



Impact of Student Activities on University Identity at KFU

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Abstract

University identity plays a vital role in shaping students' academic and social experiences, fostering a sense of belonging, engagement, and institutional loyalty. This study explores students' perceptions of the role of extracurricular activities in shaping their university identity at King Faisal University (KFU). Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 undergraduate students from diverse disciplines to examine how student engagement in extracurricular activities influences their sense of belonging, academic motivation, and social integration. Thematic analysis revealed five key factors shaping university identity: sense of community, institutional branding, faculty and peer influence, campus environment, and university traditions. Student activities—including sports, academic clubs, cultural events, and volunteer work—were found to significantly enhance students' sense of belonging and institutional commitment. However, barriers such as financial constraints, time management challenges, lack of institutional support, and accessibility issues hindered student participation. To address these challenges, students recommended increasing financial support, improving time management resources, expanding mentorship programs, and enhancing digital engagement. The study's findings provide valuable insights for university administrators and policymakers to develop strategies that promote student engagement, strengthen university identity, and create a more inclusive academic environment. By fostering a dynamic and supportive campus culture, institutions can enhance student satisfaction, retention, and long-term alumni engagement. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of student activities on identity formation and examine how digital and hybrid engagement models influence student belonging in higher education.

Keywords: University identity, student engagement, extracurricular activities, sense of belonging



1. Introduction

University identity plays a vital role in shaping students' academic and social experiences, fostering a sense of belonging, engagement, and institutional loyalty. A well-established university identity not only enhances student satisfaction but also contributes to academic success, social integration, and long-term alumni engagement (Cruwys et al., 2020). Student engagement, defined as the level of interest, motivation, and active participation in academic and extracurricular activities, has been widely recognized as a key factor in student development and institutional effectiveness (Kuh, 2009). Universities worldwide have increasingly emphasized student activities as a means to strengthen this engagement and create a cohesive institutional identity (Astin, 1984).

Student activities, including academic clubs, sports, volunteer programs, and cultural events, provide a platform for students to interact with peers, faculty, and the broader university community. These activities serve as a bridge between formal education and personal growth, fostering leadership skills, social responsibility, and professional development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, participation in extracurricular activities has been linked to higher levels of student retention, academic performance, and overall university satisfaction (Tinto, 1993). A university's identity is, therefore, not solely shaped by its curriculum or faculty but also by the collective experiences of its students within and beyond the classroom (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The significance of student activities in shaping university identity is particularly relevant in the context of modern higher education, where institutions compete to attract and retain students by offering vibrant, engaging campus environments (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). King Faisal University at KSA, like many higher education institutions, has recognized the importance of fostering an inclusive and dynamic student experience. However, the extent to which students perceive these activities as instrumental in shaping their university identity and sense of belonging remains an area of interest for further research. Thus, this study aims to explore students' perceptions of the role of student activities in shaping their university identity. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how engagement in extracurricular activities influences students' sense of belonging, academic motivation, and social integration. By examining students' attitudes toward participation in university-sponsored activities, the research aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of these programs in fostering a cohesive institutional identity.



In summary, this study will address the following key research questions:

1. How do students perceive the role of extracurricular activities in shaping their university identity?
2. What types of student activities are most effective in fostering a sense of belonging at King Faisal University?
3. What challenges or barriers do students face in participating in extracurricular activities?

By answering these questions, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform future policies and programs aimed at enhancing student engagement and university identity.

2. Literature Review

Higher education plays a critical role in shaping student experiences, academic success, and future career trajectories. Three key factors influencing these experiences are university identity and student belonging, the role of extracurricular activities, and student engagement challenges and opportunities. These elements contribute to student satisfaction, retention, and holistic development.

The first factor is university identity which refers to the collective values, culture, traditions, and mission that define an institution and differentiate it from others. It influences how students perceive their university, interact with peers, and engage with institutional activities. A well-established university identity enhances student commitment, institutional loyalty, and motivation (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions develop their identities through branding, historical legacy, academic excellence, student demographics, and physical environment (Mampaey et al., 2015). Research indicated that students attending institutions with strong academic reputations and distinctive branding report higher levels of institutional pride and belonging. This sense of belonging is associated with improved academic performance (Sotardi, 2022). Strong university brands can enhance students' learning outcomes through an expectancy mechanism, improving concentration, memorization, and numerical reasoning (Esteky & Kalati, 2021). Universities with good reputations and positive brand experiences stimulate word-of-mouth promotion among current students, influencing prospective students' decision-making (D'Uggento et al., 2022). The emotional



connection between students and their institutions, fostered by strong university brands, leads to increased satisfaction, commitment, trust, and loyalty (Sousa & Magalhães, 2020).

The relationship between university identity, student belonging, and retention has been widely studied. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of student belonging and identity in university retention. A sense of belonging is associated with increased motivation, enjoyment, and academic engagement, particularly benefiting first-generation students (Pedler et al., 2021). Belonging has been found to positively relate to first-year retention, even when controlling academic performance (Aronson et al., 2023). However, early measurements of belonging may be less reliable predictors of continuation (Gilani et al., 2024). Identity fusion with the university, a related concept, has also been shown to significantly predict retention independently of grades, with strongly fused students 7-9% more likely to remain in school (Talaifar et al., 2020).

Universities adopt a variety of strategies to help students develop a sense of belonging, which is crucial for their academic success and overall well-being. Research indicated that creating a supportive and welcoming environment is essential, achieved through positive student-faculty relationships and well-resourced counseling centers (O'Keeffe, 2013). This is particularly important for first-year, non-traditional, and online students (Hoffman et al., 2002; Thomas et al., 2014). Institutions can enhance belonging by encouraging diversity, providing support for mental health issues and disabilities, and addressing socioeconomic challenges (O'Keeffe, 2013). By fostering relationships with experienced individuals, students are more likely to feel connected and engaged with their academic community.

In addition to mentorship, inclusive campus policies play an essential role in supporting diverse student populations. Universities implement these policies to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, feel welcome and valued. Such policies often include measures for accommodating students with disabilities, providing resources for international students, and promoting equality in campus facilities and activities. Creating truly inclusive educational experiences requires collaborative efforts from the entire academic community and a shift towards celebrating diversity rather than viewing it as problematic (Larkin et al., 2014; Meng, 2024).

Furthermore, community-building events are vital for enhancing student belonging and engagement. Activities such as orientation programs, cultural celebrations, and academic clubs help students form



connections with their peers and the broader campus community. Orientation programs, in particular, offer an introduction to campus life and academic expectations, allowing students to establish relationships early on. Cultural celebrations and academic clubs provide opportunities for students to express their identities and engage in meaningful interactions that contribute to a sense of belonging (Niemi & Hotulainen, 2015). These events not only create a supportive social network but also encourage students to embrace the diversity of their university environment.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore student experiences related to university identity, extracurricular activities, and student engagement. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, ensuring that students with diverse academic backgrounds, extracurricular involvement, and institutional experiences were included. The selection criteria required participants to be enrolled undergraduate students from different disciplines. A total of 50 students were recruited for interviews.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for a flexible yet guided conversation with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 5–10 minutes and was conducted in person. The interviews focused on four main topics: (1) their sense of belonging within the university, (2) experiences with extracurricular activities, (3) perceived barriers to engagement, and (4) suggestions for improving student involvement. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed responses, while follow-up questions helped clarify points and explore emerging themes. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically examine the interview data. The researcher carefully read and re-read the interviews to identify key insights into how students perceive university identity, the role of extracurricular activities, and the factors affecting engagement in higher education.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings based on student interviews, categorized into four main themes: students' perceptions of university identity, the impact of student activities, challenges and barriers to engagement, and recommendations for improvement.

4.1 Students' Perceptions of University Identity

The table below outlines key themes that emerged from student interviews regarding their perception of university identity.



Table 1: Students' Perceptions of University Identity

Theme	Description
Sense of Community	Students feel connected when universities emphasize inclusion, diversity, and collaboration.
Institutional Branding	University logos, slogans, and reputation shape students' identification with the institution.
Faculty and Peer Influence	Supportive professors and engaged classmates enhance university identity.
Campus Environment	Modern infrastructure, student-friendly spaces, and accessibility improve students' attachment to the institution.
Traditions and Culture	Annual events, sports teams, and historical significance contribute to a sense of identity.

As shown in Table 1, the perceptions of university identity among students can be understood through various interrelated themes that emerged from interviews. These key themes provide insight into how students connect with their institutions and perceive their university experience.

A strong sense of community is fundamental to university identity. Students who feel included, regardless of their backgrounds, are more likely to develop a positive association with the institution. Universities that emphasize diversity, collaboration, and inclusivity create an environment where students feel valued and connected. Initiatives like peer mentoring, inclusive events, and group activities can foster this sense of belonging.

Institutional branding plays a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of their university. Logos, slogans, colors, and the institution's overall reputation contribute to identity formation. For example, students often feel pride when they associate themselves with a university known for academic excellence, innovative research, or community engagement. Branding efforts must resonate with students' values to strengthen their identification with the institution.

Faculty and peers significantly impact students' perceptions of university identity. Supportive professors who engage with students beyond the classroom help build a positive institutional image. Similarly, engaged and motivated peers contribute to a vibrant, collaborative atmosphere that



enhances students' connection to the university. Relationships with faculty and peers can influence students' academic and social experiences, reinforcing their sense of identity within the institution.

The physical environment of a university, including its infrastructure, layout, and accessibility, influences students' feelings of attachment. Modern, well-maintained campuses with student-friendly spaces such as lounges, study areas, and recreational zones contribute to a positive university experience. Accessibility for all students, including those with disabilities, further enhances a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Traditions and cultural practices provide a historical and emotional connection to the university. Events like homecoming, sports games, and graduation ceremonies create shared experiences that foster a collective identity among students. Cultural elements, such as university mottos and stories of historical achievements, instill pride and a sense of continuity.

4.2 The Impact of Student Activities on Identity Formation

The table below categorizes different types of extracurricular activities and their contributions to students' sense of belonging and identity formation.

Table 2: The Impact of Student Activities on Identity Formation

Activity Type	Impact on Identity Formation
Sports Teams	Fosters school spirit, teamwork, and strong social connections.
Cultural and Arts Clubs	Enhances identity through creative expression and cultural representation.
Academic Organizations	Strengthens intellectual engagement and university pride.
Volunteer Work & Community Service	Builds a sense of purpose and social responsibility.



As shown in Table 2, extracurricular activities significantly contribute to students' sense of belonging and identity formation. These activities provide opportunities for students to connect with peers, develop new skills, and express themselves in meaningful ways.

Participation in sports teams fosters school spirit, teamwork, and strong social connections. Students involved in athletic activities often feel a deep sense of pride and unity, as they work collaboratively toward shared goals and represent their institution in competitive settings.

Cultural and arts clubs offer students a platform for creative expression and cultural representation. These clubs help individuals explore and affirm their cultural identities while promoting intercultural understanding within the university community.

Academic organizations, such as debate clubs or subject-specific societies, enhance intellectual engagement and university pride. Through participation in these groups, students build academic connections, deepen their knowledge, and develop a stronger attachment to their institution's academic mission.

Volunteer work and community service activities instill a sense of purpose and social responsibility. Engaging in community-based projects helps students see the broader impact of their education and strengthens their identification with the university as a socially responsible institution.

4.3 Challenges and Barriers to Student Engagement

The table below highlights the primary obstacles that students encounter in participating in extracurricular activities.

Table 3: Challenges and Barriers to Student Engagement

Barrier	Description
Financial Constraints	High participation costs (e.g., membership fees, travel expenses for competitions).
Time Management Issues	Balancing academics and extracurricular involvement is challenging.



Barrier	Description
Lack of Institutional Support	Limited funding, absence of mentorship programs, and lack of awareness about opportunities.
Social Anxiety & Inclusion Barriers	Some students feel unwelcome or intimidated in student groups.
Limited Accessibility	Commuter students find it difficult to participate in campus-based activities.

As shown in Table 3, students encounter several obstacles when participating in extracurricular activities. These barriers can significantly impact their engagement and, consequently, their sense of belonging and identity formation.

Financial constraints are a common challenge, as high participation costs, such as membership fees and travel expenses for competitions, can deter students from joining activities. Universities that offer scholarships or subsidize costs can help alleviate this burden and encourage broader participation.

Time management issues also pose a significant challenge. Balancing academic responsibilities with extracurricular involvement requires effective time management skills. Students who struggle to prioritize tasks may find it difficult to stay engaged in both areas, potentially leading to academic stress or disengagement from activities.

A lack of institutional support can further hinder student engagement. Limited funding, the absence of mentorship programs, and insufficient awareness about available opportunities create barriers to participation. Universities that actively promote extracurricular options and provide adequate resources can enhance student involvement.

Social anxiety and inclusion barriers are another significant concern. Some students feel unwelcome or intimidated when trying to join student groups. Fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, where students feel accepted regardless of their backgrounds, can help mitigate these barriers.



Limited accessibility, particularly for commuter students, also affects participation. Students who live off-campus may find it challenging to engage in activities that primarily occur on campus. Offering flexible scheduling and virtual participation options can make extracurricular activities more accessible.

4.4 Recommendations for Enhancing Student Activities

The table below presents student suggestions for improving extracurricular engagement and fostering a greater sense of belonging.

Table 4: Recommendations for Improving Student Engagement

Recommendation	Proposed Solution
Increase Financial Support	Provide funding grants, waive membership fees, and subsidize event costs.
Improve Time Management Resources	Offer flexible meeting times and integrate extracurriculars into academic schedules.
Expand Institutional Support	Establish mentorship programs, improve promotion of activities, and enhance faculty involvement.
Improve Digital Engagement	Develop virtual clubs and hybrid event options for commuter students.

As shown in Table 4, students have provided several recommendations for improving extracurricular engagement and fostering a stronger sense of belonging. These suggestions highlight practical steps that universities can take to enhance participation and build a more inclusive campus environment.

One key recommendation is to increase financial support for extracurricular activities. Students suggest providing funding grants, waiving membership fees, and subsidizing costs for events and competitions. By reducing financial barriers, universities can ensure that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate.



Improving time management resources is another critical suggestion. Students propose offering flexible meeting times and integrating extracurricular activities into academic schedules. By aligning these activities with students' academic commitments, universities can make it easier for students to balance their responsibilities.

Expanding institutional support is also seen as essential. Students recommend establishing mentorship programs, improving the promotion of available activities, and encouraging greater faculty involvement. Mentorship programs, in particular, can help new students navigate extracurricular opportunities and feel more connected to the university community.

Finally, enhancing digital engagement can significantly improve participation, especially for commuter students. Developing virtual clubs and hybrid event options allows these students to engage with their peers without the need to be physically present on campus. Digital platforms can also facilitate communication, event organization, and community building.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between university identity, extracurricular activities, and student engagement, identifying key themes based on student interviews. Several significant findings emerged from the analysis.

To begin with, the study highlighted the relationship between university identity and student belonging. Students who feel a strong connection to their university's values, traditions, and branding tend to exhibit higher levels of institutional commitment and engagement. Key factors influencing university identity include a strong sense of community, meaningful faculty interactions, a supportive campus environment, and the presence of cultural traditions.

Moreover, the study underscored the impact of extracurricular activities on students' sense of belonging. Participation in student activities, such as involvement in sports teams or engagement in academic and cultural organizations, was found to positively influence students' identity formation. These activities provide opportunities for social interaction, personal development, and a sense of collective pride.

In addition, the findings revealed various challenges and barriers to engagement. Students reported financial constraints, difficulties in time management, a lack of institutional support, social anxiety,



and limited accessibility as significant obstacles that hinder their participation in extracurricular activities. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering greater student involvement.

Finally, the study presented several recommendations for improvement. Students suggested increasing financial aid for extracurricular participation, offering more flexible scheduling options, enhancing institutional support, and expanding digital engagement opportunities. These strategies can make student activities more accessible and inclusive for a diverse student population.

The findings from this study have several practical implications for university administrators and policymakers. By addressing the challenges identified in student interviews, universities can create more engaging and inclusive environments that foster student success. Firstly, universities should consider implementing financial support measures for student activities. This could include funding grants for student organizations, reducing or waiving participation fees for low-income students, and offering paid leadership opportunities within student government and clubs. Secondly, enhancing institutional support and awareness can significantly improve student engagement. Universities should establish mentorship programs where upper-year students can guide new students in their extracurricular involvement. Improved communication strategies, such as social media campaigns and faculty-led promotions, can also increase awareness of available opportunities. Lastly, using digital technologies can further enhance student involvement. Expanding virtual club meetings, hosting online networking sessions, and developing digital engagement platforms can make extracurricular participation more accessible, especially for students with busy schedules or accessibility concerns.

While this study provides valuable insights into student engagement and university identity, several areas warrant further exploration. For instance, future research could include longitudinal studies to track student engagement over multiple years and better understand how university identity evolves and influences retention rates. Additionally, as digital learning environments become more prevalent, it would be beneficial to examine how online and virtual student activities impact engagement and identity formation.

In conclusion, this study highlights the intricate connections between university identity, extracurricular activities, and student engagement. By implementing the proposed strategies and



conducting further research, universities can better support their students' sense of belonging and overall academic success.

Author's Contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the study. Additionally, the author drafted and revised the manuscript, approved the final version, and is accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia. All procedures involving human participants adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

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Interview Questions for the Study

The following semi-structured interview questions are designed to explore students' perceptions of university identity, the impact of extracurricular activities, and barriers to engagement.

Section 1: University Identity and Student Belonging

1. How would you describe your overall experience at your university?
2. What aspects of your university make you feel a sense of belonging?
3. Do you feel that your university has a strong identity? Why or why not?
4. How does your university's branding (e.g., logo, motto, traditions) affect your connection to the institution?
5. How important are faculty interactions and peer relationships in shaping your connection to the university?
6. In what ways does the campus environment (physical spaces, student-friendly areas) contribute to or hinder your sense of belonging?
7. Have you ever felt disconnected from your university? If so, what factors contributed to that feeling?

Section 2: The Role of Extracurricular Activities

8. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities (e.g., sports, academic clubs, volunteering)? Why or why not?
9. How do extracurricular activities influence your sense of belonging at the university?
10. What types of student activities do you find most valuable for personal or academic growth?
11. Can you describe a specific experience where an extracurricular activity made you feel more connected to the university?
12. Do you believe student activities play a role in shaping university culture? If so, how?



13. Are there any student activities you wish were available but currently are not?

Section 3: Challenges and Barriers to Student Engagement

14. What challenges, if any, have you faced when trying to participate in student activities?

15. Have financial constraints ever prevented you from joining an extracurricular activity? If so, can you elaborate?

16. Do you feel that time management is a barrier to engagement? How do you balance academic and extracurricular involvement?

17. Have you ever felt excluded from an activity? If so, what factors contributed to that feeling?

18. Are there any logistical or accessibility challenges that make it difficult for you to participate in student activities (e.g., commuting, scheduling conflicts)?

19. Do you think the university provides enough institutional support for student engagement? Why or why not?

Section 4: Recommendations for Improvement

20. What do you think universities can do to improve student engagement and participation?

21. How could financial assistance or funding make student activities more accessible?

22. Would mentorship programs or faculty involvement encourage more students to participate in extracurricular activities? Why or why not?

23. Do you think online extracurricular activities would be beneficial? Why or why not?

24. How can student organizations be made more inclusive and welcoming to all students?

25. If you could implement one major change to improve student engagement at your university, what would it be?