Adjustment to college in the United States - Perceptions of Qatari students

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Abstract:

Ensuring the success of Qatari students in higher education is a national priority to address the needs of Qatar's growing economy. Many Qatari students are earning post-secondary degrees abroad, most often in the US, where they are presumed to face many of the known adjustment challenges that international college students experience on host campuses around the world. This qualitative study explores the facilitators and barriers to college success experienced by 21 Qatari nationals enrolled in state colleges and universities in Oregon. Thematic analysis reveals that these students face many familiar adjustment challenges related to second-language proficiency, academic requirements, and daily living. Facilitators to success include the support of family and peers, and campus-based services. However, many of the students' experiences suggest areas for enhanced intervention efforts in Qatar and on host campuses to better prepare these international students for study abroad, and to support their educational success in host countries.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is currently a great deal of interest in Qatar in supporting student success in higher education domestically and abroad. Indeed, Qatar's national development plan prioritizes post-secondary education and training, particularly the need for a college-educated workforce to fill key roles in the economy (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). The rapid growth of Qatar's economy over recent decades has created a situation in which the demand for skilled labor far exceeds the supply of qualified Qatari nationals, and thus Qatar has relied on an influx of foreign workers (Berrebi, Martorell, & Tanner, 2009). The country is in the process of implementing *Qatarization*, an effort to replace foreign workers with Qataris who possess equivalent skills (Constant et al., 2010), particularly in the areas of health and biomedical sciences, engineering, energy and environment, and computer and information technology (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). An integral part of this strategy is the country's promotion and expansion of high-quality post-secondary educational opportunities for Qatari students. A substantial and increasing number of Qatari post-secondary students are attending college abroad with the United States serving as the most popular destination. There were 1,191 Qatari students studying in post-secondary institutions in the US in 2014, with steady increases over prior years (Institute of International Education, 2015).

The successful completion of degree programs abroad is particularly important if these Qatari students studying in the US are to fill critical jobs in Qatar when they return. However, many students who undertake post-secondary studies do not complete them, regardless of program type, location, or international student status. Students in Qatar's post-secondary institutions struggle to complete their degrees and drop out at high rates, particularly the men (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). In the US, only about 50% of undergraduates who begin study at a 4-year institution complete a degree at that same institution within 6 years of their initial enrollment (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010). Data on international students' persistence in US institutions is generally not available (Andrade, 2006a; Mamiseishvili, 2012).

Students' persistence in college, as well as their academic performance, is significantly influenced by the extent to which they are able to adjust successfully to the academic and socio-cultural aspects of their college environment (Andrade, 2006a; Kerr, Johnson, Gans, & Krumrine, 2004). While there is not complete alignment across research studies regarding the precise definition, adjustment is typically seen as a process that unfolds over time as students learn to cope with the challenges of the college environment (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 2014). Research on international students

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predominantly focuses on factors that contribute to *un*successful adjustment, most typically assessed by measures of psychological distress (e.g., depression, depressive symptoms, stress, and a lack of well being; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). For many domestic college students, for whom culture and language are not dissimilar from the general student body, successfully transitioning to the college environment in terms of academic adjustment and social integration is largely related to student engagement in a range of general and individualized academic and social activities on campus (e.g., Kuh, 2009). For international students who lack dominant cultural or language proficiency during this transition, adjustment tends to be more difficult (c.f. studies discussed by Andrade, 2006; and Hirai, Frazier, & Syed, 2015).

Research examining the factors that influence international students' adjustment to post-secondary educational environments started to appear during the 1950s, when increasing numbers of students began pursuing degrees abroad (Araujo, 2011). Reviews of this research have appeared periodically, and among the most recent and comprehensive of these are the reviews by Andrade (2006); Araujo (2011); Smith and Khawaja (2011); and Zhang and Goodson (2011). The reviews by Araujo and Zhang and Goodson focus on research among international students in the United States; Andrade focuses on international students in English-speaking universities, and Smith and Khawaja on international students in Western countries.

Zhang and Goodson (2011) catalogued the theoretical approaches taken in the studies that were included in their systematic review, finding that a wide variety of theoretical frameworks were used, with none clearly prevalent. Implicitly or explicitly, however, many of the theories used in the literature on international student adjustment are rooted in a general stress and coping framework (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and draw attention not only to the stressors that students may experience, but also to the coping strategies they use to manage stressors, as well as to the environmental factors that act to buffer or mediate stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). To a lesser extent, newer research on students' adjustment also includes a focus on the role of cognitive appraisal of potential stressors (i.e., the extent to which a potential stressor is interpreted as a threat to well being), as well as a focus on the purely positive aspects of international student experience (i.e., those that are not connected to stressors) that bolster student adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Yet despite this heterogeneity of theory regarding *the manner* in which various factors interact to influence international student adjustment, the research literature expresses a much higher level of consistency regarding *which* factors have a significant impact. For example, across these reviews, second language proficiency consistently appears as the most important factor influencing adjustment, particularly since a lack of proficiency in the host language can interact with other potential stressors in both academic and sociocultural domains. In the academic domain, difficulties with reading and writing in a second language make completing academic assignments more challenging and time consuming, and difficulties with spoken language cause problems understanding lectures, participating in class, and working with peers on group tasks. Socially, a lack of proficiency acts as a barrier to international students' efforts to make friends, to participate in extra-curricular activities, and to interact with locals in situations that are a part of daily living. Furthermore, language barriers can undermine or discourage efforts to cope with stressors by, for example, making it more difficult to work with tutors or advisors, or to solve problems that can arise around practical issues such as housing and transportation.

Beyond difficulties connected to second language proficiency, there are a number of other academic factors that can pose challenges to international students' adjustment. Studies have documented several types of stressors that can emerge as the result of mismatch between students' previous academic experiences and what is required for success in the host institution. For example, students may simply find themselves under prepared in terms of mastery of prerequisite material, and experience stress connected to struggling to keep up and/or receiving poor grades. Students may also be accustomed to teaching and learning styles that differ from those typical of Western higher education and thus cause difficulties related to, for example, asking questions and participating in class; participating in group projects; asking for help or attending office hours; or making written or oral arguments.

Social support is another key theme that appears frequently in the literature on international students' adjustment (Araujo, 2011; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). A lack of social support can contribute to feelings of loneliness, homesickness and/or isolation, and it can also mean that students have fewer sources of help to draw on in their efforts to cope with other stressors and challenges. Conversely, a number of studies explore the role that social support plays in buffering or mediating the impact of other stressors. A key source of social support for international students is support from "co-nationals" or "co-culturals,"— i.e., other students from similar backgrounds—though relationships with students from the host country are also important contributors to international students' well being (Hirai et al., 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Newer studies suggest that social support from these two types of sources may each contribute independently to successful adjustment (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 2014), with support from co-culturals acting to reduce negative affect and support from host country students promoting positive affect (Du & Wei, 2015).

Finally, research on adjustment also frequently includes a focus on challenges that arise as students go about their daily lives in an environment that is structured by unfamiliar rules, laws, mores and expectations. Challenges may emerge as students negotiate issues related to housing, transportation, shopping, visa status, banking, health care and interacting with members of the general public (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2013). A number of studies have documented that students' perceptions of discrimination can have a significant impact on their well being (e.g., Roberts & Dunworth, 2012; Scott, Safdar, Trilokekar, & El Masri, 2015).

While some aspects of adjustment may be similar for international students generally, students from particular cultures, nations or backgrounds may be more likely to

experience different types or levels of adjustment challenges (e.g., Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The literature that speaks specifically to Qatari students' adjustment to college is very small, and becomes only slightly larger if studies of the college experiences of students from neighboring countries—specifically, students from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who could be considered co-culturals—are included. These studies tend to focus on the academic aspects of adjustment, and point to specific areas of challenge that students face in English-language colleges and universities, particularly language proficiency, written and verbal expression, and teaching and learning styles that are very different from those that the students had previously experienced (e.g., Jewels, 2012; Pessoa, Miller, & Kaufer, 2014). The goal of the study described here was to augment this literature with a qualitative, open-ended exploration of Qatari students' perceptions of the barriers to, and facilitators or potential facilitators of, their adjustment to college in the United States.

II. METHOD

The research for this project was undertaken collaboratively by investigators based in the United States and Qatar. An interview protocol was developed by the research team to elicit student perspectives on various barriers and facilitators of their post-secondary adjustment and success. Qatari students in Qatar (n=37) and in the state of Oregon (n=21) participated in the study; however, only the findings from the interviews in the US are reported here. All of these students were male, and all were, or had recently been, undergraduates at state universities and/or community colleges in Oregon. Some had also attended language programs in other US states prior to coming to Oregon. Of the students who had a declared major at the time of the interview, approximately two-thirds were in business or economics programs and about a third in STEM programs (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics).

Trained interviewers in Qatar and the US conducted the interviews. Interviewees were given a choice of language—Arabic or English—for the interview. The interviews were recorded, and later translated into English as needed and transcribed for coding. The English-language transcriptions were entered into ATLAS.ti software (Muhr, 1991) for coding and analysis.

This study used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a qualitative method in which the initial coding structure is guided by existing themes or theory, while at the same time remaining open to information that emerges from the data and that leads to elaboration and/or reconceptualization of the initial codes. Two coders developed the coding structure and completed the coding of all of the interviews. Preliminary coding categories were developed as the two coders each independently coded three interview transcripts, and then worked together to reconcile any differences in coding and to update the code book accordingly. This process was repeated with another three interviews, after which the remaining interviews were divided between the two coders, with one serving as the primary coder and the other as secondary coder for about half of the interviews. The coders met regularly (upon completion of each set of approximately six interviews) to reconcile codes. Questions between the coders and emerging issues were detailed in memos that were discussed between the coders and the rest of the research team. Conflicts were resolved and the codebook was revised as necessary to clarify code meanings and add new codes as needed. The outcome of this process was a set of coded interview transcripts that could be flexibly queried using the suite of tools built into Atlas.ti.

III. RESULTS

English language

The students almost universally reported struggles and stress related to mastering English to an extent that would make it possible for them to undertake college-level coursework successfully: "My spoken English language was acceptable in terms of managing myself, but not at the university level at all" (Participant #01). In particular, students noted that they lacked the specialized vocabulary needed for college-level work, even though many had been taught secondary subjects like math in English by native speakers of Arabic, "and from my experience that English did not have much impact in college" (02). Students also noted that lack of confidence in their ability to speak English caused difficulty in working on group projects, seeking help from professors, or speaking up in class: "Notice classrooms with Arab students, pay attention, they are the least people to participate or raise their hands. This is for fear that if they raise their hands and they say something wrong, people may laugh at them. [Even though] the Americans never laugh at your accent, it is impossible" (01).

Students noted that their adjustment to college continued to be hampered by problems with English despite having participated in classes and programs—both in Qatar and abroad—that were intended to improve their English language proficiency: "English language was the biggest obstacle that I've faced on my educational journey. I've spent a whole year learning the language [in the US] and I'm still suffering, because it's impossible to be fluent in two or three years" (20). Another student noted that "…ninety percent of my friends entered [English language programs in the US] at the beginners' level and are still in that first level; they took three courses and still they are repeating the same level" (16). Spending one or more years on English study—and consequently delaying work on their degrees—was discouraging: "I've wasted a lot of time, I should be done now, I should be starting my own life" (18); while ongoing efforts to increase proficiency could also cause distress: "…as I had a lot of subjects in the first term like math, chemistry, engineering and two courses in English writing and speaking; five subjects caused a lot of pressure and stress for me" (02).

Students described how a lack of facility with English contributed to a sense of isolation or caused problems related to day-to-day life in the community. For example, one student observed that "That is why I am feeling so lonely, because I can't speak English fluently" (16). Another student pointed out that "there may be some racism, and these situations cause stress, and you may be a new student with low English skills, which is also a stress because you cannot reply and

defend yourself so you become sad" (06). Other students noted language-related stress that arose during other daily situations such as shopping, dealing with landlords, and being in social groups with English-speaking students.

Students also mentioned factors that facilitated adjustment by helping them overcome perceived deficiencies in English language. While there was much criticism of the English language programs that students had attended, some students reported positive experiences: "[The language program at the college] prepared me for college itself, not only in vocabulary, as in chemistry, etc., but also in general English. They prepared you in three steps: the lifestyle, the academics for the university and the general language preparation" (01). Similarly, there was much criticism of language preparation during secondary school, particularly that subjects that were supposed to be taught in English but that this expectation was often not realized in practice: "[During high school] lots of subjects were in English, but the teachers would translate in order for us to understand" (02). A small number of students gave credit to their secondary schools for good preparation in English, however, while also noting that this was not the typical experience. Students described their English as having improved as a result of being in English-only environments, for example, through a home stay program, by seeking out English-speaking friends, or through taking classes with non-Arabic speaking students or professors.

Other academic factors

It was common for students to describe themselves as unprepared for college in the US. For some, the main difficulty was a lack of academic preparation: "At the beginning I thought our high schools were great, but when I came here I realized our education is not good enough, students are not qualified to study in America" (16). Students also pointed to differences in expectations between secondary school in Qatar and college in the United States, both in terms of the level of effort required—"In my whole life I didn't do homework in [Qatar], but here I keep studying almost three to five hours and the homework never ends and each teacher gives more homework than the other and I wasn't qualified for that as I had never experienced that before" (08)—as well as the expectation for the student to be responsible for his own education: "At the beginning I faced some difficulties…because of… having to be responsible for everything regarding education. Since primary school I have had private teachers and I didn't really depend on myself in any matter related to studying or even opening a book; these were the difficulties I faced" (12). Another stated: "It was a different experience to me, because when I was at school, when anything happened to you, your parents deal with it, but here, you are the responsible one and you have to deal with everything by yourself" (18).

Students reported that confusion about school requirements and policies led to challenges and stress. "I didn't get a good understanding of the consequences that might happen. For example, if your GPA goes lower than they wanted you are going to be on probation for 1-2 terms and then they are going to kick you out for two or three terms… [For not understanding that] I paid the price. All the frustration and stress not only on me but also on my parents" (18). Similarly, another student explained, "On the first day for me here at school, I did not know what the percentage of passing was, I swear that I thought it was 50% like we have it back home. There are many other things like that, but you don't notice these small things that might get the student" (01). Some students felt that insufficient or ill-informed advising either caused or contributed to the academic challenges they experienced, while others suggested that professors did not understand how to teach international and/or Arab students: "There are some teachers who don't know how to deal with Arab students, may be because they have a wrong image about Arab students. I don't know why. Maybe that was because of a negative experience with previous students. But, in general, most of the teachers are very cooperative" (19).

Students pointed to some cultural differences that contributed to academic difficulties and stress. Difficulties with time management and self-discipline was a frequent theme: "[Americans] are ambitious and so organized people, something we lack and we don't have.… I am not used to that lifestyle. The Americans raise their children on time management rather than us, as we don't do our work on time, we delay it… so we have to learn time management" (08). Or, "I know lots of Qatari and non-Qatari students from the [countries of the Gulf Collaboration Council], who have discipline problems in attendance, submitting their assignments and homework, and participating in class" (19).

The main facilitators of successful academic adjustment were interactions with helpful students, faculty and staff. Many students emphasized that other Arab students were their first line of academic support: "If I didn't understand a lecture I would talk to other Arab students in the class who understood the lecture and if we all don't understand, we all go to the teacher" (13). Students also found other sources of academic support helpful: "I also used to head directly to my tutor, not my friend, if I didn't get anything. As the institution used to have an American tutor available for any international student, I met him twice a week. I used to ask him about everything, even if it has nothing to do with studying and he was really helpful" (15). Advisers were also seen as potentially very helpful: "This is why it's important to meet with an adviser… At orientation they will inform you about two things: the university and the language. Then the adviser will explain to you everything in detail. … Yes, [they walk you through it] like holding you by your arm exactly [laughing], they teach you everything and you will not feel like a stranger, you will know your responsibilities" (09). Smaller classes, when available, also were seen as contributing to academic adjustment: "[In contrast to large classes] you feel the interaction in the lab, or a classroom that has 30-40 students, because there are discussion groups and you become acquainted with everyone, including the teacher. There is dialogue and connection between the students and there is no discrimination or anything like that. You feel you are part of the whole class and everyone is at the same level, despite our cultural differences" (01).

Social support

Students consistently described how they relied on social support not only as a way of combating loneliness and isolation, but also as a source of practical information and advice (as well as academic support, as described earlier). Almost universally, other Qatari students, as well as students

from other Gulf or Arab countries, were seen as the key source of social support. "[To be happy] you must have friends or relatives from El-Doha with you, that is the most important thing" (03). Another student stated: "When you find people from your country or from any Arab country they make you feel better; it's easy that you can speak Arabic with them. Also, they make you feel safe, so none of them will take advantage of you [and] they can help you with things" (05). Similarly, a student explained: "I came here with two of my cousins, who are my roommates right now, my older cousin graduated from the University of Miami so, he helps me a lot. He gets all the needs of the house, helps in the classes and how to do in them, a lot of stuff" (06).

Students typically reported having no American friends, though this tended not to be viewed as a problem. As two students explained, "I deal with American students as my classmates. But regarding everyday life I deal only with Arab and Qatari" (20), and "… with Americans, I have some difficulties dealing with them…. [I know Americans] only from the class but, no friendships, just salutations" (02). Indeed, students described spending most of their discretionary time with co-culturals, and while this was primarily viewed very positively, it could also be a distraction from study: "One has to know how to arrange his schedule and know when to hang out with friends, and when to study. There is time for study and time for play. I learned this as they say here, 'the hard way'" (01).

Daily living

While students reported some challenges related to housing and generally feeling uncomfortable or "shy" when interacting in the community, the most stressful situations appeared to stem from interactions with formal authority figures, i.e., immigration officials and the police. As explained by two students: "The only thing I have problem with is the immigration, nothing else. If the immigration could talk to us and tell us that there is something wrong or give us a chance to know what is happening, I swear to God we will be the happiest people in the world" (10), and "Yes… you have problems with the police. Every single Gulf person will tell you the same thing; they are stopped [when driving] for no reason. Therefore, sometimes, you're afraid of going out and getting a ticket" (18).

More frequently, however, students commented that they felt comfortable and welcomed by Americans and by the Oregon towns and communities in which they were studying. Students in the university towns found them "safe," "calm," "quiet," and "comfortable," while students in Portland noted that they had chosen to attend school there because the city had a reputation for having little crime, and because the residents were seen as helpful and welcoming.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study is obviously limited by the small sample size and the fact that all of the students that participated were attending college in Oregon. An additional limitation is that the analysis was done on English transcripts, whereas the interviews were a mixture of English and Arabic. Nevertheless, the findings can be seen as suggesting several avenues for further exploration. A key area for future investigation would be the development and testing of programs, policies and interventions consistent with study findings and existing research, and also, in most cases, consistent with what the study participants themselves suggested as ways of improving Qatari students' adjustment experiences.

Students offered several types of recommendations about how adjustment stress could be reduced through efforts undertaken in Qatar to improve students' preparation for post-secondary study prior to their departure for the US. Many student comments focused on the need for improved instruction in English, at least in secondary institutions and perhaps beginning much earlier. Indeed, efforts to do so have been underway in Qatar for some time (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011) and may ease adjustment for future cohorts of Qatari students studying abroad in English-language institutions; as one student noted, "We are considered the lost generation because we've started learning English language too late, unlike the new generation who started learning English language very early" (20). Students also had suggestions regarding how college preparatory English language programs could be improved, whether curriculum is delivered in high school or during study abroad. These are consistent with research demonstrating how programs can include a focus on academic vocabulary and writing in English, particularly academic reasoning and argumentation that integrates the students' own ideas and interpretations with those from other sources (e.g., Hayes, Holden-Rachiotis, Kavanagh, & Otoom, 2011; Pessoa et al., 2014). Further, students and researchers alike propose investing in secondary school information sessions and intensive pre-departure orientation programs focused on helping students understand what to expect academically, socially, legally, and culturally when studying and living in the countries where they will be studying (e.g., Best, Hajzler, & Henderson, 2007). Students also recommended that knowledgeable peers—i.e., students who had been or were currently studying in the US—have an important role in these efforts, since these students were seen as having unique knowledge about adjustment challenges and successful strategies.

Some students reported very positive experiences from homestay programs in the US, because they provided an opportunity for accelerated language practice as well as practical support adjusting to the new country. However, other students specifically dismissed homestay programs based on the belief that they would be uncomfortable living with strangers. Given the potential benefits from this kind of immersive language experience, it seems worth exploring whether homestay programs could be designed, structured and/or marketed to pre-departure Qatari students so as to make them more generally appealing.

Students also spoke to a number of known campus-based factors related to adjustment. Broadly, their comments support the idea that orientation and freshman seminars should be specifically designed for international students if possible, and include content around the expectations of US professors, the study skills needed to meet these academic expectations, and other aspects of campus life. That said, specific cultural differences may warrant a separate orientation (e.g., for Middle Eastern students), though other

student groups may have some overlapping adjustment challenges with international students in general. Similarly, culturally-specific advising is recommended, especially for first-year students in the US; in general, this advising should not be limited to academic concerns, and should also include avenues for students to resolve logistical or intercultural difficulties that arise beyond campus (e.g., immigration, housing, etc.), although this advisory function may be more readily available through peers or facilitated by the country of origin (e.g., online or by phone). Campuses can also better support international students in the classroom, including enhanced instructional practices to help English-language learners and providing cross-cultural learning opportunities (Razek & Coyner, 2013; Volet & Ang, 1998)

Students' comments also suggested that strategies aimed at influencing cognitive appraisal—i.e., the meaning that students ascribe to adjustment experiences—are worth investigating. Cognitive appraisal is a key feature of the stress and coping theories that are most commonly used to understand adjustment experiences; however, in the context of international student adjustment, cognitive appraisal is underexplored (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Recent developments in education psychology have demonstrated the impact of even brief, one-time interventions, often delivered online, to improve student adjustment and persistence (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Key appraisal strategies used in these kinds of interventions include seeing difficulties as challenges that can be overcome, and seeing one's own difficulties as challenges shared by others. Both of these themes were readily apparent in the interviews with students who had been in the US for several years, suggesting that interventions to promote these appraisals among early-year students might be effective.

Similarly, formal peer mentoring or "buddy" strategies can be a way to strengthen cognitive perceptions that support student adjustment, while also providing peer guidance and role modeling in addressing academic, socio-cultural, and daily living challenges. Although most students in this study did not report having American friends, the ones who did said these ties were especially helpful in practicing language and understanding intercultural differences. What is more, emerging research suggests that social ties to host-country students contribute uniquely to international student well being (whereas ties to co-culturals protect against depression). Other research demonstrates the adjustment value added through international student relationships with host-country students for academic support and campus integration (e.g., Campbell, 2012; Mendelsohn, 2009). Importantly, the success of peer mentoring in higher education can depend on the degree to which the relationship is structurally supported by faculty and staff in ways that allow both the mentored and mentoring students to benefit from participation, for example, by earning credits, developing networks or maintaining academic performance (e.g., Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Kiyama & Luca, 2014).

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