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# Persistence in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of Student Perceptions, Beliefs, Outlook and Context in Qatar

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# A qualitative study of student attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, outlook and context in Qatar: Persistence in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to address the challenges of students in higher education in Qatar. The study draws on student perceptions, beliefs, outlook, and context; we approach the study through grounded means by posing leading interview questions with the aim of exploring and probing. The approach is grounded in that no specific theory drives the questions; rather, the responses from the interview often require interpretation through theory to justify the findings. The sample comprised 35 students who were interviewed through probing and questioning techniques. The questions led to converging responses, which were segregated into themes. A large majority of students felt advising was absent or mismanaged, while some also were of the view that schools did not prepare them to enjoy the benefits of extracurricular activities; many students further viewed English or the Foundation Program (preparatory year's program) a barrier to their continuation in higher education. The most striking result was the apparent relationship between advising and student preparation in secondary school. Schools in Qatar and particularly independent schools (public schools) assign only a small role to advising and inducing strategies that reflect independence and any future anticipatory approaches to link expectations of higher education with support and guidance systems in secondary school.

*Keywords:* higher education providers, services, student perceptions, student outlook, barriers, and decisions

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## BACKGROUND

In 2002, Qatar initiated an ambitious educational reform project to revamp its K-12 educational system. In particular, its schooling system went through a major overhaul to increase the level of student academic achievement with the aim of developing a robust higher educational system. Concomitantly, the rapid growth of Qatar's economy over the recent decades has created a situation in which the demand for skilled labor far exceeded the supply of qualified Qatari nationals. The Qatar National Development Plan identified an acute need for highly educated and skilled Qatari nationals in the areas of health and biomedical sciences, engineering, energy and environment, and computer and information technology (Qatar National Development Strategy, 2011). In this context, post-secondary students seek higher education in two significant institutions in Qatar, namely Qatar University (QU) and the American Branch Universities at the Qatar Foundation, both of which have grown tremendously over the years.

Educational opportunities whether in admission or enrollment in higher education does not guarantee success for students in higher education. Tinto (1975) posited a theory that focused on the retention of students and their subsequent integration into the academic and social system of the higher education providers; He suggested an underlying multidimensional component that helped the higher education community to engage students in all aspects of higher education, both academic and non-academic. Tinto's theory basically hypothesizes that persistence (retention) is determined by the match between an individual's motivation and academic ability and the institution's academic and social characteristics. A second and major model was proposed by Bean (1986), which included students' intention to stay or leave, derived from psychological theories and based on attitudinal research of Ajzen and Fishbein (1972), which was later developed by Bentler and Speckart (1981). Key ideas from the model suggest that a strong association between intentions and behaviors and that an undergraduate student's decision to persist or dropout was strongly related to affect. One conclusion about student engagement relates to the need for students to be satisfied and academically prepared, especially those students in the first years, to achieve success and maintain continuous enrollment in higher education (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2001, 2007; Tinto, 2005). Tinto's integration theory has received considerable validation, which proposed that integrating non-academic factors in higher education has an impact on student continuation (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977a, 1977b). This model has received empirical validation and support based on a large number of studies that looked at background information such as the socioeconomic levels of students' families and its effect on post-secondary continuation in higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Sewell & Shah, 1968).

There has also been a large body of research that took into consideration the factors that have an impact on continuation in college (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). Other studies have laid emphasis on input and functional factors such as preparation for college, the rigor of the secondary school student rank, college entrance exam, and high school grade point average (GPA) (Adelman, 1999; Borman, Rachuba & Stringfield, 2000). Once in college, students are more likely to persist and graduate and also have their future academic success predicted to a significant extent by their college GPA (Ishitanti & Desjardins, 2002; Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab & Lynch, 2003; O'Brien & Shedd, 2001). There are also non-academic factors that predict whether students stay at the university and the level of their academic achievement, including demographics, personal characteristics, academic self-confidence, academic skills, and psychosocial adjustment that include study skills or time management (Braxton, 2000; Braxton & McClendon, 2002; Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab & Lynch, 2003) in addition to language proficiency, gender, age, educational level, status, self-esteem, racial discrimination, dietary restrictions, and financial stress (Lin, 2006; Lin & Yi, 1997; Mori, 2000), which contribute to academic difficulties.

A large number of studies in the United States and other Western countries (Dekker & Fischer, 2008; Kenny & Stryker, 1994) have underlined the ways in which students develop and internalize beliefs, needs, and wants, which, in turn, have an impact on academic motivation to persist and succeed in higher education. While a few studies have emerged from the Middle East, the recent establishment of the Middle East and North Africa Association of Institutional Research has prompted many researchers in this area to seek an understanding and experiences of students in higher education. In Qatar, for instance, the first-year experience study and the National Association of Colleges and Employers Survey have just recently been implemented at Qatar's National Public University. Faced with the danger of dropping out of the university, a large number of students are likely to remain in the first

years for a longer time, reflecting the dangers of higher education as a bottleneck to economic development and human resource development (Qatar University Fact Book©, 2011).

One clear indication and danger of rates of completion of higher education in other parts of the world is disparaging. It has been reported that in the United States, for instance, 55% of undergraduates who begin their study at a four-year institution complete a degree at the same institution within six years of their initial enrollment and another 7% complete baccalaureate degrees within six years after attending two or more institutions (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). Pascarella (1985) and Adelman (2006) came to the conclusion that continuous enrollment is the most powerful variable in explaining completion of a degree and time to achieve a degree.

There are several factors, both academic and non-academic, that are likely to affect students as they make the transition to post-secondary institutions. Many students may experience stress, anxiety, withdrawal, and even depression (DeStefano, Mellott & Peterson, 2001; Feldt, Graham & Dew, 2011; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom, 2004; Wie, Russell & Zakalik, 2005). There are also a variety of non-academic challenges that have a bearing on the likelihood of academic persistence and the success of students. A fairly large body of research is available from a number of countries examining the experiences of international students in comparison to those of students native to the host country. Academic factors (i.e., secondary preparation) appear to influence post-secondary success (see Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom, 2004). However, in addition, a range of non-academic factors, influenced by culture and values, may also contribute to challenges faced by students in higher education in their local context.

### Context of the study

Significantly, an overarching approach that typically considers the individual's motivation, academic ability, and academic and social characteristics is required. While reports have shown a lack of intrinsic motivation in students to pursue education, many in Qatar may see the instrumental value of education as leading to social status or power and related to rewards and outcomes arising from academic achievement, which is more characteristic of group-oriented and hierarchical societies (Dekker & Fischer, 2008; Elliot & McGregor, 1999).

Additionally, in Qatar, there is impeding evidence of challenges, particularly students arriving unprepared for language studies. At the level of secondary preparation (Nasser, 2012), students are equipped to transition successfully into post-secondary studies. Once in higher education institutions, students typically require academic, social, and/or psychological support and resources to enable them to cope successfully with the challenges inherent to transitioning to a new educational environment.

Over the years, many Qatari students have continued on to post-secondary education at universities in Qatar and in increasing numbers at universities outside of Qatar (see Nasser, Alkubaisy & Al-Horr, 2015). However, rapid economic growth has created a major gap between its human capital needs and the number of Qatari graduates entering the workforce. Qatar's leadership identified a need to increase the number of highly qualified post-secondary graduates to fill key roles in the economy. So, it becomes important to understand the factors that affect Qatari students' post-secondary aspirations, persistence, and achievement as a crucial step toward achieving this goal.

This study was conducted in Qatar in two major university campuses: Qatar's National Public University and selected colleges in the Education City. Qatar's National Public University has emerged as the country's major institution of higher education, offering a variety of educational programs in its colleges of arts and sciences, business and economics, education, engineering, law, pharmacy and Sharia and Islamic studies. The second university hub included the branch universities of prestigious US and European colleges and universities included in Qatar's Education City, which are the second primary providers of post-secondary education to Qatari and many non-Qatari students.

There are differences between the foreign universities in the Education City and Qatar's National Public University. The branches of US and European universities in Qatar are present in the Education City and they subscribe to an educational philosophy heavily influenced by the Western liberal arts perspective (Berrebi, 2009; Rostron, 2009). It is thus possible that there is a degree of cultural ambivalence regarding the value and importance of pursuing post-secondary education at these institutions. Furthermore, the value of a liberal arts education *per se* may not be apparent to many Qataris because the liberal arts philosophy tends to stress the abstract and intellectual aspects of education over the more concrete and pragmatic ones.

In addition, Qatari students may experience academic difficulties stemming from discontinuities between their secondary and post-secondary school “cultures”. For Qatari students, attending post-secondary institutions abroad in Western countries as well as for students attending Qatar’s National Public University or the institutions at Education City, there may well be a sort of culture clash between the values of these institutions and the values that guided their education in the secondary schools in Qatar. One of the challenges that students may face is the ability to engage in higher education independently and seek information and lifelong learning skills.

There is also a great deal of academic differences between student preparation in secondary school and requirements by the higher education provider. Many students in Qatar express serious concerns about the preparatory program or what is known as the Foundation Program, particularly regarding the length of time that some students remain in the program without fulfilling the program requirements (Nasser, 2012). Hansen et al. (2006) explain that while preparing students for university requirements, secondary schools do less in preparing them at a university level.

One of the key difficulties appears to be the students’ exposure to English language throughout their K-12 experience; many Qatari students do not achieve a level of proficiency in English that prepares them to skillfully navigate higher education where the medium of instruction is English. English language proficiency is an important predictor of academic outcomes, particularly in Qatar (Nasser, 2012). The level of English proficiency may not be a challenge for students entering Qatar’s National Public University; however, when the instruction is predominantly in English in some programs in Qatar’s National Public University, it can be challenging.

A few studies have addressed Qatari students’ outcomes, more so, their educational experiences and outcomes. Thus, the proposed study aims to understand perceptions, beliefs, outlook, decisions, experiences, and context through grounded approaches; in addition, this study integrates with the existing theory that proposes the factors most significantly affecting university students’ academic aspirations, persistence, and success. To do so, the project proposes a systematic exploration of the post-secondary experiences of Qatari students and in a diverse set of post-secondary settings in Qatar.

The main objectives of the study were to identify and explore students’ academic perceptions, beliefs, outlook, decisions, experiences, and context in Qatar’s higher educational system, and how these factors can have an impact on female and male students. This objective also includes an exploration of the students’ perspectives regarding their overall educational experience in Qatar.

The new approach in teaching and research as well as the new curricula in higher education is drawn on the administrative structures that respond appropriately and effectively to the unique identities of the new types of students pursuing higher education. The structure and delivery of the programs are deeply implicated in this changing context, as are the perspectives and experience of the faculty, responsible for delivering instruction and intellectual guidance, the staff tasked with supporting bureaucratic activities and student services, and the administrators charged with providing institutional support.

The study methodology in this paper is qualitative in nature. The study draws on the provision of services in Qatar’s higher education as perceived by Qatari students pursuing it. The various perspectives of the higher education providers on empowerment are reviewed before empirical evidence is presented. Finally, the findings from the research are discussed and conclusions are drawn.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A large volume of research in recent decades has thrown light on the factors that contribute to student retention and success; however, this growing sophistication has not led to consensus about how these factors are connected or which of them are most crucial. In fact, the theoretical picture has become less clear, and this in turn makes it reasonable for this study to focus on factors that most significantly impact Qatari students’ academic retention, persistence, and success. We address these factors indirectly by addressing students’ beliefs about the context, decisions, experience, and the said actions.

A qualitative, interpretive approach was adopted in the present study. Through this study, we aim to provide a rich description of people’s perception of higher education, context, decisions, actions, and future outlook. In-depth case studies were required to reveal students’ experience in higher education. Although a plethora of studies using quantitative approaches have been carried out in the United States, little work has been conducted on students’ beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and outlooks, which

is most likely to be interpretive and qualitative and draws researchers who are actually living and experiencing what students say, as a pointer to future research, which is most likely to be quantitative. We are aware that facts are value-laden and are more likely to be interpreted and produced keeping in the background one's own values in the research, but it would be necessary in cases where the researcher is aware of the research domain and tries to interpret the shared living experiences of those who wish to study. It should be kept in mind that the quantitative approaches can provide an aggregate picture in which tools or instruments are supposed to measure or purport what they are supposed to measure and give meaning from the responses to the instruments. We are interested in the meanings attributed by students; it is thought that a positivist approach would provide only a partial picture of the issues at hand. An interpretive approach has the advantage of allowing the researchers to listen carefully to how people interpret their world and give meaning and significance to their daily lives.

Students were selected opportunistically based on their availability. They were sent an email regarding the study. Interviewers then sought their advice on where to conduct the interviews. They explored prior educational experience such as the type of secondary school, whether private or public, whether the school prepared students for university, and what difficulty they faced in making the transition from secondary school to private universities.

University-wide experience addressed the level of learning and teaching experience, extracurricular activities, issues with diversity, adjustment, availability of the faculty for classes, or any other type of help from the college—such as advisors or tutors, peer support or peer help, family support, or help and the availability and use of university support as well as access to and training for participation in the social life of the university. The interview with each individual lasted for an hour to an hour and one half. They were audio-taped and fully transcribed in Arabic. The Arabic transcriptions were translated into English and then checked by the researcher, who is bilingual.

At the discretion of students, they were interviewed in the multipurpose library room in their respective institutions. Consent was sought in advance from the academic/library staff as well as the students. The student and researchers signed the consent form that explained the purpose of the research, the use of the results, and confidentiality.

The narratives of the interviews were written in a word processing file and then imported into Atlas.ti software to preserve the “narrative” elements of the interviews. Prior codes or categories were already developed by the researchers as “grand family codes” rather than more specific codes; they wrote down some categories *before* the start to fit the textual data. The researchers also developed prior codes after looking at the data. Therefore, given the issue of faculty and student interaction or reading the narratives, the inductive codes were developed by the authors, discovering new categories and codes.

The codes were developed by the key investigators of the study and then reviewed again and improved. Additions were made through new readings by different key investigators, and recursively, the codes were then organized under the code headings. Later analysis concentrated on more theoretical concepts emerging from the data, and the authors took up close readings of the transcripts for recoding and reclassifying; different operations were conducted as queries to breakdown, reclassifications into super codes that were over encompassing, and could readily identify what was most relevant to the study.

### Sample

Twenty students were recruited for the study from the only public university, which is referred to as Qatar's National Public University, and another 15 students attending the American universities were recruited from the Education City in Doha, the capital of Qatar. Those attending Qatar's National Public University came from various colleges and majored in the following subjects: business and economics ( $n = 4$ ); law ( $n = 5$ ); education ( $n = 4$ ); social work ( $n = 1$ ); journalism ( $n = 2$ ); and engineering ( $n = 4$ ). There were 11 males and nine females. At the Qatar Foundation, students attended the following institutions: Virginia Commonwealth University, majoring in art ( $n = 3$ ) and interior design ( $n = 2$ ); Northwestern University, majoring in journalism ( $n = 3$ ), communication ( $n = 1$ ), finance and accounting ( $n = 1$ ), and public relations ( $n = 1$ ). At Georgetown University, students majored in political science ( $n = 4$ ). There were 13 females and two males. All students were in good standing at the university with the exception of one student at Qatar's National Public University who was on probation.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this study were generally obtained through a naturalistic approach; through our broad questions and the responses, we constructed the meaning of the situation perceived by the participant. We were directed toward certain objects or things that participants were aware of that had an impact on their experience in higher education. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views and interactions. The logical approach was to look at those with the highest frequency of being grounded by the participants, in other words, recurring across all participants. The approach was to analyze the most occurring issues and themes drawn from the questions and then the network of the responses into super codes that allowed us to narrow the meaning into a few categories or ideas and its implication on student success at the university. We list those themes and student responses in order, from the highest tallied responses of the assigned codes to the lowest. These listed codes comprised about 65% of the total responses. We also draw on the reiterative approach of coding and recoding by narrowing codes, themes and meaning.

### Academic advising

One of the most recurring themes and unpleasant experiences was advising, particularly drawn from students' experiences at their entry or when they had set their academic plans. Many students found that academic advising was mostly needed, particularly in their first year. If it was there, it could have resulted in a pleasant and supportive experience. At entry to the university, students suddenly found themselves in a context with a new reality and environment. The level of guidance and advising that students received allowed them to engage to some extent in higher education's core curricular activities. Academic advising by faculty in general provided the opportunity for direct out of class contact between the faculty and students that can affect students' values, goals, and behavior. If such interaction leads to positive outcomes in the sense that the students are guided correctly, the direct consequence was increased satisfaction with college and thus persistence (Rendon, 1994). Reciprocally, students who have no contact with faculty outside the class experience have lower development in ethical reasoning (McNeel, 1994), care less for the university, and take less interest in engaging in it. It was also shown that positive association between self-esteem and academic performance suggests that, beyond improving their study skills, building students' self-esteem may be a good way of improving their academic success (Covington, 1989).

Many students felt that advising was not adequate or satisfactory, especially those in the National Public University. Some of their statements reflect a level of dissatisfaction with advising. Each transcript is written with a code. In each code, QU stands for Qatar's National Public University and QF stands for the Qatar Foundation universities. The following are some of the negative statements about advising:

At the beginning, there was no clarity, and there was no proper academic advising. (QU 55)

I faced some difficulties at the beginning of university life, namely, in the first semester. These difficulties led to lower grades because the academic advising did not reach my expectations. (QU 55)

The lack of effective academic advising at the outset of joining the university placed me under an academic warning in the first year. (QU 53)

The only difficulty that complicated things for me was the academic advising, which effectively did not exist. (QU 53)

I have had a bad impression about that since my first experience when one of the advisors asked me to register for courses, and later, I discovered that they were not within my study plan. (QU 37)

The failing system in the university is the academic advising and counseling. For instance, no one advised us to see a certain faculty. Registration was a mystery. (QU 46)

Some students expressed their unawareness about the existence of academic advising at the university and were surprised to know that it did exist to support students.

Student: we did not know that there were persons assigned to offer us academic counseling in terms of course selection and registration, university rules and regulations. (QU 50)

There was no (academic) advising to the extent that I did not know that I would have to submit research. (QU 50)

I was only shocked when I received the academic warning as I did not know about the system. If they had informed us about that, I would not have been in that critical situation and would have rectified the situation right from the beginning. (QU 49)

Some students felt that advising could be improved, and this could be done through a system-wide implementation of a program of planning and advising. A few suggestions from the students were:

Students benefit from such services these days. However, in the past, and as my sister told me, students suffered much due to the absence of proper advising and guidance, particularly in what relates to registration and choosing a major. Now the situation is different as long as there are academic advisors and a clear study plan, which can be deemed as a roadmap to success. (QU 47)

I also think that there should be competent advisors to guide students to QU facilities. (QU 43)

I also suggest that the university employ specialized personnel in Academic Advising instead of assigning faculty to do that because they do not have the time to do it properly. It should also focus on prequalifying the academic advisors through different courses and workshops. I also propose to appoint a number of student volunteers who would be identifiable in and around the university buildings to help students at the beginning of their university and guide them to various university buildings and available services. (QU 41)

More attention must be given to academic advising, which has caused many problems for students. In the UK, there is a system against which an advisor is assessed. Based on the evaluation result, either he is rewarded and kept or he is sent away. (QU 54)

I think that academic advising is in dire need of greater attention to follow up on student concerns. (QU 38)

I think high school should teach each individual student how to act when he enters university. There should be counseling sessions. We had advisors but I never talked to them. (QF 65)

In the American branch universities and the National Public University, a number of respondents felt that there was substantial help at the university but not from the advisor; the help came from the faculty or administration, and much of this guidance was organic and part of the daily functioning of the university:

There are no advisors, but there is a dean. We have many deans, and they generally help. (QF61)

Academic advisors, professors, the students' community . . . all of them are supportive. (QF68)

Student: We have a department advisor at GT, who is very helpful. For example, in the final weeks, they prepare good food for and provide us with some study tips. Whenever we need help, there are people to support us. (QF 62)

No, they definitely help. They always ask us to come. We have advisors. They ask you what type of jobs you want, so you connect with them before you graduate. (QF 32)

The seminal work conducted by Tinto (1993) and Light (2001) is of particular relevance, which indicates that institutions should understand the quality of academic advising as key to retaining students and ensuring their success and that the institutions should draw on such service to maintain the quality of academic advising. While the Qatar Foundation's campus advising appeared to be more organic and distributed among the different offices, the public institution was more divided in providing the advising support. While no specific office was in place, it appeared that the system was not fully connected; when we probed about friends and student support, we found that many of the students seek support from their peers and friends and less likely from the institution.

### English language

As many universities in the Gulf have been established along the American model of higher education, it has been observed that the American model of higher education that herald progress, enlightenment, and development has led to a mushrooming of higher education institutions in the Gulf. These institutions provide instruction in English. Many students in the Gulf, including Qatari students, have not achieved a level of mastery of English necessary to successfully undertake higher education in these institutions. A large number of students who enrolled in the National Public University over the years have come from Arabic public schools where the language of instruction is Arabic and they have difficulty in some programs that require a high level of English proficiency.



A number of students felt that they were not prepared for university-level education and found the language preparation programs in secondary schools did not prepare them for the university education. Some of the thoughts of the students are as follows:

I was unable to make it as I was not well qualified in English when I was in high school due to the modest English learning output at school whose teachers were also incompetent. (QU 38)

The school did not prepare me for university education in terms of communication and research skills, TOEFL or IELTS. (QU 38)

Despite the fact that I passed the English levels one after the other, I was very much frustrated because the language of instruction at schools (Arabic) differs from its counterpart at QU (English). This difference and frustration reduced my desire for learning and affected my enthusiasm toward education. In addition, studying English under the Foundation Program did not add anything to my English competency. (QU 42)

I blame the secondary schools because they usually overlook this important aspect and neglect the importance of the English language. (QU 45)

I was coming from a traditional place and a culture that neither knew nor used English. It is not because the faculty always changes and instruction takes place in English. We were not prepared to study in English when we were at high school. Therefore, we face many language problems. (QU 46)

Why does QU adopt English as the language of instruction while teaching in schools is in Arabic? (QU 46)

Some students opted to leave Qatar to study English outside the country. Many felt being immersed in foreign language institutions was more beneficial. Being prepared at school, they were able to achieve success in the English entry tests:

I applied for freezing the enrollment for a full year. After that, I travelled to New Zealand, and I studied English for nine months; I then achieved the required score for the IELTS test there. Then, I returned to the QU and joined the College of Engineering. Thank God. (QU 44)

[...] but that was not coming from the Foundation program or Government schools. In fact, my English improved after I spent approximately seven months in the UK. I was very good at English at that time, and I used to obtain "B" marks in courses taught in English. Later, my level dropped relatively as we talk and communicate in Arabic. In the UK, I was obliged to communicate in English. (QU 48)

Other students felt the language tests were an obstacle because they did not make the score:

TOEFL score were also obstacles that prevented me from joining QU. (QU 41)

I sat for the IELTS three times, and I obtained a five every time on the test. Then, I heard about the opening of a new Community College in Qatar and decided to join it and rushed to register, but registration was closed, which compelled me to stay at home for a full semester. I was in severe despair and frustration despite my intense desire to complete my ... (QU 42)

At the beginning of my university life, I felt that I would have to overcome a big obstacle. The obstacle was to obtain the required score for IELTS or TOEFL test. (QU 44)

I did my portfolio and studied IELTS. I tried many times to obtain the grade that they want. When I first gave them my papers, they did not accept me because of the IELTS. I applied once again, and they accepted me. (QF 59)

I was unable to enroll at the Education City because I did not pass the IELTS. Thus, I joined QU of my own will. (QU 47)

The big problem was how to pass the IELTS. I sat for the exam 15 times, and I even went to Bahrain to obtain it but in vain. I finally obtained it in Qatar. (QU 49)

Students from the Qatar Foundation universities had a completely different experience from their counterparts at Qatar's National Public University, as one student said:

For me, in our school, we mostly focus on IELTS because the majority of the students are not good at English; those who were good at English were in advanced classes. (QF 60)

Several studies have emphasized the need for success in the English language and suggested that English language proficiency, as well as actual measured proficiency is an important predictor of

academic outcomes for international students in the United States (Lee & Bradley, 2001; Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker & Al-Timimi, 2004; Yeh & Inose, 2003). The level of English proficiency may be a challenge for students entering Qatar National Public University—where instruction was predominantly in English—and is likely an issue for at least some Qatari students in US institutions in Qatar, where the majority of their peers in the US and other English-speaking universities do not have this challenge. It is significant to refer to Nasser's (2012) national study; using data from the National Public University, he found a strong relationship between those who performed poorly in English and their ability to continue and succeed in later years. Thus, knowing a second language, in fact, suggests that the students have language and academic skills that are important dispositions for success in and outside the university.

### Amenities

Higher education providers can insure quality education based on amenities in the form of services, which are perishable and concrete. Such services among higher education providers might include the ease by which students might be able to register for a course, seek advising, find library resources, or get from one class to another. Students tend to interact with the service provider and, in most cases, make an effort for the service to succeed (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). Many students found academic amenities of the university instrumental to socialize and they do so with the intent to find the space and facilities to engage in activities with other students. Thus, finding the amenities and services is not easy, but many students may identify the space and place, and the appropriate environment on campus, which adds to the affective life that binds them to the institutions.

Students were generally satisfied with “amenities and services”, which are tangible services such as the library, technology, study areas, and recreational facilities; some students expressed feeling at home and secure at the university. While students expressed acceptance of those tangible amenities, there were also aspects that were intangible and less likely to be concrete, such as feeling safe, feeling at home, and enjoying a nice environment and experienced at both campuses. The following are some of the statements that students expressed:

All factors together, including faculty members, admission and registration staff, friends and e-learning, have had a big role in facilitating my success and happiness. (QU 55)

Yes! I feel comfortable because of the availability of teaching aids and other respective infrastructure. (QU 55)

Excellent e-services help students achieve success . . . excellent library services and the other respective online services. (QU 54)

The university helped to achieve success. There is the library with fully equipped study halls and reference materials. The faculty helped us during their office hours. (QU 48)

[The University] environment demonstrates a great deal of psychological security and stability. I feel that QU is my second home because of the available amenities, such as the library, quiet individual study rooms, central study halls, Internet service across the colleges and the campus at large. (QU 42)

[ . . . ] best technology and teaching aids. The university is also keen to provide students with computers in return for minimal fees recoverable at graduation. Moreover, the university offers transportation service for students to tour the campus and other university facilities. (QU 41)

I use daily the individual study halls, the e-library, cafeterias, the Internet, printing and photocopying and many others. I did enjoy and benefit from student groups, particularly when we studied together for the Civil Law Course, which was somewhat difficult . . . Students can access the QU library while at home, including giving print orders and searching for any reference or agreement while off-campus. (QU 37)

I spend most of my time in the new library, which I love very much. I always say to my friends I wish my bridegroom would offer this library to me as a dowry. The new library offers many unique services and facilities: study rooms, computers, quietness, wireless printing and much more. I do most of my assignments in it . . . The University offered many services such as faculty office hours. The Student Learning Center is also a great asset that helps student improve and develop . . . the viability of world-class services that you may not find in other institutions such as the library, distance book borrowing and internet availability across campus, student clubs and diverse cultural activities. (QU 36)

Facilities provided by the VCU or by the Education City are of high quality and help you to concentrate on your work; and it is better than staying at home and doing your work. Is that not right? Yes, the equipment and the machines that we have are all amazing. I love that we have UV Printers. You put in a big sheet of paper; we have laser cutter. The fabrication lab that we have in the VCU is amazing, and I love the workshop. (QF 54)

I feel comfortable. I can use the facilities and the student center. Sometimes I go to revise my essay in the Writing Center . . . they are offering me equipment to make movies outside the class and the university. I work on things that I like and make it easy to use the facilities such as the studios and cameras they have. I find that really helpful. There are so many pieces of equipment that I use during my work, and all are provided by NW. (QF 56)

I feel comfortable when I walk around the campus and use the facilities. (QF 60)

Not all amenities provided the needed access; many students at the National University expressed dissatisfaction with the parking and distances between buildings; although public transportation exists in Qatar, no public bus routes serve the campus, and students are forced to arrange their own transportation. Students who do have cars find the university too spread out, and generally, parking is at a distance from where their classes are. Because of this “inappropriate” amenity, it could affect them being able to come on time. Again, these concerns were seen among students at the National Public University rather the new and modern Qatar Foundation university complex. Here are some of the statements that the students expressed:

I feel comfortable while I am on campus, but I am a bit annoyed because of some problems, particularly the parking lots. This problem has been raised again and again to find a solution to it, but to no avail. It is obvious to everyone that the high temperature in the State of Qatar does not help the student to park his car away from the building where the lecture is. This has resulted in the prevalence of an odd phenomenon in the campus. (QU 45)

I suggest that the university use the broad areas surrounding the university campus and turn them into car parks designed for students. This aims at making it easy for students and curbing the problem of a student attending lectures late because of needing to look for a parking spot. (QU 44)

In addition, the inadequate parking lots make us violate the traffic laws number of student positions us for violation of traffic rules and park in prohibited places exposing ourselves to traffic tickets. (QU 43)

Add to that the overcrowded parking lots which used to create a problem and misunderstanding between the student and faculty member who requires the student to be punctual in lecture attendance. (QU 41)

It also makes it easier for the student to use the services and facilities provided by the university for students. The University strives to make life easier for the student and it applies systems and services which makes our life easy such as online payment and online printing and many others. (QU 40)

The University offers many ways and means to serve the student such as the new library, which constitutes one of the institution’s landmarks containing thousands of books, references, collections, and world-class rooms. In addition scores of computer labs scatter across the university as one of the best learning resources. (QU 38)

I daily use the individual study halls, the e-library, cafeterias, the Internet, printing and photocopying, and many others. I did enjoy and benefit from student groups especially when we study together the Civil Law Course which is somehow difficult. (QU 36)

### **Parental support**

Many cross-cultural studies have shown differences in how diverse cultural or ethnic groups develop and internalize beliefs, needs, and wants, which in turn have an impact on academic motivation (Dekker & Fischer, 2008; Kenny & Stryker, 1994). For example, student and/or parental attitudes regarding the importance of education are widely thought to have an impact on academic motivation and academic success, and these attitudes have been shown to have a considerable cross-cultural variation (Hong & Ho, 2005; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007). Parental influence certainly affects the student’s purpose and motivation to continue in higher education. From our findings, we found students had some sort of support, be it encouragement or moral, and financial. Parents were generally supportive of their children’s education. They wanted their children to continue in their education. Here are some of the typical statements:

I did not learn them at school but my father gave me a general idea about them. He taught me. Because of the support of my parents, I took the first step to university particularly my father. He taught me how to do my assignments, how to manage time and how to collect information. (QF 31)

My parents usually help me if I am obliged to work in the university during weekends. They help me overcome any difficulties. (QU 36)

My father remains my best moral supporter in my university life, and he is desperately waiting for my graduation. (QU 38)

My family offers me moral and psychological support, which is quite significant. (QU 39)

Things went on well with me at the university, particularly lectures, thanks to the support I received from my family. (QU 40)

It is widely thought that parental attitudes regarding the importance of education have an impact on academic motivation and academic success, and they have been shown to have a considerable cross-cultural variation. In fact, many of these factors, in turn, have been the object of cross-cultural studies. While many students were on scholarships or attended tuition-free public higher education, they did not require the financial support from their parents but were motivated by their parents' appreciation and encouragement, guidance, or support (Hong & Ho, 2005; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007).

### Faculty support

Generally, faculty members were very supportive in both campuses, and students were appreciative of the relationship. Faculty support and feedback primarily remain an important factor for student success in higher education. This included faculty teaching, and subsequently, collaborative learning, support, and feedback were significantly and positively associated with students' academic outcomes (Bjorklund, Parente & Sathianathan, 2004; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Braxton, 1996). All students from both campuses reported positive experiences with the faculty; there were statements regarding helpfulness, support, assistance, respect, and extending help. Here are some of the extracts from the scripts:

Faculty Support and Encouragement

Faculty helped me.

Offered assistance.

Treated me respectfully.

Professors extend help.

Faculty extended assistance.

I benefited from faculty members who really deserve to be recognized and appreciated by the university for their great suffering and hard work.

While students did express that faculty supported them, this still did not reflect the relationship between faculty support and student outcomes. Nevertheless, there is no sufficient evidence to generalize these findings, and it remains unclear as to whether the results of previous research can be compared across contexts (Heng, 2014). Heng concluded that faculty needs to address the achievement gaps between students and support those students who need help to achieve academically.

### Help from peers and friends

Qatar's society is known for its collective social nature; it is assumed that individuals with a collective orientation are motivated to achieve in order to meet the expectations of friends and family. Many students may seek peer support as a natural development of their own social environment (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In the United States, Hurtado, Carter and Spuler (1996) found that among the Latino students, peer support could provide social adjustment, which means that students would be able to interact with groups or individuals who easily adjust to the social as well as the intellectual environment. Many students want to help because they felt a duty to meet people, to get more

involved, to give something back to the university, and to develop skills and personal attributes such as mentoring skills, communication skills, confidence levels, and leadership skills.

We found that students in general were helpful mostly in advising, getting to know their way, and offering other forms of help in their classes. Some of the statements that reflect this are found in the transcripts:

Helped to write research paper.

Student groups helped me tremendously.

Senior students played a major role in helping me select the proper courses.

Support in every class.

Help with homework.

Openness and support.

There was smooth help from faculty, friends and peers.

Friendly environment and supportive community.

Small community gives advice and help.

We also caution that while students thought that peer support helped them succeed, such support was generally seen in the first years of the higher educational experience. [Cote and Levine \(1997\)](#) found that two years into college, the student's personal motivation was a significant predictor of academic skills such as self-management skills, organization, and planning. Thus, peers may play a significant role in succeeding but generally are less likely to do so in the long run at the university.

### **English Foundation: English Institute/Foundation Program/Bridge Program, Foundations Program or attendance at the English Institute**

[Nasser \(2012\)](#) reported that students in Qatar's National Public University expressed serious concerns about the Foundation Program. Many students who spent a considerable time in the program did not achieve the desired outcomes, such as on the score of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Much of the blame goes to the structure of such programs, which appear to be credit-based rather than outcome-based in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes ([Shoenberg, 2000](#)). In fact, the findings of the present study concur with Nasser's claims about students' dissatisfaction with the Foundation Programs. Most of the concerns came from students of Qatar's National Public University; many of the students found them being an obstacle to their progress, which also entailed a loss of time, in their higher education:

I suffered a lot from the Foundation Program, specifically in math and computer skills. This resulted in delaying my graduation for one year. I think the Foundation Program is weak and a loss of time. (QU 37)

QU was one of my life priorities from the very beginning, but the Foundation program was the only obstacle. (QU 43)

The Foundation Program stage at the beginning of my academic track was a big obstacle to my joining the university. This is because it entails that a student attain a certain grade in the English language level test, namely, IELTS or TOEFL. (QU 44)

The Foundation year did not go well. It was a mere loss of time. I lost one year and a half during which I did not benefit from anything that may serve me in Law. (QU 48)

I spent two years in the Foundation Program, and then, I stayed home for another year because I was not able to obtain the IELTS . . . before university. (QU 49)

Surprisingly, however, in contrast to the experience of students mentioned above, a number of students realized the benefits of the Foundation Program, and students, particularly at the National Public University, experienced the following benefits:

I did learn things from the Foundation Program such as self-confidence and self-preparedness. (QU36)

With regard to the Foundation Program, I have benefited greatly from this Program because it enriched my English, and I began to understand the deeper structures of sentences. (QU 38)

The Foundation Program and my experience at the English Language Institute enriched and refined my skills in English. (QU 42)

I suffered from my poor English, both written and spoken, but after the completion of the Foundation Program and enrollment in some courses on my own account, my English language skills improved to some extent. (QU 45)

I was afraid of the English Foundation program, but because I was not good at English, I joined the Program for two years and benefited from it. (QU 52)

Students entering universities in Qatar—where instruction is predominantly in English—see the language as a barrier to learning and their own academic development; in contrast, some Qatari students who may enroll in American, British, or Australian institutions do not have this challenge. However, a fairly large body of research undertaken in a variety of countries examined the experiences of international students and compared them to those of the students native to the host country. Academic factors (i.e., secondary preparation) appear to influence post-secondary success for international students in a way similar to that found in the studies conducted among domestic students. Additionally, a range of non-academic factors are influenced by culture and values and thus may contribute to challenges that particularly impact Qatari students at international universities in their local context.

### **Extracurricular activities**

Extracurricular activities known by learning service are not curriculum-based and have been an important element in higher education college campus experience in which students are able to network, socialize, and engage in non-curriculum activities (e.g., team sports, student union clubs, and committees). As early as in 1990, research by [Bordelon and Phillips \(2006\)](#) identified the benefits of extracurricular activities in its ability to promote personal satisfaction, time management skills, problem-solving skills, and social skills ([Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon & May, 2011](#)). Those students who were involved in extracurricular activities found them to be enjoyable and interesting, which helped them make friends, increased their self-confidence, and they opened up to the community. These are some of the statements made by the students:

With regard to activities outside the university, I love to sit in the Council (a meeting place for parents, relatives and friends to share news and events). It is one of the most prominent features of the Qatari environment. (QU 42)

This prompted me to launch the Poetry Club. I hope that Qatari students grasp these opportunities and attend such activities and benefit from them. I like to see QU students involved in and attending QU activities. I personally attend most of the activities, events and competitions, and sometimes, I organize many of them. (QU 43)

Moreover, several voluntary activities and events have contributed to developing my own potential and skills; something that significantly helped me adapt to university life. (QU 44)

What makes me feel happy and satisfied is my participation in organizing many activities and conferences and attendance at workshops aiming to improve and refine my personality. (QU 45)

I am a member of the Student Club and am in the Debates and the Japanese Club. Activities are enjoyable and enrich our knowledge. They teach us the language, and I love learning languages and quickly master them. (QU 47)

We have clubs for culture where all of the students sit and exchange their cultures and experiences. They basically introduce their culture, and we get to know each other and learn about their culture. (QF 31)

I like travelling with the university. It is fun, and I learn about many different art works . . . that happens every year. They usually take us there every year and it was interesting. (QU 58)

Student: I do not do a specific activity. We had a conference. I enjoyed going there. We went and listened to that conference debate about the Middle East. I enjoy going with my friends here and there; many good opportunities exist here. (QU 62)

I did the modern United Nations. I was involved in charity work. I was a cofounder of the charity team in high school. I did many things that developed me as a person, which really helped me increase my self-confidence. (QU 63)

The reason behind that is because my mother wants me to focus on my studies and to pay more attention to my academic life. Things are changing positively, and I have more freedom now than before. (QF 57)

My parents . . . although they are not living here right now. I am living alone but they are always there to support me whenever I need something or when something bad occurs. I know I can always talk to my mother or my father and they are both always supportive of me. (QF 61)

My husband encourages me and supports me socially and psychologically. I faced many obstacles but I did not give up. Some faculty used to ask me why I joined the university because I was not well prepared for that. (QF 69)

Many students found extracurricular activities attractive and engaging, which enhanced their social networking. Programs in the universities around the world have promoted extracurricular activities from the mid-1990s onward and tracked the benefits of engagement for students, as summarized by Bordelon and Phillips (2006), which includes personal satisfaction, time management skills, and problem-solving skills as well as a sense of community engagement. Such benefits have been articulated by students whether they had participated in community activities, suggesting that “students find service-learning attractive more so in principle than in action”.

### Secondary school preparation for university

As English appeared to be fundamentally a major barrier, students who had the opportunity to pursue post-secondary education must have been motivated to do so. These students have had a level of secondary preparation that allows them to transition successfully into post-secondary studies. Tinto's seminal book, *Leaving College*, published in 1987 detailed the impact on the retention factors in the university environment (i.e., the academic and social systems of the institution) as well as characteristics of the student and his/her experience, particularly the student's academic preparation and program selection as well as the student's ability to meet the demands of the study program, at the college or university. Regarding academic factors, the most important factor appears to reflect preparation for college: the rigor of the secondary school curriculum, high school GPA, and scores on college entrance tests (Kern, Fagley & Miller, 1998; Robbins et al., 2004; Tinto, 1997). Once a student enrolls in college, his or her persistence and graduation are predicted to a significant extent by college GPA (Robbins et al., 2004; Tinto, 1997).

Students at Qatar's National Public University mentioned that independent schools did not prepare them for university. Here are some of their remarks:

Student: I was not prepared for joining the university, and high school education outputs were not quite supportive for me to study at the university as well. (QU 38)

The school was keen to encourage me to join the university and focused on attracting representatives from local universities to familiarize us with universities available despite the fact that the school was not interested in preparing school students. (QU 40)

In fact, I was not prepared. The three high schools that I joined did not give us any advice relevant to university life, programs or education. (QU 49)

### Social motivation

Motivation is one of the most important factors for student engagement and retention in higher education. Cultural values, along with the values espoused by parents, are the most significant factors that might motivate students to persist in higher education. As found in this study, this includes support, whether from family, parents, or friends (Tinto, 1987).

Different cultures have different orientations and beliefs, needs, and wants. In some cultures where close-knit societal structures predominate, family may set goals that stress upon education, which have an impact on academic motivation (Hong & Ho, 2005; Kozulin, 2003; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007).

Qatari culture has deep roots in Bedouin customs and Islamic belief. Despite the rapid pace of recent changes, Qatari society is seen as retaining a tribal outlook, characterized by a group-oriented,

hierarchical, and pragmatic ethos and a powerful code of honor and shame (Rostron, 2009). Tribal values also suggest that individual success translates to tribal success and that students may be motivated to succeed and that their success may be seen by others, thereby placing them in the group's esteem or collective. Many Qatari students are motivated by their social locus; they are more likely to seek an education to have the esteem and, consequently, the privilege they seek from their group. Some of these students said:

I aspire to be a good achiever and to graduate from the College with honors and to stand as a role model for other students. (QU 39)

[...] would help me become a social figure in the community and a social worker who could influence the people around me, causing numerous changes in their thoughts and actions. (QU 40)

I dream about working as an ambassador of Qatar as I love travel, fame and the privileges given to the ambassadors, such as the diplomatic passport, social status and financial earnings. I think that fulfillment of this dream will be easy as long as I have the determination to achieve it. Hard work and diligence pay off. (QU 38)

Other students saw this as a duty, not only as a means to advance their immediate social status but as a national duty:

[...] because of the severe shortage of the number of engineers in Qatar, something which has attracted foreign experts who are unaware of the country's affairs and needs, unlike nationals themselves. Thus, to serve my country has constituted my psychological motive to join the College of Engineering. (QU 44)

Many students saw role models in the community, and peers and colleagues are socially motivated, which seeded a thought to succeed because of their praise:

They have women leadership workshops or Qatari women who design. The workshop is for Qatari women. She keeps talking about her college experience to motivate me to and to get me to engage in some events. I can learn from her because she has already participated in those workshops. I can learn from her. (QF 31)

If a student is surrounded by friendly and cooperative colleagues, s/he will feel happy and motivated. (QU 36)

To me, it is enough to see some faculty members praising my hard work and diligence regardless of my cumulative average. (QU 44)

I want to improve my skills to reach the level that I could become a famous artist like Haze or Richard Serra. (QF 58)

Student: Yes, because when you have an achievement and you tell them about it, you feel happy because they are happy for you. This makes you work harder. (QF 62)

My mother insisted that I should go and find a job, but now, she is very proud of me. It would please her to see me obtain my university degree although she wanted me to find a job and forget about higher education. She felt happy when I entered the university. That gave me more power and motivation, and I have become more productive and more motivated. (QF 69)

Praise always be to Allah. I have many friends in the university and beyond. They motivate me to achieve my goals and success. (QU 70)

Rostron (2009) argued that Qatar's culture may persuade its people to view education primarily in pragmatic terms of it, mainly valued for the practical, tangible outcomes and rewards that it confers or allows. Thus, extrinsic motivations to pursue education would tend to predominate over intrinsic motivations. More generally, researchers have argued that an extrinsic motivation toward academic achievement is more characteristic of group-oriented and hierarchical societies (e.g., Qatar's), versus an intrinsic mastery orientation, which is more characteristic of societies that place a higher value on individualism and/or egalitarianism (Dekker & Fischer, 2008; Eliot, 1999; Tanaka & Yamauchi, 2004).

### **Recoding the codes into super codes: "Families"**

Once we created an initial coding and organized the codes, the researchers went through them and re-coded through a reiterative coding and refining process by re-coding them into narrowed categories. After the final step, we analyzed those codes that appeared to have the greatest frequency or highest



number of grounded responses and performed final coding, which we called the super codes or what may be considered a “family of codes”. The highest frequency of codes may be considered as the density of codes or thematic codes, with the highest reoccurring codes within them. When someone raises an issue more than once in the interview scripts, the interview density is increased within each interview and between interviewees.

Overall coding: The quotations were recursively coded into, for example, Extracurricular Conference and Committee Activity, Extracurricular Voluntary Activity, and Extracurricular Clubs Activity. [Table 1](#) presents the super family codes or themes that had the highest recurrence or what we call super codes. The super codes were “negative advising” and “secondary school did not prepare them for the university”. Both these elements appeared to carry the greater “grounded weight”, which means frequency or tally of responses. By analyzing further, we generated qualitative data by identifying those respondents who raised the two issues of negative advising and lack of secondary school preparation. We found that those students were more likely to be doing relatively well in school (evident by their GPA) and have faced difficulty in the English language, whether in testing or difficulty in English language courses at the university. More importantly, these students were mostly at the National Public University, which suggested that they all came from the independent schools in Qatar (i.e., public schools).

One reason for this is that the independent schools may have started teaching mathematics and science subjects in English. As of 2012, however, this practice has been reversed again: the schools reverted to Arabic by using scientific terminology in English and in some cases, bilingualism. In addition, the school outcomes are not adequately aligned with college learning or even environmental requirements. Implications from this study suggest a greater understanding of high school engagement and the relationship of high school engagement to college engagement; thus, understanding the needs of the first-year students is the first step to ameliorate the situation ([Cole, Kennedy & Ben-Avie, 2009](#)). At the university level, however, there is a greater need to help students to provide advice and direction as well as possibilities and academic plans. The student affairs staff may have a greater role to play to support students about foundation, language, choice of majors, and other policies that could affect the students. There is impetus now to develop a strategic plan to design a first-year experience program.

## CONCLUSION

The study attempted to examine the factors that contribute to Qatari students’ post-secondary experience, engagement, and success. There is an abundance of existing theory and research potentially relevant to the effort, but virtually none of this existing literature, however, particularly focused on Qatari students and their educational experiences and outcomes. Indeed, most of the relevant research described the experiences of college students in Western countries, particularly the United States. While the literature is relevant to the understanding the experience of Qatari students in the United States, the experience of students in Qatar may be drastically different from their counterparts; for one, Qatari society is characterized by a close-knit structure, which may contribute to a completely different social and affective experience but also pose academic difficulties for them different from the students in the United States or Western countries. The research undertaken could be used for further research in this area, and this study acts as a guide for determining the factors grounded on what people say and express naturally, which identify the issues that affect Qatari students’ aspirations in persistence and achievement. However, the specific circumstances of Qatari students suggest a number of specific challenges that differentially affect them (versus the typical US college students who are the subjects of most research on post-secondary success). Some of these challenges are relevant to all Qatari students in a US context or studying abroad, whereas others pertain particularly to Qatari students studying in Qatar.

The most salient issues that arose in this study were advising students, especially the lack of advising that students felt in their experience, particularly in their early years at the university. The research literature on attrition suggests the importance of contact between students and the faculty, which clearly demonstrates greater faculty–student interaction and promotes higher levels of student satisfaction with the college experience. Because the faculty is in such a position of authority, they are more inclined to affect the student and play an important role in advising students. In addition to the entire student community, staff and administrators could help provide support in advising or guidance; it is usually the faculty who act as guides and main support for the students ([Cain, 1999](#); [McArthur,](#)

Table 1. Super codes: Family codes.

	Extra-curricular Conference and committees	Foreign schools and private schools prepared well	Public schools did not prepare for University English	Public schools did not prepare for University English				Satisfied with amenities:				Secondary School did not prepare them for University	Saw the Benefits of extra-curricular activities	Negative Advising	
				Difficulty in English	Extra-curricular Voluntary	Limited or dysfunctional amenities	Public schools did not prepare for University English	English Competency Test Obstacle	Benefited from foundation	Obstacle foundation and/or English	Positive Advising				Extra-curricular Clubs
P30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P32	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P37	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P38	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P39	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P40	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P41	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P42	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P44	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P45	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P46	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P47	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P48	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P49	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P51	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P52	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P53	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P54	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P55	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P56	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P57	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P58	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P59	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P61	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P62	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P63	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P65	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P68	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
P70	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1	2	3	4	4	5	5	5	7	7	9	10	10	11	12

2005). Advising has an important implication for the overall quality of the programs, particularly for the persistence of students continuing in higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Glennen, Farren & Vowell, 1996).

Taken together, these findings suggest that institutions should provide advising or academic support as an intrusive measure to familiarize students with the knowledge and understanding of what could be expected of them. Students may enroll in a program or a university with little knowledge of what is required of them. Advisors are in the ideal position to connect the students with the academic support staff at the university. They also have to take an active interest in getting the student involved in co-curricular activities. The results did show the delight and worthiness of extracurricular activities. Thus, through extracurricular or co-curricular activities, students feel they are socially connected and integrated in the community and see higher value of their education and campus life (Terenzi & Pascarella, 1977).

The findings of this study suggest that the faculty were supportive and helped the students but at the same time, the faculty did not play their role as advisors well. The most important findings of Terenzi and Pascarella (1977) was that students need the interaction with faculty to support and increase student achievement, persistence, and academic skills (Tinto, 1987). Further, Halpin (1990) came to the conclusion that the importance of student – faculty interaction could result in a strong and positive level in student achievement, persistence, academic skill development, and personal development. Thus, in conclusion, intrusive measures must be in place to draw students to the university life, particularly through co-curricular activities or extracurricular activities and interaction with advisors and faculty. The study conclusively suggests and emphasizes on the following: the greater the potential among students to connect with university life, the greater they will engage in it, promote it, and have some affinity to it.

Two important theories come to the fore in light of the findings of our study; first, the theory of student involvement. The theory stresses the active participation of the student in the learning process and that student learning will increase when the environment is structured where the student is encouraged to participate and play a role in the learning process (Astin, 1984). The second relevant theory is the socialization theory. The socialization theory suggests that extracurricular activities help students value social interaction, where the institutions concomitantly commit to social values (Flores-Gonzalez, 2000; Melnick, Sabo & Vanfossen, 1992). Both theories taken together suggest that extracurricular activities may have a positive impact on student achievement and also affectively provide the students with possibilities that peers could help in the achievement of students. In our family codes, we found that students were very positive about the extracurricular activities and their peers. These potential activities can be energized if staff involvement in them also increased, which could encourage student engagement. However, Kaufman and Gabler (2004) cautioned that those extra-curricular activities such as clubs, drama, sports, or music are more likely to encourage individual sentiments rather than inter-institutional sentiments. Thus, universities need to be able to set inter-institutional activities, such as in peer support, or academic-based activities as a priority in Qatar.

While many of the university issues can be addressed and managed from within the university, there are, however, background characteristics and environmental circumstances that may be out of the control of the higher education provider (Halpin, 1990). One of the issues is student background and level of preparedness in secondary school. Nasser's (2012) study identified and validated empirically how English language proficiency was the most important factor for student success in the subjects of their study. The difficulty in English is also reported in US universities; Bettinger and Long (2006) reported that 25% of the students in their study in the state of Ohio were required to take remedial English. So difficulties abound not only with students where English is the second language but also with North American students with different ethnic backgrounds. Many discussions about Foundation Programs that provide remedial courses of English have constantly questioned the nature and the role of the program. The public outcry had forced the university to change the medium of instruction to Arabic, where many of the programs that were offered with English as the medium of instruction were switched completely to Arabic. Although this led to many students bypassing the remedial programs, i.e., Foundation Programs, many students were still unprepared to deal with advanced knowledge, problem-solving skills, higher-order thinking, and other 21st century skills that the university requires. Many students are still not prepared to face the required cognitive and affective demands of higher learning. The establishment of the Qatar Community College provided a way to address the unpreparedness of students, but with the limited number of seats available, still many students seek

the national university for admission and enrollment. Even with English preparedness, still the university suffers not from a lack of English skills but from a lack of other learning skills that students are required to master in schools. Arguments regarding the overhaul of the entire educational system draws many suggestions about the best way to improve student performance and the university. With a decade-long educational reform that has cost the nation hundreds of millions of dollars, many questions remain regarding the educational quality and outcomes resulting from the new educational system. We recognize that these difficulties arose from those attending the National Public University rather than from those who attended the Western branch universities at the Education City, as most of the respondents from the Education City sample had attended private international schools. In conclusion, Qatari students may experience academic difficulties stemming from discontinuities between their secondary and post-secondary school “cultures”. For Qatari students attending post-secondary institutions abroad in Western countries as well as for students attending Qatar’s National Public University or the institutions at the Education City, there may well be a sort of culture clash between the values of these institutions and the values that guided education in the students’ secondary schools.

To one extent or another, the post-secondary institutions are guided by a Western liberal arts perspective (Berrebi, 2009; Rostron, 2009) that sees education as stemming from dialogue, discussion, and debate. The liberal arts tradition stresses questioning the received wisdom and authority and prioritizes developing general intellectual capacities over mastery of specific facts, skills, or curricula. As such, a liberal arts philosophy is thought to represent something of a mismatch with instructional philosophies in schools. It has also been suggested that traditional education is based on the transmission of revelation, where students were expected to receive unquestioningly the wisdom passed on to them by their teachers (Reagan, 1996; Rostron, 2009; Sultana, 1997). In this specific sense, then, Qatari students may not be prepared for post-secondary studies in the liberal arts tradition. This may hinder students’ success, particularly those who enroll in institutions of higher education that follow the American style and curriculum.

In summary, much has been learned in recent decades about the factors that contribute to student retention and success; however, this growing sophistication has not led to a consensus about how these factors are connected or which are the most significant. In fact, the theoretical picture has become less clear, and this, in turn, makes it reasonable for this project to focus in its first phase on organizing relevant findings from existing research into a theory about factors that most significantly affect Qatari students’ academic retention, persistence, and success. While this study addressed the social factors, there are cognitive factors such as metacognitive skills, motivation, and self-regulated learning skills in higher education, to name only a few, which endow benefits that include managing emotions, moving toward interdependent relationships, gaining knowledge, developing cognitively, increasing autonomy, and developing a sense of moral reasoning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In conclusion, we recognize that there are exogenous and endogenous factors that have a direct impact on persistence, continuation, and success. We see that those factors that are beyond university control, such as students’ backgrounds and sociodemographic makeup, all have a direct impact. While the endogenous factors could affect the students, other factors could have an impact in a positive valence sense, which may require further study.

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