



Saudi student studying at the Catholic University of America library in Washington, D.C., on 27 October 2006.

Reshaping Higher Education in the Gulf States: Study Abroad Trends and Student Experiences *by Samar A. Abid Al Tamimi*

The challenges imposed by internationalization and globalization trends in higher education—in particular that of escalating competitiveness—is forcing higher education institutions worldwide to look for models to follow.¹ A common response is the adoption, and in some cases the local adaptation, of the Western research university model that has its roots in the UK and is employed in Australia and in European countries.²

In the Gulf states, efforts to reform and modernize higher education to create knowledge-based societies are ongoing.³ Member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) share a regional vision to make the Arab Gulf a hub for world-class education.⁴ Arab higher education systems that were long characterized by mass production of graduates and incremental support from the state are now shifting to new Western models of higher education. Several factors, including the development of the knowledge economy, massive access to higher education and increasing higher education differentiation are contributing to this push.⁵

To achieve this vision, the Gulf states have adopted the Western research university model by hosting international branch campuses (IBCs) in the region.⁶ GCC governments have also embraced study abroad scholarship programs that sponsor large numbers of Gulf nationals to study in Western universities. Ac-

According to *Open Doors*, an annual report that is produced by the Institute of International Education (IIE), Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are now ranked as two of the top 25 countries of origin for international students studying in the US.

In numbers: study abroad programs

The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Foreign Scholarship Program (formerly King Abdullah Scholarship Program) is the most ambitious government-sponsored study abroad project in the Gulf. Since its launch in 2004, it has facilitated educating thousands of young Saudi university students—including women—to study in the US. The program's goal is to improve Saudi Arabia's relations with the West and the US in particular, and to produce more highly-trained nationals to better meet the needs of the Saudi labor market. The program gained momentum in 2007, with about 8,000 Saudi students participating at that time. The number of Saudi students enrolled in American universities has since grown exponentially. In 2015, Saudis were the third largest group of international students studying in the US,⁷ contributing about \$2.06 billion to the domestic economy.⁸ The majority of these students pursued undergraduate degrees in the STEM fields (21.6% of Saudi students studying in the US were enrolled in graduate programs).⁹

Saudi enrollment in higher education institutions in the UK has also skyrocketed in recent years. According to the UK Council of International Student Affairs,¹⁰ 9,065 Saudi nationals studied in UK higher education institutions in 2013. Three-thousand of those students pursued post-graduate research in the UK, and 2,750 of them were women. In total, 57,303 male and 17,902 female students are currently on the scholarship program. Last year, 10,491 male and female students together were nominated to join the scholarship program.¹¹

The UAE and Bahrain's different approaches to higher education reform explains the comparatively low number of their nationals studying abroad.

Like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait also has a robust study abroad program. With 9,772 students in the US, Kuwait is ranked the 16th country of origin for international students in the US.¹² Most of these students are sponsored to graduate with undergraduate STEM-related degrees. Last year, Kuwaiti students contributed \$308 million to the US economy.

No other Gulf state scores in the top 25 countries of origin for international students in the US. But other Gulf states are ramping up the number of students they sponsor to study in Western universities. For instance, Oman and Qatar have followed Saudi Arabia and Kuwait's lead by sending more students to study abroad throughout the last decade. Currently, 2,856 Omanis and 1,443 Qataris are studying in the US.¹³

Perceptions, attitudes and experiences

Two large-scale surveys by Hobsons and IIE asked international students about their experiences in, and perspectives of, Western higher education institutions. Hobsons surveyed international students from 198 countries—including those from Saudi Arabia—studying in the UK and Australia. The report highlighted that, generally, students select an academic program before choosing the country and institution at which they wish to enroll.¹⁴ For those students, teaching quality and the ranking of the academic course were the most important elements affecting their decision to study at an overseas institution.

The IIE survey specifically examined the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi students toward American and Western higher education.¹⁵ Saudi students viewed the model of the Western research university as

II. Analysis

holistic and educationally enlightening. They saw high value in characteristics of Western higher education such as gaining preparation to be professional leaders, achieving a graduate degree, the integration of research into higher education, improving research skills, publishing research studies and studying to succeed economically. This view was framed in terms of developing independent learning, gaining preparation to become more autonomous, conducting multidisciplinary work, acquiring knowledge to be more competitive and creating new knowledge. In addition, Gulf students enjoyed Western universities for the good support, student services and lifestyle that they provide. Language barriers and the lengthy application and visa processes were viewed as the main obstacles deterring students from attending universities in Western countries.¹⁶

In both surveys, participating students viewed high academic value and graduation outcomes as the most beneficial aspects of their education abroad. Aligning academic training with students' expectations signified future success and the accomplishment of national and personal goals.¹⁷

The outliers: Bahrain and the UAE

Of the six Gulf states, Bahrain and the UAE have taken a somewhat different approach to internationalization and educational reform. Since its independence in 1971, Bahrain has invested in modernizing its educational system and infrastructure with the help of international organizations such as the World Bank.¹⁸ The result is that Bahrain has the highest level of educated nationals in the Gulf, and they make up the majority of the Bahraini labor market.¹⁹ In contrast, the UAE's approach has been to transform the country into an international hub for world-class education. The Dubai Academic City, which was established in 2006 and hosted a combination of local and international institutions, exemplifies this approach.¹⁹ The UAE has focused mainly on importing IBCs rather than sponsoring students to be educated abroad. (It's worth noting that Qatar has taken a mixed approach. Top international universities operate on its soil, and the government sends a considerable number of its nationals to study abroad).

The UAE and Bahrain's different approaches to higher education reform explains the comparatively low number of their nationals studying abroad. In 2015, there were only 2,920 Emirati and 469 Bahraini students in the US.²⁰

Looking forward

Despite economic downturns and declining oil prices, more Gulf students than ever before are projected to pursue some sort of education in Western universities. Given the attempts to either adopt or adapt to the Western research university as a model for strengthening higher education systems, it is imperative that we understand the perceptions and experiences of Gulf students educated or influenced by Western higher education. This could be of great value for Gulf policymakers and administrators at both Western universities and IBCs.

But Gulf policymakers must also consider the drawbacks. Adopting outcome-based education and internationalized education policy may reduce the state's control over national education and economic policy choices. Policy borrowing from the global center inextricably links the Gulf to the educational systems of Western countries. This kind of partnership risks making the Arab Gulf dependent on policies and strategies foreign to the region—all for the sake of achieving international competitiveness status.

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- ¹⁷ "What International Students Think about U.S. Higher Education," Institute of International Education, New York, 2015.
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- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ "Open Doors 2016," Institute of International Education.