The Challenge of Understanding the Academic Expectations of Gulf Sponsored Students: traditional student aspirations versus modern graduate attributes

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Abstract

The Gulf States have identified educational sponsorship as one of the most powerful means of building a better qualified national work force, with a view to redressing 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 nor the sponsor's expectations, nor indeed the students' or their families'. The accepted explanations for the students' difficulties include: outmoded pedagogical practice in their home countries; the challenges of learning in English; gaps between assumed knowledge and actual high school curriculum; and religious/cultural difference. However, these do not satisfactorily explain why these students' experience of Australian education differs so dramatically from that of other international students.

This study in progress questions 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.

Key words and concepts

A number of key concepts involved in this paper warrant extensive discussion by way of background to the argument.

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, the latter term can also be used to describe other groups living in the Gulf States who are not entitled to citizenship.

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. 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 build a better qualified workforce of Nationals, thus reducing reliance on the expertise of foreign expatriates.

In order to replace non-Nationals in specialist and technical positions, an appropriately qualified workforce of Nationals is required. *Sponsored students* are therefore the 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 deters Gulf Arab students). An additional problem is the "bulge" of secondary school leavers requiring training – some 15% of the Gulf population is under the age of 15 [Dew and Shoult (Eds): 2002, 209] – which 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 for Australian universities, who might also benefit by enhancing the cultural and ethnic diversity of their own international undergraduate population (traditionally 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 *poor academic performance* of Gulf Sponsored students is particularly 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 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 illustrated from the experience of cohorts from the Sultanate of Oman allocated to a Group of Eight university in the recent past. 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. To some, the idea of taking foundation studies at all was 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, when it became apparent (through various modes of assessment) that this would not eventuate, the students expressed dissatisfaction with the academic program and their motivation appeared to decline. Over 85 per cent of the total population of 800 students enrolled in this particular pathway program achieve entry to its parent Group of Eight institution annually. By contrast, only three out of eight Omani students received offers from the University in 2004, and two out of eight in 2003. In 2005, neither of the two students permitted to enrol in the same pathway program achieved entry to the parent institution; the reduction from eight to two is arguably evidence of the sponsor's distrust of, and dissatisfaction with, the program's ability to channel the students through to undergraduate programs.

Academic expectations have been discussed extensively in the context of the Australian higher education market and with specific reference to the factors influencing student choice of country and institution [eg Ballard and Clanchy: 1991; Chan and Drover: 1997; Lawley and Blight: 1997; Barker: 1997; Lawley and Perry: 1998]. A useful working definition of

expectations has been explicated as follows: "*a preconsumption belief about the future performance of the service provided by a foreign university*" [Willis and Kennedy : 2004, 4, italics original]. However, recent work by the same researchers focusing on students from Singapore and Hong Kong, argues that previous work utilising this definition does not reveal how expectations have been influenced by family and friends, nor the extent to which attitudes might change over the period the students are studying in Australia [Kennedy, Rushdi, and Willis: 2000].

For the purposes of this study, Gulf Sponsored students' *academic expectations* (also referred to as *educational goals*) are clearly 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. As they have been allocated by the Ministry of Higher Education to the country, institution and undergraduate degree in which they are enrolling, much of the research about student choice is redundant in the case of sponsored students. However, fieldwork revealed that the students managed to exercise a degree of control over their study and career destination, though not necessarily through informed choice. Through the course of interviews, it also became apparent that, contrary to their (and their sponsor's) anticipation, the students had difficulties adjusting to their new learning environment and were not able to complete assessments to a satisfactory standard. This was observed by support staff to be particularly problematic in light of the students' apparent assumption that they would easily be able to maintain the level of academic performance (particularly in terms of grades) in Australia to which they had become accustomed at home, despite the absence of family support and the private tutors on whom they had been reliant.

Current explanations for the underachievement of Gulf Sponsored students, their limitations, and gaps in the literature

Preliminary scoping for the research – comprising an informal audit of support services for Gulf Sponsored students as well as prevalent attitudes of academic, marketing and support staff – revealed opinions largely represented by statements such as the below:

> 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'...
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> [Dew and Shoult (Eds): 209]

> Becoming instant millionaires in Saudi Arabia is still the fortune of a minority, but there has been enough such individuals for the others to see. This is not the familiar American "rags to riches" mythology, which still emphasizes individual hard work. In the Saudi context, it is rather from "rich to richer" with little or no work and with the shortest route possible.
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> [Ibrahim: 1982, 112]

These opinions are supported by influential Western media reports, which focus on challenges faced by private companies operating in the Gulf under positive discrimination imperatives and imposed employment quotas for Nationals. Explanations are limited observations that: "Emirati firms prefer hiring expatriates from Asia and Europe, who are seen as cheaper, better qualified and harder working. Emiratis themselves often prefer work in the public sector, where hours and shorter, salaries higher and conditions less stressful." [*The Economist*: July 2006]

However, this study acknowledges that the attitudes of Gulf Sponsored students – and the behaviours they demonstrate when faced with difficulties during their studies – differentiate them from other groups of international students, but argues that this does not necessarily

derive from the absence of a "work ethic" of any significance, as suggested. Rather, this work ethic is very different from that of other international students in Australia.

Literature supporting this argument is not easily available, particularly to professional staff engaged in marketing and student support. Most Gulf governments provide reports on the demographics and opinions of their Sponsored students on Ministry of Education websites, but with only one exception, these are in Arabic. The one exception is largely limited to lamenting the pressure placed on management to maintain output, as well as staff morale, in the face of positive discrimination for Nationals [Abdelrakim: 2001].

Google searches on teaching students from, and in, the Middle East yield articles warning about "difficult" and "unmotivated" classes [Koolmees: September/October 2006], opinion pieces containing anecdotes about students apparently intent on "disrupting the infidel's class at any opportune moment" [McAllister: April 1999], and interviews with experienced educators advising that the key to success for teachers is to emphasise their power as arbiters of passing or failing, and the consequent continuance or otherwise of stipends for successful [Dupree: November 2003, 1].

More scholarly works problematise the Gulf classroom experience against research undertaken on teaching in a foreign context [Long,: 1999; Sonleitner and Khelifa: January 2005; Arden-Close: 1999]. The focus of this research is almost exclusively on the ways in which the Gulf secondary school experience limits the students' ability to cope with problem-based learning and interactive classrooms, despite the endeavours of their expatriate teachers. The observation that "[T]here is an association between having a career in mind and academic performance" is left unexplored [Sonleitner and Khelifa: 15].

This would seem a glaring omission, given that the local Gulf media are saturated with editorial, articles, and advertisements linking education to employment opportunities.[1] They also publish warnings about the extent to which Gulf Nationals have been equipped to meet the "challenges of advancing their society", but these are limited to blaming the "calibre" of the curriculum offered by local institutions [*Gulf News*: 19 April 2006, 10].

The recent United Nations Development Programme's series of *Arab Human Development Reports* reveal low literacy levels, poor quality curriculum, low qualification levels for teachers, and outmoded pedagogical practice, arguing that they have resulted in a society out of step with technological developments in the rest of the world [United Nations Development Programme: 2002, 2003, 2004].

A small amount of local commentary arose from Kuwait's participation in the international *Third Mathematics and Science Study* [TIMSS] survey in 1994-1995. The survey of over half a million students in 45 countries included several tests comprising multiple choice and open-ended questions. The compilation of results was designed to indicate the extent to which Seventh and Eighth Grade students were familiar with particular concepts and had been equipped with the skills required to tackle various problems. Kuwait was ranked third from the bottom in terms of average achievement in both Mathematics and Science for Eighth Grade students.[2] The Assistant Under-Secretary for Student Affairs at the Ministry of

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[1] To use one typical example, the *Gulf News* newspaper of April 18 2006 contained no fewer than 11 articles pertaining to education, seven of which focussed on local opportunities for Nationals. The newspaper itself was only 36 pages long and included articles on contemporary events such as the Palestinian crisis, Avian Flu and Hurricane Katrina.

[2] Australia was ranked 16 (out of 41) for Eighth Grade Mathematics, 17 (out of 39) for Seventh Grade Mathematics, 11 (out of 41) for Eighth Grade Science and 13 (out of 39) for Seventh Grade Science. Of the top four source countries of international students in undergraduate programs in Australia: Singapore ranked 1 for all categories; Hong Kong was ranked 4 for Eighth Grade Mathematics, 4 for Seventh Grade Mathematics, 24 for

Education in Kuwait commented that society would be justified in blaming the school "system" for "failing them" in terms of nation-building [Hussein: 1992, 463]. However, it should be noted that students from the two countries that were consistently ranked lower on the TIMSS scale – Colombia and South Africa – enrolled in pathway programs in Australia have rarely experienced the same degree of difficulty in completing their studies as their Kuwaiti peers.

Certainly, feedback collected for this study from the students themselves about the secondary curriculum in the Gulf States suggests that both syllabus and pedagogical approach differ substantially from those experienced by most secondary students in Australia. The difficulties reported by these students indicate that the comparatively high focus on religious and moral education, together with a culture of rote learning and predictable examinations, impair the ability of Gulf Nationals to adapt to Australian tertiary education.

However, this educational background is not unique to Gulf Sponsored students in Australia. Students from Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, have a similar level of exposure to Islamic values in the curriculum. Furthermore, current explanations do not account for the failure of various "transition" or "bridging" programs to ameliorate the situation for Gulf Sponsored students, whereas they have successfully addressed the needs of other groups.

Gulf Sponsored students do face a number of challenges in common with many other international students in Australia, but their responses to these difficulties are what set them apart. No single text specifically addresses the question of why this might be the case. Furthermore, support staff seem to assume that because students are not only financially supported by their government but also guaranteed graduate employment, they are free of burdens placed on other international students. By contrast, discussions with the students themselves reveal that their pursuit of a particular qualification is driven by a pressing desire to minimise any risks associated with the advancement of their own and their families' social status. It is also evident that mechanisms for negotiating such advancement – particularly the function of business relationships and favours – become problematic outside the students' country of origin.

The complex reasons for Gulf Sponsored students' behaviour, particularly the impact of their family's values on their expectations and aspirations emerge from the fieldwork for this study, described below.

A framework for exploring "face" in the Gulf context

In establishing how Gulf students' experiences of Australian education differ from those of other international students, due consideration must be given to the particularities of their cultural background. The most influential work on cultural values remains Geert Hofstede [2001], possibly the single resource most frequently consulted by teacher and support staff seeking to understand differences between various cohorts of international students or between international and Australian students. Hoftsede's work on cultural dimensions has provided a preliminary framework for conceptualising what makes students from the Gulf States so different from other students [Gauntlett: 2005]. In particular, his graphs depicting degrees of Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance dimensions provide compelling visual evidence that mechanisms employed to support the transition of students from the top four source countries for international students enrolled in undergraduate programs in Victoria [3] will not address the specific needs of students from the Arab region [Hofstede: 2001, 152, Exhibit 4.2].

Eighth Grade Science and 16 for Seventh Grade Science. Indonesia and Malaysia did not participate. [International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement: 1999]

[3] Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Hong Kong [AEI: 2000]

Having established that the cultural values of Arab students are different from those of other students, these values need to be defined, as does how they translate to expectations and behaviours. The seminal work of 14th century scholar Ibn Khaldun [1958], clearly shows that the Arab world has developed around the establishment and growth of families and tribes. This being the case, all social interactions are measured by the extent to which they contribute to the tribe's *group feeling*, that is, the extent to which they can command loyalty and exert influence. Accordingly, the priority of young individuals is to equip themselves with the skills and attributes required to leverage key relationships which will, in turn, enable business transactions needed to improve the family's material and financial status. The fact that the Gulf States had minimal interaction with the outside world until the mid-20th Century might suggest that such aspirations have remained unchanged. The validity of this work in the 1980s is confirmed by the work of Hisham Sharabi [1988] which reveals how the sheer size of the *petit bourgeoisie* in the Arab world has ensured the resilience of traditional means of ensuring upward social mobility. These mechanisms, he argues, were consolidated and fortified upon encountering with modernity, including industrialisation and democracy. In establishing that contemporary Middle Eastern societies are *neopatriarchal*, Sharabi demonstrates that the protection of family interest remains the dominant paradigm into the 1980s.

The extent to which this paradigm remains relevant to the Gulf States in the 21st century is evident from the participant observation conducted by Anh Nga Longva [1997] in Kuwait, which clearly shows how citizenship in the Gulf States is the main vehicle for consolidating the status of Nationals in Gulf society. Longva establishes that the patriarchal, tribal structures were that prevailed long before the discovery of oil, formed the basis upon which Kuwaiti Nationals demarcated and hierarchised access to significant privileges in response to the sheer scale and pace of oil production. This served not only to protect financial and material interests but also to maintain the status quo in the symbiotic relationship between Nationals and non-Nationals, the latter of whom being required to ensure continued oil production, trade and provision of services.

The implications of such soccio-cultural factors for the expectations and aspirations of Gulf Nationals in regard to tertiary education are rarely explored in the limited relevant literature beyond cursory, sweeping observations. For example, one "Anglo-American perspective" discerns a profound imbalance that developing between the outcomes of education in Kuwait and the needs of the country's rapidly developing infrastructure. In particular, the Ministry of Education's attempt to open a state-of-the-art technical school in the 1950s is lauded as a sincere attempt to redress the imbalance, by encouraging its citizens to learn "useful" trades. However, it also notes that by 1961, the student to teacher ratio in the same school was 3 to 1, whereas the number of taxis in Kuwait had risen to 10,000 in the same time span. Taxi-driving, the researcher surmises, was considered a "perfectly acceptable" occupation, where other trades were not [Joyce: 1998, 82]. She neglects to consider the fact that taxi driving requires a skill set already possessed by Nationals, as well as the flexibility to accommodate other simultaneous enterprises such as sponsorship of migrant workers and sub-contracting.

The latter are, in fact, the main means of income and business networking in Kuwait. Indeed, it has been argued that such choices of modern occupations reflect an extension of traditional aspects of family normative systems [Ibrahim: 7-8].b The fieldwork for this study reveals that Gulf Sponsored students' aims and aspirations have been predicated on outcomes that were available to their parents and grandparents: namely, expeditious advancement and enhancement of their family's *face*.

Much research has been undertaken on the significance of building, and the risk of losing, face in other cultures [eg Hofstede: 2001], particularly in South East and North East Asia [eg Irwin: 1996]. In South East and North East Asian countries whose heritage has been identified as Confucian, the accepted definition of face is as follows:

Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to a person by others is a function of the degree of congruence between judgements of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him.

[Ho: 1976, 883 quoted in Barker: 1997, 113]

The distinctive nuances of face in the Arab region deserve further analysis, but as in the above definition, for Nationals in the Gulf, face specifically translates to the peer merit which is bestowed as a consequence of a person's actions and "the consensus a group makes about a particular member's capabilities" [Kennedy: 1997, 438]. However, in the context of traditional family values challenged by modernity, an individual's opportunity to leverage strategically beneficial relationships in order to consolidate the group's social standing becomes absolutely critical. This phenomenon, otherwise known as *wasta*, is often mistaken by outsiders for nepotism or equivalent of the British "old school tie". It is a uniquely Arab phenomenon that acts as a social lubricant and revolves around personal connections and influence: a complex network of mediation and "two-way favours" which take time and effort to develop. Although it may appear that wasta is utilised to skew outcomes in favour of the individual, it is actually a sign of commitment to the advancement of the interests of various collectives, the most important being the family. Indeed, in the Gulf region it has been observed that "a youth is considered mature once he views his own success as being synonymous with the success of his family" [Kennedy: 444-445]. Everyone involved in the network of allegiances stands to gain through continuing commitment and development, with the balance of power held by the one who bestows the favour [Sharabi: 41-42].

Fieldwork

In order to ascertain how concerns of building and losing face influence the behaviour of students from the Gulf, fieldwork was conducted with a group of Sponsored students from the Sultanate of Oman. Each year, the Omani Ministry of Higher Education sends a total of 30 fully sponsored students (and a further number of partially sponsored students) to enrol in undergraduate programs in Australia. The students allocated to Victoria – some 12 in number – were selected because of their accessibility to the researcher.

The students were interviewed immediately after the scholarship announcement in Muscat in August 2004 and prior to their departure for Australia; then shortly after their arrival in Melbourne and commencement of their ELICOS or pathway studies between September and December 2004; and again close to the completion of their pathway studies between April and September 2005. The purpose of the interviews was to establish: the students' expectations prior to departure; the main challenges they faced upon arrival and commencement of studies; the strategies they employed to overcome difficulties faced; and the relative success (or otherwise) of these strategies in supporting their aims to meet specific educational goals. The data collection process gave the students several opportunities to contribute to engage with the issues in the debate about their expectations and experience. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were employed to prompt discussion around the themes of expectations, employment outcomes, motivation, community, relationships to figures of authority, and face.

The Omani cohort was ideal for this research as the group consistently had comprised the majority of the Gulf cohort in Australia since 1999. This being the case, issues faced by students were unlikely to stem from misunderstandings about the Australian education system, as has been observed with countries for which sending students to Australia is a relatively new undertaking. 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 level of revenue from oil and

gas production enjoyed by its neighbours in the Gulf.[4] 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 Nationals employed in the private sector. That is not to suggest that Omani Nationals working in the public sector have been deprived of privileges, however, it is known that they are not as generous as in other Gulf States (such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait). However, Omani students have been observed by support staff in Australian institutions to face the same sorts of difficulties as other Gulf Sponsored students.

Interview questions were similar in focus to Hofstede's IBM survey and designed to ascertain the degree to which attitudes and behaviours had changed between rounds, particularly once feedback had been received about their academic performance. Examples of the questions asked during the first round of interviews were as follows:

> What type of work do you want to do when you finish your studies?
> What sorts of activities and responsibilities do you think this will include?
> What is it about this type of work that appeals to you?
> What do you think you will need to learn at university in order to do this kind of work?
> *How* do you think you will need to learn at university in order to do this kind of work? That is, what kinds of skills do you think will need to be developed?
> Have you studied using these skills before? If not, how easy do you think they will be to learn?

In many respects, the challenges faced by these students were expected and predictable, and unlikely to differ from those reported by other international students adjusting to studies in Australia. Very few of the students had a detailed understanding of the course to which they had been allocated or the role that their career would play in the development of Omani industry and society. In particular, the skills and attributes that would require development to succeed in the program and subsequent career path, were unknown quantities.

All students anticipated that language barriers, independent lifestyle, different teaching and learning styles (particularly attending lectures) would require a degree of adjustment. These concerns indeed came to fruition. Several students continued to find written assessments a challenge, despite attaining the required level of English language proficiency to progress to the next stage of their studies. All students reported frustration at the necessity to juggle different assessments and tasks, all of which required consultation of a range of resources, as none of these approaches had been required in secondary school. As anticipated, they found time management a challenge, particularly in combination with cooking, shopping, cleaning and other domestic duties.

It was evident that the gap between the syllabus encountered at secondary school and the knowledge assumed by pathway programs severely challenged the majority of students: the two students enrolled in more technical diploma programs were the notable exception to this. All of them were affected by the absence of support from parents, older siblings, and subject teachers but most especially the private tutors on whom they so heavily relied in their final year. Of greater interest, however, was the extent to which individual students recognised that a change in study strategy was required. Three students reported success in daily revision and consultation with tutors regarding specific exercises: the remainder acknowledged that they were aware of alternative strategies, and that academic support was available, but chose to continue with the rote learning techniques and pre-exam cramming that had served them well in secondary school.

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[4] 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. Where 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: 23/3/02]

Conclusions supported by the fieldwork

The Omani respondents reported seeking support in addressing their academic difficulties, particularly their distress at not attaining the scores to which they had become accustomed at home. However, their reports contained a palpable sense of entitlement which evidently prevented development of constructive strategies to ameliorate the situation. The students were evidently anxious to deflect responsibility for the situation onto their teachers and claimed to be frustrated that assessment requirements had not been explained fully or effectively.

The students naturally experienced embarrassment, trepidation and shame when relaying details of their academic progress to their parents and Sponsor. In effect, the students had lost face, inasmuch as their personal credibility as an active contributor to the upward advancement of their family had been undermined. In their home context, such a situation would be addressed by calling upon a range of people to support the student – possibly by introducing them to an older mentor who has already completed the same course; by expediting employment opportunities through personal contacts; or by negotiating through influential friends or relatives for academic results to be amended. Outside the home community this is not necessarily possible. In particular, the fact that a favour needs to be negotiated is problematic in the Australian context, where the power to bestow a favour through personal connections is not necessarily held to be a positive attribute.

One respondent reported a positive outcome when trying to influence a staff member in order to be granted leave of absence from her studies:

> When I told them that I would be late [returning from my brother's wedding] and it was easier for me to go and talk to them […] because she was my teacher, and I knew her way. I was trying to… you know, the words I am saying, the way that I am saying, the sequence of my talk: mentioning my brother's wedding at the beginning, and then I want to be late.
> You know, it's different when you know the person.

In preparing for her discussion, she had considered the perspective of her teacher, who was a known quantity. The student was evidently buoyed by the fact that she knew her teacher's "way", such that she could present her request to her in a way that she could be confident would appeal. This confidence paid off: she was granted leave. The student attributed her success to the fact that she had garnered sufficient interest in the wedding such that it would be reasonable to allow her to attend. Therein lies an important clue to how wasta works in Gulf societies: there must be significant effort invested in ensuring that the bestower of the favour is happy with the course of action. That other students reported belligerent and angry conversations over favours is evidence of the response to negative outcomes.

In the final analysis, scholarships to study overseas are greatly coveted and carry significant prestige, consistent with the social advancement aims outlined above. However, the fact that they require the students to relocate outside their community context becomes problematic given their aspirations. In particular, their reliance on social relationships to overcome challenges do not serve them well outside their sphere of influence, resulting in anxiety and dissatisfaction with the experience of studying overseas.

Challenges faced by students interviewed for this study indicate that pre-departure briefing programs conceived to anticipate some of their difficulties did little to moderate their expectations of their overseas study experience. Furthermore, few had managed to utilise academic and support services effectively. It would appear that those designing and maintaining services available failed to take cognizance of their clients are situated in a country, and a region, facing unprecedented change: the desire of students, graduates and employees to secure specific outcomes that consolidate their income and social standing – and that of their families – is their key motivation for pursuing tertiary qualifications. This is

consistent with the traditional mechanisms for upward advancement in their home society which, rather than being dismantled by economic and social transition, are being consolidated and reinforced. The customary ways of seeking assistance from family, friends and colleagues become particularly critical in times of change and uncertainty, but these are not portable to countries, cultures and academic environments that are not organized along patriarchal and tribal lines. It is precisely at the point where Gulf Sponsored students encounter difficulties with their studies – in particular, adjusting to a new and challenging curriculum, language, culture – that the absence of these particular social and cultural supports results in behaviours and academic performance, unrepresentative of the majority of international students.

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