INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD:
Improving the International Student Experience

Bryce Loo
World Education Services

Salma Benhaida
Kent State University

Nastaran Navari
International Student, Iran
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Presenters

Bryce Loo
Senior Research Associate, WES
Bryce has published several research reports and articles for WES, most notably on credential assessment for refugees and on career services for international students. He has presented at NAFSA Annual, NAFSA Region X, and the 2016 WES-Boston College Center for International Higher Education Summer Seminar. Bryce earned a master’s degree in international education development from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a bachelor’s degree in history from California State University, Bakersfield.

Salma Benhaida
Director of International Recruitment, Admissions, and Sponsored Student Services, Kent State University
Salma Benhaida is the director of international recruitment, admissions, and sponsored student services at Kent State University where she oversees international recruitment and admissions over the eight-campus system. She also acts as liaison between Kent State University and various sponsoring agencies and foreign embassies. She received her bachelor’s of science in accountancy and her master’s in communication from The University of Akron. She is fluent in English, French and Arabic.

Nastaran Navari
International Student, Iran
Nastaran is an international student from Iran at a U.S. state university where she majors in neuroscience. In addition to studying neuroscience, Nastaran is interested in poetry and learning about new cultures. She hopes to become a doctor and provide first rate medical services to patients. Nastaran has lived in the U.S. for nearly four years.
Agenda

Part I:  WES Research – The International Student Experience
Part II: The Experience of Kent State University
Part III: Conversation with an International Student – Nastaran Navari
Part I:
WES Research – The International Student Experience
Why Care About International Student Satisfaction?

FACT:
International students who are satisfied with their U.S. education experience are more likely to recommend their institution to family, friends, and peers back home.

“I would like to share my experience with my friends in my home country and encourage them to apply to the same institution.”

– Master’s student from Jordan
MENA (Middle East & North Africa)

- Algeria
- Bahrain
- Egypt
- Iran
- Iraq
- Israel
- Jordan
- Kuwait
- Lebanon
- Libya
- Morocco
- Oman
- Palestinian Territories
- Qatar
- Saudi Arabia
- Syria
- Tunisia
- U.A.E.
- Western Sahara
- Yemen
Spectacular Growth and Now Decline of MENA Students in the U.S.

Total Students from MENA Region in the U.S.

Source: IIE Open Doors, 2017
Project Background & Overview of Methodology
Methodology

Review of the literature

Survey of WES Applicants

- May 2016
- 4,256 respondents were current and former U.S. enrollees (going back to 2010)
- 427 respondents who enrolled outside of the U.S. were asked only a few questions.
Respondent Profile

Distribution by Countries/Region (n=4,256)

- Sub-Saharan Africa: 18%
- India: 18%
- Latin America & Caribbean: 12%
- Middle East & North Africa: 12%
- China: 12%
- Oceania: 12%
- Europe: 10%
- Canada: 6%
- Other: 3%
- Canada: 1%
Research Findings
Motivations for Going Abroad

Motivations for Studying Abroad

- Better education outside of my home country: Overall 57%, Middle East & North Africa 54%
- Opportunity to gain work experience outside home country: Overall 40%, Middle East & North Africa 40%
- Opportunity to improve my career prospects in my country: Overall 37%, Middle East & North Africa 28%
- Opportunity to experience living in a foreign country: Overall 29%, Middle East & North Africa 25%
- Improve my English skills: Overall 14%, Middle East & North Africa 8%
- Pathways to immigration in the future: Overall 9%, Middle East & North Africa 15%
- Financial aid provided by government and/or employer: Overall 7%, Middle East & North Africa 4%

Question: Please select the TWO most important reasons that lead you to seek opportunities to study abroad. NOTE: "Other" removed from chart.
The Availability of Specific Programs of Study is a Big Draw

**Question:** Please select the **THREE** most important factors that influenced your decision to enroll at a U.S. institution.

**NOTE:** "Other" removed from chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Overall (n=4,256)</th>
<th>Middle East &amp; North Africa (n=440)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of a desired program</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution’s reputation</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earning potential after graduation</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of research opportunities</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of financial aid/ scholarships</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution’s location</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions and/or advice from friends or family</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of study</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestion and/or advice from current students or alumni</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online reviews</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation by a recruiting agent</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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# Top Issues and Challenges

## Overall (n=4,256)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of tuition fees</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of living expenses</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in making social connections</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness/homesickness</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency in English</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## MENA (n=440)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost of living</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of tuition fees</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency in English</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in making social connections</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness/homesickness</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question: Please select the **THREE** most significant challenges you faced with your experience in studying in the U.S.
Other Issues and Challenges

Cost of tuition and living
Cost of tuition (65%) and of living (63%) were highest among students of all regions.

Academic Demands
MENA students most often cited meeting academic demands as a top challenge (26%).

Discrimination
MENA (21%) students were the second most likely to cite discrimination as a challenge.
Faculty and Learning Support Services Are Rated Most Highly in Terms of Academics

**Overall Satisfaction Rates for Academic Quality Factors**

- **Expertise of faculty**: 94% (Overall) & 87% (MENA)
- **Learning support services (such as library, labs, computer facilities, etc.)**: 93% (Overall) & 89% (MENA)
- **Your institution's evaluation of your academic performance (e.g., grading)**: 93% (Overall) & 88% (MENA)
- **Courses offered in my program**: 92% (Overall) & 86% (MENA)
- **Research opportunities**: 84% (Overall) & 78% (MENA)

**Question**: Please indicate the degree of satisfaction with your institution’s academic quality.

**NOTE**: “Overall satisfaction rate” is a combination of those who answer “satisfied” and “very satisfied.”
Question: Please indicate your degree of satisfaction with the following institutional career preparation services to help you achieve career and employment goals.

NOTE: "Overall satisfaction rate" is a combination of those who answer "satisfied" and "very satisfied."
Of Student Services, Students Are Least Satisfied with Financial Aid and Housing

### Overall Satisfaction Rates with Campus Facilities & Student Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Overall (n=4,256)</th>
<th>MENA (n=440)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic advising</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student counseling services</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International student orientation programs</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS)</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language courses</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of financial aid and/or scholarships</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and accommodations</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MENA students were the least often to indicate dissatisfaction with this factor (20%).

Question: Please indicate the degree of satisfaction with your institution’s campus facilities and services for international students.

NOTE: ”Overall satisfaction rate” is a combination of those who answer “satisfied” and “very satisfied.”
English Language Support for MENA Students

38% MENA students were the second to most often cite English proficiency as a top challenge, after Chinese students.

14% They also expressed greatest dissatisfaction with English courses.

“The institution prepares student for academic life in U.S. However, it has some drawbacks. For example, there is a lack of speaking skills preparation while concentrated on writing skills and focus on homework and assignments rather than practicing the English language in real life.”

– Master’s student from Saudi Arabia
Respondents Are Happier with Student Interactions than with Faculty

Overall Satisfaction Rates with Campus Experiences & Overall Support

- **Overall (n=4,256)**
  - Opportunities to interact with and learn from students of other cultures: 86%
  - Opportunities to participate in learning and development activities through campus services such as student clubs/organization, societies, etc.: 74%
  - Overall support for international students: 81%
  - Opportunities to participate in social activities within the institution (e.g., travel, sports, cultural events, etc.): 75%
  - Opportunities to develop professional connections with faculty outside of class: 74%

- **MENA (n=440)**
  - Opportunities to interact with and learn from students of other cultures: 81%
  - Opportunities to participate in learning and development activities through campus services such as student clubs/organization, societies, etc.: 82%
  - Overall support for international students: 81%
  - Opportunities to participate in social activities within the institution (e.g., travel, sports, cultural events, etc.): 80%
  - Opportunities to develop professional connections with faculty outside of class: 79%

Question: Please indicate the degree of satisfaction with the following aspects of your institution’s support services for international students.

NOTE: “Overall satisfaction rate” is a combination of those who answer “satisfied” and “very satisfied.”
Recommendations
Recruitment

Overall
- Recruit best-fit students.
- Examine the whole student experience.
- Make sure recruitment efforts and student services align.

MENA
- Enhance support services for students in tandem with recruiting heavily.
- Focus on improvement of English language and academic support.
Student Support

Overall

- Examine the whole student experience.
- Work across department to improve student experiences overall.
- Involve faculty in making improvements.
- Improve job, internship, and research opportunities for international students.

MENA

- Evaluate and improve English language support systems, including IEP, writing center, conversation partners, etc.
- Ensure that English language support targets both academic and conversational/everyday English.
- Give students opportunities to connect with other students and share culture.
Part II:
The Experience of Kent State University
Kent State University

- Large public research university
- Large MENA population
- Host to students from all 15 MENA countries
- 569 of MENA students at KSU
- 55% male
- 45% female
MENA Students in the US

- Mostly from Muslim majority countries
- Large Saudi population
- Increase in female students studying in the U.S.
- Complex and diverse cultural context
Common Challenges Faced by MENA Students

- Co-ed programs and events
  - Female Muslim students feel uncomfortable participating
- Dietary restrictions
  - Halal food unavailable, inaccessible
  - Students must be careful of ingredients – lard, wine, gelatin
- Preparation / serving food while separating kitchen utilities
- Restrooms
  - Adjusting to using Western-style restrooms
- Availability of restrooms (to perform ablution) near prayer rooms
  - Community bathrooms in residence halls
Strategies for Improving MENA Student Experience

- Pre-departure events open to students and their families - Engage students with Education USA
- Arrival support
  - Airport pick up
  - Housing assistance
  - Food options/dietary restrictions
- Community engagement
  - Student organizations
  - Campus community
  - Beyond campus - city
Strategies for Improving MENA Student Experience

- Preparing faculty and academic units (intercultural training)
  - Food options to accommodate for dietary restrictions
- Engaging with women’s center
- Diversity and inclusion
- Opportunities for storytelling and culture sharing
- Support for dependents
- Academic support
  - ESL support
  - Plagiarism
  - Tutoring
  - Career coaching/resume writing/mock interviews
- Assess student satisfaction/experience - surveys
Part III:
Conversation with an International Student
Why Did You Decide to Study in the U.S.?

- Diversity
  - Background
  - Ideas

- Quality of life

- Quality of education/career prospects
What Influenced Your Decision on Where in the U.S. You Wanted to Study?

- Size and ranking of program
- Extra-curricular
  - Opportunities
  - Research
  - Activities
- Campus and student life
  - Clubs
  - Events
  - Student support
What Aspects of Your Campus Life that is Most Satisfying and Why?

- Student body and campus life
- Campus accessibility
- Variety of classes, sports, and other activities offered
What are Some of the Activities that Your School Provide to Help International Students Integrate?

- ESL classes
- Small student groups
- Free events and activities
What Would You Encourage Institutes to do to Help International Students on Campus?

- Pre-arrival orientations
- Informing students about the ways that they can seek help about academic and non-academic issues on/off campus
- Provide mandatory seminars and workshop in their first semester curriculum about financial and social topics. This can be achieved in a form of a website or app too
Read and Learn More

- Download the full report: https://knowledge.wes.org/WES-Research-Report-Improving-Intl-Student-Experience.html

- Previous Webinars on the topic: https://knowledge.wes.org/On-Demand-International-Student-Satisfaction.html
Online Resources

- WES Report: Improving the International Student Experience: Implications for Recruitment and Support

- WENR Article: Students From the Middle East and North Africa: Motivations, On-Campus Experiences, and Areas of Need
  [wenr.wes.org/2017/02/campus-life-students-middle-east-north-africa](wenr.wes.org/2017/02/campus-life-students-middle-east-north-africa)

  [knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-career-outcomes](knowledge.wes.org/wes-research-report-career-outcomes)

- WES Report: Career Services for International Students: Fulfilling High Expectations

- WES Article: Nine Actions to Help Students Navigate the Effects of Uncertainty About the Travel Ban
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Conferences

CLEAR | NACAC | NAFSA I

Free WES Webinars – Fall 2018:
Available on August 15, 2018
wes.org/partners/events/
Next Steps

Upcoming workshops:

• **2018 International Credential Evaluation Lab**
  - Toronto, Canada: October 24 – 25, 2018

Read this next:

• [Improving the International Student Experience: Implications for Recruitment and Support](#)

• Students From the Middle East and North Africa: Motivations, On-Campus Experiences, and Areas of Need

Listen to this next:

• [International Student Satisfaction in the U.S.](#)
For support or more information, please contact your WES Regional Director

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WES Facts

Did you know?

- Over 10,000 participants attend WES webinars and training yearly.
- WES delivers credential evaluation reports to more than 2,500 academic institutions worldwide.
- More than 1.5 million credential evaluation reports have been provided to international students and skilled immigrants.
- Our database contains more than 40 years of WES research including data on more than 200 countries and jurisdictions, 40,000 educational institutions, 20,000 credentials and equivalencies, and 1,600 grading scales.
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