

Assessing the Immediate Impact of Regional Conflict on GCC Student Mobility Interest

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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, led primarily by Qatar and the UAE, have positioned themselves as education hubs in the Gulf region. They host some of the most prestigious branches of international universities, mostly American. In the last couple of years, both these countries have seen a significant increase in international student enrolment (Table 1).

Table 1. Inbound internationally mobile students (2018-2024)

Year	Qatar	UAE
2018	11,515	199,958
2019	12,332	204,942
2020	13,712	210,030
2021	15,392	208,453
2022	17,017	225,845
2023	18,762	237,034
2024	20,735	238,986

Source: [UNESCO, Institute for Statistics \(UIS\)](#).

NYU Abu Dhabi, shifted to distance learning for the remainder of the Spring 2026 semester following security alerts.

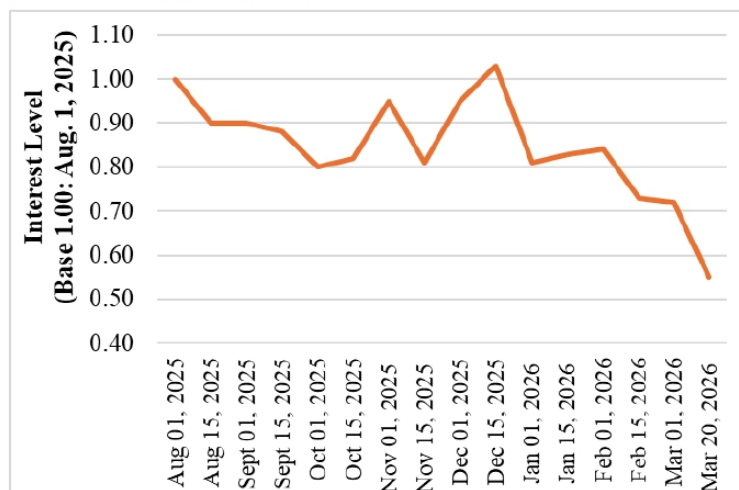
Although the presence of these university branches has driven inbound student mobility, the current trend shows that they are not insulated from political strife. If such trends persist for an extended period, they may undermine the region's appeal as a stable destination for education.

However, the long-term implications of this downturn remain uncertain. The full extent of the impact on international student mobility will only become clear following the next admission cycle. It is possible that as the situation stabilizes, student interest may recover to previous levels.

However, the US-Israeli war on Iran that started in late February 2026 has exerted an adverse impact on this growth trajectory. Real-time data from education portals shows that interest in studying in one GCC country, measured as the relative share of pageviews on Gulf destinations in all pageviews, from over 40 million prospective higher education students, has dropped by 43% since a pre-conflict peak in late December 2025 (Figure 1). In this figure, the data are presented as a relative index, with a value of 1.00 representing the baseline level of global interest in August 2025.

The conflict has created a bifurcated academic environment regarding safety and operations. While local institutions in Qatar, such as Qatar University and Lusail University, began operating on campus as normal after a brief online mode, nearly all American branch campuses in the region, including those in Qatar's Education City and in the UAE, like

Figure 1. Evolution of the share of Gulf destinations among searches for higher education destinations since August 1, 2025, indexed (Base 1.00 in August 1, 2025)



Source: Reproduced from [Studyportals.com](#)

The indexed ratios and trends are provided directly by the Studyportals' data tool, which calculates relative interest using the portal's global traffic database.