Regional solidarity undermined? Higher Education Developments in the Arabian Gulf, Economy and Time.

The paper theorises fragility of regional solidarities in light of the emerging ways in which two Arabian Gulf states, Bahrain and Oman, are undertaking their transition to a knowledge economy. The paper shows ways in which regional symbolic solidarity goals of common economic and educational development in the Gulf region are challenged by locally focussed priorities at the level of each nation state. These findings carry important theoretical implications as the time of transition to a knowledge economy seems to drive readjustments in thinking about what the ‘Gulf-wide unity is for’, prompting its repositioning from an alliance established to protect and facilitate regional development to a means supporting local ends. The paper therefore challenges the spatial focus in some theoretical frameworks used in analyses of the sociology of regional solidarities and calls for the need of temporal lenses in such analyses.

Keywords: regionalism; temporalities; policy-making; Arabian Gulf; higher education

# Introduction

The continued currency of regional solidarities in political, social, economic and educational spheres has been highlighted in many works from the field (Giovannini 2016; Lo 2016; Jules 2017). Some of the ideals of regional alliances have however also been put to question, challenging not only the very definitions of regionalism and regional territories (e.g. Jonas 2012) but also focusing on the viability of regional governance and economic frameworks, especially at the time of increased globalisation (e.g. Lingard and Rawolle 2011; Hayes and Findlow 2017). But there is also another layer of questions about regionalism that is less explored. These questions focus on factors beyond the role of spatial spheres of shared geographies, histories and cultural and political heritage in shaping the sustainability of some regional alliances, especially those that are symbolic, and draw attention to the need for exploring why nation states that share the same symbolic features may nowadays apply a particular ‘gloss’ (Meyer et al. 1997) to ideologically similar goals. This paper speaks to this need and answers some of these questions.

The analysis below deconstructs the meaning of the symbolic value of the political and economic unity originally established between six Arabian countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman), which today is known as the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). The analysis reveals that the symbolic value of the GCC unity goals becomes readjusted in light of some of the emerging ways in which Bahrain and Oman are undertaking their transition to a knowledge economy. We also show that these ways and the period of economic transition in across the GCC states more generally carries important theoretical implications for explaining the current economic and HE developments in these two Gulf states. We draw special attention to engagement with international input that emerges as an important part of these developments, as strategies for engaging with international experts, as we will explain below, are understood by the locals as a new public good. Such positioning of international input then justifies adjustments in thinking about ‘what the GCC unity is for’, revealing ways in which this unity is used as a means to local end. We reveal in the paper that such a ‘use’ of the GCC alliance is prompted by the time of transition to a knowledge economy, highlighting ways in which its symbolic value is highly temporalised.

Our discussion is located in theoretical frameworks of moral economy, regionalism, glocalisation and ‘spatial’ perspectives on understanding regional and educational developments. These are concepts that are identifiable across the analysis in the paper and their definitions and understandings are provided in the first section that follows. Our findings challenge the spatial focus in these frameworks as the best way of studying regional (educational) solidarities. They point to the need for temporal lenses in understanding how the crucial time of transition to a knowledge economy in Oman and Bahrain influences people’s thinking about the purpose of the GCC alliance which, as such, becomes a socially-constructed concept (Lingard and Thompson 2017).

Transition to a knowledge economy in both Bahrain and Oman has been undertaken to shift from an economy built on oil wealth to a productive, globally competitive economy, shaped by the government and driven by a private sector. As such, it can be seen to be based on a common UNESCO (2005) definition which denotes national investment into people, skills and economic growth that can give rise to new jobs, new industries, productivity and competitiveness. But in the Arab world specifically, transition to a knowledge economy has also been noted to be linked to the notion of *power*, which may be shaping *the current* thinking about ‘what the GCC unity is for’ (Mazawi 2010). The emergence of this link in this paper supports Mazawi (2010, 215) who argues that ‘knowledge and development cannot be disconnected from their correlative constitutions of power that shape restructuring of political, social and economic institutions [such as the GCC] and inform educational reforms which seek to build an Arab knowledge society’. These constitutions therefore create specific imaginaries of knowledge societies which through educational reforms for development (such as those described in the paper) simultaneously prescribe specific social transformations that, conceived of based on the perceived need for a new economic order, are legitimised and sustained (Mazawi 2010). The main aim of the paper is to show that these imaginaries are influenced by time, as they reflect what is ‘thinkable’ and ‘imaginable’ about Oman and Bahrain *at the time* when these two states are becoming new knowledge societies. Such observations show more clearly that the social relations of spaces are not pre-given but are rather the outcome of new political projects that *evolve over time*. ‘It is thus possible to imagine and create a different assemblage of social relations’(to the one that has traditionally constituted the GCC) through engagement with a ‘different geometry of power, set of knowledges and politics of representation’ (Robertson 2006, 313). These in the paper involve specific ‘arrangements’ with international experts.

These arrangements, as the paper will show, make Oman and Bahrain interesting and revealing lenses. We chose to focus on Oman and Bahrain because engagement with international input in these two states differs from those of their Gulf neighbours. International input in Bahrain and Oman, as will be explained below, is mainly driven by the view that international experts can improve local education standards so that *local* (not international) universities can ‘plug the holes’ in the labour market skills. In the neighbouring states of Qatar, the UEA and Saudi Arabia, international experts are viewed differently, not as sub-contractors whose task is to improve standards of local education institutions, but rather as a contributor of international knowledge essential for global development of these states. This view is manifested in the establishment of education cities in Qatar and the UAE (where most universities are foreign) (e.g. Crist and Powell 2017) and increased investment in research partnerships and facilities in Saudi Arabia (e.g. Times Higher Education 2016). Kuwait is currently grappling with the quality of its private universities, with engagement with international input being rather ‘ad hoc’ and, unlike in Bahrain and Oman, not playing an important role in Kuwait’s’ national strategy for HE (Gulf Affairs 2017).

Finally, we have focused in the paper on policy representations of the problems with HE, as these representations justify some of the rhetoric that feeds the observed re-balancing of the function of regional ties in the Gulf. We analysed key HE policy documents and regulatory frameworks issued in relation to Oman’s and Bahrain’s national economic visions to flesh out these representations. We used Carol Bacchi’s (2009) approach to critical discourse analysis ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR). WPR enabled us to focus the analysis on factors beyond spatial characteristics (such as cultural and political heritage, as well as common geographies) and to capture those elements that change at the level of individual nation states, whilst the ‘original’ geographical, historical and cultural allegiances to regional networks stay the same. Through WPR, we were therefore able to seek answers to the following research questions:

(a) Which priorities *actually* drive investment in HE in Oman and Bahrain?
(b) What is the nature and scope of these priorities, especially in terms of engagement with international input?
(c) How are the dual notions of local economic benefits and symbolic solidarity of the GCC held in balance and influenced by these priorities?

Our answers show a series of ways in which the symbolic significance of the GCC unity is re-adjusted by goals that have pragmatic economic utility at the level of each nation state. The subsequent sections of this paper provide more insights into these ways, pointing to their highly temporalised nature. The first section critiques the subordination of temporal lenses in understanding the sociology of regional educational developments, discussing ways in which the spatial focus in these frameworks limits their ability to effectively capture contradictions that are imposed on the symbolic values of regional solidarities by developments related to time. The second section outlines in more detail our approach to policy analysis. The subsequent parts of the paper canvass ways in which the problems with HE in our two cases have been represented to be, how these representations have come about and how they are now used to justify a political and moral shift away from regional unity goals. The conclusion highlights the value of temporal lenses in understanding these shifts.

Moral economy, regionalism, nationalism, glocalisation and ‘space’.
The symbolic and political goals of the GCC unity, manifested in social ideology of protecting and growing the region’s religion, finance, trade, customs and legislation, as well as strengthening ties between people (Naheem 2017), can in many ways be seen to be ‘threatened’ by the economic developments currently taking place in Bahrain and Oman. The lens of moral economy therefore offers a useful analytical paradigm to understand and explore the emerging tensions (discussed in the following sections) between the developing economic values and valorised structures, views and social dependencies that have traditionally underlayed the GCC unity. Moral economy is understood in the paper, drawing on ideas from Polanyi (1957) and Sayer (2000;2011), as economic developments that are built on *moral* undercurrents, in the sense they emphasise the relationship between the society and the economy. Polanyi (1957) posits that economic growth driven by marker expansionism destroys the human character of connections and links that form societies. He argues that a successful market economy has to embed social, moral and political spheres and it is this ‘embeddedness’ that enables people on the ground to control market forces in a way that ensures protection for the society and redistributive wellbeing (Polanyi 1957). What emerges in this paper however, is a slightly different relationship between the society and the economy. It seems that what counts as successful and ‘good’ for the Bahraini and Omani societies is not dictated by the extent to which new economic ideas are embedded in the ‘old’ values underlying the GGC alliance but is rather shaped by new imaginaries of these two states as young competitive economies. In turn, these imaginaries shift the social ‘function’ of the GCC, from an alliance protecting the Gulf society into a vehicle that is used to win the inter-state rivalry.

Based on the above observation, the findings in the paper may be more aligned with theorisations about the moral economy proposed by Sayer (2000), who argues that the role of historically grounded community-based relations in managing the public good cannot be fully understood without studying their relationalities to global economic developments. When the latter is considered, what is ‘moral’ is also often influenced by wider social values and an understanding that free-markets and economies can actually hold opportunities for people and enable them to take more control over their wellbeing (Sayer 2000; 2011). We show below ways in which such opportunities are ‘sold’ to people in public discourses surrounding the new economic visions in Bahrain and Oman, which emphasise new public good opportunities that can be brought about by the transition to a knowledge economy. What such discourses do is they create a concept of moral economy that is still grounded in key GCC values and norms but ‘plants’ innovative ideas about how these values and norms can be re-used *at the time* of economic change. Such observations support Sayer (2000) who argues that despite shared and inherited values informing people’s sentiments, developments in social life observed elsewhere enable them to either embrace these values more or reject them (or strategically re-use them, as will be shown below). Such decisions depend on whether people think, or are told, that these developments will help them flourish or will be debilitating for them (Sayer 2000). The paper therefore evokes the on-going and shifting dimensions of what is represented to be ‘good’ for Bahrain and Oman in light of global influences of the rhetoric about free economies that are also kept in balance with specific regional ties and norms. What is interesting is that these dimensions do not attempt to change or break these ties but rather re-work their ‘usefulness’ for purposes that are *currently* being understood as a ‘better’ public good. In short, what becomes ‘moral’ is more contingent on different periods of change rather than the space in which this change is taking place. This observation has led us to critique some of the perspectives that emphasise ‘space’ in understanding regional and educational developments.

For instance, Miller-Idriss and Hanauer (2011) posit that regional lenses can help explain the emergence of off-shore university campuses across the Arabian Gulf which, according to the authors, has resulted from common histories as well as future developmental goals for the region. Miller-Idriss and Hanauer (2011) argue that the common economic backbone of natural resources (oil and natural gas), as well as the common regional struggle to imminently lose these resources, in addition to factors such as the shared regional inability to prepare Gulf citizens for the demands of the knowledge economy, young population across all Gulf states and political events such as 9/11 – all of which have contributed to an increased HE market in the region, create an equally common need for the region to ‘stand together’ and pursue policies that will protect its unity. We however show below that despite these spatial (i.e. regional) commonalities, strategies and priorities that our two Gulf states pursue are *not* for regional good. Instead, they are based on the need to win inter-state competition, using regional commonalities as a weapon. As such, our analysis is more in line with observations described by Findlow and Hayes (2016, 124) who argue that ‘despite the stronger history of regional sharing of both capital and policy in the Gulf, the main policy driver is inter-state competition’. Findlow and Hayes (2016) further assert that shared capital and unity of the Gulf is only meaningful insofar it denotes a trading environment. We agree, and based on the analysis in subsequent sections, contend that such a situation points to limitations of regional frameworks in explaining why this is the case.

Regional analytical frameworks can also obscure complex ways in which HE systems engage with international input. Writing about the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ,for example, Burden-Leahy (2009) posits that because the UAE is a young country, despite its ‘tribal’ social organisation, in the sense of regional and cultural allegiance to other Gulf countries, conflicts and characteristics of educational developments that would normally be present in tribal societies, do not occur in the case of the UAE. Burden-Leahy (2009, 538) argues that instead, the formation of the UEA higher education system has been shaped by the globalisation forces of modern and contemporary periods, which caused ‘anomalies in the development trajectory of the UAE state which are not accounted for by the prevailing theories of globalisation of education’. If regional frameworks were adequate here, in the sense of pursuing regional common goals, we would most likely see some sort of a uniform processes by which the Gulf states would be engaging with the influence of globalisation. What we see instead, is that each of these Gulf states (Findlow and Hayes 2016; Powell 2017; Burden-Leahy 2009 ) adopt differing strategies which is conceived of, in the current circumstances of their transition to a knowledge economy, as the best means of wining the regional competition which, in turn, is perceived at the best strategy to facilitate this transition. We therefore argue that, whilst strategic decision making is always embedded in some form of symbolically grown values, especially when it comes to economic developments (e.g. for latest review see Bolton and Laaser 2013), there is also scope to understand it using perspectives that prioritise time over space. The understanding in these perspectives, however, should not be based on time measured in hours and minutes, but rather as a construct that frames people’s actions and ‘thinking’ about certain (regional) values (Lingard and Thompson 2017). Only this sort of time-sensitive lens, as we will show below, can enable new understandings of situations in which regional ties emerge as sources of inter-state competition.

Being mostly a unity of nation states, built on shared ownership of political, social and economic projects, provision, regulation and funding (e.g. Dale 2005; Jules 2017), studies of regional ties have been dominated by a spatial focus (Warleigh-Lack 2015; Malamud 2010; Dwyer 2016). But if we take the Bologna Process as an example, it clearly emerges that this spatial focus has some limitations as analyses of the Bologna agreement continually point to the recurring focus on domestic rather than supra-national level of needs as a factor for discarding the regional educational goals of this EU project (e.g. Onursal-Beşgül 2017). Zmas (2015, 742) argues that actors on the ground need to solve a national problem first, which is why ‘the metamorphosis of the Bologna Process model and its basic principles are re-contextualised in a completely different story *every time*’. *Time* therefore may also be useful in explaining the metamorphosis of some of the GCC-unity goals that we analyse below, as this metamorphosis seems to be taking place because of the time of transition to a knowledge economy. It has already been argued elsewhere that education policies, which in our cases play an important role in the metamorphosis that we discuss below, are not only spatialised by some common regional values but also highly materialised and temporalised at very local levels (Hayes and Findlow 2017). Spatialisation, materialisation and temporalisation of educational policies driven by time may therefore lead to various degrees of separation from some regional goals and to critical rebalancing of their value.

Previously cited Sayer’s (2000, 2011) theorizations about moral economy, also known as ‘lay morality’ may have some continued currency in understanding this re-balancing. Sayer (2005) emphasises the role of an individual (here ‘a nation state’) in prioritizing their own needs above those of the collective good (here the regional unity of the GCC). ‘At the heart of Sayer’s concept of lay morality is an understanding of people as needy and vulnerable beings whose capacity to flourish (...) [is] universal and dependent on how and if their needs are met’ (Bolton and Laaser, 2013, 516). Thus, as Sayer (2005) explains, people’s moral evaluations of whether something is working for them or not change and become more and more materialised as they are forced to challenge whether symbolically grown values of, for instance, regional solidarity are bringing them the benefits that are desired in the context of some universal changes such as the growth of free markets, globalisation, and indeed, transition to a knowledge economy.

The question that then arises is one that focuses on the extent to which the ‘unmoral’ behavior of nation states, manifested in prioritising their individual needs, is linked to forms of nationalism. Nationalism can be analysed for instance from primordial, modern and ethno-symbolic perspectives (for latest review see Özkirimli 2017), but most analyses seem to agree that, all things considered, the term broadly denotes two meanings - one being linked to forms of xenophobia and separatism, the other being concerned with nation-building (see again Özkirimli 2017). And again, when taken at face value, it is this latter understanding of nationalism that seems to adequately explain the economic developments in our chosen Gulf states, as the ways in which allegiances to ‘old’ GCC nations are drawn upon point to strategies that invoke the past where ‘useful’ - that is, in situations when the GCC unity can be used to create a new national identity characterised by economic functioning based on knowledge.

But the emerging relationships between the state-driven cultural change underlying the pragmatism of nation-building discussed in this paper, manifested, as we explain below, in shifting the function of the GCC unity goals to supporting local ends, cannot be understood simply through social, cultural and historical heritage lenses. As argued by Hayes and Findlow (2017), understanding of such pragmatism through these lenses would fail to capture the fact that adjustments to the GCC-wide economic and education goals are not made because of the loss of regional identity but rather because priorities driving economic developments, supported by a specific HE strategy, are related to the crucial time of the transition to a knowledge economy. Our critique of moral economy, nationalism and regional theoretical frameworks is thus focused on the fact that, through their predominant focus on spatial lines, these frameworks suggest an assumption that the dynamic of economic developments is linear, and to some extent constant, as it is theorised to be mainly contingent on historical and social characteristics of spaces. This does not give due consideration to human agency and the ability and willingness of people to oppose, accept or re-shape this linear dynamic, both of which are often based on factors that are not related to historically and socially embedded values. We show in the paper how this ability becomes prompted by priorities related to time. This makes or analysis more theoretically aligned with the concept of ‘time-space’ (Lingard and Thompson 2017) which proposes that domains such as governance of economic development based on departure from regional goals almost always operate in relation to time that becomes a construct which shapes people’s actions in a given space. We will argue that it is such understanding of time that gives new direction and intensity to developments that justify departure from values traditionally established in a space (such as the GCC unity), prompting fresh understandings that regional solidarities are in fact highly temporalised.

It has already been noted elsewhere that spaces are not atemporal (Webb and Gulson 2015; Gulson 2016) revealing that ways in which economic developments are facilitated, for example, through strategic governance of HE, are susceptible to decisions that are thinkable and justifiable only at a particular time (Gulson 2016). Because engagement with international input is an important part of HE governance discussed in the paper, this kind of temporal lens also prompts ideas that the theory of glocalisation, that encircles the incorporation of the global into the local (Robertson 1992) can also be further developed alongside temporal lines.

Similarly to moral economy, glocalisation theory, as conceptualised by Robertson (1992), has mainly been considered alongside spatial lines (Robertson 2005). This means that the process of submerging the global into the local, and its realisations in specific localised forms, has mainly been captured through lenses of geographical locations of people, their cultures and their associated symbolism as factors affecting the global–local relationship (ibid). And indeed, this is how it has been predominantly understood in many works using glocalisation as a framework for analysing local developments and their contingency on the input from the global (e.g. Herod et al. 2007; Pries 2009; Patel 2017). According to Robertson (1992; 1995) glocalisation represents a two-way relationship that is maintained in response to and through influences from the global but the ‘global’ does not have a homogenising effect overall because individuals and social groups, through allegiances to their values, histories, traditions and geographies, seek to re-shape and re-conceptualise global phenomena at local levels (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2012, 437). When applied to regionalism, glocalisation however requires another layer of analysis to understand why and how nation states that are part of symbolic allegiances such as the GCC (in cultural, political and geographical sense) engage with the global to win the inter-state rivalry. Spatial lenses are not sufficient here to capture the competition between the GCC states that is described below because the observed departure from regional goals and common regulatory frameworks in Bahrain and Oman seems to take place not because the regional solidarity becomes erased from the social minds of people but rather because priorities arising at the time of transition to a knowledge economy prompt some fresh possibilities at the level of each nation state. As noted elsewhere in relation to the Gulf states ‘a temporal lens therefore draws attention to the changes within nation states that intercept and encapsulate glocalising forces originally established along spatial dimensions’ (Hayes and Findlow, 2017, 12). The kind of temporal lens suggested below suggests can therefore help explain why it is justifiable, and thinkable, to use regional solidarity as a means to local ends. Before we move to the analysis section however, we offer a summary of recent developments in Oman and Bahrain to shed some more contextual light on the ways in which these developments depart from key GCC unity goals.

# Background Information

The strength of the GCC partnership between all member states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) has been thrown into some doubt by the recent cutting of all political and socio-economic ties with Qatar (e.g. Naheem, 2017). Historically however, the ideological solidarity of the GCC alliance has been very strong, evidenced especially in forms of cross-state HE governance supporting economic development of the region. Regional ‘bureaus,’ ‘organizations’ and ‘councils’ (the Arab League Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization, ALECSO and the Arab Bureau of Education for Gulf States, ABEGS) have monitored each state decision-making as forums for sharing concerns and deciding on joint responses. These organizations have also been closely tied to deeply-rooted political commitments. Educational governance, in common with other forms of governance, has been shared according to strategic political interests, with complex and historic relationships of dependence and subsidy between states and emirates. The Association of Arab Universities and the Association of Islamic Universities as well as ALECSO and ABEGS have been involved in the drawing up of joint action plans to ‘prevent duplication of efforts.’ Direct borrowing of curricula, GCC-wide administrative frameworks and associated ideologies have been born-out of objectives based on common good for the Gulf citizens who needed regional education and support with employment (ibid).

Bahrain for instance, was an early focus of such GCC-wide educational aspirations. In 1968, the Gulf Technical College was established, with financing from newly oil-rich Abu Dhabi and supported by the aim of providing technical education to students from across the region. In 1978, the co-educational University College of Arts, Science and Education was founded, with an independent board of trustees from King Fahd University in Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and Amman as well as Bahrain. Its immediate aim was to train regional teachers. It was renamed the Gulf Polytechnic in 1981, and the money Abu Dhabi had been planning to invest was redirected to the new project of the Arabian Gulf University (AGU), jointly owned by all the GCC states which was located in Bahrain. The new university was intended to pool resources in meeting increased demand for higher education among citizens in the GCC countries, and to foster through this a sense of GCC unity. This aim was captured in the AGU’s founding mission statement which reads:

*The Arabian Gulf University aims to be an exemplary regional Gulf university striving to focus its efforts on fundamental regional issues of the Gulf Cooperation Council in health, human development, environment, science and technology and aims to contribute effectively to spreading the culture of knowledge and education in Arabian Gulf society.*

*(AGU website)*

In Oman, the higher education system was established officially in 1986 when the +Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was opened. The opening of the University was part of the Omani Educational Renaissance, led by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos who, over the period of 30 years, oversaw HE initiatives driven by the same goals of catering for the needs of GCC citizens and equipping them with skills for the much needed jobs in the Gulf’s teaching, medicine, nursing and engineering sectors. Other ways in which SQU was fulfilling GCC unity goals included, for instance, jointly funded research between the University and the United Arab Emirates, prioritising key social, economic and health issues of the region, for example, child safety in cars, new food technologies for the agricultural sector or DNA variations among Gulf citizens (see Al'Abri 2016).

The regional aspirations of common good and the symbolic ideology of GCC wide unity were however thrown into some doubt when Bahrain and Oman started investing in their new flagships projects - i.e. private universities supporting national economic development and local agendas of Bahrainisation and Omanisation (i.e. government initiatives aiming to increase the percentage of local people in private and public sector jobs). In the early 2000s, Bahrain started to look away from the GCC unity goals, towards locally focused economic benefits, planning an expansion of private universities through catching on to the global ‘for-profit’ orientation of higher education (e.g. Shah and Sid Nair, 2013). As a result, 12 private universities in the past 15 years have been created, an initiative whose legitimation was strengthened by the launch of the Economic Vision 2030 in October 2008. Oman launched their economic vision a lot earlier, in 1996, called ‘Vision for Oman’s Economy: Oman 2020’, with goals of sustaining the national economy through diversification, privatisation, Omanisation, foreign investment, and trade industrialisation and liberalisation being very similar to Bahrain’s. These goals have been drawn upon in many subsequent policy documents in Oman (e.g. MoNE, 2008; 2004). To attain these goals, the government is clear that , through the HE system ‘the training of Omani citizens, promotion of their skills, as well as adoption of policies aiming for the promotion of each citizen’s living standard’ are critical for the sustainable development of the economy (MoNE, 2004, p.25). Thus, private HE has an important role to play and is seen as an innovative route to achieving Oman’s economic competitiveness:

*The future of Oman depends upon diversification of the economy, and this requires an innovative culture, an entrepreneurial spirit, and continuous strategic planning. In meeting this objective, education is to play a vital role. Higher education will help ensure that the Sultanate of Oman takes its place among the developed nations of the 21st century* (MoNE, 2008, ch.3).

Perhaps that is why Oman has 29 private university and colleges operating today. And similarly to Bahrain, such heavy investment in private HE is fully justified because the economic visions in both countries, and their associated objectives for HE developments, have enabled a public discourse based on the view that the main purpose of HE is to feed the local labour market needs at the time of economic change. Consequently, a number of problems with HE were identified which needed addressing *at this crucial time*. We explore below how this time has driven specific governance decisions that were made to address these problems. We show ways in which these decisions reflect rampant free-market competitiveness that has produced a change in conceptions about ‘what GCC unity is for’, and how the distributive traditions and residual ideals of higher education as a public good for regional citizens became rebalanced relative to the new economic goals.

# **Methods and** Analytical Approach

As explained above, we chose WPR as our approach to policy analysis as it prompts interrogation of representations of the problem through scrutinising the premises leading to these problematisations and the effects they produce. The WPR frames analyses of policies around the following questions:

(1) What’s the problem represented to be in a specific policy?

(2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?

(3) How has this representation of the problem come about?

(4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?

(5) What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?

(6) How has this representation of the problem been produced?

(Bacchi, 2009, p. xii)

 In the following sections, we use WPR questions 1-6 as a basis for our comparative analysis of problems with HE as represented in key policy documents and regulatory frameworks supporting Oman’s and Bahrain’s economic visions. The policy documents from Oman include: *Vision for Oman’s Economy: Oman 2020* (MoNE 2008), the *Five-year Development Plans* (MoNE 2004, 2007) and some additional documents produced at the back of these key papers. The policies from Bahrain are: *Achieving Excellence Together: Annual Report 2012* (HEC 2012) and *National Higher Education Strategy 2014-2024 (*HEC 2014). The analysis is focused on tensions between HE policymaking, the overlay of ‘global’ frameworks used to produce local economic benefits and symbolic undercurrents of the GCC alliance. Exploring these tensions provides explanations of the ways in which this traditional alliance is re-shaped to produce local benefits, supporting our theoretical points about the role of time in this process.

# What are the problems with HE in Bahrain and Oman represented to be and what are the underlying presuppositions shaping these representations?

The strategic objectives of the Economic Vision 2030 in Bahrain ‘invite the higher education to feed the industry with its *local* experts’ (HEC 2012, 10). As a result, the government licensed more private universities, with the alignment between the courses and the Kingdom’s economic vision said to be the main prerequisite for their accreditation (Karolak 2012). The foreword to the National Strategy for Higher Education 2014-2024 contains this message:

*The higher education sector is central to the future development of the economy, public services and nation. The sector must perform a critical role in terms of addressing the skills needs of the workforce of tomorrow and developing* ***our*** *knowledge economy through improving overall quality, skills, entrepreneurship and technology (...) The strategy provides an integrated approach to providing skills, supporting students and contributing to the creation of jobs through enterprise and innovation (HEC 2014, iv).*

But when many of those private universities were stopped from recruiting students due to poor quality reviews by the Quality Assurance Authority for Education and Training (QAAET), a national body awarding degrees in Bahrain (HEC 2012), and after damaging reports about Bahraini universities awarding degrees without the required credits were released, resulting, for instance, in Kuwait announcing to stop recognising Bahrain as a regional provider of HE qualifications (Toumi 2010), Bahrain recognised that the HE system with such ‘problems’ cannot fulfill its economic objectives. It was subsequently positioned that ‘people require new educational opportunities that are in tune with the new economy and national priorities’ (HEC 2014, 13). Thus, *the problem with HE was represented* to be as lacking high quality graduate programmes, which is why ‘clearly the focus is now on quality rather than quantity’ (HEC 2012, 14) and that ‘the main challenge is to raise the quality of the sector to match or exceed international standards’ (HEC 2014, 1)

In Oman, the main focus in also on human resources development and upgrading the skills of Omanis through massification of HE. University participation of Omani youth, aged between 18 and 24 years, increased from 19 percent in 2004 to 50 percent in 2020 (Council for Higher Education 2004). Here *the main problem is represented to be* in very similar terms to Bahrain - that is, that Oman does not have enough HE institutions with programmes feeding the economic change and that, with the private sector being given the green light to create more universities, stricter quality audits need to be applied. In the *Seventh Five-Year Development Plan (2006-2010)*, it is clearly stated that ‘there is need for enhancing quality’ and the Ministry of HE has to work on ‘raising the quality of the HEIs’ and ‘build quality assurance system’(MoNE 2007, 433-437). Such representations of the problem may feed Al Shmeli’s (2009, 18) concerns that a ‘rapid growth and the introduction of the profit motive in relatively immature systems of HE inevitably pose a threat to quality’, which resulted in negative effects of economically-driven massification on the quality standards already being seen in Oman ( Al'Abri 2016). Similarly to Bahrain, it has been observed in Oman that ‘the real question here is not about quantity, but the quality of such a large number of institutions, established in a short period of time in a small state with a small population’(Author 2016). The government is however adamant that the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (QAAA) established in 2010 can:

*support the Omani higher education sector in meeting international standards; to maintain the national qualifications framework; and, through a transparent rigorous system of institutional and program accreditation, provide reliable information to the public and other stakeholders on the quality of higher education in Oman (QAAA 2016, 14 )*

So, we observe complementary agendas of rampant private sector expansion and raising academic standards in both our cases. We also observe that in both countries, *the underlying presuppositions* about the best ways of raising academic standards are centered around the idea of international (not regional!) experts coming to rescue. There are however differences in how Bahrain and Oman engage with these international experts. In Bahrain, the strategy is more ‘ad hoc’ and has a consultory nature whereby ‘some of the world’s best experts and institutions [are invited] to provide insights and learning tools’ (HEC 2012, 5). In recent years, these experts included: Queen Margaret’s University, the British Council, University of Manchester, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Higher Education Academy and Stanford Research Institute. Oman, on the other hand, has an ‘affiliation’ policy which mandates private HEIs to have academic affiliation with reputable international universities to assure the quality of the Omani private HEIs. As a result, no private university in Oman currently operates without an academic affiliation with an international university. The affiliates are from different parts of the world such as the UK, the USA, India, Austria, Jordan, Egypt, Malaysia and Lebanon. The ministry does not impose restrictions on the origin of the affiliates but highlights the importance of their accreditation in the country of origin and their international recognition (MoLA 1999).

Despite being different in nature, the strategies of relying on international expertise to frame new standards in both countries represent a particular developmental dynamism whereby pragmatic solutions compete at the expense of symbolic allegiances to the ‘good old’ GCC governance bureaus and affiliations as experts. But as explained by the General Secretary of the Higher Education Council in Bahrain (HEC), presently strategic engagement with international input is crucial for Bahrain as a country that is ‘*in transition*’ (HEC 2012, 5), and this requires ‘*a paradigm shift* [as] higher education institutions must work towards international standards quickly (…) through regulation and audit’. The rationale behind the affiliation policy in Oman is similar and, as a result, ‘all private higher education institutions in the Sultanate are required to maintain academic affiliation to a reputable international institution’ (MoHE 2005). Views that international experts will help raise standards in both countries are used to rationalise engagement with them as a greater public good than the GCC unity can presently offer. The need for international experts in Bahrain is justified on the basis that ‘in years ahead, we will have to be knowledge creators ourselves in order to stay competitive as a nation’ (HEC 2014, 14); this need ‘comes *at a time* of increased regional competition and increased skills demands from employers’ (HEC 2014, iv). The national strategy for HE is very clear in terms of how international input will support the following local ends:

*The vision is to position Bahrain as a regional hub for quality higher education, producing graduates with the skills, knowledge and behaviours required to succeed in the global knowledge economy while contributing to the sustainable and competitive growth of Bahrain’ (HEC 2014, 11).*

In Oman, engagement with international experts is driven by similar domestic goals, whereby the affiliation strategy reflects efforts to ‘successfully base the development of modern Oman on the dual strategy of embracing international ideas and practices while retaining what is important about Oman’ (MoHE 2006, 23). While safeguarding the educational and cultural lifestyle seems to hold an important place in this strategy, as development through international affiliations needs to be carried out ‘in a way that ensures maintaining the Omani traditions and customs’, these symbolic goals are matched (at the very least) by pragmatic objectives to increase ‘the low level of productivity of labour resources’ (...) and to actually challenge some cultural characteristics such as ‘ the reluctance of Omanis to join certain professions and occupations, [which] has led to reduction of their capacity to face future challenges, affected their integration with the world economy, and at the same time has hindered the substitution of expatriate labour’(MoHE 2006, ch.3, 3). In the end, Oman, like Bahrain, needs to respond to ‘competition in the next century (...) and support ‘success of nations in the coming century, [which] will be closely linked to the potentialities and skills of their people to cope with technological and scientific advances’ (MoHe 2006, ch.3, 1). Such discourses, however, *leave prioritising economic goals over grassroots symbolism of GCC solidarity unproblematic.* They also produce specific effects in the ways the role of regional links is repositioned in HE developments. We discuss these effects below.

# What effects are being produced by pragmatism of economic nationalisation which is ‘sold’ to the locals as a new public good?

Our analysis revealed that the effects produced by pragmatism underlying the economic transition in both Bahrain and Oman led to critical repositioning of regional links as a means to local ends. In Bahrain, this is evident in goals to ‘become a regional hub for quality private higher education institutions’, which is why ‘it remains important to (...) build on a strong [GCC] legacy to make the country a hub for regional education (HEC 2014, 25) . The objectives of becoming a regional educational hub are not however driven by past allegiances to regional common good and education opportunities for regional citizens, but rather to ‘improve Bahrain’s higher education competitiveness’ and to generate local benefits such as ‘greater revenues to the country’ (HEC 2014, 25). For instance, the continued emphasis on the GCC-wide secondary qualifications Tawjihi to be used as a basis for common entry exams to universities that we identified in the analysis seems to reflect such economic goals. The strong regional appeal Tawjihi has, in that it has traditionally been used as a means of establishing prestige and social hierarchy (Shirawi 1989), is now being used in Bahrain not to heal any effects of the lost regional solidarity but rather to attract regional students to heal the economic losses after ‘Bahrain has lost some important streams of flow of regional students’ (HEC 2014, 25). As explained in the HE strategy, ‘the recent loss of confidence in the quality of education requires proactive and conscious efforts to attract students back’ (HEC 2015, 25).

In Oman, the economic goals of generating revenues seem to be targeted through a strategy that aims to retain Omani students in home-grown institutions, as opposed to encouraging them, as was the case in the past, to study in neighbouring GCC states. This is clear in the Royal Decree supporting the establishment of the private HEIs that these institutions ‘shall benefit the society and national economy’ (MoLA 1999, article 1). Also, unlike the early goals of establishing regional universities, such as the AGU project in Bahrain discussed in the background section, the strategy in Oman seems now to be focused on growing domestic HE provision. And while there are ways in which this strategy may be seen as being driven by nationalistic and symbolic goals related to nation building, as the founding SQU strategy, for instance, aimed to develop the prestige of the University as ‘one of the three best universities in the region by the year 2013 and to achieve an international reputation that is a source of Omani pride’ (SQU 2009, 13), there are also ways in which it is possible to see how any such remainders of symbolism are matched by goals related to pragmatic nationalisation to support economic change at home. The SQU strategy clearly states that the University ‘takes guidance from the foundations of the Omani Economy Vision 2020’ and that ambitious vision for the university to be among the three best in the region is intended to ‘meet the nation’s changing development needs at all levels’ (SQU 2009, 3). Thus, the effects that are being produced, both in Oman and Bahrain result in critical rebalancing between economic and symbolic goals, whereby economic goals compete at the expense of emancipatory objectives of sustaining the GCC unity. The time of transition to a knowledge economy seems to relocate the value of this unity to functions supporting economic returns, which are then represented in policy as a new public good. It is therefore reasonable to assume that when the objectives shaped by this crucial time are achieved, more adjustments to the GCC unity will be made, perhaps when either Bahrain or Oman decide that *it is time* for them to enter the global competition stage. F*or the time being* however, global rankings seem to be less important than the production of domestic and operational capital. Our conclusion focuses on the conceptual implications of this choice.

# Conclusion

The answer to the first research question about the type of priorities that drive investment in HE in Bahrain and Oman suggest that these priorities are highly materialised and temporalised. We have shown in the paper that regional solidarities established on the basis of the symbolic and moral allegiances underlying the GCC project become challenged by materialist perspectives driven by generating local economic returns which are sought at the time of transition to a knowledge economy. This answer then feeds into our second research question as, through the analysis in the paper, we have revealed that the nature and scope of these priorities is mainly based on strategic engagement with international ‘experts’ who are invited to Bahrain and Oman to win regional competition. We have shown how the nature and scope of HE developments becomes determined by time-specific agendas related to economic change at home, reducing all developments (at least presently! ) to the production of structural capital in the form of internationally recognised standards and external accreditation of university courses. This capital feeds directly into labour market needs.

Through strategic engagement with international input, both Bahrain and Oman aim to fulfill their agendas of upskilling the local workforce and to increase the pace of developments in building operational excellence needed at ‘at a time of increased regional competition’ (HEC 2014, 8). Such aims necessitated adjustments in understandings of what presently ‘counts’ as public good, which simultaneously prompted departing from high levels of regional consciousness in the public discourse and more focus on dometic capacity. Through such observations, we then arrived at the answer to our third research question, showing ways in which the dual notions of local economic benefits and symbolic solidarity of the GCC are held in balance to support the rhetoric of economic visions in both countries. These observations carry important theoretical implications. The review of key concepts underlying theoretical frameworks of moral economy, regionalism and nationalism presented above showed ways in which these frameworks fall short of capturing potential reasons behind striking this balance. We argued above that these reasons might be obscured because of the predominant focus in these frameworks on spatial characteristics. And whilst we acknowledge the importance of ‘space’ in giving historical legitimacy to regional projects such as the GCC alliance, we would like to challenge their primary role in shaping understandings of how and whether these projects can be sustained. This would require an assumption that once established, these projects are constant and *atemporal*, but we have shown that they are in fact fluid and highly temporalised.

There is then an interesting overlay between the ‘spatial’ and the ‘temporal’ that cannot be ignored in analyses of regional solidarities. The observed strategic use of regional links to facilitate local goals cannot be seen as an indication of change in grassroots traditions of the GCC. It should rather be viewed as an indication of the influence of time on people’s experiences of the GCC unity, which prompts new questions about the purpose of this unity when both Bahrain and Oman are undergoing their transitions to a knowledge economy. We therefore cannot conclude that the shift away from regional good is linked to any specific forms of nationalism; it rather reflects ‘nationalisation’ as a pragmatic strategy underpinning economic goals. Pragmatic nationalisation seems to therefore be more temporalised than spatialised, but cannot be separated from the symbolic characteristics of spaces that had enabled regional solidarities in the first place. In other words, without the GCC alliance ‘being there’ in the first instance, the strategies for regional competition we have identified above would most likely be of different nature and scope. Thus, we conclude that the sort of time-space lens proposed in this paper offers a more nuanced analysis of regional solidarities as it encapsulates ways in which presently established relationships and possibilities are originally supported by symbolically-driven values. So the time-space lens that we propose here does not compromise the importance of the latter but rather cautions about the use of symbolic allegiance as a primary analytical paradigm for understanding fragility that characterises educational regionalism nowadays. The ‘time-space’ lens on the other hand offers an important new way of thinking about sociology of regionalism, prompting analyses that encourage acknowledgement of ‘multiple temporalities in a space’, because while spatial regional constructs such as the GCC stay the same, people’s thinking about their ‘value’ is likely to change by different times people in that space experience.

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