

Extracurricular Experiences and Graduate Employability in Conservative Cultural Contexts: A Methodologically Rigorous Narrative Review

Rula Al-Abbas Al-Kayyali¹

¹Higher Colleges of Technology Department of Computer and Information Science

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Email: rkayyali@hct.ac.ae ORCID: 0000-0002-1116-6773

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Learning beyond the curriculum has gained momentum following the continuous discrepancy between graduate competencies and employers' demands. This review examines current literature on the association between extracurricular activities and graduates' employability in conservative cultures specifically. A systematic search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC (2010–2026) databases through the use of search terms associated with extracurricular activities, graduate employability, and higher education. Thematic analysis based on experiential and transformative learning theories was used. Four main contributions of extracurricular activities have been recognized in the review: development of communication and interpersonal skills; building up adaptability and cultural intelligence; development of leadership, entrepreneurship, and innovation mindset; and development of professional identity and graduate capital. In conservative cultures, institution-led activities offer an avenue through which women can gain workforce skills in a non-confronting way. Equitable participation may be hindered by several structural, social, cultural, and institutional barriers. The role of extracurricular activities is important in the development of the competencies required from individuals in the modern labour market. Institutions need to make investments in extracurricular activities. Future studies need to adopt empirical designs that help to create causality and determine under what conditions extracurricular experiences are most effective.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Graduate Employability Challenge in Contemporary Higher Education

The persistent gap between graduates' capacities and employers' expectations is becoming one of the defining issues within the higher education system globally (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Garcia-Aracil & Van der Velden, 2008). Although qualifications gained through formal education programs serve as sources of disciplinary knowledge, their inadequacy is increasingly noted in developing the comprehensive skills needed in the modern labour market (Barrie, 2006; Kember, 2009). The inability of graduates to demonstrate critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and adaptation skills that transcend knowledge alone is regularly reported by employers (Robles, 2012; Ortiz et al., 2016). This skills-expectations gap led universities to consider new employability development strategies.

Among these approaches, extracurricular activities have become an important strategy that complements the official curriculum and offers students authentic ways of developing workforce-related competencies (Tchibozo, 2007; Kuh, 2008). Extracurricular activities include a wide variety of activities performed by students beyond their formal degrees, such as involvement in clubs and societies, professional associations, volunteering, internships, competitions, and various forms of leadership activities (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2023). The development of graduate employability skills depends on three factors, which include pedagogic practices, student reflection, and experience and ability articulation (Harvey, 2002). Such experiences develop competencies through engagement in authentic contexts; this approach is consistent with the experiential learning cycle by Kolb (2015) and the transformative learning approach by Mezirow (1991, 2000).

1.2 Significance of Extracurricular Activities for Women in a Conservative Culture

The significance of extracurricular activities is especially pertinent to particular student demographics. Female students in conservative cultures, for example, may struggle due to a lack of experience and awareness of the realities of the world of work (Kirk & Napier, 2009; Gallant & Pounder, 2008). For such students, participation in extracurricular activities could help foster the development of graduate employability skills in a non-threatening way (Madsen & Cook, 2010; Khine & Hayes, 2010). Studies carried out in the Gulf area have shown that institutionally organized activities are authorized structures acceptable to families and thus allow women to acquire workforce skills while staying culturally true.

Although awareness of the significance of extracurricular activities is increasingly widespread, there remains a need for careful synthesis of evidence, particularly regarding the mechanisms by which such activities contribute to the development of work readiness across diverse cultural contexts. Studies have shown many benefits of extracurricular activities to graduates (Ribeiro et al., 2023; Szucs & Harpur, 2023), but there is a lack of cohesive understanding of how they affect employability capital.

1.3 Contribution and Scope of This Review

This narrative review attempts to integrate existing knowledge on the role of extracurricular activities in preparing graduates for the future workplace. In the process, the following research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: What is the nature of the relationship between extracurricular participation and graduate employability outcomes?

RQ2: Through what mechanisms do extracurricular experiences contribute to workforce engagement?

RQ3: What challenges and opportunities shape the effectiveness of extracurricular engagement across diverse student populations?

The review contributes to the literature in three major ways. First, the review offers a methodologically rigorous synthesis of the available empirical evidence and helps overcome the drawbacks of previous narrative reviews (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Second, it examines the distinctive challenges and opportunities related to engaging in extracurricular activities within conservative cultures (Metcalf, 2011; Tlaiss, 2014). Third, it identifies the gaps in the current evidence base and suggests directions for future research.

2. Methodology

2.1 Rationale for a Narrative Review Approach

A narrative literature review was used in this synthesis because the connection between extracurricular activities and graduate employability is related to several fields, including education, psychology, management, and sociology, and involves different research methods, making a quantitative analysis of the topic irrelevant (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Different from systematic literature reviews, which demand thorough searching and strict adherence to the guidelines, a narrative literature review is useful in situations where the subject matter, methods, or outcomes are diverse and where the studies use heterogeneous methods (Suto, 2013). This methodology will enable the combination of theoretical, empirical, and contextual knowledge to gain a holistic perspective on the role of extracurricular activities in enhancing the employability of graduates.

Following best practice guidelines (Ribeiro et al., 2023; Suto, 2013), this narrative review utilizes a methodology that is transparent in its design by incorporating (a) a clearly defined search strategy, (b) inclusion and exclusion criteria are explicitly stated, (c) a systematic process for data extraction and synthesis, and (d) an acknowledgment of the interpretive nature of narrative synthesis.

2.2 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was adopted to find peer-reviewed literature that analyzes the

relationship between extracurricular activities and the employability of graduates.

2.2.1 Literature Searches

Databases were searched within Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). The selection of these databases was based on their extensive range of educational, psychological, and management literature.

2.2.2 Search Terms and Strings

The following search string was used in each of the databases:

("extracurricular" OR "extra-curricular" OR "non-classroom" OR "co-curricular" OR "out-of-class")

AND

("graduate employability" OR "employability skills" OR "graduate attributes" OR "workforce readiness" OR "job readiness")

AND

("higher education" OR "university" OR "college" OR "tertiary education")

Further specific searches were undertaken using the activity type:

("student clubs" OR "societies" OR "volunteering" OR "internships" OR "leadership programs" OR "competitions" OR "student organizations")

2.2.3 Additional Search Methods

An additional search was carried out using the snowballing method, whereby the list of references from key sources and their citations on Google Scholar was examined.

These strategies helped identify key works and those that may not have been obtained through database search. Institutional databases and grey literature (theses and technical papers) were considered when required for region-specific works on women from conservative societies.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The obtained sources were filtered using inclusion and exclusion criteria defined in

advance for consistency and relevancy to the objectives of the review.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Study Selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Undergraduate or postgraduate students in higher education	Primary/secondary school students; non-education professionals
Concept	Participation in extracurricular or non-classroom activities	Mandatory/graded curriculum or co-curriculum
Outcome	Employability outcomes, skill development, or workforce readiness	No impact on employability reported
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or published theses	Editorials, commentaries, opinion pieces
Language	English	Non-English
Timeframe	2010–2026	Before 2010 (except seminal theoretical works)

These criteria ensured that the study was purely concentrated on higher education literature on the relationship between extracurricular activities and graduates' employability without compulsory curriculum activities and non-empirical studies.

2.4 Analytical Approach

A thematic synthesis approach was used according to the given guidelines (Ribeiro et al., 2023). The process was divided into three phases:

Phase 1: Familiarisation and Initial Coding.

All included studies were thoroughly read. Important information was extracted from the studies and put in a data extraction table. Initial coding identified common concepts and patterns among the studies.

Phase 2: Theme Development. The cyclical approach of coding and theme development was carried out by combining similar codes into themes using an iterative cycle of reading, coding, and theme development. This thematic analysis

was informed by the theoretical perspectives of experiential learning theory and transformative learning theory, as proposed by Kolb (2015) and Mezirow (1991, 2000), respectively.

Phase 3: Synthesis and Integration. This step involved defining, refining, and integrating themes. Synthesis not only entailed presenting information but also critically analysing the same.

The details of each research article that were used in the analysis include the authors, publication year, geographical location of the research study, research methodology, participants' demographics, extracurricular activity studied, theory used, and main findings regarding graduate employability.

2.5 Reflexivity and Saturation

The authors are aware that narrative reviews present an interpretation of synthesis but not an exhaustive search for the full literature (Suto, 2013). Literature selection was based on

relevance to the research questions and theoretical value. The analysis was performed up to thematic sufficiency, which means that further literature did not change the developed themes (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

The evidence gathered in this narrative review comes from a variety of geographical and institutional settings. To enhance transparency in methodology, a summary of the empirical findings underlying this narrative review is provided in Appendix Table A1. The appendix highlights the contribution of each study's characteristics to graduate employability.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This narrative review synthesises previously published peer-reviewed literature and does not involve primary data collection from human participants. As such, formal ethical approval was not required. The review adheres to ethical research practices, including transparent reporting, accurate citation of sources, and acknowledgment of authors' contributions. All sources are appropriately cited, and no copyright infringement has occurred.

3. Theoretical Framework for Extracurricular-Employability Relationship

3.1 Experiential Learning Theory

The theoretical basis of how extracurricular activities affect employability can be established using the theory of experiential learning. The key theoretical basis that explains how involvement in extracurricular activities aids in employability is experiential learning theory. The four-stage process of the experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb (2015), which includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, allows understanding of how involvement in activities helps students turn experience into learning. Extracurricular activities provide students with first-hand experience of what they are studying, as opposed to learning about these realities through the act of reading, listening, or writing about them.

Research indicates that learning is most likely to be effective in context and that the transfer of learning from the learning setting to the working setting will most likely occur when the learning setting simulates the work setting (Barrie, 2006; Kember, 2009). Extracurricular activities offer this form of contextualized learning, which gives the opportunity for students to practice professionalism and hone their competencies through experience. This aspect becomes even more important for students within conservative cultural settings, where opportunities to be exposed to professional settings are rare (Madsen & Cook, 2010).

3.2 Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory, as proposed by Mezirow (1991, 2000), provides yet another framework for analyzing the effects of extracurricular activities. There is a need for a framework for understanding the teaching and learning of generic graduate attributes that considers the interdependence between disciplinary knowledge and transferable competencies (Barrie, 2007). The development of generic graduate attributes through a research-driven process is fundamental to those institutions that want to implement this policy successfully (Barrie, 2012). Transformative learning can be understood as the transformation of a problematic frame of reference to make it more reliable for adults, thereby producing well-justified opinions and interpretations. This theory has three central elements, which include the construction of knowledge out of experiences through interaction with life experiences, reflective thinking on such experiences, and development through exploring possibilities of assuming different roles or actions.

Through extracurricular activities, students have the opportunity for transformative learning through the process of gaining new insights and perceptions, thereby building a more productive identity (Madsen & Cook, 2010). This is especially significant regarding students who come from conservative cultures because their involvement in activities allows them to redefine themselves within their society and within the

larger community. According to Madsen and Cook (2010), transformative learning experiences among Emirati female students resulted in the redefinition of women's work roles in society.

3.3 Framework of Graduate Capital

The Graduate Capital Framework proposed by Tomlinson (2017) offers an all-encompassing approach to comprehending the resources that graduates utilize in making the transition into the workforce. This framework consists of five interdependent types of capital, which determine the graduate's employability outcomes.

Human capital can be defined as the pool of knowledge, skills, and credentials that the graduate acquires through his/her educational experience. Human capital involves subject expertise, technical skills, and other general skills acquired through formal and informal educational processes (Tomlinson, 2017). The graduate's human capital is the pool of resources that demonstrates competency to the employer.

Social capital refers to the network and professional contacts that a graduate develops during his/her period of study. Social capital gives an opportunity to connect with people, obtain job opportunities, and acquire industry knowledge (Tomlinson, 2017). Participation in extracurricular activities such as clubs, professional organizations, and internships provides many chances to develop social capital through networking with fellow students, professionals, and employers.

Cultural capital consists of dispositions, cultural competence, and professional norms that allow graduates to function effectively in workplace environments (Tomlinson, 2017). These include knowing workplace etiquette and cultures. Involvement in extracurricular activities, especially those with international experience or professional involvement, is vital for the development of cultural capital (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012).

Identity capital refers to graduates' identity, career intentions, and professional identity. These include career intentions and an understanding of their professional strengths

(Tomlinson, 2017). Extracurricular activity involvement, especially leadership positions, assists students in building professional identities and identifying their career intentions (Smith & Smith, 2024).

Psychological capital includes resilience, self-efficacy, confidence, and persistence through difficulties (Tomlinson, 2017). Such capital becomes particularly valuable for graduates who face uncertainties while entering the labour market. Extracurricular activities, including dealing with difficulties, taking responsibility, and goal accomplishment, are especially useful for building up psychological capital.

The five types of graduate capital are interconnected, and one extracurricular activity can have an influence on more than one type at the same time (Tomlinson, 2017). This interconnected development contributes to the understanding of why there is such a strong correlation between extracurricular participation and graduate employability, especially in conservative cultural environments, where identity and psychological capital become particularly important (Smith & Smith, 2024; Metcalfe, 2011).

3.4 Synthesis: An Integrated Theoretical Framework

Combining the three theoretical frameworks, this review employs a combined theoretical framework to examine the relationship between extracurricular and employability. Experiential learning theory is useful in explaining how students acquire knowledge through their participation in extracurricular activities. Transformative learning theory can be applied to understand the changes that take place as a result of such a learning process. Capital theory for graduates elaborates on the types of resources that are acquired and the varied kinds of capital required for workforce transition. This integrated theoretical framework recognizes that extracurricular activities do not just provide additional skills but help students develop a whole new self-image along with the resources necessary for workforce success. For students in conservative cultural environments, this is

especially important because it helps women to create a new identity while retaining their culture.

To ensure easy referencing, the main theoretical frameworks underlying this review are presented in Appendix Table A2.

On the basis of the theoretical framework outlined above, Figure 1 below provides the

conceptual framework of the study derived from the reviewed literature. The framework shows how extracurricular involvement promotes graduate employability through experiential learning, transformative learning, and graduate capital formation in the light of the role of conservative cultural contexts.

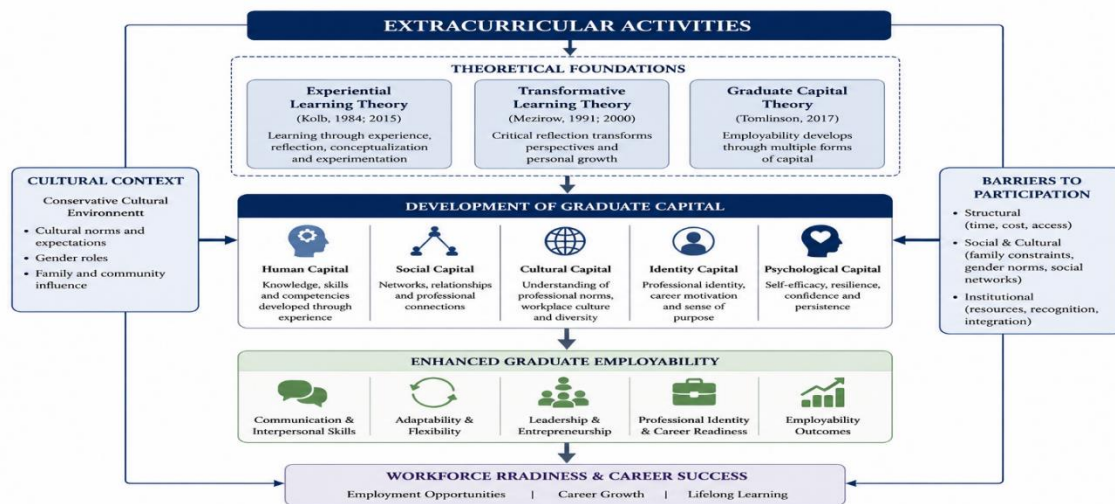


Figure 1. Integrated Conceptual Framework Linking Extracurricular Activities, Graduate Capital, and Employability in Conservative Cultural Contexts

4. Key Contributions of Extracurricular Activities

This section contains the thematic synthesis of the results from the reviewed literature. The four major contributions of extracurricular experiences to the employability of graduates are provided here.

4.1 Developing Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Communication skills remain the most important graduate employability skill that is gained by participating in extracurricular activities (Crebert et al., 2004; Tchibozo, 2007). Membership in clubs, events, and leadership positions enables learners to acquire communication skills such as speaking and writing in professional settings as well as interacting with different audiences (Kuh, 2008).

The research shows that extra-curricular activities offer the possibility of gaining skills in practice. Students participating in student associations

claim that there is considerable improvement in the development of their communication skills, critical thinking, and teamwork (Crebert et al., 2004). Moreover, feedback is a crucial factor for the development of these skills, and students receiving constructive feedback make greater progress (Kember & Leung, 2005).

The development of interpersonal skills via involvement in extracurricular activities goes further than just communication skills to include teamwork, conflict management, and intercultural communication skills. The individuals engaged in the extracurricular activities learn how to collaborate, how to handle conflicts, and how to adapt their communication style depending on the culture (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). Such skills are becoming increasingly important for employers that require graduate employees with the ability to perform efficiently in multicultural workplaces (Robles, 2012; Ortiz et al., 2016).

4.2 Cultivating Adaptability and Cultural Intelligence

Adaptability and being able to adapt to diverse cultures have become increasingly important in modern times because of the constant changes in the professional world. Extracurricular activities help develop these skills by exposing students to varied viewpoints and people (Kuh, 2008; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Various international experiences like study visits, international competitions, and cultural exchange programs have been found to help widen the horizon of students and develop intercultural competence in them (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). Students having these international experiences find themselves more aware of culture, more flexible in their thinking, and better able to deal with people from other cultures (Ribeiro et al., 2023). This is in accordance with the findings from various studies showing that positive attitudes towards people of other cultures result in motivation to communicate and develop intercultural competence.

Even in domestic settings, the extracurricular activity exposes students to diversity through interactions with fellow students from diverse disciplines, backgrounds, and perspectives (Kuh, 2008). Involvement in multidisciplinary activities promotes the development of an adaptive attitude to problem-solving and consideration of alternative points of view (Crebert et al., 2004).

4.3 Fostering Leadership, Entrepreneurial, and Innovation Mindsets

Extra-curricular activities offer an exclusive platform where students can acquire leadership qualities and entrepreneurial spirit. Empirical evidence suggests that participation in extra-curricular activities, specifically holding leadership positions within clubs and associations as office bearers, committee members, or founding members of clubs, fosters self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and motivation of others (Kuh, 2008; Hall et al., 2008).

These types of experiences as leaders are especially important for individuals from a

background where there is little familiarity with being in charge. Women living in conservative societies may experience transformation in joining leadership programs and student councils, which helps them build their self-confidence and develop effective communication skills (Madsen & Cook, 2010). Research has shown that participation in extracurricular activities as leaders helped female Emirati students discover their potential and transform their identities (Madsen & Cook, 2010; Khine & Hayes, 2010).

Extracurricular involvement is also another way of developing entrepreneurial and innovative skills (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Business fairs, start-up accelerators, and innovation contests facilitate the development of intrapreneurial and entrepreneurial skills among students (Tlaiss, 2014, 2015). These activities play a key role in nurturing independent thinking and the ability to take advantage of opportunities, especially in view of changing career paths in the modern world (Goby & Erogul, 2011).

4.4 Constructing Professional Identity and Graduate Capital

In addition to developing certain skills, extracurricular activities help in the formation of professional identity and building of graduate capital (Tomlinson, 2017). Involvement in extracurricular activities helps students develop a better sense of their career goals, make contacts with other professionals and students, and gain experiences that distinguish them from other people in the job market (Smith & Smith, 2024).

Studies into the employment-related artefacts of near graduates have shown that students use extracurricular activities to showcase their worth to employers (Smith & Smith, 2024). Involvement in club activities, especially in positions of leadership, shows potential for leadership qualities. Community service shows that a person possesses traits of being an all-round individual outside of studies. Experience in professional work, both paid and unpaid, showcases preparation for the industry (Crebert et al., 2004).

In addition to developing human capital, extracurricular participation helps to develop social capital, cultural capital, identity capital, and psychological capital, which together facilitate graduate employability outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017; Tchibozo, 2007; Ribeiro et al., 2023).

According to the reviewed literature, there are several interrelated developmental paths by which extracurricular activity contributes to graduate employability. These thematic contributions are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Thematic Synthesis of the Major Contributions of Extracurricular Activities to Graduate Employability

Theme	Representative Extracurricular Activities	Graduate Capital Developed	Key Employability Outcomes
Communication and interpersonal skills	Student clubs, volunteering, student organizations	Human, Social	Communication, teamwork, networking
Adaptability and cultural intelligence	International exchange, multicultural programmes, community engagement	Cultural, Psychological	Adaptability, intercultural competence
Leadership, entrepreneurship, and innovation	Student leadership, competitions, entrepreneurship programmes	Identity, Human, Psychological	Leadership, creativity, problem-solving
Professional identity and graduate capital	Internships, placements, mentoring, reflective activities	Human, Social, Identity, Psychological	Career readiness, professional identity, workforce transition

The reviewed literature suggests that extracurricular involvement improves graduate employability through several interlinked aspects, not independent competencies. The following table summarizes the contributions of extracurricular participation to graduates' success in terms of communication and interpersonal skills, adaptability and cultural intelligence, leadership and entrepreneurship, and professional identity and graduate capital formation. Together, these components strengthen the preparation of graduates for work, especially within conservative cultures where extracurricular engagement offers culturally acceptable possibilities of personal and professional growth (Tomlinson, 2017; Madsen & Cook, 2010; Kirk & Napier, 2009).

5. Extracurricular Activities in Conservative Cultural Environment

5.1 Special Challenges and Benefits

The importance of extracurricular activities in helping prepare graduates for work is especially critical in conservative cultural environments, where female students may encounter special difficulties as a result of their limited experience regarding business expectations and insufficient experience of living beyond family and college (Kirk & Napier, 2009; Gallant & Pounder, 2008). For such students, extracurricular activities are an important and non-confrontational method of acquiring graduate employability qualities (Madsen & Cook, 2010).

Studies on the development of employability attributes among Emirati female students in higher education have indicated that widening the experience of the learners in education beyond

classroom-based learning through activities that entail engagement outside their comfort zones was an important route to the development of employability attributes (Madsen & Cook, 2010; Khine & Hayes, 2010). It was discovered that planned activities promoted by the educational institution and effectively monitored by the institution could give them official legitimacy, thus making such activities acceptable for families or guardians (Kirk & Napier, 2009).

5.2 Gradual and Non-Confronting Exposure Strategy

Extracurricular activities' effectiveness in a conservative environment hinges on how they are implemented. Literature indicates that a strategy involving gradual and non-confronting exposure strategy, which acknowledges the norms of the community, is feasible and effective (Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Metcalfe, 2011). It entails ensuring that parents are assured that the activities are organized by the college, responsible persons will supervise the students, and the institution is responsible for their safety.

The aspect of social accountability involved in the after-school activities has special importance given the conservative nature of those contexts. Community service and humanitarian projects will allow students to go beyond their narrow social environment while keeping them protected, supported, and accountable through being part of the educational institution (Madsen & Cook, 2010). Engaging the community in extracurricular activities helps in developing graduate attributes such as citizenship, resilience, and problem-solving abilities (O'Connor et al., 2011). Research from the Gulf area demonstrates how structured activities under institutional supervision enable an accepted structure to be created and respected by families, allowing women to learn workplace skills without compromising cultural values (Kirk & Napier, 2009; Khine & Hayes, 2010). This approach is especially important because it respects culture while gradually broadening their professional horizons.

5.3 Effect on Families and Communities

Crucially, the effect of extracurricular experience is not limited to an individual student but is extended to the family and community at large. Studies have shown that by gaining graduate employability skills through extracurricular activities, it could bring about a change in the attitude of families towards the participation of women in the workforce (Madsen & Cook, 2010; Gallant & Pounder, 2008). Those families that were initially against the involvement of their daughters in any activities became supportive due to observing the progress of their daughters.

This ripple effect implies that participation in extracurricular activities may not only lead to personal employment opportunities but also bring about a more general social change. The involvement in extracurricular activities allows women to showcase their abilities in the context of professionally guided activities, which can help to challenge cultural conventions and create new opportunities for women to be employed and active in the community (Metcalfe, 2011; Tlaiss, 2014).

For instance, research on Emirati female students has shown that leadership skills gained from extracurricular activities helped students realize their own potential, redefine their identity, and become more involved in their community and work environment (Madsen & Cook, 2010; Khine & Hayes, 2010). This, in turn, affected those around them and contributed to a change in the community's attitude toward women's engagement in work.

6. Barriers to Equitable Extracurricular Participation

Although the advantages of extracurricular participation have been established, several barriers affect student engagement. The barriers function in the structural, social, cultural, and institutional realms, producing inequality in access to activities that enhance employability opportunities.

6.1 Structural Barriers: Time, Costs, and Access

The time factor is a major issue for many learners. Academics, caring responsibilities, and jobs limit the time left for participation in activities (Ribeiro et al., 2023). It is especially difficult for those learners who combine education with either a part-time or full-time job and for those whose family responsibilities affect learning time. Sometimes the need to combine academics and participation becomes too much for some learners, forcing them to drop out despite their realization of the importance of the latter (Crebert et al., 2004).

Cost is another major barrier. Activities have costs associated with travel, accommodation, insurance, and materials (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Students with constrained financial capabilities will not be able to attend such extracurricular activities that can help them improve their employability. This creates inequality of access to employability development opportunities, particularly for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. (Szucs & Harpur, 2023).

Proximity to the campus area is an additional structural barrier. Extracurricular activities are usually arranged in metropolitan cities and, thus, students living in regional or rural areas are disadvantaged (Ribeiro et al., 2023). This is especially significant for commuter students or those who cannot move to another city to study.

6.2 Social and Cultural Barriers

The social and cultural aspect is also relevant in terms of participation in extracurricular activities. Less privileged students might not have professional or social networks that will help them source the activities, giving them an edge over the other "more connected" students (Tomlinson, 2017). This shows broader inequalities in access to cultural and social capital that influence employability outcomes.

In culturally conservative settings, other constraints will come into play. Restrictive family policies with regard to women's mobility and interaction with the opposite sex will make it

difficult for women to participate in activities beyond the institution (Kirk & Napier, 2009; Gallant & Pounder, 2008). While supervised activities offer a chance for participation, families with deep-seated opposition against women participating in the public sphere will continue to resist. As shown in studies on Emirati female students, some female graduates were still unable to enter the work force despite the acquisition of employability skills because of continued opposition from the family (Madsen & Cook, 2010).

In the valuing of extracurricular participation, there are gender considerations involved. There have been findings showing that there are marked gender differences in the way that students construct their extracurricular participation experiences to become employability stories, with men placing high value on their participation as preparation for future employment than women (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). These findings highlight the need for institutions of higher learning to help students, especially women, realize the importance of extracurricular participation as an approach towards employability.

6.3 Institutional Challenges

From an institutional perspective, there are certain obstacles in providing and implementing extracurricular activities. Scheduling is one such issue when students miss classes to attend activity sessions, a practice which may be frowned upon by teaching personnel (Crebert et al., 2004). The issue of finding free slots in the students' schedule to provide them more opportunities persists.

Financial and human capital constraints restrict the implementation of quality extracurricular programmes (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Productive extracurricular activities require effort and time, along with specially assigned employees. Expenses related to the process, such as equipment, transport, and attendance at conferences, can be a big financial burden for educational institutions.

Another institutional challenge is associated with the acknowledgement and integration of extracurricular experience into official programs. Some institutions have created point schemes or co-curriculum records to recognize extracurricular activity, but most do not (Crebert et al., 2004). The absence of official recognition might negatively affect students' willingness to engage in extracurricular activities.

The literature identifies three broad categories of barriers that influence students' participation in extracurricular activities and the employability benefits derived from such experiences (Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Metcalfe, 2011; Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2023). These barriers are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic Synthesis of Barriers to Effective Extracurricular Participation

Barrier Theme	Key Challenges	Impact on Employability	Institutional Response
Structural	Time constraints, financial costs, academic workload, limited access	Reduced participation and skill development	Flexible scheduling, financial support, expanded access
Social and cultural	Family expectations, gender norms, limited networks, cultural restrictions	Limited leadership, networking, and confidence	Family engagement, culturally responsive programmes, mentoring
Institutional	Limited recognition, inadequate resources, weak curricular integration	Lower motivation and reduced engagement	Formal recognition, resource investment, curriculum integration

Overall, Table 3 highlights that the advantages of extracurricular involvement for employability not only depend on student motivation but also on structural, socio-cultural and institutional factors. Addressing these barriers requires collective efforts of higher education institutions and policymakers to guarantee equal access to relevant extracurricular activities.

7. Implications and Recommendations

The results from this review imply four major areas for higher education practice and policy.

7.1 For Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions should strategically allocate funds towards extracurricular activities as an integral tool for enhancing employability. This involves allocating specific resources towards coordinating the activities, ensuring that there is equal access through provision of scholarships and flexibility in timing as well as documentation of extracurricular activities (Crebert et al., 2004; Ribeiro et al., 2023). They must allocate specific

time within student schedules for activities, give evening and part-time students an equal opportunity, and create co-curricular transcripts or digital badges to showcase their extracurricular successes.

7.2 For Educators and Program Coordinators

Educators are extremely important for making use of the employability benefits of extracurricular experience. They should give constructive feedback that would allow skill formation (Kember & Leung, 2005), promote reflective thinking for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), and assist students in expressing the value of their extracurricular experience in front of employers (Smith & Smith, 2024). Educators should encourage such students who are either shy or disruptive or those at risk to participate in meaningful activities.

7.3 For Policymakers

Policymakers should view extracurricular activities as a valid part of higher education

delivery. This entails providing financial resources for extracurricular programs, especially those aimed at underrepresented student groups, and the development of quality assurance mechanisms to measure employability results. Policymakers should encourage collaboration among the education sector, business, and communities to ensure that students get real-life chances to learn graduate skills. The integration of community service hours as part of graduation criteria is encouraged since it allows students to practice real-life decision-making and problem-solving skills (Giles Jr & Eyler, 1994).

7.4 Culturally Sensitive Practice

In cultures that are conservative in nature, institutions must adopt approaches that show respect for cultural values while increasing the scope of students professionally. In institution-based activities, there is an acceptance from the perspective of the family as well as providing a framework for developing graduate attributes within the context of cultural values (Kirk & Napier, 2009; Gallant & Pounder, 2008). A gradual and non-confronting approach which shows respect to community values is practicable (Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Metcalfe, 2011). Programs for leadership development specifically designed for women in a conservative culture need to be devised.

8. Discussion

8.1 Synthesis of Findings

In this narrative review, previous literature on the connection between extracurricular activities and graduate employability, especially in conservative cultures, is analysed. Based on this analysis, it has been identified that there are four major contributions of extracurricular activities, such as gaining communication and interpersonal skills through experiential learning, adaptability and cultural intelligence through exposure to different situations, leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation orientation, and professional identity and graduate capital formation. All of these contributions are based on the theoretical frameworks of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015),

transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000), and graduate capital theory (Tomlinson, 2017).

Concerning answering the three research questions that were the focus of this literature review:

RQ1: What is the nature of the relationship between extracurricular participation and graduate employability outcomes? It is positive and multi-dimensional in nature. Involvement in extracurricular activities is always linked with better employability results such as better skill development and greater career preparedness (Tchibozo, 2007; Crebert et al., 2004; Ribeiro et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, it is influenced by many factors, including the type, degree, and quality of involvement.

RQ2: Through what mechanisms do extracurricular experiences contribute to workforce engagement? There are four means identified: (a) practicing communication and interpersonal skills; (b) encountering different perspectives to develop adaptability and cultural intelligence; (c) gaining leadership and entrepreneurship experience to develop an innovative mindset; and (d) building identity and capital of a graduate to facilitate transition to workforce. The mechanisms are interrelated and reinforce each other such that an extracurricular experience can work on several mechanisms at once (Tomlinson, 2017; Smith & Smith, 2024).

RQ3: What challenges and opportunities shape the effectiveness of extracurricular engagement across diverse student populations? The effectiveness of extracurricular involvement can be influenced by structural constraints (time, expense, access), social and cultural constraints (networks, family constraints, gender relations), and institutional constraints (scheduling, resource limitations, recognition). In conservative cultures, there is an opportunity to use institutionally supervised activities that offer an accepted structure for families and allow women to acquire workforce skills without losing their culture (Kirk & Napier, 2009; Gallant & Pounder, 2008; Madsen & Cook, 2010).

8.2 Theoretical Implications

An integrated theoretical framework, incorporating elements from the theories of experiential learning, transformative learning, and graduate capital, provides a richer understanding of the role of extracurricular activities in fostering employability than any one of these theories alone. The experiential learning theory outlines the process of learning (Kolb, 2015). The transformative learning theory accounts for the type of change, the profound change of identity and self-concept (Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Graduate capital theory accounts for the type of resource built: human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological capitals that help in making the transition to the workforce (Tomlinson, 2017).

This framework shows how these three views complement each other. Experiential learning, transformative identity formation, and graduate capital development all occur at the same time, which is why extracurricular activities work.

8.3 Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this literature review. Firstly, it is a narrative literature review, hence interpretive rather than comprehensive (Suto, 2013). Secondly, this review covers only those sources written in the English language. Thirdly, the scope of this literature review is restricted to higher education and is unlikely to be generalized to other educational settings. Finally, the available evidence may suffer from publication bias with respect to positive effects of involvement in extracurricular activities.

8.4 Future Research Directions

Several research directions have emerged from this review. Firstly, empirical research that includes longitudinal research is required to test causation and understand the circumstances under which extracurricular activities would be most beneficial. Secondly, research must investigate the quality and extent of involvement with the extracurricular activities, going beyond the binary of participation (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Thirdly, cross-cultural comparative research could help us identify contextual factors that

affect effectiveness, especially within a conservative culture (Metcalf, 2011; Tlaiss, 2014). Fourth, research needs to be conducted on differential impacts among diverse groups of students from different social, economic, and gender backgrounds, as well as different cultural contexts (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012; Szucs & Harpur, 2023). Finally, the processes through which the extracurricular experiences help develop graduate capital, especially identity formation and psychological capital development, can be investigated further (Tomlinson, 2017; Smith & Smith, 2024).

9. Conclusion

The narrative review has reviewed current literature on the link between extracurricular activities and graduates' employability, with specific focus on conservative cultural backgrounds. There were three key research questions explored in the literature review regarding the type of link between extracurricular experiences and workforce readiness, challenges and opportunities associated with its success. The synthesis provides the following four main contributions that extracurricular experiences make: development of communication and interpersonal skills; development of adaptability and cultural intelligence; development of leadership, entrepreneurship, and innovation mindset; and development of professional identity and graduate capital. All these contributions have been discussed using an integrated theoretical framework that includes the concepts of experiential learning theory, transformative learning theory, and the graduate capital framework.

Furthermore, the paper outlines major obstacles to equality in participation, such as structural barriers, social and cultural barriers, and institutional barriers. Institutionalized programs offer a non-threatening route for women students to acquire workforce skills without compromising their cultural values within conservative cultures. Implications of the research findings are quite substantial for higher education institutions, educators, and policymakers. Institutions need to invest

strategically in extracurricular activities and promote their availability. Educators need to give constructive criticism and foster reflection. Policymakers should appreciate the value of extracurricular experience as part of the higher education system and promote collaborations between education, industry, and the community.

Further research efforts ought to involve robust research designs that include longitudinal studies in order to demonstrate causation and find out when extracurricular experiences are most useful. Comparative research in various cultural environments can shed light on the influence of context, especially in conservative cultures. The

differential impact of extracurricular experiences in varied demographics and the process by which extracurricular experiences build graduate capital need further investigation. Thus, extracurricular activities constitute an important avenue of acquiring the comprehensive skills required in today's job market. In the case of conservative cultures, extracurricular activities provide especially important avenues of equipping one for the demands of the future workforce. Higher education institutions need to take advantage of this opportunity and ensure that all their graduates have what it takes to thrive in the future workforce.

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Author Declaration

The authors declare that this work is original and has not been published previously, nor is it under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources have been properly cited, and the manuscript adheres to ethical research practices. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to its submission to the International Journal of Special Education.

Appendix A

Table A1. Evidence Base Underpinning the Narrative Review

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Population	Extracurricular Activity	Key Contribution to Employability
Crebert et al. (2004)	Australia	Qualitative	University graduates	Work placements and extracurricular activities	Enhanced communication, teamwork, and workplace readiness
Tchibozo (2007)	United Kingdom	Survey	University graduates	Extracurricular participation	Facilitated transition from university to employment
Hall et al. (2008)	United States	Case study	Undergraduate students	Campus recreational leadership	Developed leadership and decision-making skills
Gallant & Pounder (2008)	United Arab Emirates	Qualitative	Female graduates	Educational participation	Identified cultural and institutional barriers to employability
Garcia-Aracil & Van der Velden (2008)	Europe	Survey	Higher education graduates	Higher education experiences	Demonstrated the importance of transferable competencies in employment
Kirk & Napier (2009)	United Arab Emirates	Policy analysis	Female students	Institution-supported activities	Highlighted culturally acceptable pathways for workforce preparation
Madsen & Cook (2010)	United Arab Emirates	Qualitative	Female university students	Leadership programmes	Strengthened confidence, leadership, and professional identity

Khine & Hayes (2010)	United Arab Emirates	Qualitative	Female students	Student engagement	Improved self-confidence and career aspirations
Goby & Eroglu (2011)	United Arab Emirates	Qualitative	Women entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurship programmes	Encouraged innovation despite cultural constraints
Metcalfe (2011)	Gulf Region	Critical review	Women professionals	Professional development initiatives	Emphasized culturally sensitive institutional support
O'Connor et al. (2011)	Ireland	Case study	University students	Community engagement	Fostered teamwork, civic responsibility, and graduate attributes
Stevenson & Clegg (2012)	United Kingdom	Mixed methods	University students	Extracurricular activities	Demonstrated gender differences in employability narratives
Carnevale & Smith (2013)	United States	Labour market analysis	Employers and workforce	Workplace competencies	Identified communication and teamwork as critical employability skills
Tlaiss (2014)	United Arab Emirates	Qualitative	Women entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurial activities	Reported cultural barriers affecting professional participation
Tlaiss (2015)	United Arab Emirates	Qualitative	Women entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurship	Promoted entrepreneurial confidence and career independence
Ortiz et al. (2016)	United States	Employer survey	Employers	Communication competency	Identified oral communication as a key hiring criterion
Tomlinson (2017)	United Kingdom	Conceptual synthesis	Graduates	Graduate capital	Explained employability through human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological capital
Szucs & Harpur (2023)	Australia	Literature review	Students with disabilities	Extracurricular participation	Identified accessibility barriers to employability development
Smith & Smith (2024)	United Kingdom	Qualitative	University graduates	Student placements	Demonstrated development and application of graduate capital
Ribeiro et al. (2023)	International	Narrative synthesis	University students	Multiple extracurricular activities	Synthesized evidence linking extracurricular

					participation with graduate employability
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Note: The above table represents an overview of the major studies used in the construction of the thematic synthesis of this review. Conceptual and theoretical studies employed in developing the review framework (Kolb, 2015; Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Barrie, 2006, 2007, 2012) are mentioned in the main text but are not included in this section since they formed part of the review's conceptual foundations and not the empirical basis.

Table A2. Theoretical Foundations Supporting the Narrative Review

Theory/Framework	Key Proponent(s)	Core Concept	Relevance to the Review
Experiential Learning Theory	Kolb (1984; 2015)	Learning occurs through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation	Explains how extracurricular activities foster transferable skills through experiential learning.
Transformative Learning Theory	Mezirow (1991; 2000)	Critical reflection transforms beliefs and perspectives	Explains identity development and personal growth resulting from extracurricular participation.
Graduate Capital Theory	Tomlinson (2017)	Employability develops through human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological capital	Provides the primary framework for interpreting employability outcomes throughout the review.
Graduate Attributes Framework	Barrie (2006; 2007; 2012)	Universities should intentionally cultivate transferable graduate capabilities	Explains the contribution of extracurricular activities to graduate attribute development.
Employability Framework	Harvey (2001; 2003)	Employability extends beyond academic achievement to include experience, adaptability, and reflection	Supports the broader conceptualization of graduate employability adopted in the review.

Note. The table summarizes the main theoretical frameworks used to understand the relationship between extracurricular participation and graduate employability.