

“Home and Away” A look at Gulf Medical Students’ Influencing Factors, Challenges and Attitudes for Studying Medicine Abroad

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Abstract — Introduction: Higher education is no longer provided solely in the confines of national borders. Now days, the general trend is that students are no more reluctant to cross boundaries and travel to different places for achieving better education. Aim: To explore gulf medical students influencing factors, challenges, and perceptions to study abroad.

Methods: Cross sectional prospective study was conducted with self-administered survey which consisted of six sections. The survey was distributed by email to gulf medical students studying in four countries (United Kingdom, Ireland, Kingdom of Bahrain, and Jordan). Data were tubulated on Excel and analysed with SPSS V.22.

Results: Total responses received that met inclusion criteria were 94 with mean age of 20.89 (68.08% females). 51% of participants were from Kuwait, and 57% of participants were studying in European universities. Broadening personal experience was the main influencing factor to study abroad, and word of mouth from parents and students studying abroad were the main individual influences. Financial issues were the main challenges for studying abroad. Surgical specialities were the desired specialities for future career accounting for 44.7%.

Conclusion: Understanding the underlying reasons behind a student’s decision to study abroad plays an important part on structuring scholarship and allocating resources. The high rate of students regretting studying abroad and at the same time the high rate of recommendation for other to study abroad indicate that personal satisfaction is a key factor, however, studying abroad does not suit everyone.

Index Terms — Studying Abroad, Scholarship, gulf students, postgraduate, challenges, international students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is no longer provided solely in the confines of national borders as the horizon of education has widened from national school to global universities. The world in which we live in today demands global education for students. The importance of studying abroad has been

supported since the early 1930s as a key factor in affecting international understanding [1]. Studying abroad offers the ability to learn by doing, interact actively through a trial and error approach and deal with lots of information; all factors that have appeal to Millennial students [2].

National and international education authorities need to understand the underlying reasons behind a students’ decision to study abroad, factors influencing their decision, what sources of information are available to them and what other factors these students consider while taking a decision to study overseas.

Most developing nations have strengthened the root of global education as a trend. Now days, the general trend is that students are no more reluctant to cross boundaries and travel to different places for achieving better education. Number of international medical students increased worldwide and more in Europe. Ireland has the highest number of international medical graduates per population; in 2017 half of the medical graduates were international students [3].

Subsequent studies relating to international education have two discrete research approaches. One approach has been to study the macroenvironmental variables that influence the outflow of students from source countries. Another approach is to identify reasons of choice at an individual level by examining the perceptions of students [4].

The objective of this study is explore gulf medical students influencing factors, challenges, and perceptions to study abroad. It also extends to evaluate interest in post-graduate specialty training.

II. METHODS

A. Study Design and Participants

A quantitative prospective study was conducted using electronic survey. This was distributed to gulf medical students abroad by emails. Study sample was limited to students in two European and two Middle Eastern Universities (United Kingdom, Ireland, Kingdom of Jordan, and Kingdom of Bahrain). Inclusion criteria were undergraduate medical students from any of the gulf countries studying abroad. The word abroad in this study indicates any country other than country of residence.

B. Questionnaire Design

A self- administered survey was developed according to study scientific objectives (Survey ID: GRCG.19.04/2:GR: Int). This contains six sections as follow:

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- 1) Demographics;
- 2) Influencing factors;
- 3) Influence of others;
- 4) Challenges;
- 5) Perceptions;
- 6) Future specialty.

Apart from demographics, all elements were closed ended with the used of either 3 and 5-point Likert-scales, in which the participants had to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, or (Yes or No) questions. To identify the strength of different factors, influencing factors and challenges were weighted and scored out of 5. Consent to participate in the in the survey was obtained by return of completed survey.

C. Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed with the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v22 Inc, Chicago, USA). Continuous variables were presented as mean, standard deviation, or as percentages were appropriate. Categorical data were presented as numbers and frequency. Chi-square test was used when comparing groups of data and p value of <0.05 was set as significance. The study is conducted and analyzed in conjunction with the Gulf Research Collaboration Group (GRCG).

III. RESULTS

Of the distributed surveys, 94 responses were fully completed and met the inclusion criteria of the study. Participants average age was 20.89 years. Majority of participant were female (n=64, 68.09%). Participants countries of origin and region of study are shown below (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

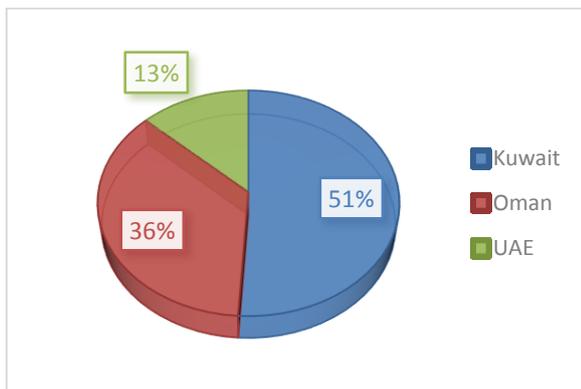


Fig. 1. Participants Home country.

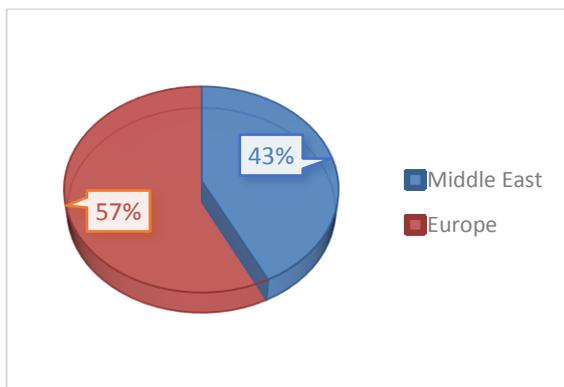


Fig. 2. Students Study Regions.

With regard the year of study, majority of the students were in second year and third year (34.0% and 27.7% respectively). Study finding are divided into 5 categories as illustrated:

a) Influencing factors:

The main influencing factor for gulf students to study medicine abroad was to broadening personal experience which was agreed by 93.6% of participants (score 4.4). Of the total participants, more than three quarters (76.6%) agreed that studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects. A similar number of participants (n=72) agreed that seeking qualification with worldwide recognition was one of the strong driving factors to studying abroad. Surprisingly, analyzing all the results on influencing factors, experience living in more developed country was ranked the least by students.

b) Influence of others:

On studying potential impact of family, relative and others influence on students' intentions to study medicine abroad parents influence was the most common motivator by others to study abroad (72.34%). This was followed by word of mouth from students studying abroad followed by siblings' influence (59.57% and 48.94% respectively). However, suggestion from academic advisor was the least influencing factor were more than two-thirds (68.09%) agreed that advisor had no influence at all in their decision (Fig. 3). This might reflect on the role of teacher or trainer as an advisor on influencing students' decisions.

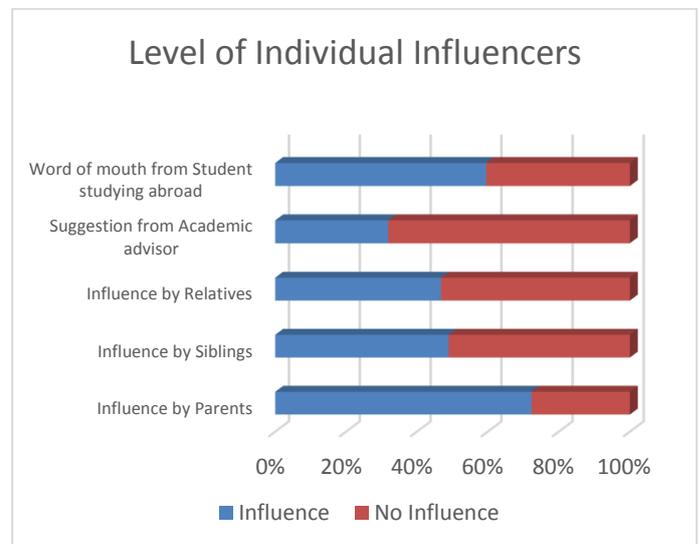


Fig. 3. Level of individual influencers.

c) Challenges

The most obstacle that students agreed on as of concern is not enough financial means to cover living expenses (51.06%). Not surprisingly, this was followed by difficult to live away from home (45.55%). Not confident with the language was weighted the least challenge of concern to participants with a score of 2.21 as shown in Table I. This might be explained by that 42.6% of participants are studying medicine in Middle Eastern Universities and hence the language is the same as home country (Arabic).

d) Attitudes and perception:

Of the study participants, twenty students have regretted studying medicine abroad (21.28%). Along this, about one

quarter of participants have at least thought, at some stage, of withholding their study abroad and to continue at home country (25.53%). With regard to recommendations for others to study abroad, 10.64% of participants would not recommend it. Relationship between regretting to study abroad and recommended studying abroad was not significant.

TABLE 1. WEIGHTED SCORES FOR CHALLENGES

Challenges	Score
Lack of family Support	2.38
Family obligations	2.49
Not wanting to be away from home	2.94
Difficult to live away from home and friends	3.15
Extra-curricular obligations in foreign universities	3.06
Not confident enough with the language	2.21
Fear of safety in other countries	2.83
Fear of racism in other countries	2.89
Security issues in host country	2.79
Not enough financial means to cover living expenses	3.38
Concerns about health service costs	2.87

e) Post-graduate Training

Of total participants, 44.7% were interested in pursuing a career in surgery and its sub-specialities. General Surgery, Neurosurgery, and Cardiac surgery were the most preferred specialties. Internal medicine and its sub-specialities were the preferred choices in 14.9% of participants. About 12.8% of participants were not interested in continuing their postgraduate training abroad and preferred to go back home. Of the interested student in postgraduate training abroad, 70.73% would like to do specialty training only, and 29.26% would like to do sub-specialty as well. As shown in figure 4, Canada was the top desired destination for post graduate specialty training preferred by 54.55% of participants followed by the United States of America (20.5%).

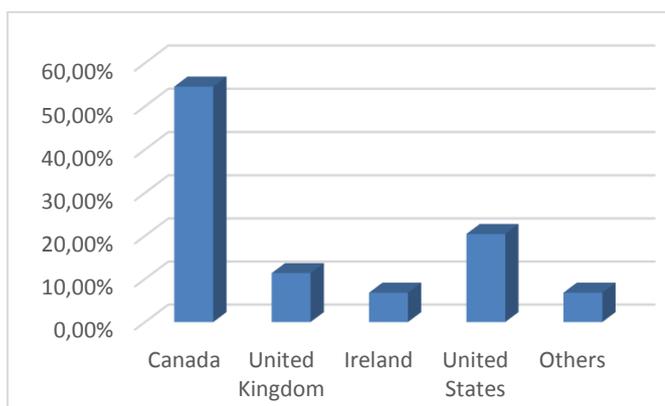


Fig. 4. Postgraduate Training Destinations.

IV. DISCUSSION

As demands on health systems have been rapidly rising worldwide, demands on their human resources have also been growing. A student's intent to study abroad can be influenced by several factors, either real or perceived [5].

Students studying abroad can also be faced with challenges and obstacles that may affect their performance during their medical school and increase possibility of drop-out [6]. Language and cultural barriers, lack of social support, alienation, homesickness, and financial difficulties were found to be the main challenges of international students [6]–[9]. At the same time, postgraduate training for international students is known to be difficult due to competition from national graduates and from other international graduates from other countries. Most of international students prefer to re-emigrate to other countries or returned to their home country for post graduate training [3], [10]

Gulf Medical Students are fortunate to have the availability of financial support offered by their countries through international scholarships for highly achieving students. However, students who do not meet the set criteria can still self-fund and study abroad. This study is exploring gulf students influencing factors, challenges, and perceptions of studying medicine abroad. Majority of participants in this study were female. This is similar to previous international studies in which females having more intent to travel abroad compared to males [5], [11], [12]. This could be the case in this study; however, these findings can also be interrupted as male students are more hesitant to respond to surveys than female students.

The finding of low participation from senior medical students was suggested to be due to that that senior students were busy with clinical attachment which limited their extracurricular activities and availability to complete the survey.

Heffron et al described several factors that can influence international medical students to study abroad; a limited medical education capacity in home countries, limiting the intake into medical schools in other countries and the quality of education in the destination country of the study were major attraction for students from overseas. [3]

Comparing the findings in this study to the literature, the availability of seats and number of medical schools were not among the high influencers for gulf medical students abroad. However, broadening personal experience and seeking qualification with worldwide recognition remain the main influencing factors to study abroad. Other influencing factors that considered high influencing factors were studying abroad can enhance future employment prospects and broadening personal experience. As the Gulf countries combined both modern developed countries and traditional lifestyles; students from these countries ranked, experience living in more developed countries as the least influence factor for studying medicine abroad.

Several studies showed that family, relatives, and peers play major parts in career choices and decision-making process for students' continuity of education [13]–[16]. The study found that influence from parents and advice and recommendation from other students studying abroad were the strongest influences of others to decide on studying abroad and choosing the country. This could be due to that influence of family and other students are all related to the importance of word-of-mouth communication, which is seen as objective, reliable and not commercially oriented. Surprisingly, suggestions or advices from academic advisors

or teachers were the lowest influencing factor. The reason for this is unknown but could be related to the teachers' experience or motivational background. This limited involvement of the academic advisor is believed to be improved by further training and preparation for the advisor on student consultation skills and future career issues.

Challenges facing students abroad have been explored before. Huhn discussed several factors that can challenge students abroad and affect their academic, social, or personal life. These challenges included, language and cultural barriers, lack of social support, homesickness, and financial difficulties [6]. Financial issues were the main challenge facing the student in this study. Not surprisingly, this was followed by difficult to live away from home. However, the language came as the least of challenges and difficulties. This might be explained by that 42.55% of participants are studying medicine in Middle Eastern Universities and hence the language is the same as home country i.e. Arabic.

Despite the overall satisfactory perceptions of medical students towards studying abroad, the challenges and obstacle facing them has affected a significant proportion of medical students. Almost one-quarter of the participants regretted studying medicine abroad and a significant number of participants have at least thought of withdrawing or withholding their studies due to the challenges facing them abroad. No significant relationship has been found between participants regretting studying abroad and recommendation to other not to study abroad. Of interest, although the number of participants who regretted studying abroad were higher in one country than the rest, all these participants agreed they would recommend studying medicine abroad to others. The reason for regretting could be related to personal issues rather than studying medicine in that particular country. It can also be explained by that, since majority of students in this study were influenced by their parents to study medicine abroad, the decision to study abroad could be more of following family wishes rather than student's own choice.

It is imperative to realize the importance of future specialty choices and the impact these decisions have on the physician workforce in the gulf region. Choosing a medical specialty can be either a daunting and confusing experience for some medical students and junior doctors, or a foregone conclusion to others. Many factors contribute to one's decision with regards to motivation and reason to choose a specific medical specialty. This study found that almost half of participants were interested in career in surgery and its sub-specialities. A study by Al-Fouzan found that the most desired speciality by medical students was Paediatrics followed by General Surgery and Cardiology [17].

In the light of accelerated development of health systems on the international and local levels, it has become vital to train generations of highly educated and qualified youth given the requirements of comprehensive development. Humphries found that most of the international medical students prefer to go back to their home country or re-emigrate to the third country for postgraduate training [10]. However, in our study, we found that most of the Gulf medical students whom currently studying abroad also prefer to continue their post-graduate training abroad. North

America is a popular destination accounting for almost three-quarters of intended post-graduate training destination (Canada 54.6%, and USA 20.5%).

The study would be the first to study influencing factors, perceptions, and challenges for gulf medical students abroad.

V. CONCLUSION

Various factors appear to influence medical students' decision-making regarding studying abroad. Understanding the underlying reasons behind a student's decision to study abroad and challenges facing them, provide valuable information that can be used by authorities in structuring scholarship programs and allocating resources. Broadening personal experience and word of mouth from parents and other students are main drivers to study abroad among gulf medical students. The high rate of students regretting studying abroad and at the same time the high rate of recommendation for other to study abroad indicate that personal satisfaction is a key factor, however, studying abroad does not suit everyone.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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