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International Student Perceptions of an American Educational Leadership Program: A Look at Students Residing in Qatar and Their Quest to Receive an Advanced Degree from an American University

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Abstract

Transnational Higher Education has become more prevalent and an option that many international students seek. International students choose online education through United States universities for a plethora of reasons including the perceived high quality of US universities, the flexible modality of online education, and the associated reduced costs. This study seeks to examine the perceptions and experiences of international students residing in Qatar as they progress through a United States university's online (hybrid of synchronous and asynchronous) master's degree principal preparation program in Educational Leadership. This phenomenological qualitative study surveys international student candidates at the completion of the program to ascertain their experiences of receiving an advanced degree from a university in the United States. The candidates represent a variety of countries, yet work as teachers in various types of schools in Qatar. This study should add to the growing research of transnational education and help to provide a better understanding of international student insights.

Introduction

Online education, with respect to overseas students and offerings, has become known as Transnational Higher Education (TNHE). The term 'TNHE' refers to all types of higher education study programs or educational services in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based (UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2001). Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) encompasses higher education providers and programs across national borders which allow students to participate in and gain academic degrees and achievements without leaving the country in which they reside (Knight & Liu, 2019).

With regards to higher education, however, nations have varying requirements, expectations, procedures, and rules for students to obtain degrees from other countries. American degrees are considered valid in many countries around the world. As a matter of fact, there are more than 50 member nations of the Commonwealth (thecommonwealth.org, n.d.). These Commonwealth countries accept American degrees. This is especially helpful as students who receive a bachelor's degree in America wish to pursue advanced degrees or jobs abroad.

However, even those nations that are part of the Commonwealth may require a credential evaluation service before

acceptance of those degrees. As a result, many colleges and universities cultivate relationships with the education entities of other countries in order to alleviate some of the obstacles, address any common questions regarding credentials, establish partnerships, or establish pathways for students. These relationships are not only for students from America wishing to pursue education abroad, but also for international students to obtain American degrees. As such, many American colleges and universities have established partnerships with foreign universities, established branches in overseas nations, or worked directly with governmental education offices of those countries.

The university in this study worked closely with the ministry of education in Qatar - Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) to ensure that the education the international students received would be recognized by the country of Qatar. The ministry has established an equivalency system to issue decisions regarding the legitimacy of outside degrees. Through the University Degrees Equivalency Department, the ministry also grants prior approval to for those students wishing to pursue higher education options from universities outside of Qatar (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, n.d.).

The United States has long been the top receiving country for international students, who historically have been drawn by the high quality of U.S. higher education, its value on the international labor market, and access to job opportunities in the United States after graduation. About 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. institutions in school year (SY) 2019-20 (Israel & Batalova, 2021). The perceived higher quality education of an international program posited by Israel & Batalova (2021) has been a long-standing measure as other studies have suggested (Pyvis & Chapman, 2005). According to Ford Murray, a law firm specializing in immigration law and solutions, “U.S. higher education institutions are highly sought after for international students who want to learn from world-class faculty and broaden their cultural horizons” (Ford, n.d.).

Vioreanu (2021) purports that the U.S. attracts international students for a variety of reasons – specifically the following four. The U.S. has renowned higher education programs – known for high academic standards and rigorous practice – and some of the most valued universities in the world; further, a degree from the U.S. distinguishes international students from some of their peers with a competitive edge (Vioreanu, 2021; IDP Education, 2021). Secondly, the U.S. is the leader in many areas of technology and research. Third, the U.S. welcomes a diverse and multicultural environment (Vioreanu, 2021). And lastly, American universities are considered a “flexible education system” in which students not only have multiple options of programs and courses, but also methods of delivery such as online education (IDP Education, 2021).

Receiving a degree via online methods is attractive to many international students. Not only do online modalities allow for greater flexibility, but also impact costs. As reported in US News and World Report, “relocation and overall costs may weigh heavily on their decision to study overseas” which attracts international students to online education (Durrani, 2020). Kapur and Crowley (2008) reported that studying offshore (online) can be a less costly alternative than moving to the country of the education provider.

Although the Educational Leadership program at the study’s university has been designed for online learning, the

students in Qatar experience hybrid learning of synchronous and asynchronous opportunities. They have access to the online course through the Blackboard learning management system, but also receive real time face-to-face instruction and classroom experiences via Zoom each week. Much like a face-to-face offering at a university, the professors of the courses would Zoom in with the students each week and instruct virtually. Because of the requirements of the Qatar education system, students in the educational leadership program would convene weekly at a designated classroom located at a school central to the country. The professor would join virtually and facilitate the course as if he/she were there in person.

Method

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore the lived educational experiences of international students pursuing an advanced American educational leadership degree while residing and working in Qatar. The researchers sought to understand students' experiences (Dilthey, 1979). "One advantage of qualitative methods in exploratory research is that use of open-ended questions and probing gives participants the opportunity to respond in their own words, rather than forcing them to choose from fixed responses" (Mack & Woodsong, 2005, p. 4). For phenomenological studies, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest broad interview questions such as: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" (p. 79). As such, this preliminary qualitative study consists of a survey with open-ended questions.

Data Analysis

"Phenomenology thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness" (Giori, 1997) and involves deep analysis of data to identify emergent themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Miles et al. (2020) define qualitative data as "a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions of social processes" (p. 3). Interviews, one of the most common forms of qualitative data collection (Mack & Woodsong, 2005), will take place and then undergo thematic analysis. These themes will generate insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of TNHE students as they traverse an American Educational Leadership program while residing in Qatar.

In line with thematic analysis, the researchers followed a process whereby we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading through the entire dataset without coding. Next, we re-read the data and identified the main features to generate initial codes. These codes were reviewed and grouped to generate overarching themes. The themes were reviewed and revised against the codes generated from the data to check for consistency.

Population and Sample

The population for this study includes students of various nationalities who live in Qatar, are employed as teachers, and are seeking an American Educational Leadership master's degree. Convenience sampling is utilized. Convenience sampling is a qualitative research sampling strategy that involves selecting participants based on their accessibility and availability to the researcher (Saumure & Given, 2008). The seventeen participants were

in the first cohort of students that earned a master's degree in Educational Leadership from a particular American university.

The population of the study includes a cohort of 17 teachers of various nationalities (see Table 1) residing and working in Qatar pursuing a master's degree in Educational Leadership through an American university. Of the seventeen, three were male (17.6%) and fourteen were female (82.4%). The population included a mixture of teachers from government and private schools in Qatar. Nine worked at government/private schools while eight were employed by private schools.

Table 1. Nationalities of Students

Nation	N
Qatar	4
Yemen	1
China	1
Nigeria	1
Kenya	1
Niger	1
Africa	1
America	2
Jordan	2
India	1
Lebanon	1
Philippines	1
Total	17

Survey

Participants of the study were asked to complete the survey via an electronic questionnaire administered through Qualtrics during the last course in the program. The data consists of the personal written synthesis of participants' perceptions (N=17). The writing was a reflection of personal experiences, motivations, and perceptions guided by the three open ended questions:

1. Why did you choose to get an advanced degree from an American university?
2. What challenges have you faced with pursuing a degree from an American university?
3. What could be done differently to assist you in the courses or assignments?

Results

The results are organized based on the themes that arose within responses of each survey question.

Why did you choose to get an advanced degree from an American university?

In this study, the reflections of graduate candidates residing in Qatar were examined in the context of their pursuit of a master's degree in Educational Leadership from an American University. The first survey question elicited responses that varied from general to specific. While students answered the question as to why they chose to get an advanced degree from an American university generally speaking, some also responded as to why they chose a degree from the specific university in which the degree was awarded.

Personal Improvement

Generally speaking, *Personal improvement* was the first theme to emerge. One student mentioned that they chose an international degree from an American university because they “wanted a new perspective.” Along the same lines, another student said, “To learn more and more differences of the places in the world is the most beneficial experience.”

Under the personal improvement theme, one student said that it was their “ambition to get an international degree.” This student had been searching for an international degree that the country would recognize. In the same vein, another student said they wanted “to pursue a leadership position in the future and this university is approved by the ministry of education in Qatar.” Career advancement continued to resound as yet another student said that “the master's degree is a bridge to a doctoral degree,” and in the case of this student she continued that she wanted to pursue a PhD in English literature. Still another student stated, “The school I work in was offering to pay for some staff members to complete the degree and I decided I would like to do it; I was wanting to pursue a master's degree anyway.” Generally speaking, a student said they were pursuing the degree “to improve my living situation, for a better job, a better career.”

Quality and Validity of American Universities

As reported in other studies (Vioreanu, 2021; IDP Education, 2021; Pyvis & Chapman, 2005), the perceived quality and validity of American universities was expressed as well. A participant currently employed at a private school in Qatar stated, “Most private schools in Qatar give preference to American certificates/degrees.” Another student corroborated that statement as they averred, “American degrees are well sought after in the Middle East” and are seen as “very advanced.”

Approval of the Qatar Ministry of Education

While the survey question did not ask, some of the students addressed why they specifically chose the particular university in which they were receiving the degree. Within that substructure, the *Qatar Ministry of Education approval* was the next theme to emerge. One student simply stated that “the program is approved by the Ministry of Education here.” Examining the responses, it became clear that it was important that the country in which they reside approved the program and modality.

Another student stated that, “[the university’s] willingness to adhere to Qatar government’s requirement to hold face-to-face classes” was paramount. The student continued that “a strictly online degree would not be recognized by the Qatar government.” One student’s response supported this as she said, “I did not want a strictly online degree; so, I like that this is blended and approved by the ministry.” Another participant concluded:

“A globally recognized school and certificate is a must in today's society. In my case, because China temporarily does not recognize all the graduation certificates of any Qatari higher education institution, even if I study in a local university in Qatar, it is not recognized by my country.”

Affordability

While reduced costs of online education by TNHE students has been studied (Durrani, 2020; Kapur & Crowley, 2008), the responses of participants in this study appear to confirm this. One student simply stated, “It’s affordable” while another said it’s “more affordable than a Qatar university.” While this program was not a traditional online modality, the associated costs (or lack thereof) were the same. This blended model of asynchronous and synchronous instruction proved appropriate and beneficial for the students.

University-Specific Reasons

While the language of Qatar is Arabic, most of the population also speak English. Again, the majority of the population of Qatar is expats (expatriates). Although they hail from many other countries, English is still one of the most common languages of the world. In responding as to why the students chose an American university, one participant appreciated that “courses are taught in English, while in Qatar University, [courses] are taught in Arabic.” The student added another reason for choosing this specific university was that there were “no mid-terms and finals – only research work.” This program is largely comprised of course-embedded field activities in which students apply knowledge and skills. One student simply stated that “It’s a well-known university.” Brand recognition is important. Another student said they chose an American university because they “have been teaching in an international school for the past 10 years with an American curriculum.” Dialogue with the students throughout the program also revealed that other participants and their schools also use American curriculum.

What challenges have you faced with pursuing a degree from an American university?

Procedural Issues

Although all of the participants are quite fluent in English, the language can still be somewhat of a barrier. Regarding challenges, one student said that “submitting paperwork for admissions in English” was an issue. Another student addressed a procedural issue stating “The attestation of the diploma and transcripts when this program is done will be extremely costly. We need this attestation in order for the diploma to be valid in Qatar.”

Course Issues

Some participants discussed challenges with the design of the courses. One student responded that the “number

of assignments (mainly from taking two classes at a time while working full time as well)” was a bit of a challenge while working full time. This is not unlike comments that students pursuing advanced degrees in the United States make as they, too, work full time while taking classes. Another student discussed a difference in the course structure compared with those in her home country. She said, “Researching through literature review is new to me as I have studied previously in an Indian culture.” Yet another participant mentioned, “Occasionally when a subject in an essay is more US based it can be harder to understand.” This leads into the next theme of cultural differences.

Cultural Differences

“The main challenge is the different backgrounds of life, culture and education; some of the content is more suitable for education in the US” averred one participant. Another student agreed, “The cultural differences between the American and Qatari societies as it affects the educational system is a major challenge.” While there are many similarities in the educational systems, the researcher recalls certain elements or courses which posed challenges. As one student concurred “I feel the educational leadership program is more relevant to the US for some courses.”

For courses such as Planning and Resource Allocation, one mentioned that they have “less access to information within the educational sector in Qatar compared to the American system.” Another student expounded on that statement, “Some of the information required for assignments is not possible to obtain in Qatar; the information from the ministry of education in Qatar is limited and confidential (financial resources).” Another agreed, “We are asked to do a lot of things based on the US standards, like budgeting, salary structures, etc. which we are totally unaware of here in Qatar as everything is dealt by the Ministry and government directly. We don’t know all these details as these are very confidential.”

What could be done differently to assist you in the courses or assignments?

General Course Suggestions

Some participants made some general suggestions regarding the courses. Among them was a request for more discussion boards. Some of the students voiced appreciation for student-to-student interaction online. A couple of students stated that more in-class assignments would be helpful. As at least one course allowed for students to employ the jig-saw method of instruction, two students specified more opportunities to jig-saw.

As with most educational programs in the United States, APA formatting and citations are typically required for course papers. As such, one student said that “a course on APA formatting would be helpful.” One final general request was that textbook information be “available earlier so we can get them in time.”

Due Dates

Multiple students mentioned due date or time restraints of modules and/or assignments. One participant said,

“More flexible time windows to complete assignments” should be taken into consideration. Another student stated, “Since it is face-to-face and some classes are on Wednesdays, it would be helpful to have the due date of assignments due the following Wednesday instead of on Sundays.” (Following the American format of delivery and expectations, due dates were set for Sunday evenings.) Along the same lines, one student requested “extended time to submit assignments” would be helpful.

Consideration of Cultural Differences

The recognition of cultural differences emerged as a theme as well. One student mentioned “The US education system differs in quite a few areas of education.” The student continued that “maybe the courses be addressed on an international level instead of it being US centric.” Another student agreed, “Maybe if there could be more appropriate assignments that can look at education as a whole.” Still, a third participant said that “assignments related to Qatar school practices” could be a positive change.

Discussion

This study was conducted to assist the university and course professors to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of the TNHE (Transnational Higher Education) students that are served. With this being the inaugural cohort of students for this program offered by this university in Qatar, it is important to examine the lived experiences of the first students. While the results support and confirm other studies regarding the motivation of international students choosing an American university (Durrani, 2020; Israel & Batalova, 2021; IDP Education, 2021; Kapur & Crowley, 2008; Pyvis & Chapman, 2005; Vioreanu, 2021), the students also spoke directly as to why they chose this specific university. This data will inform the marketing efforts that the university employs for future enrollment.

Of note, this particular university has some brand recognition in Qatar which should be capitalized on. Additionally, the willingness of universities to make concessions and changes to their program in order to satisfy other countries’ requirements is increasingly important. In the case of this study, the American university had to transform its traditionally asynchronous online degree program into one that offered face-to-face instruction albeit via Zoom. The ministry of education in Qatar required the students to meet altogether in a designated classroom each week while the professor Zoomed in for instruction. (It should be noted that the professor(s) did visit Qatar and were able to instruct the students in person for multiple class periods.) Because of the hybrid modality, the program was recognized and approved by the ministry of education in Qatar. (It should also be noted that the university also offers engineering and business degrees in Qatar.) Additional offerings from this university in Qatar may expand its brand recognition and elevate its status among other universities in Qatar.

Affordability was important to some of the participants in the study. Pursuing this degree from an American university was more cost advantageous than receiving a degree a brick-and-mortar Qatari institution. This mirrors the research by Durrani (2020) and Kapur & Crowley (2008). Ensuring that education is competitively affordable will continue to be a factor among students across the world.

One of the challenges the participants mentioned was the amount of assignments required while working fulltime. Those types of comments are not uncommon even for students in America. Juggling family, work, and schooling will always present a challenge and is more so for some than others. However, we must also take into account that for the students in Qatar, English is probably not their first language. Therefore, more time is likely necessary for those students to read, comprehend, and write material which would not be as much of an issue for students whom English is their primary language. Writing in English has been shown to be a challenge in for transnational students in other studies as well (Sawir et al., 2012; van der Rijst, et al., 2022). It is also important to note that this cohort of students was taking 2 courses at a time.

Cultural differences also played a part in presenting challenges for students. While the educational systems overall are quite similar, there are some nuanced differences which specifically apply to educational leadership. As mentioned by the students, they don't have access to budgets or financial resources. Unlike schools and districts in the United States, money and finances is all handled by the ministry of education in Qatar. Therefore, courses such as Planning and Resource Allocation as it has been traditionally presented with American students is less applicable to the context of education in Qatar.

Another course, School Law, was also geared toward American law. As the professors were unfamiliar with Qatari laws at the time, instruction was limited to United States laws. Guzel & Glazer (2019) have discussed socio-cultural adaptation difficulties of international students studying abroad. In this study, it is the professors who experienced the socio-cultural adaptation difficulties. For future iterations of the course being taught in Qatar, additional planning and research will be required to ensure that the course is more applicable to the Qatari context.

The responses indicated that students would appreciate more consideration of Qatari culture and the educational system. There are certain aspects which could be modified. For instance, schools in Qatar meet Sunday through Thursday rather than Monday through Friday. So rather than having due dates on Sunday evening, the university could change the due dates to mirror Qatari weekends. Another option, as requested by a student, was to move the due to be week after class instruction. For instance, if a course has a class meeting and instruction on Wednesday, then they asked if the due date could be the following Wednesday.

Sin, Leung, and Waters (2019) asserted that there is need to consider contextual specificities when instructing transnational education students. Some accommodations were made to account for international differences. In one course, Administration and Supervision of Special Education, the professor invited a guest speaker who was a Special Needs educator in Qatar. She was able to make specific application to special education practices in Qatar as well as make comparisons to United States practices and procedures.

Additionally, as students asked for more opportunity to jig-saw and interact with each other online, modification to instructional methods can be made. Researchers have encouraged more active student engagement in the teaching and learning process (Bovill et al., 2016; Peters & Mathias, 2018; Seale et al., 2015). Their research demonstrates that active student engagement increases student attention, motivation, comprehension, retention, more critical thinking. As this was the first time the courses were taught in Qatar, the professors were hesitant to

employ multiple instructional methods. This is partially due to unknowns such as potential language barriers, cultural difference, etc. Knowing that most candidates are English proficient alleviates any trepidation towards trying new methods. In a study in Singapore, Hoare (2012) found that transnational education providers still have room to grow in designing curricula that facilitate in-class intercultural and transnational comparisons.

As in the case of this study, some educational systems and schools across the world utilize American curriculum. One of the student's responses included that their international school utilizes an American curriculum which led to their choosing of an American program. Additionally, throughout the program, various students mentioned that their schools employ American curriculum such as the AP (Advance Placement) curriculum and courses designed by College Board. Another student noted that they use Glencoe – an American curriculum. Because some schools in countries around the world utilize American curriculum, this may be an attraction for international teachers to choose American universities for advanced degrees. Therefore, it is helpful for American universities to meet the needs of educators in other countries as they navigate American curricula.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the perceptions and experiences of transnational higher education students residing in Qatar as they progressed through a United States university's online master's degree principal preparation program in Educational Leadership. The responses to the first survey question highlighted their motivations for choosing an American university. These responses corroborated and supported the research from previous studies while also recognizing the importance of American universities to meet the standards and requirements of other countries.

Responses to the second survey questions described the challenges that transnational higher education students face. Most of the issues stem from the cultural and linguistic differences as well as education differences between the countries. While the similarities of the educational systems are plentiful, some differences in government structures make some assignments difficult. In response to the last survey question, the participants provided suggestions that will inform future design and instruction of courses for transnational higher education students. It is vital for universities to be attuned to the experiences of all students – whether locally or abroad. Therefore, continuing to survey students will give voice to the students and provide direction for improvements.

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