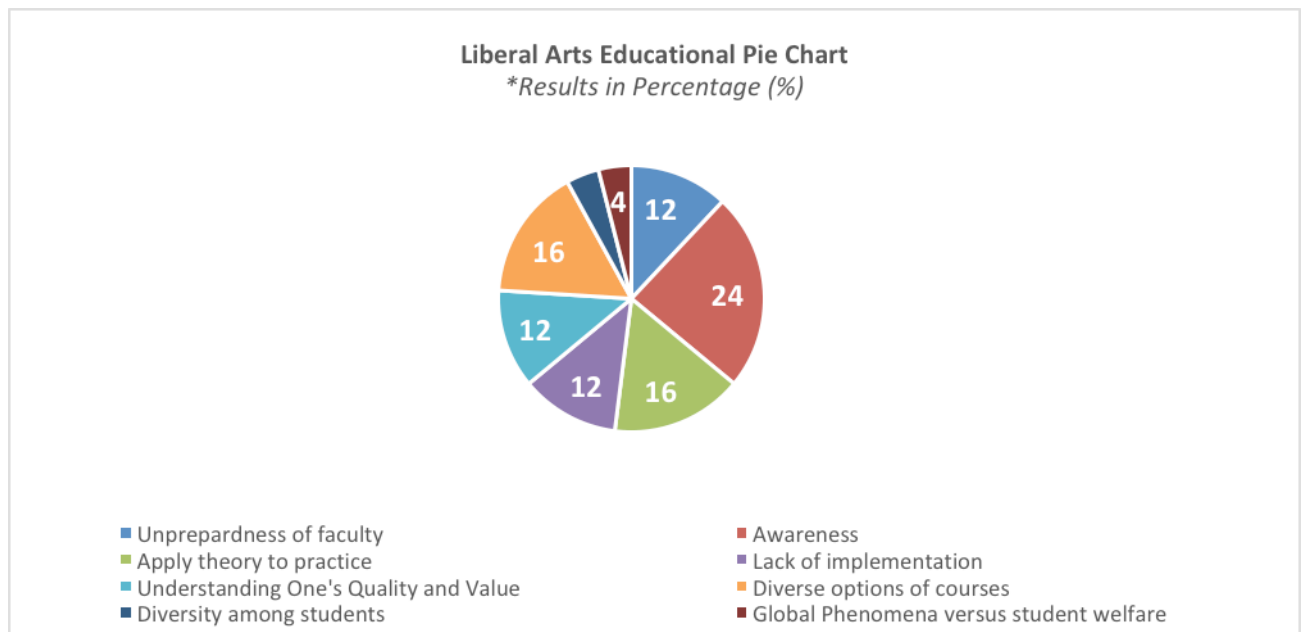Figure 1: Liberal Arts Education Chart

Figure 2: Liberal Arts Educational Pie Chart

As shown in the graph, 24% of students share a concern about the lack of awareness of the liberal arts education within their university. Students expressed the need for a better vision and understanding of the purpose of a liberal arts education. They feel that the benefits of such an education should be well communicated through different entities within the university. 16% of students stated the need for increased diversity of courses to choose from. Students also pressed for having more disciplines to match diversity of student interests. Moreover, 16% of students emphasized the importance of practicing what is merely learned on a theoretical level. Students believe that in

order to grasp and fully understand concepts within a liberal arts education, they should be entitled to apply theory to practice and deeply reflect upon acquired knowledge. Three different themes emerged during the interviews, each individually occupying 12% of the thematic diversity. These themes are (1) unpreparedness of faculty, (2) understanding one's quality and value, and (3) lack of implementation. Diversity among students, and global phenomena versus student welfare were two of the minor themes that were mentioned during the interview process. Students mentioned the need of benefiting from the merging of different cultures through a system that encourages the exchange of knowledge and broadening of understanding. These students represented 4% of the data. 4% of the sample also expressed concern for the global phenomena versus student welfare.

Junior and seniors student at AUC and AUK emphasized certain common challenges regarding the implementation of the liberal arts education in the MENA region. Students came across these challenges through their interactions with some unprepared faculty members. Some students struggled in grasping the idea of the liberal arts since it was not implemented in some of their courses. For example, some classrooms did not include in their curriculum discussions or reflections that trigger critical thinking. Also, a serious flaw was student unawareness of the liberal arts education; freshmen students were neither familiarized nor, well-prepared with an understanding of the process, importance and meaning of the liberal arts. It is also worth mentioning that upperclassman students seek more diversity in course options that prepares them to be well-rounded individuals ready to implement in their career what they learned from the liberal arts. Students from both institutions expressed the idea of implementing the Western liberal arts education system in the Arab world. Most students viewed this form of implementation as an eye-opening experience that allowed them to know more about the Western world. Moreover, students noted that this also granted them both an edge to compete in the international market and a unique identity in the local market. Interviewed AUC and AUK students appreciated the concept of merging Arab world studies section in general requirements with the liberal arts education. The inclusion of Arab culture in this system gives (Arab) students an opportunity to explore their own culture and history. Meanwhile, a few students mentioned the frustration of learning more about other cultures and not having the chance to fully understand one's own culture first. According to the findings mentioned above, offering new higher education courses, hands-on real-life practices, cohesive understanding of the liberal arts ideology through students, and service learning courses will improve student learning outcome.

Conclusion

Based on the research, findings and data analysis of this study, a common result constantly appeared within both institutions. One of the central goals of a liberal arts education is to teach undergraduate students to go beyond the limits and explore various disciplines. They should have the motivation and capabilities to argue, debate and disagree (Chopp, Frost, & Weiss, 2013).

To conclude, to create a progressive educational system in a higher education institution, students seek opportunities for exposure and encouragement. The liberal arts education necessarily equips students to be academically successful. This particular study discusses the importance of the impact of the Western liberal arts

educational model on higher education within the transnational university settings. A comparison of two transnational universities was presented and thoroughly analyzed by interviewing undergraduate upperclassmen students. The main focus of the analysis was pedagogies of student learning outcome.

Future Research

Researchers for future studies can examine different ways of applying and implementing good practice in undergraduate education. They might take into consideration developing a self-assessment instrument for faculty members by applying each of the principles. Application of the seven principles on undergraduate students will enhance the academic development of the upperclassmen students and carry out studies of teaching practices and faculty discipline. For academic development to be successful, researchers must put theory to practice. I recommend consideration of the various suggestions offered by students during the interviews.

After prolonged research and studies, the importance of the liberal arts education system and its impact on the quality of education is quite palpable. However, it is crucial to understand, respect and consider the cultural differences between the east and the west by adapting the liberal arts model to the host culture. In addition to merging eastern and western ideologies in the educational system, it is important to introduce practical practices in the liberal arts system. As stated by Alayan & Rohde (2012), "Education is also viewed as an important socializing factor that influences the formation of individuals as enlightened state citizens who are capable of independent and critical thinking." If this is successfully accomplished, it will yield a great opportunity in the Middle East by enriching the quality of education and diversifying learning experience for Middle Eastern students, giving them the opportunity to compete internationally in the work place while producing well-rounded individuals. Also, incorporating real-life practices is important because it helps students go beyond mere theoretical learning. This will ultimately help bridge the gap between university life and the career phase.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. What is liberal arts?
2. How did the experience of receiving the Liberal Arts education affect your decisions?
3. As a senior, do you see the implementation of the liberal arts education distinguishes you as an individual from those who don't study using the liberal arts system?
4. Given that under the liberal arts education you were assigned certain courses, did these types of courses broaden your intellectual horizon that helped inform your major courses?
5. Do you see liberal arts education as an important form of education or not? Elaborate? If yes or no, in your opinion is there any way we can strengthen the liberal arts education?
6. If no, what aspect of education is most important?
7. What are you planning to do upon graduation? Is that what you want to do?