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

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### Abstract

Qatar has gone through an educational reform in year 2000; its educational and particularly schooling system went through a major overhaul from K-12 reaching higher education providers. The major reasons for the educational reform were to increase the level of student academic achievement. Concomitantly, the rapid growth of Qatar's economy over 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 acute needs 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). Two significant higher education providers' serve post-secondary students, being Qatar University (QU) and American Branch Universities at the Qatar Foundation have grown tremendously over the years. Understanding the factors that affect Qatari students' post-secondary persistence and achievement is crucial for achieving the country's human capital growth. Tinto (1975) deposited his theory about student integration into the academic and social system of the higher education providers, Tinto suggested a multidimensional component which underlined the higher education community engaging students in all aspects of higher education including academic and non-academic. Tinto's theory basically hypothesizes that persistence 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 is Bean's (1986) student's intention to stay or leave into the attrition model, derived from psychological theories and based on attitudinal research of Ajzen and Fishbein (1972) which later developed by Bentler and Speckart (1981). Key ideas

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from the model suggest that a strong association was related to intentions and behaviors and that an undergraduate student decision to persist or dropout was strongly related to affect. One conclusion about student engagement was students need to be satisfied and academically prepared especially those in the first years to achieve success and maintain continuous enrollment in higher education (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 2005; Kuh, 2001, 2007). Tinto's integration theory has received considerable validation of non-academic factors and impacting student continuation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). The latter model has received empirical validation and support based on a large number of studies that looked at background information as the socioeconomic levels of students' families and its effect on postsecondary continuation in higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Sewell & Shah, 1968). With the large number of studies coming from the United States (US) and other western countries (Kenny & Stryker, 1994; Dekker & Fischer, 2008) have underlined the differences on how students develop and internalize beliefs, needs, and wants that in turn impact academic motivation to persist and succeed in higher education. While 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 the understanding and experiences of students in higher education. In Qatar for instance, the first year experience study and National Association of Colleges and Employers Survey have just recently been implemented at Qatar's national public university. Faced with the danger of students dropping out from the university, and a large number of students who are likely to remain in the first years for longer years reflects the dangers of higher education being a bottleneck to economic development and human resource development (Qatar University Fact Book, 2011). One clear indication and dangers of Higher education completion rates as anywhere in the world is disparaging. It has been reported that in the US for instance 55% of undergraduates who begin study at a 4-year institution complete a degree at that same institution within 6 years of their initial enrollment and another 7% completed baccalaureate degrees within six years after attending two or more institutions (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). Pascarella (1985) and Adelman (2006) came to the conclusion that continuous enrollment is the most powerful variable in explaining degree completion and time to degree. There are several factors academic and non-academic likely to affect students as they make the transition to post-secondary institutions. Many students may experience stress, anxiety, withdrawal, and even depression (Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom, 2004; DeStefano, Mellott & Peterson, 2001; Feldt, Graham, & Dew, 2011; Wie, I & Zakalik, 2005). There are also a variety of non-academic challenges that have bearing on the likelihood on academic persistence and success of students. A fairly large body of research undertaken in a number of countries have examined the experiences of international students, and compared their experiences to those students of native to the host country. Academic factors (i.e., secondary preparation) appear to influence postsecondary success (see Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley & Carlstrom, 2004). But also a range of non-academic factors, influenced by culture and values, thus may contribute to challenges faced by students in higher education in their local context. This study attempts to address Qatari student challenges in their lives in the higher education in Qatar. The study draws on student, perceptions, beliefs, outlook and context; we approach the study through grounded means by leading interview questions through exploration and probing. The approach is grounded in ways that no specific theory drives the questions rather the responses from the interview often call upon theory to justify the findings. The sample will be made of 35 students who were interviewed through probing and questioning techniques. The questions will probe and guide students with converging responses leading to themes. The long-term goal of this line of research is to provide the Qatari society with much needed scientific information regarding the challenges that its students face in completing their university education at the competence needed to build Qatar's human capital to support its rapidly expanding economy. Finally, we believe that is a broader regional need for specific and focused information on this topic as the study findings are directly applicable to students from several other countries in the region.

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