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Paper: The Challenge of Understanding the Academic Expectations of Gulf Sponsored Students

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Abstract

Educational sponsorship in the Gulf States has been identified as one of the most powerful means of building a more qualified national work force, in order to address the overrepresentation of expatriates in the private sector. Over the past five to seven years, this has created an opportunity for Australian education providers to enrol Gulf nationals who have been identified as the elite of their high school graduating cohort and sponsored to obtain specialist qualifications overseas.

In general, it has been observed that the students’ academic performance has met neither the institution’s, the sponsor’s, nor their own (or their family’s) expectations. However, the accepted explanations for the students’ difficulties – such as outmoded pedagogical practice in their home countries; challenges to learning in English; gaps between assumed knowledge and high school curriculum; religious/cultural difference – do not satisfactorily explain why these students’ experience of Australian education differs so dramatically from other international students.

This study in progress seeks to unpack some of the assumptions held about Gulf sponsored students, working on the premise that more productive support mechanisms may be employed once the students’ expectations are better understood.

Preliminary fieldwork with the 2004 cohort of sponsored students from the Sultanate of Oman suggests that students’ expectations of guaranteed employment and elevated social status (for themselves and their families) may shape their motivation and ability to address constructively difficulties faced during their academic transition to studying in Australia.

Introduction

Australia’s Federal Minister for Education has identified the Middle East as an education market with excellent recruitment potential, and in recent years the entire suite of Premiers and State Education Ministers have swept through the region on profiling missions. [Nelson, B.N.: 2003] Competition between Australian education providers to recruit students from the Gulf region in particular is intensive and continues to grow.

Opportunities in the region generally fall into two categories: building relationships with Gulf nationals (either through enrolling sponsored students or joint ventures, such as offshore course provision or university status accreditation) and the recruitment of private fee paying expatriate students into postgraduate programs (usually Indian nationals pursuing MBA or MIT programs for the purpose of skilled migration). Given the unique structure of Gulf society, opportunities to attract expatriates through profile-raising activities are not possible without the endorsement of nationals in the Ministry of Education. Therefore, all marketing activities are aimed at servicing both ends of the mutually-exclusive spectrum.

Gulf sponsoring bodies are showing increasing interest in Australia as a study destination, attracted by safety and security, diversity and quality of educational offerings, and the comparatively low tuition fees and cost of living. However, Australian education providers are becoming wary of enrolling sponsored students, fearful that the consistently poor academic performance of these students will have negative repercussions for all facets of their marketing activities in the Gulf region.

This study therefore aims to equip Australian education providers with a new way of considering the specific challenges faced by Gulf sponsored students. With more accurate information about the students’ expectations, and the ways in which these influence how and what the students learn, more appropriate support services may be designed to assist students with their transition to the Australian education environment. If this can be achieved, Australian education providers might be more confident that they are negotiating suitable agreements with Gulf sponsoring bodies.
Overview of education-workforce relationship

The Gulf States are the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Nationals is the accepted term for those who hold citizenship in the Gulf States. Citizens of the Gulf will usually identify themselves as Arabs. However, this term can also be used to describe other groups living in the Gulf States who are not entitled to citizenship per se.

In the Gulf States, government sponsorship of education forms a key part of the broader social and economic policies for nationalisation. Such policies seek to address the disproportionately high representation of non-nationals in the private sector through building a more qualified workforce of nationals. Usually non-nationals are expatriate workers, for whom employment opportunities will vary depending on their country of origin, profession and reasons for being granted permission to live in the Gulf. A significant number of expatriates from countries such as the United States, England, Germany and Australia, respond to calls to work in management positions in Gulf owned companies, attracted by the promise of a high salary, tax-free income and subsidised living expenses (some of the benefits enjoyed by nationals). It is these non-nationals that the policies of nationalisation aim to reduce in number.

The other significant group of non-nationals in the Gulf States have been recruited en masse by agencies who supply human resources from countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for the purposes of domestic help, hospitality and manual labour. These workers have access to very little by way of dues or legal rights. By contrast, there is little desire or incentive to replace these workers with nationals.

In order to replace non-nationals in specialist and technical positions, an appropriately qualified workforce of nationals is required. Sponsored students are therefore elite of the high school graduating cohort who have been selected for overseas study opportunities on the proviso that they return to work in management, research and development roles in the private sector upon their return. The sponsoring body is usually the Ministry of Higher Education [MoHE], for whom the business of sending students overseas forms a major part of nationalisation policies.

Increasingly, such education needs cannot be supported by traditional markets such as the United States (whose student visa application process has become prohibitive for Gulf Arab students). In addition, it is problematic that the “bulge” of secondary school leavers requiring training – some 15% of the Gulf population is under the age of 15 [Dew, P. and A. Shoults (Eds): 2002, 209] – cannot be accommodated in national universities. However, a significant number of graduating students may be in a position to pay for private education in-country, creating another opportunity for overseas education providers.

The Gulf region is therefore a potentially lucrative education market that may also contribute in a positive way to enhancing the cultural and ethnic diversity of the international undergraduate student population (which has traditionally been dominated by students from South East, and more recently North, Asia). In the study, the term education provider will refer to the Australian tertiary institutions that have been authorised by any given MoHE to enrol sponsored students, including their affiliated English language centres (offering the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students [ELICOS] program) and pathway programs. Pathways are usually foundation studies or diploma programs which function as academic bridging programs for undergraduate studies. These are a compulsory course of study for graduates of the national secondary curriculum in the Gulf, as the National Office for Overseas Skills Recognition [NOOSR] in Australia has deemed that this qualification is not the equivalent of an Australian matriculation program.

The problem of poor academic performance

The poor academic performance of Gulf sponsored students is more notable in their disappointing subject results in pathway programs, with the result that few are able to gain entry to their designated undergraduate degree. The consequent strain placed on teaching and support staff has prompted Australian education providers to question whether they are able to meet the needs of sponsoring bodies. This uncertainty presents a threat to the long-term viability of the Gulf market and has significant implications for the individual students involved.

The impact on students can be seen, for example, in the cohorts of students from the Sultanate of Oman that have been allocated to a Group of Eight University in the past two years. These students were required to achieve an IELTS of 6.0 before undertaking the designated pathway program (from which places in undergraduate programs at the University are guaranteed provided certain academic results are achieved). The students required more than 40 weeks of ELICOS to reach the required IELTS score, double the time which had been allocated to them. Many students expressed anxiety and frustration that they were not able
to commence their foundation studies sooner, despite not achieving the required IELTS. For some, the idea that they had to take foundation studies at all was an anathema, as they perceived themselves to be qualified for direct entry to university. Upon enrolment, the students expressed confidence that they would be able to achieve the required entry score for university entry. However, as it became apparent (through various modes of assessment) that this was not going to eventuate, the students expressed dissatisfaction with the academic program and their motivation appeared to decline. Over 85 per cent of the 800 students enrolled in the pathway program achieve entry to the Group of Eight annually. By contrast, only three out of eight Omani students received offers from the University in 2004, and two out of eight in 2003.

The academic expectations (also referred to as educational goals) of this group have traditionally been defined as achievement of the necessary level of English proficiency, and meeting the required entry score in their pathway studies for entering a specified undergraduate program at an approved institution. It may certainly be inferred from the example above that the students had difficulties adjusting to their new learning environment and difficulty completing the assessments to a satisfactory standard. This was usually attributed (by teachers and support staff) to the fact that the students performed well, relatively effortlessly, in secondary school, where schooling was largely based on rote learning and examination, and the majority of subjects undertaken were focused on Islamic values and Qur'an study.

Certainly, feedback from the students themselves about the secondary curriculum in the Gulf States would suggest that syllabus covered and pedagogical approach differ substantially from education experienced by secondary students in Australia. The comparatively high focus on religious and moral education, as well as a culture of rote learning and predictable examination, have been demonstrated as substantial influences on Gulf nationals’ ability to adapt to Australian tertiary education.

Current explanations for the underachievement of Gulf sponsored students, and their limitations

However, this educational background is not unique to students from the Gulf States. It is conceivable that many international students in Australia come from similar pedagogical experiences, and that some (for example, Indonesian students) have a similar level of commitment to Islamic values. Furthermore, current explanations do not explain why attempts by various education providers to employ “transition” or “bridging” programs for these students have not ameliorated the situation, where they have successfully addressed the needs of other groups of students. Students from the Gulf appear to be a special case.

Following extensive discussion with teaching and support staff, it is reasonable to commence the research with the assumption that the students’ lack of motivation to take responsibility for their own studies and address apparent learning difficulties, provides the biggest obstacle to academic success. However, staff seem to assume that because students are financially supported by their government, as well as guaranteed graduate employment, they do not share the burdens placed on other international students. By contrast, discussions with the students themselves indicates that pursuit of a particular qualification – and its associated (or, perhaps, presumed) teaching and learning methods – is driven by a pressing desire to minimise any risks associated with the advancement of their (and their families’) social status. Although they are prepared to work hard at completing assessment, they do not feel that they should be required to pursue their studies independently, for fear that they might not achieve the results that they need for university entry. Having encountered a situation where the education provider’s expectations of them did not concur with the above, the students’ morale drops substantially.

The assumptions of academic and support staff about the motivation levels of Gulf sponsored students are neatly encapsulated in the following:

Increasingly, young Gulf Arabs […] are expecting employment by right and their laws demand – for good reason – that all companies take on more nationals. […] Many nationals – who form the minority of Gulf populations – are excellent employees (and managers), but many come from a family where great wealth has been the norm for perhaps two generations. The ‘work ethic’ has therefore not been a prominent Gulf Arab characteristic, nor has ‘good timekeeping’…

[Dew, P. and A. Shoult (Eds): 209]
This study proposes that although it is the attitudes of Gulf sponsored students which differentiate them from other groups of international students, this in itself does not necessarily imply that the students do not possess a “work ethic” of any significance, as suggested above. Rather, this work ethic may be dramatically different to that of other international students in Australia.

To date, the majority of research commissioned across the Gulf region has focused on the social and economic implications of the apparent lack of progress towards nationalisation. Very little of this information has been made available outside the Government bodies who commissioned the study, and those that are accessible seem largely focused on lamenting the pressure placed on management to maintain output, as well as staff morale, in the face of positive discrimination [eg Abdelrakim, A.: 2001].

Those studies that do consider the issue of qualifications are unable to see past the *how* to consider *why* students were not meeting the educational and employment goals held by their Governments. The students (and their families) are rarely invited to contribute their perspective. For example, one of the few studies of Kuwaiti society takes into consideration the MoHE’s difficulty in redressing the profound imbalance between graduate outcomes and the needs of the country’s rapidly developing infrastructure. Although a state-of-the-art technical school was opened in the early 1950s in order to encourage Kuwaiti citizens to learn “useful” trades, by 1961 the student:teacher ratio was as low as 3:1. By contrast, the number of taxis on Kuwaiti roads had risen to 10,000. The researcher’s only conclusion was that taxi driving must have been considered a “perfectly acceptable” occupation. [Joyce, M.: 1998, 82] No teachers, students or taxi drivers were consulted in the process.

To date, systematic research has not been conducted to investigate and contextualise the specific expectations held by Gulf sponsored students when obtaining overseas qualifications, and the effect that the mismatch between their expectations and reality can have on both the student and the education provider.

**Alternative ways of considering Gulf students’ expectations**

The argument that the lack of a proactive and disciplined work ethic is a byproduct of an insular oil-wealthy Islamic state is arguably unhelpful when trying to formulate strategies to assist staff and students in the above situation. However, the stereotype is not entirely unfounded. It is generally accepted that, in the Gulf, citizenship has been uniquely demarcated and hierarchised in terms of access to benefits and services that have come to be considered *dues*. [Longva, A.N.: 1997, Tétreault, M.A.: 2000] This usually includes the right to vote, land ownership, health cover, and legal rights (all of which are denied to non-nationals) as well as generous endowments for birth, education, marriage, and property acquisition, to name a few.

For Gulf nationals, public sector employment is one of the most important mechanisms for providing citizens with access to these dues, and educational sponsorship has been the traditional pathway to such employment. Increasingly, however, Gulf States are experiencing employment saturation in the public service and a consequent rise in unemployment. For many of these countries, the imperative to find solutions to the unemployment problem is becoming more urgent as oil and gas reserves, which have supported the national economy in recent times, approach depletion. Particularly sensitive at the present time is the substantial increase in number of bored and disenfranchised youth, who are potentially vulnerable to recruitment by fundamentalist and extremist organisations. Educational sponsorship, therefore, has been identified as one of the most powerful means for supporting a diversifying economy.

It has been argued, by researchers of the Gulf region’s unique social structure, that *working* has traditionally been differentiated from *employment* in the sense that the former has been an activity that expatriates are contracted to undertake in the private sector, so that particular goods and services can be provided to the community. The latter is a luxury assumed by nationals, namely guaranteed public service employment after graduation from university. [Longva, A.N.: 124] Increasingly, however, nationalisation policies dictate that accepting educational sponsorship now means that a Gulf national must accept a particular career outcome in the private sector. This may be in conflict with the experiences of individual’s parents, for whom employment in the public sector was a given. The students’ desire to avoid uncertainty by gaining specialist qualifications which are assumed to entail some form of employment guarantee (as well as the remuneration and social status afforded to specialists) is therefore not insignificant.
An exploratory framework: Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance dimensions

In considering how Gulf sponsored students’ expectations might differentiate their experience (and consequent ability to succeed) from other international students, the highly influential research of Geert Hofstede [2001] can provide a useful preliminary conceptual framework.

Hofstede’s survey of IBM employees around the world enabled him to make generalisations about differing cultural values between country branches. He divided these generalisations into five dimensions – Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism (as opposed to Collectivism), Masculinity (as opposed to Femininity), and Long-term (as opposed to Short-term) Orientation – and ranked countries according to the degree to which their average survey response leaned towards diametrically opposed values.¹ It can be argued that the site of Hofstede’s research is the converse of this study, in that he investigates the ways that one company experiences different organisational values when it is transported into a diverse range of countries, rather than considering what happens when a diverse range of people work in an organisation located in a specific place. However, the method he used to develop country rankings in relation to key criteria is a valuable lens through which to consider how cultural values might differentiate specific groups of people in a particular context.

For the purposes of this study, the responses attributed to employees from countries grouped into an Arabic-speaking region (namely, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) will be considered representative of Gulf sponsored students. This assumption is justified arguably by the fact that the country grouping is the closest geographically, culturally and linguistically to the country background of Gulf sponsored students (acknowledging that the nominated countries span a region much broader than the Gulf States). Problematic, however, is the lack of information about who was actually surveyed in this research. In order to establish general views about power and authority, Hofstede surveyed non-managerial staff. However, non-managerial staff at the UAE branch of IBM, in the present day, comprises non-nationals from the sub-Continent. Although these people undeniably live in an Arabic-speaking region, it does not follow that they would hold similar values to nationals. Given the grouping of the seven countries together, it can be assumed that the number of individuals surveyed was less than their counterparts in other “stand alone” countries. For the purpose of this study, therefore, it will be assumed that the number of non-nationals interviewed would have been small enough to be subsumed into the diversity of the responses from the seven countries subsumed into the Arabic-speaking region category. This assumption is supported by the fact that the Arabic-speaking cluster does not tend to reflect the same rankings a patterns of a country such as India in Hofstede’s study, as it might if only expatriates from the sub-Continent were interviewed.

Unsurprisingly, in many of Hofstede’s rankings, Australia and the Arabic-speaking countries are often in polar opposition. This, in itself, does not shed much light on the issue, as it only reiterates already-established differences between school experience, familial structure, and organisational culture in the two regions. It does not reveal the specific ways in which the values of Arab students may differ from other students, and why their experiences in Australia are unique. However, when Australia and Arabic-speaking countries are compared against key dimensions for the top four source countries for undergraduate studies in Australia – Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Hong Kong [Australian Education International: 2000] – more interesting groupings become apparent.

The dimension where the difference between Arabic-speaking countries and the top four source countries is most apparent is Uncertainty Avoidance. The Uncertainty Avoidance principle considers ways in which societies respond to fear of the unknown. In terms of organizational culture, Hofstede argues that countries which rank highly in the Uncertainty Avoidance Index [UAI] demonstrate inclination towards specialist over generalist, preference for consensual modes of decision-making, dislike of working for foreign or expatriate manager, resistance to change, and a pessimistic outlook on company motives (despite a commitment to company loyalty). [153]

Of the 53 countries surveyed, Arabic-speaking countries were ranked 27 in terms of high Uncertainty Avoidance, with Australia following at 37, Indonesia 41, Malaysia 46 and Singapore 53. Despite some clustering at the top and bottom levels of the ranking, it is interesting that the distance between the Arabic-speaking countries and Australia is about the same as it is between Australia and Malaysia and Singapore, as this suggests that Australians demonstrate tendencies that place them midway between two very different groupings of cultural values.

¹ For the purposes of this paper Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Individualism will be considered, as these relate most specifically to behaviours identified in Gulf sponsored students in relation to their ideas about employment.
The similarity between the characteristics of Hofstede’s high UAI countries and the desire of Gulf sponsored students for employment guarantees is quite compelling. The preference for specialisation is particularly revealing as it is arguably indicative of a lower motivation to “work up the ranks” through promotion to management positions. Promotion in the Gulf States, it is generally known, takes a long time and is increasingly difficult as the public sector is saturated with graduates from one and two generations ago (there is no enforceable retirement age in the Gulf). Students may therefore perceive sponsorship as an opportunity to gain qualification in a unique field which would, in effect, “fast track” their career outside the usual modes for advancement. This is consistent with reports of students’ preference for particular study disciplines, and confidence that they will meet their own expectations of academic success. It can also be argued that management positions entail some degree of responsibility for other staff members. A lack of interest in responsibility for the academic or professional development of others (outside the family sphere) is consistent with the stated specialist employment goals of Gulf sponsored students.

The desire to work in a larger organisation, avoidance of competition with colleagues and the preference for less authoritative (and more consultative) modes of management are also reflective of the differentiated status of Gulf nationals. Arabic-speaking countries scored quite low on the Individualism Index [IDV], indicating the extent to which respondents perceived themselves to be part of a particular group or collective. However, the Arabic-speaking countries’ scores on the IDV were not dramatically different to the top four source countries: out of 53 countries, they were ranked 26 while Malaysia was ranked 36, Hong Kong 37, Singapore 39 and Indonesia 47. This would suggest that Individualism is not a unique factor that would explain the experience of Gulf sponsored students. However, despite clustering, it is apparent that the distance between the Arabic-speaking countries and Australia (which was ranked 2, at the opposite end of the spectrum) is similar to the difference between the Arabic-speaking countries and Indonesia. This suggests that students from the Arab region may configure individualism somewhat differently to some other groups of international students in Australia.

This unique configuration of Individualism in the Gulf States might be seen, for example, in the way that face (often discussed in relation to other ethnic and cultural groups) is configured in the Arab region. Arguably, for nationals in the Gulf, face specifically translates to the peer merit resulting from a person’s actions and “the consensus a group makes about a particular member’s capabilities”. [Kennedy, P.D.: 1997, 438] The phenomenon of wasta cannot be overlooked here. Wasta is often mistaken by outsiders for nepotism or equivalent of the British “old school tie”. It is a uniquely Arab phenomenon that revolves around personal connections and influence, a complex network of “two-way favours” which take time and effort to develop. Rather than skew outcomes in favour of the individual, wasta indicates a commitment to the advancement of the interests of various collectives, the most important being the family. Indeed, it has been argued that, in the Arab region “a youth is considered mature once he views his own success as being synonymous with the success of his family.” [Kennedy, P.D.: 444-445]

Hofstede’s inclusion of a “pessimistic outlook” in the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension may then seem contradictory in the face of statements about the influence and negotiation for the benefit of the collective. Pessimism is explained in an example of a petition conducted in Belgium (which scored highly on the UAI), where respondents either denied the problem, refused to sign or signed with resignation that it “wouldn’t help”. It is argued that this is evidence of the alienation from the “systems that affect their lives” often experienced by individuals living in high UAI countries. [171] It has been noted that Gulf sponsored students, while confident of their own ability to succeed, do express frustration about the bureaucracy that governs their lives as sponsored students, and are particularly vocal about their despondency that they are not achieving the academic success that they expected. When asked to consult with Ministry officials regarding the status of their enrolment, or with lecturers or tutors to address specific difficulties they are experiencing in their studies, they consistently respond that such an action is not necessary as it “wouldn’t help”. In some cases, students will refuse to spend time identifying and dismantling their own learning difficulties, apparently preferring that their tutors assume they know absolutely nothing than take responsibility for their own learning (and accept the consequent/inevitable academic failure). The inevitable recourse to the “will of Allah” is, unfortunately, misunderstood in this context.

Interestingly, such pessimism about the power structures that govern their lives was not noted to such a great extent in the Power Distance principle. The Power Distance Index [PDI] measured the extent to which different cultural groups accept that power is distributed unequally. In this Index, Arabic-speaking countries were not differentiated to any great extent from other source countries: Malaysia was ranked 1, Arabic-speaking countries 2, Indonesia 8, Hong Kong 15, as compared to Australia which ranked 41 out of 53.[107]
However, when PDI was plotted visually against UAI in Exhibit 4.2 A UAI x PDI Plot for 50 Countries and Three Regions [below, 152] a more revealing situation emerged. Australia’s low score in both the UAI and PDI placed it in one quadrant, where the four source Asian countries grouped in low UAI and high PDI were placed in another, and the Arabic-speaking countries sitting diametrically opposite Australia in the high UAI and high PDI quadrant. From this, it can be inferred that although students from Arabic-speaking countries may share ideas about power and authority (particularly in terms of pedagogical practice) with the majority of undergraduate international students in Australia, their ideas about motivation and success (with specific reference to employment outcomes) set them apart.

Recent fieldwork and preliminary findings

To test this hypothesis, empirical work will be undertaken with a group of Gulf sponsored students. A representative group of students has been identified from the Sultanate of Oman, where the Ministry of Higher Education annually sends a total of 30 fully sponsored students (and a further number of partially sponsored students) to study in Australia. This group has consistently comprised the majority of the Gulf cohort in Australia since 1999.

The Sultanate’s policy of Omanisation was one of the earliest pieces of legislation in the region to address the problem of underrepresentation of nationals in the private sector. Although located in a region that is known to be oil-wealthy, Oman does not generate the revenue from oil and gas production enjoyed by its neighbours in the Gulf. This has meant that the public service has never been able to sustain the same level of employment as other Gulf States, and there has been a relatively more consistent distribution of national

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For example, Oman and Kuwait have approximately the same population size (2.2 million) but the 1999 GDP in terms of US dollars (billion) was 15.6 for Oman and 30.4 for Kuwait. Oman produced 0.8 million barrels of oil per day, Kuwait produced 1.9. At the current rate of production, Oman’s oil and gas reserves are anticipated to last 17 years, Kuwait’s 126 years. Importantly for this study, the percentage of non-nationals in Oman is 27% whereas it is as high as 65% in Kuwait. [Rodenbeck, M: 23/3/02]
employment in the private sector. That is not to suggest that Omani nationals working in the public sector have been deprived of dues, however it is known that these are not as comprehensive as other Gulf States (such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait).

Educational sponsorship has been a distinguishing feature of Omanisation since the accession of Sultan Qaboos in the 1970s. Destinations for Omani sponsored students include the Middle East, UK, US, Canada, New Zealand, and several Eastern Block countries. The Sultanate was also one of the first Gulf States to provide equal opportunities for women in education. The underutilisation of women’s capabilities is a feature that has arguably undermined other Arab countries’ attempts to redress an imbalanced workforce and underqualified population. [United Nations Development Programme: 2002]

Usually, around 30 fully sponsored Omani nationals (of which nearly half are female) are divided into groups of six and sent to five institutions with whom the Ministry has negotiated an agreement. Institutions are selected on the basis of discipline offerings, as well as willingness to offer fee remission for one student in six (in effect, “giving something back” to the Ministry, in the form of a “six for five deal”). Students are selected on the basis of academic results achieved in their secondary schooling, and allocated to specific undergraduate degrees at particular institutions. Their tuition fees are fully paid and they are granted a stipend for living expenses (although, unlike some other sponsoring bodies, students are not rewarded with financial bonuses for above average academic performance). The students are not contractually obliged to work for Ministry of Higher Education upon returning home to Oman, and (also unlike some other sponsoring bodies) are not required to repay the total amount of tuition fees and stipends if they do not meet academic expectations.

Interviews with the Omani sponsored students were conducted immediately after the Scholarship Allocation program in Muscat in August 2004. The interviewees were the twelve sponsored students (a combination of partial and fully sponsored students) who had been allocated to Victorian institutions. In 2004, a total of 22 students were officially allocated to Australia, although the number seems to be a bit fluid as students (and their parents) continue to negotiate course and country destinations with the Ministry.

Interviews aimed to establish the students’ intentions and aspirations regarding their overseas study experience, and the employment outcomes it would entail. An important part of this discussion was the extent to which students were aware of the nature of their [specialist] studies, and career opportunities in their home country. Their understanding of the skills (as well as knowledge) required to succeed in this course, and the extent to which the students felt that they were prepared academically and emotionally for the anticipated mode of study, were also ascertained.

One of the strongest themes of the initial interviews with Omani students was the desire for specialist qualifications, even if the nature of the qualification and its consequent outcomes was not fully known or understood. The desire to avoid any uncertainty with regard to employment was a top priority, and usually linked to social advancement for the student and their families. Students were aware that they would have to “work hard” and that they would find this a challenge, given that it would be in a different language and they would be away from their families and other support networks. But virtually all expressed great confidence that they were in a strong position to succeed in their allocated programs.

This study proposes that these expectations have greater influence on a students’ motivation than their academic history or cultural background, when it comes to succeeding in undergraduate programs in Australia. Such expectations differentiate Gulf sponsored students from other groups of international students in Australia.

Future interviews will reveal whether the students’ expectations of the program, but also of their own ability, were matched by reality. In particular, the study will focus on students’ motivation levels as they learn more about their course and career destination, and as quantifiable evidence of their actual performance (ie IELTS scores, academic results) become available.

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3 The notable exceptions to this were students from private schools who were in a position to accept partial scholarships. The majority of these had come from a comparatively affluent metropolitan setting, where a number of members of their family had studied overseas.
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