Graduate Student Profile of Saudi Arabian Students Enrolled in the Hospitality and Tourism Management Program at RIT

Saleh Aljubaili

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GRADUATE STUDENT PROFILE OF SAUDI ARABIAN STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AT RIT

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Science in Hospitality and Tourism Management

By

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June, 2015
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Abstract

This research explores the experience of Saudi students at RIT who are enrolled in the Hospitality and Tourism Management graduate program. It focuses on investigating the educational needs and expectations of the students for the purpose of program development in regard to the courses offered and the teaching methods used. The data of this study were collected using interviews, which resulted in a large amount of data being collected. The key areas that the interviews sought to explore were reasons for choosing the US and RIT, learning and educational experiences, and social and cultural interactions with faculty. It was found that the majority of students had positive experiences at RIT, but they suggested a more directed program. Students aiming for PhDs were provided different views as those students aiming for industry. This research provides recommendations among which are adding research focus courses and practical training, along with other courses, such as entrepreneurship and restaurant operations.

Keywords: pedagogy, Saudi Arabian, graduate student
Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank my friends in the HTM program for our fruitful debates, exchanges of knowledge, skills, and venting of frustration during my graduate program, which helped enrich the experience.

I would also like to thank my family for the support they provided to me through my entire life, and in particular, I must acknowledge my parents. Without their love and encouragement, I would not have made it through my graduate studies in the United States.

In conclusion, I thank Rochester Institute of Technology and the Saudi Cultural Mission for all the support I have had in the past three years. THANK YOU!
Author’s declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. I authorize Rochester Institute of Technology and the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management to lend this thesis to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I further authorize Rochester Institute of Technology and the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management to reproduce this thesis by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

HTM Graduate Student

Saleh Aljubaili

Name  Signature  Date
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1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Tourism in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government has recognized the need to diversify the economy away from oil as it represents the main income for the country. Other incomes are from pilgrimage, as well as agriculture (Tourism in Saudi Arabia, 2014). Developing the tourism industry, including encouraging more Saudi students to study tourism, is expected to help achieve this economic diversification in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the development of tourism is further expected to lead to the creation of jobs and sustainable economic development (Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), 2013).

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia boasts geographical and historical features that can be leveraged for better returns in tourism. Those returns are to create new jobs in the tourism industry, as well as keep the local residents to spending their money within the country (Tourism in Saudi Arabia, 2014). The Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA) estimates that if the country focuses on developing tourism, this may activate domestic tourism, which will grow to approximately 128 million trips, including air and ground transportation, and about 640 million overnight stays by 2019. Thus, Saudi Arabia’s main tourism markets are the people who are already living in Saudi Arabia, as well as the neighbouring countries such as the Persian Gulf states (SCTA, 2013). The demand for the tourism industry led the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the SCTA, to invest in Saudi students to encourage them to study tourism abroad so that they would be able to contribute to the development of the tourism industry within Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia Profile, 2014).

1.2. Scholarship Program Background

The growth of the Saudi economy in the past 20 years has played an important role in educating Saudi citizens by sending them abroad to major countries like the USA, England, and Australia (Chanin & Gause, 2003). The Saudi government believes that investment in education will pay great dividends for the kingdom in the future (King...
Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), 2014). As a country, Saudi Arabia’s people understand the importance of education as a means to development (Altamimi, 2014). Saudi Arabia spends $2.4 billion annually on tuition fees, as well as living expenses, for over 100,000 Saudi students who are currently enrolled in US universities and colleges (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

Scholarship programs started when King Abdulaziz founded the region in late 1938 (Pavan, 2013). Saudi Arabian students were sponsored to study abroad in a few Arab countries, such as Egypt and Lebanon, to study Arabic and Islamic studies. In 1960, Saudi scholarship programs expanded to the US and Europe (Ruiz, 2014). By 1975, there were thousands of sponsored students studying abroad, who were mostly working on higher degrees, like master’s degrees and doctorates, in different fields (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). However, the number of students studying abroad dropped considerably after the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), when more restrictions were put on acquiring American visas. In 2004, there were 1000 Saudi students studying in the US (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

In 2005, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia started the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) with an agreement between King Abdullah and President George W. Bush to increase the number of Saudi students in the US and to make the visa requirements easier for Saudis. After the meeting, King Abdullah and President Bush released a lengthy joint statement:

Finally, the United States and Saudi Arabia agree that our future relations must rest on a foundation of broad cooperation. We must work to expand dialogue, understanding, and interactions between our citizens. This will include programs designed to (1) increase the number of young Saudi students to travel and study in the United States; (2) increase our military exchange programs so that more Saudi officers visit the United States for military education and training; and (3) increase the number of Americans traveling to work and study in the Kingdom. The United States recognizes we must exert great efforts to overcome obstacles facing Saudi businessmen and students who wish to enter the United States and we pledge to our Saudi friends that we will take on this effort. (GPO.gov, 2005, p. 667)

KASP is the largest scholarship program in the history of Saudi Arabia, and it is unique in scope and ambition. According to the Ministry of Education, KASP’s mission is:
to prepare and qualify Saudi human resources in an effective manner so that they will be able to compete on an international level in the labor market and the different areas of scientific research, and thereby become an important source of supply of highly qualified individuals for Saudi universities as well as the government and private sectors. (Ministry of Education, 2011).

This program aims to satisfy the staffing requirements of future tourism workplaces all across the kingdom. More than 100,000 KASP students have enrolled in US colleges and universities (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). The number of Saudi students in the US is set to grow even further in the near future, because in 2013, King Abdullah extended the KASP program for another five years. The program is currently set to end in 2020 (Altamimi, 2014).

Saudi students can choose to study in highly developed countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and other Western European countries. Despite the many options, the US is now the preferred destination for Saudi students (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). California is at the top list as the favorite state in the US with over 11,000 enrolled Saudi students. This is partly because California has over 80 public and private colleges that are approved by Saudi’s Ministry of Education (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia handles the scholarships in majors like hospitality and tourism management, nursing, medicine, engineering, and many others (Ministry of Education, 2011). Additionally, the Ministry of Education has a list of all of the accredited schools in the world, which helps students find the universities or colleges they would like to attend (Denman & Hilal, 2013). In addition, California attracts so many students because of its good weather and many recreational attractions (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

1.3. Growth of Tourism Schools in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government has invested $2.6 billion in the expansion of the education system for any Saudi university, and a total of $219 billion is the largest number that has ever been approved in the history of Saudi Arabia (Pavan, 2013). There are six public and seven private colleges that offer bachelor and two-year diploma degrees in the tourism and hospitality fields. Those degrees are aimed at filling the tourism and hospitality industry positions in Saudi Arabia (Monshi & Scott, 2016).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year Opened</th>
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<td>Alhokeer High Institute for Hospitality and Tourism Education</td>
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<td>Tourism</td>
<td>Tabuk</td>
<td>2015-17</td>
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Table 1-1  Public and private colleges in Saudi Arabia offering degrees in tourism and hospitality. (Monshi & Scott, 2016)
To ensure the quality of these colleges, some have signed agreements with well-known international institutions or colleges. The idea is to use these institutions to improve the curriculum at the Saudi colleges, as well as to establish contacts for an exchange programs for the students. For example, the Tourism Institute at King Abdulaziz University has a partnership agreement with Gallon Institute in Switzerland. Another example, Alhokeer High Institute for Hospitality and Tourism Education has a partnership with the Hotel and Tourism Management Institute in Switzerland (Monshi & Scott, 2016). In addition, the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation has signed several agreements to improve its tourism programs. These agreements will establish approximately 29 tourism and hospitality colleges that will be fully operated by international institutions such as Laureate College, Niagara College, and Q2 College (Technical and Vocational Training Corporation, 2014).

1.4. Saudis at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)

RIT has more than 2497 students from other countries (rit.edu, 2014). The Saudi population of students studying at RIT comes in third after that of India and China (rit.edu, 2014). Jeffrey W Cox (2014), the Director of International Student Services at RIT, provided the following figure that shows the growth data of Saudi student enrollment in RIT’s programs:

![Enrollment from Saudi Arabia at RIT](image)

**Figure 1-1** Enrolled students from Saudi Arabia at RIT
1.5. **Statement of Problem**

According to the numbers provided by Cox (2014), the number of Saudi students studying at Rochester Institute of Technology has been steadily growing. R. Lagiewski (personal communication, February 2015) stated that almost a third of students enrolled in the graduate HTM program at RIT are from Saudi Arabia. With a large proportion of Saudi students enrolled in this program, it is unclear if their educational needs and expectations are being met. Hence, this study focuses on investigating what their experiences are in order to provide recommendations to RIT faculty and leadership.

1.6. **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this study was to explore Saudi graduate students’ educational experience in the US, specifically at RIT. This study investigated the students’ reasons for choosing to study in the HTM graduate program at RIT. The study aimed to identify the curriculum and pedagogical needs of graduate students from Saudi Arabia who were studying hospitality and tourism management in the United States.

1.7. **Definition of Important Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the terms are defined as follows:

**Curriculum:** “the courses that are taught by a school, college, etc.” (Merriam Webster, 2015).

**Pedagogy:** “the art, science, or profession of teaching.”(Merriam Webster, 2015).

**Saudi market:** For this study, the Saudi students at RIT.

1.8. **Importance of Research**

The results of this study provided feedback to RIT and the School of International Hospitality and Service Management in their effort to continually improve their program. Specifically, this study helped provide a unique understanding of the needs
and experiences of Saudi Arabian students. This may also help to improve the future experiences of other foreign students studying in the US.

1.9. Research Questions

In order to improve the courses offered in the graduate HTM program at RIT, as well as improve the teaching methods in the classroom and the overall educational experience, the following questions were explored:

Question 1: How do Saudi students feel about their educational and social experiences at RIT?

Question 2: What type of pedagogical strategies are best implemented to deliver a hospitality and tourism curriculum to students from Saudi Arabia?

1.10. Research Objectives

The research objectives were as follows:

1. Determine why Saudi students choose to study at RIT.
2. Document why Saudi students choose to study in the United States.
3. Explore Saudi learning and educational experiences at RIT.
4. Make recommendations for improving course content and teaching methods offered in the HTM graduate program at RIT.
5. Document the social and cultural interactions with RIT HTM faculty.

A review of the academic literature is provided in chapter two of this research. A large number of academic sources, including thesis papers, journal articles, and books, were used to provide the research with the amount of information it required. The literature review covers the factors influencing international students’ selections of universities, quality of education, and learning environment and styles differences between Saudi Arabia and the US. Moreover, the roles of employability, language acquisition, gender integration, and friendship were also discussed.
2. CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This literature review examined the research surrounding international and Saudi Arabian students studying abroad in the US. It also covered the reasons international students select the US as the country to do their studies as well as how they select a university and program of study. The literature review addressed the major learning style differences between Saudi Arabia and the US. Finally, the social and cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and USA were covered.

2.2. Factors Influencing the Selection of the US as the Country in which to Study Abroad

Several factors influenced international students’ decisions to study in the United States. Schweitzer (2009) described them as the high quality of American education, the wide selection of universities to choose from, the many kinds of degree programs, the fact that tuition is affordable, and the improved ability to find employment. These factors are explored in more detail below.

2.2.1. Quality of education

The high quality of the education in US universities draws students into all levels of graduate and undergraduate programs (Caldwell 2013). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found that the most important factor influencing the choice of what country to study in is the quality of its reputation. The United States is well known all throughout the world, and its educational system has a reputation for having high standards; these are significant reasons for international students to study in the US (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The extracurricular learning environment is also a draw for international students, meaning the students have the opportunity to join in activities, such as sports, music, clubs, and volunteer work, within the college environment (Caldwell, 2013). Smith & Abu (2013) noted that in US, the programs and extra-curricular activities are
designed to give students the best chance at learning the material while at the same time developing their potential to the fullest. Caldwell (2013) stated that Saudi students took advantage of the activities outside of the classroom, such as joining the Muslim Society group, as they played sports within the college. Those activities made the Saudi students’ life easier while they were away from home (Caldwell 2013). However, it was up to the individual student to take advantage of the opportunities (Smith & Abū, 2013).

2.2.2. **Effect on employability**

A degree from the US increases employability, and that is an important factor leading Saudi students to choose to study in the US (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Caldwell, 2013; Schweitzer, 2009). Taylor and Albasri (2014) pointed out that a US education is considered so desirable now in Saudi Arabia that many Saudi students need to seek an education abroad simply in order to stay competitive. Alhazami & Nyland (2013) specified that the US is considered to have a high educational standard with regard to training people for professional business jobs, and it is generally regarded as up to date with the practices and theories being used in the global economy. Because of this, students who have graduated from US universities have a better chance of gaining employment anywhere in the world over students who have degrees from less reputable countries (Alhazmi & Nyland 2013).

In addition, most US universities have career centers that offer student services like resume workshops, direct links to recruiters, connections to the network of alumni, and other services to help position them advantageously in the job market. This kind of professional support is seen as a significant advantage if students want to compete in the private sector for a job after graduation (Alhazmi & Nyland 2013).

2.2.3. **Language acquisition**

The majority of Saudi students come to the US without the ability to speak and/or write grammatically correct English (Pavan, 2013). However, many US universities have programs and learning centers especially designed to help students develop and polish their English language skills in writing, reading, listening, and speaking. The
ability to understand spoken English easily and to respond clearly is important in the tourism industry, because employees are required to interact with people from many different countries; for this reason, language acquisition is a significant reason Saudi students come to the US (Pavan, 2013). Taylor & Albarisi (2014) also found that the major reason a US education is so desirable is because it greatly improves the English of the students, and most employers in tourism strongly prefer to hire people with English language skills (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

2.3. University Selection Among International Students

Students decide where to do their undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States for a wide variety of reasons (Schweitzer, 2009). International students have their own unique set of reasons to consider, leading them to weigh the school’s reputation, using family or friends recommendations, and considering the social cost and the weather (Veloutsou, 2009; Patton, 2000).

According to Mazzarol (2002), the university’s place of origin, along with its recognition in the student’s home country, is a significant reason to choose the right offshore college. Recommendations from those who have already studied in a particular offshore university or college is considered valuable when those past students recommend their alma mater to their children and/or family members. Therefore, word-of-mouth referral is considered an effective way that international universities are promoted in order to attract as many students as possible. The reputation of the school in regard to its accreditation is a reason for selecting an offshore institution. Hence, accreditation, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, is appreciated by employers in the international student’s home country (Mazzarol, 2002). According to Daily, Farewell, & Kumar (2010), social cost issues, such as crime and safety, are high among international students selecting an offshore college. In addition, the presence of international student populations and friends or relatives in the college that is targeted is considered an important reason in the student’s the final decision. Taylor & Albasri (2014) indicated that the weather was one a reason many international students considered before choosing a university. Students from Saudi Arabia prefer
hot and sunny offshore college destinations because they have come from hot and sunny Saudi Arabia.

International students place the most emphasis on the ability to select a major (Patton, 2000). O’Mahoney, McWilliams, and Whitelaw (2001) found that the availability of the desired major is a more important consideration for international students than the overall reputation of the university. Also, in the O’Mahoney et al. (2001) study of 143 students, who were applying for hospitality schools, 76 of them chose their majors before looking into a school’s career opportunities and its reputation. Thus, teachers in those hospitality colleges were the first to introduce the students to career chances in the industry (O’Mahoney et al., 2001).

Financial aid is an important reason in the choice for many international students. Sometimes, the financial packages are the first consideration. Students would rather learn, first, about the financial situation rather than risk making a final decision that could turn out to be too expensive down the road (Dimaria, 2003). However, this research is less applicable to Saudi students because they can rely on the KASP for financial support. According to the Ministry of Education (2011), Saudi students still could finance themselves and study aboard as self-sponsored students. However, the Saudi Arabian Culture Mission is committed to serve all scholarship holders and self-sponsored students aboard. In addition, the requirements to transfer from being a self-sponsored student to the King Abdullah Scholarship funding program is to complete 30 credit hours for the undergraduate applicant and to complete nine hours for graduate students (Ministry of Education, 2011).

2.3.1. Trusted sources of information

One limiting factor that is applicable to Saudi students is that students can only apply to programs they know about. A major way that Saudi students get information about where to study is via the Ministry of Education’s list of approved schools (Denman & Hilal, 2013). The ministry of Education provides a list of universities to choose from. Thus, university and major information are not updated in some of the listings. Increased availability of information and updated information are still needed (Pringle, 2014).
Li et al. (2013) describe how international students rely more heavily on trusted people and familiar institutions (“reference groups”) when choosing a university than they do on impersonal sources such as websites, social media, or literature from the university. For example, inviting successful alumni to participate in an informational sessions to share their knowledge and experience about choosing offshore university to prospective students will increase the confidence of the students’ future choices. In addition, in-person informational sessions in the students’ country of origin, especially if these sessions include parents and other influential people, could improve international student recruitment and choice of college (Li et. al., 2013).

According to Li et al. (2013), a trusted source can also be a company in the student’s home country acting in a partnership capacity with the foreign university. For instance, US colleges which they attract students from all over the world, they first choose their local partner with high reputation as students pay more importance to the local partner image before considering what offshore university to choose. Thus, the reputation of the local partner company can be a bigger factor in choice of school than the school’s international reputation (Li, Liu, & Rojas-Méndez, 2013).

### 2.3.2. Selection of major

In one study that spanned 25 years, Gordon and Steele (2003) studied the decision-making process of 19,800 students concerning their choice of a college major. The researchers found that 70-90% of the students chose a program of study that would enable or further their career development (Gordon & Steele, 2003). McInerney, DiDonato, Giagnacova, & O’Donnell (2006) found that while the selection of a major or a program of study can be influenced by factors like positive experiences in high school, key teachers, or family encouragement, the most important elements controlling students’ choice of a major were career-related considerations like salary offered by that field, job opportunities, and potential for advancement (McInerney et al., 2006). Maringe (2006) also found that job-related factors among college students in the US influence their selection of choosing a major (Maringe, 2006).

The expected growth of the tourism industry in Saudi Arabia, and the number of jobs expected to result from it, are high. Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, President of the SCTA, recently pledged financial and administrative support for
raising tourism to one of the most important features of the state (MENA Report, 2014). In 2011, the SCTA launched the National Project for Tourism Human Resources Development with the aim of training 10,000 Saudis for new jobs in the tourism sector over the subsequent three years (TradeArabia, 2011). The SCTA is also working in cooperation with the private sector to raise their investment level. As a result, the Hilton hotels group stated that they are scheduled to open 20 new hotels in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by 2018 (McClatchey-Tribune Business News, 2014). Linking the importance of employment in the selection of a college major with the enormous investment in tourism on the part of both the government of Saudi Arabia and major foreign hotels, high numbers of Saudi Arabian foreign students can be expected to choose majors in the hospitality and tourism industries as a result.

2.4. Learning Style Differences Between Saudi Arabia and the US

According to Sywelem, Al-Harbi, Fathema, and Witte (2012), the way people learn is influenced by culture, and it is therefore natural to expect different cultures and countries to have different styles of learning. Learning styles can include different amounts of participation, different techniques, and even the use of different senses. For example, someone who hears something and remembers it is considered an auditory learner, whereas someone who sees something and remembers it is considered a visual learner (Abdu Saadi, 2014).

Saudi education is religiously based; it emphasizes tradition and obedience to authority (Prokop, 2003). Around 54% of the subjects and teaching hours are in Islamic-related topics, such as the Qur’an (the holy book), and the Tafsir (interpretation on the Qur’an), from elementary school through high school (Prokop, 2003). In addition, departments, such as art, history, and administration in the university level, have up to 45% of their subjects and topics in Islamic- and Arabic-related topics. Even students in technical colleges with English being used in the classroom as the main language of communication are required to take up to 14% of their courses in Islamic topics (Prokop, 2003). Prokop (2003) stated that obedience to authority (Obey Allah and his Prophet and those with authority such as a teacher and head of the family) is an important duty to be followed from the citizens.
As part of this traditional orientation, the Saudi Arabian educational system focuses on rote memorization as a learning method, with less emphasis on critical thinking. This causes Saudi students to have weaknesses in communicating verbally, as well as in writing communications—not only in English but even in their native language—which is Arabic (Rugh, 2002a). In addition, students are not encouraged in the Saudi educational system to make presentations and use computer applications, such as Word, PowerPoint, and Excel in their studies. As a result of the memorization learning style, Saudi students are not able to easily succeed in the workforce because they fail to solve problems, be critical thinkers, and be creative (Rugh 2002a).

The level of participation in US and Saudi classrooms is quite different. Caldwell (2013) specified that in America, the students have to do a lot of homework, group work, presentations, projects, and peer-reviewed discussions, and showing up for class is very important. In Saudi Arabia, however, aspects, such as attendance, are less important, and student participation is minimal, as students are evaluated by passing the exams (Shaw, 2009). According to Smith & Abū (2013), the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia allocated 60% of the final grade for examinations and 40% for midterm exams and other assignments in class. Hence, short-answer, true-false questions, and multiple-choices were the method of evaluating students’ performance. Also, students were not able to receive feedback especially after the final exam (Smith & Abū, 2013).

The ways in which the American education system ensures that students understand and internalize the content of their studies are completely foreign and unfamiliar to Saudi students (Razek, 2013). According to Shaw (2009), the Saudi classroom is teacher-oriented, meaning the learning is done by the professor giving a lecture and the students listening to it. This is the traditional learning environment that has been used since the inception of the Saudi educational system. Because of the importance attached to upholding tradition in the Saudi culture, as well as the disinclination to question authority, this style of education is built into the Saudi educational system. There is a criterion for success in this system, and that is passing the exams. Therefore, Saudi students are used to focusing all of their efforts on passing exams, and they are not at all accustomed to other learning methods like participating in class, asking questions, giving presentations, or doing group exercises. Faced with
these unfamiliar tasks, priorities, and criteria for success, Saudi students can feel unsure of themselves and even feel threatened (Shaw, 2009).

2.5. Learning Environment Differences Between Saudi Arabia and the US

Saudi Arabian students in American institutions have several issues to deal with. The loss of familiar language, friends, family, and comprehensible cultural norms, along with unfamiliar food and clothing, make life difficult and bewildering (Dudley, 2013). Close to 75% of Saudi Arabian students perceive vast cultural differences between them and the American students (Caldwell, 2013). Cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication between international students and members of the host country can lead the students to being less willing to interact with the students in the host country (Goldoni, 2013). In a study by Lee and Rice (2007), they interviewed 3000 international students and found that students thought that Americans were not interested in exchanging cultures with them, as well as them feeling unwelcomed because of the lack of English language proficiency. The biggest problems reported by Saudi Arabian students studying in Missouri were living and dining situations and the language barrier (Hofer, 2009).

Denman and Hilal (2013) found that social life is challenging for international students, as they may feel left out and alone at times, and they have a hard time keeping up with school work. In the US, for instance, students must do their homework, study every day, prepare for class, complete projects, and write papers on a regular basis, while in Saudi Arabia, most of the mentioned tasks are not required. Therefore, time organization may present a new challenge (Denman & Hilal, 2013). The challenge of time organization is especially relevant in light of Smith & Abu’s (2013) finding that while the extracurricular life of US universities is rich (meaning the students have the chance of participating in sports, art, academics, and/or community service within the college), it is up to the students to take advantage of those opportunities (Smith & Abū, 2013). Alfnifie (2012) found that students in Saudi Arabia tend to participate in sports, arts, and extracurricular activities more than community service and academics. However, when Saudi students participate in community service, it helps to improve their team work and social skills. Rather
than to attend classes consistently, Saudi students hire tutors to help them outside of the university setting in order to increase their academic scores (Alfnifie, 2012).

### 2.5.1. Gender roles

One important difference between Saudi and US universities is that in Saudi Arabia, the universities all have women in separate classrooms or facilities, whereas in the US, women and men usually roam the same halls, share the same classrooms, and even study together (Rugh, 2002). A gender-integrated learning atmosphere means that both men and women from Saudi Arabia must navigate different expectations of how to behave as men and women, in addition to all the other new facets of life. Saudi Arabian women report increased confidence, intellectual growth, and independence as a result of experiencing new gender norms while studying in the US (Leftal-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Heyn (2013) stated that Saudi male students changed their perceptions about Saudi women studying in the US, and they believed that women could have as same opportunities as men in terms of jobs or positions. According to the Alshaya (2005) study findings, that 80% of 245 male Saudi participants believed that women were as important as men, and they believed that Saudi women had the right to have higher positions as equal to men in governmental and private-sector jobs.

### 2.5.2. Social interactions

Social networks are important for helping international students handle the various challenges of being away from home (Kisang, 2010). Because Saudi Arabia is a much more collectivist culture than the US, international students feel the loss of their family, friends, and personal support networks extremely acutely (Rezak, 2013). The language barrier and cultural differences are great enough to make it difficult. Heyn (2013) pointed out that the creation of social and culture interactions between Saudis and Americans are important to improve their educational exchange. Therefore, when Saudi students interact with the rest of the students in the classroom and the university, in general, it is much easier for them to reap the benefits of their cross-cultural education (Heyn, 2013).
Personal relationships and positive interactions with the Americans they met were key in helping Arab students engage in American society (Kamal & Maruyama, 1990). Home stays, in particular, were extremely beneficial for Saudi Arabian students. The chance to live with American families for some time ensures that both societies have a chance to learn and to understand each other better. Initial misunderstandings that might be due to cultural differences can be overcome with time and as mutual understanding grows. Much of the cultural integration between the Saudi Arabian and the America society is defined by the respect that develops from these interpersonal relationships (Razek & Coyner, 2013).

International students who engaged, and formed friendships, with American students described their personal interactions as helpful to both their educations and their careers (Shaw, 2009). Shaw recommended that schools encourage activities where both international and American students are involved, citing benefits for all parties. Finally, according to Alhazmi and Nyland (2013), joining social gatherings helped international students form lasting relationships at the personal and professional levels, highlighting the importance of forming friendships in both a successful program of study and a successful career later on (Alhazami & Nyland, 2013).

In summation, Chapter two identified the key areas this study sought to investigate. The literature review made use of reliable academic sources such as books and journal articles. Areas that the literature review covered included factors influencing the selection of the US as a destination for education, quality of education in the United States, and language issues for Saudi students. The chapter also discussed factors of university and academic major selection and the differences in learning environments and styles between Saudi Arabia and the US. In Chapter three, methodology is presented, and it explains the procedures the researcher followed through the process of data collection and data analysis.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This is a basic qualitative study. A basic study is used to understand how people interpret their experiences and how people make sense of their worlds, as well as how they construct their lives (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

In this study, open-ended interview questions were used to understand the Saudi Arabian graduate HTM students’ needs and expectations in regard to courses offered and teaching methods used in the classroom. This study may help improve the future experiences of other foreign students studying in the US.

3.2. Interview Design

The study consists of interviews with Saudi students who are currently attending the Graduate Program of Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) in Rochester, New York, USA. The primary investigator interviewed each person using a semi-structured interview format. According to Patton (2002), qualitative interviews help to provide in-depth information about a small sample of participants.

The interview consisted of questions designed for HTM Saudi Arabian graduate students at RIT. The questions were divided into five sections (Appendix 3). Section one included six questions about the participant’s background in terms of where he/she was from in Saudi Arabia, as well as what university he/she attended for an undergraduate degree, along with what they majored in. This section also included if this was the student’s first visit to the US and if he/she took English classes in Saudi Arabia. This section included what exit strategy (comprehensive exam, capstone project, or thesis) the student decided to take to graduate. Section two consisted of three questions, along with a sub question, to determine why participants chose to attend RIT and why they chose to major in the HTM program. This section also sought to reveal if the student was looking to be prepared to continue onto a doctoral program or be prepared to work in industry. Section three contained two questions to determine why participants chose to study in the US, as well as to describe their experience studying in Rochester. Section four consisted of six questions to
determine the major differences between studying in the US vs Saudi, and if the participant’s English ability had an impact on the achievement of higher grades in courses. This section also included the interaction with non-Saudi students as well as describing the overall experience taking courses in the HTM program. Finally, this section contained questions about the course subjects and whether or not they met the students’ expectations, as well as if they would like to see topics added into the program. Section five investigated social and cultural interactions with faculty, which consisted of three questions. In this section, the questions were focused to gather information from the participant on his or her relationship with professors, and whether or not the students felt comfortable discussing goals with their teachers. In addition, the final question asked in this section was to reveal how taking classes with other Saudi students influenced their learning experience. Last, an open question was asked at the end of the interviews to learn from the participants what change they would make to their learning experience.

3.3. Participants

The study was conducted with Saudi students who were enrolled the HTM department at RIT. All graduate Saudi students in the HTM program of both genders, different ages, and with different backgrounds were recruited. The research faculty advisor provided the researcher with a list of the current graduate Saudi students in the HTM program at RIT. Invitation letters, with an attached informed consent document, were sent to nine students via email (Appendix 1 and 2). The students took two to four days to connect with the researcher. Six students connected with the researcher by a phone call, and three students replied to the invitation letter via email. All nine Saudi HTM graduate students agreed to take part in this study and participate. In addition, they agreed to sign the informed consent document on their scheduled interview day. The study was voluntary, and the interviews took place in a private room at the Park Point Club House next to RIT. This location was chosen by the participants, and it was convenient for them. Students agreeing to take part in the study signed the informed consent document (Appendix 2). Each interview lasted between 45 to 55 minutes.
3.4. Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher submitted all required documents and the thesis proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received an approval. The participants were protected by conducting the interview in a private setting and by allowing no manual recording of any identifying information about the individual participants. Any reporting or publication of the study does not include the names of participants. To ensure anonymity, the participants were assigned a code to link them to their interview audiotapes for the purposes of verification.

Transcribed interviews have been kept in a secured drive and saved in a locked drawer. The signed consent forms are kept in a separate location in a locked drawer. Interview recordings have been stored in a locked cabinet and were destroyed after verification of the transcriptions. The data in this study is only accessible to the HTM faculty advisor and the researcher.

3.5. Data Collection Procedures

The data was collected from the participants in semi-structured, qualitative interviews. The interviews were audio recorded using an iPhone recording application called iTalk in order to record the interviews for transcription. The audio recordings were transcribed by an expert transcriber to ensure quality. Each transcript was checked against the audio recordings to verify the accuracy of the data.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedures

The interviews were hand coded using Creswell (2014) steps, which helps to describe and analyze the data collected. The data analysis in qualitative research began with several general steps. The researcher started by organizing the data for analysis. Then, the researcher went through each line as in hand coding. The interviews were coded using open coding, yielding a total of 65 initial codes (Appendix 4). The codes were grouped into 10 categories (Appendix 5), and the categories were grouped into three core concepts (Appendix 6). A conceptual
diagram was developed to explain the relationship between the categories of findings and to suggest overarching themes (Fig. 1).

The transcript recordings were repeatedly consulted in a process of constant comparison to check the validity of the categories and the conceptual diagram. Seven tables were populated with sample quotes to illustrate the nature and range of the findings. The categories were adjusted and some new categories were developed.

Continuing the process of constant comparison, the interviews were re-read to check for overlooked information relevant to the new categories. The conceptual diagram was adjusted to better show relationships between categories. Finally, the data were presented and discussed.

In short, the data of this study were collected using semi-structured interviews. The population of the study included only Saudi students who were enrolled in the HTM Master’s Program at RIT. Approval from the RIT IRB was received by the researcher to conduct interviews while also ensure the protection of the human subjects. Data analysis was hand coded using Creswell (2014) steps. Chapter four summarizes the results of the research.
4. CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

4.1. Introduction

The HTM program at RIT seeks to develop the courses offered and the teaching methods used in the classroom. With a large proportion of Saudi students enrolled in this program, it is unclear if the students’ educational needs and expectations are being met (R. Lagiewski, personal communication, February 2015). This study focused on investigating what the students’ experiences are in order to provide recommendations to RIT faculty and leadership. This study also focused on determine why Saudi students choose to study at RIT and in the United States, in general, as well as to document the social and cultural interactions of the Saudi students with RIT HTM faculty.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 1&lt;br&gt;Start of Interview</td>
<td>1. Participants background&lt;br&gt;2. Undergrad major&lt;br&gt;3. School attended in S.A.&lt;br&gt;4. Student’s first visit to the US&lt;br&gt;5. Exit strategy taken to graduate&lt;br&gt;6. English courses taken in S.A.</td>
<td>Profile questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 2</td>
<td>1. Reason to attend RIT&lt;br&gt;2. Reason to major in HTM&lt;br&gt;3. If the student was looking to be prepared for a PhD or industry</td>
<td>Determine why Saudis students choose to study at RIT – Objective 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3</td>
<td>1. Reason for study in the USA&lt;br&gt;2. Experience studying in RIT</td>
<td>Document why Saudi students choose to study in the United States – Objective 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 4</td>
<td>1. Differences between S.A. vs US&lt;br&gt;2. If English ability impacted courses expectations&lt;br&gt;3. Interactions with non-Saudi students&lt;br&gt;4. If the subjects of the courses met the student’s expectation&lt;br&gt;5. If there are topics the participant would like to see added&lt;br&gt;6. Overall experience taking courses in HTM program</td>
<td>Explore Saudi learning and educational experiences at RIT – Objective 3&lt;br&gt;Make recommendations for improving course content and teaching methods offered in the HTM graduate program at RIT – Objective 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 5</td>
<td>1. Relationship with the teachers&lt;br&gt;2. If the student feels comfortable to discuss goals with professors&lt;br&gt;3. If taking classes with Saudis influenced student’s experience</td>
<td>Document the social and cultural interactions with RIT HTM faculty – Objective 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 6&lt;br&gt;End of Interview</td>
<td>If you could make one change to your learning experience what would it be</td>
<td>Closing the Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-1 Interview questions linked to research objectives
The interview questions that were asked were divided into five sections, as explained in Chapter three in the interview design section. Table 4-1 shows the structure of the interview questions and the link to the research objectives.

### 4.1.1. Profile of Participants

The participants for this study came from different cities in Saudi Arabia. Three out of nine, or 33% of the students were from Riyadh, and the rest of the students came from Jizan, Jeddah, Thuwal, Al Jubail, and Madinah. The majority of the students, or 78%, majored in HTM in their undergraduate degrees, whereas 22% majored in programs outside of the HTM program. Most of the students, or six out of nine graduated from the same undergraduate college and majors in Saudi Arabia. In addition, 66% of the students had directional academic interests, as they had chosen to take use the thesis method as their exist strategy. Last, 89% of students were in the US for the first time, and 66%, or six out of nine, had taken English courses at the English Language Centre at RIT. These demographics are illustrated in Table 4-2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Where are you from in Saudi Arabia?</th>
<th>Undergrad major</th>
<th>School attended</th>
<th>First visit to the US?</th>
<th>Exit strategy</th>
<th>Took English classes before?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jizan</td>
<td>Hospitality &amp; Tourism Mgt. (HTM)</td>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>S.A./ US – RIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Thuwal</td>
<td>Hospitality Mgt. (HM)</td>
<td>University of Utara in Malaysia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>MALAYSIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Madinah</td>
<td>Germanistics</td>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Comp Exam</td>
<td>S.A./ US – RIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>HTM</td>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>S.A./ US – RIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jizan</td>
<td>HTM</td>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>S.A./ US – RIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Al Jubail</td>
<td>Resorts &amp; HM</td>
<td>Utah University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Comp Exam</td>
<td>CANADA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>HTM</td>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>S.A./ US – RIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Riyadh</td>
<td>HTM</td>
<td>King Saud University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>RIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jeddah</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>King Abdul Aziz University</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Comp Exam</td>
<td>S.A./ US – RIT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-2 Profile of students who participated
The following headings are categories with objectives for gathering data and they are in place to illustrate the variety of responses of the participants. The sample quotes are labeled so they can be located in the interview transcripts. The notation “(4; Q. 5.1),” for example, indicates that the quote came from the fourth interview, section five, question one.

4.2. Why do Saudis choose to study at RIT?

Objective: Determine why Saudi students choose to study at RIT. Document why Saudi students choose to study in the United States.

In this study, 56% of the participants mentioned that the low entrance bar, including the lack of having to complete a GRE or other standardized tests as a requirement for application, as a factor in their choice to attend RIT. Three participants specifically mentioned the lack of an English-language exam requirement. This is a host institution issue because the university sets the entrance requirements. However, it is also a student preparation issue because the low entrance barrier, particularly with regard to language, defines the minimum level of language skill required to undertake graduate studies at that institution. By defining the minimum language level, it thereby defines the student-preparation requirement.

A high number of participants reported the desire for to be on a research track, which points to an important feature of this group of participants; that is, six out of nine, or 67% of the participants, intended to pursue PhDs. While most linkages to the literature review are indicated in the discussion section, it is worth noting here that the high percentage of PhD aspirants was unexpected based on the literature review, because the literature review focused heavily on hospitality jobs in the tourism industry as a reason for Saudi Arabian students to pursue graduate degrees in the US (Alhazmi & Nyland 2013; Pavan 2013; Taylor & Albasri 2014).

With regards to exploring reasons for getting a master’s degree in HTM, some students expressed their interests with a research track course focus, and they also explained some of the detailed reasons behind their decision. Specifically, five participants (55%) said they have jobs as research assistants at universities in Saudi Arabia, and the job contracts for these positions require them to get graduate degrees
from US institutions. The following quotes extract their reasons to study a master’s degree in HTM at RIT:

I’m [an] assistance teaching at Jizan University, so . . . actually it’s kind of like compulsory to complete my PhD program. (1; Q. 2.1)

I want to pursue my PhD since I have a full scholarship from King Saud University. They asked me to, not they asked, they forced me to take a master’s degree followed with a PhD. (4; Q. 1.5)

I was hired in Jizan University as a teachers assistance [assistant], and they asked me to go complete my Master’s and PhD. . . . I have a contract to accomplish my Master’s and PhD in order to complete my job there. (5; Q. 2.1, 2.2)

I’m [a] teacher assistant at King Saud University, so my university required me to get a PhD. (8; Q. 1.5)

It is crucial to understand the rest of the findings. Hence, three out of nine participants expressed a non-academic route of study, and their reason to study a master’s degree in HTM in the US was prepared them for work in the HTM industry. They said:

This field could provide me with a lot of opportunities to work in Saudi Arabia. (3; Q. 2.1)

Well, honestly I was looking for both. You know, job opportunities both in the United States and Saudi Arabia, too. (6: Q. 2.2)

I would like to start my own business and be a wedding planner. (9; Q. 2.1)

Five out of nine, as mentioned above, already had jobs in Saudi universities as a teaching assistants. Four out of nine had not signed contracts yet. Three of the four were looking into the industry for job opportunities. However, one of these four was looking to be trained in both, in the industry and to be an academic. He said:

I plan to take my PhD and I also plan [to be] an academic. . . . I am looking for both; it’s not only the one that prepare[s] me in industry, but also [the] PhD. (2; Q. 1.5, 2.2)

4.3. Saudi Learning and Educational Experiences at RIT

Objective: Explore Saudi learning and educational experiences at RIT. Make recommendations for improving course content and teaching methods offered in the HTM graduate program at RIT.
The main issue in student preparation was their level of ability speaking English. Almost all of the participants, eight out of nine, or 89%, reported that their level of ability with speaking English caused difficulties for them. Of these, one respondent (#4) reported that while he saw the additional time spent reading and writing as a not beneficial, he also saw the thorough understanding that resulted from the additional times as a beneficial. He said:

[S]ometimes I need more time to understand things . . . . It’s negative when you just have another thing to do and you just spend your time and spending more time. But it’s just beneficial when you keep focusing on the task and try to realize it, and try to put your effort on it, so that would provide you with the knowledge, with new thoughts. And from that point, you can learn a lot. So, as I mentioned, it’s a positive and negative thing. (4; Q. 4.2)

The mean of the total reporting that their English level had a non-beneficial effect on their studies was 78%. Of the students who had English preparation from Saudi Arabia and RIT, all seven reported difficulty with English and spending extra time, which means they had to read and re-read the assignments to understand them. The following quotes express their opinions in this regard:

Sometimes I have to do double of the work that English speakers do. For examples, if they can read a chapter in two or three hours, I would read that chapter in four or six hours. (3; Q. 4.2)

Sometimes even when we attend classes, we cannot catch up because this is hard for us to understand information that we need from articles or textbooks that we read, because we need to read it more than once. And that is hard for us because we do not have time to read all of the materials given to us. (5; Q. 4.1)

The most point that I am suffering with in my studying here is the English barrier. (7; Q. 4.2)

I have to spend six, seven hours in one paper, not like my American classmates, they might spend just one hour or less. Or they can just like read the main things in the paper. But for me, no, I have to, maybe I don’t trust the situation, I don’t trust my understanding. So, I have to, I think I have to read and read and read until I can be able to discuss with the professor. (8; Q. 4.2)

Of the students with English-language preparation from a source outside RIT, one reported no difficulties, whereas the other participant reported difficulties. The student (#2) who reported no difficulties described because of four years of undergraduate education that was taught in English in Malaysia. He said:
Because I was studying for four years in Malaysia in English, it was very much easier for me to be familiar with the terminology in our program. And that set me apart from other students who did not have four years English experience. . . . And I think I was able to meet the expectation of course with my English ability. (2; Q. 4.2)

Student #6, who reported difficulties, and who had learned English in Canada said:

[T]he things I would learn for the first time or I would hear about for the first time, yes, it would probably take me double the work or, like, a little bit more than just doing it like once, maybe try to do it twice or three times to actually achieve the results, or having the answer for a question. (6; Q. 4.2)

Regarding classroom pedagogy, the initial findings revealed that 78% found that teaching techniques and methods were different between the US and Saudi Arabia, and the preferred the US modalities. Some of the participants stated the following:

[D]efinitely it’s positive to learn and to know or realize what’s the new skills are like research methods in the US. (1; Q. 4.1)

[H]ere in the US, we have a lot of presentations. We have a lot of interactions inside the class. We have visited a lot of sites. . . . Moreover, here in the United States, they would bring you people from your industry, from your field in the class to give you more experience. (3; Q. 4.1)

[T]he difference . . . it is positive here in the United States. You can share your ideas, your thoughts with the students, you can learn from them . . . . We have learned how to share our knowledge, our thoughts. . . . We have learned a lot. (4; Q. 4.1)

[T]he US environment in studying, it’s better than the Saudi Arabia . . . . [T]he teacher here has tried to use different method[s] in teaching, like for example . . . most of teachers take a student to field trips. (7; Q. 4.1)

[H]ere the total experience is different. In Saudi Arabia, we just listened to the doctor, the professor, but here, no. We are more involved. We present, we write, we discuss. (8; Q. 4.1)

One student did not comment at all, and another student (11%) reported differences that while the requirements to cite sources and write papers using APA style were difficult, the new level of writing skill he or she had gained was beneficial; that interview was categorized as containing both beneficial and non-beneficial reactions to the US teaching methods. The student stated:

I had to develop my writing skills . . . And also the plagiarism and the APA style, we don’t have all of this in Saudi Arabia. You can write whatever you want, from wherever you want, you don’t have to cite anything. . . . Actually,
all that was challenging to me. Besides, I like the teamwork that they do here in classes, brainstorming, and online discussions. (9; Q. 4.1)

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents intended to pursue PhDs. They would like to see more research courses or skills added to the curriculum. Some of those who desired more research-track courses and skills shared their opinions in this regard.

[S]tatistics for research methods. It’s not good enough for us . . . because we are gonna plan for to do PhD that they have four or three classes in statistics. (1; Q 4.5)

If they want to be an academic, there must be courses to teach them how, about the research methods and how to be a good researcher, and how to utilize the library, and how to do a literature review. (2; Q 4.4)

[I]f they add a class . . . to teach people how to do their proposals, either qualitative or quantitative or mixed methods, whatever the student brings to his thesis, they just give him some ideas about what he is doing and to better prepare for his PhD. (5; Q. 4.5)

[T]hey have to add some other topics and courses that care more about research method and methodology and stuff like that. Because once the student he complete the courses and go to the thesis they . . . didn’t know anything. Just start from zero. So the lost time and studying [on] how can they analyse the data and how they can write the literature review. (7; Q. 4.4)

All but one participant wanted more operations classes. Eighty-nine percent of the students wanted more practical courses, including internship, and co-op opportunities. Some of participants said:

For me personally, and a lot of my friends, [I] would like to do some co-op [internship] at companies in Rochester or anywhere. (3; Q. 4.5)

I think it would be better if they would add courses elected specifically to hotels and resorts operations. (4; Q. 4.4)

I would say add in the field experience. (6; Q. 4.5)

I think they should add more courses to, for example, event management for people who are interested in event management. And also, they don’t have enough materials about restaurants. (9; Q. 4.4)

Students feel unprepared for PhD or research career. Of the six PhD aspirants, or 67%, said they did not feel prepared for a PhD or research career. It is significant that over half of this category of graduates did not feel adequately prepared by RIT for their next step.
4.4. Social and Cultural Interactions with Faculty at RIT

Objective: Document the social and cultural interactions with RIT HTM faculty.

A tabulation of the students’ reported relationship with their professors, with PhD aspirants separated from non-PhD aspirants, revealed a markedly lower assessment of relationships with professors among PhD aspirants. Two of the six PhD aspirants (33%) characterized their relationships with their professors to be helpful. They said:

That maybe the word “perfect” is the best described to the relationship. The faculties in the department they are few . . . you can keep in touch with them. So, the relationship is perfect. (4; Q. 5.1)

I think they are very helpful and they look for student advantage or benefits. Yeah, I think it’s over all very good, really. (8; Q. 5.1)

Two students or (33%) had mixed—helpful and non-helpful relationships with their professors, and they stated the following:

The problem is, when I ask for a recommendation for a . . . PhD, they are a bit hesitant. Ok, here is a big problem in this part . . . But overall . . . they are very helpful and they reply and they teach me how to get things done. (2; Q. 5.1)

It’s actually very good. (5; Q. 5.1)

But sometimes when I try to understand something out of my topic, I find that my teachers tell me to focus on what I have now and not think about something else. That is what makes me not comfortable . . . . For example, [for] my PhD, they will say just focus on your maste[r’s] only and study now and your PhD will be later, think about it another time. (5; Q. 5.2)

Two (33%) thought that the relationship with their teachers was not helpful. The following extracts express their point of view:

I’m not comfortable to discuss anymore with professors if they’re like ignore me and ignore my interests. (1; Q. 5.2)

There are some teachers that just say to the student, you know, you can’t go to PhD, it’s difficult for you as international, and they just like don’t encourage you to go there. (7; Q. 4.4)

By contrast, two of the three non-PhD aspirants (67%) characterized their relationships with their professors as helpful. They said:
Most of the professors, they know their materials, they know exactly what they are talking about, so if you need any help, if you need any recommendation, they would be friendly and they would help. (3; Q. 5.2)

Actually, my relationship with my teachers was great. They are very respectful, helpful, understanding. They’re all great in my opinion. (9; Q. 5.1)

The remaining student, who was not aspiring a PhD (33%), described his/her relationship with professors as mixed, helpful and non-helpful relationship. This participant stated:

I actually have a good relationship with one of the professors. . . . One of the professors actually said that, aah, students from Saudi Arabia are actually lazy. (6; Q. 5.1)

I don’t feel comfortable discussing any of my academic needs or goals, because I did not feel they’re actually interested. (6; Q. 5.2)

Particularly notable is that Participants 2, 5, and 7 all report the lack of encouragement around the PhD as the negative factor in an otherwise positive relationship.

Over half of interview subjects (five participant or 56%) expressed a desire for more guidance and show of interest from the professors and more a directed program with less optional in-class-activities. This means that students aiming for PhDs would be provided with different views than those aiming for industry. Of these, one participant was a non-PhD aspirant, and the other four were PhD aspirants. Some of the participants’ stated:

I think that in the first semester when the student come they need to show their interest, what they wanna be . . . . I think that if interview is not possible then survey is a simple way to get the interest of the student . . . . Test their ability, test their research ability, check their work experience, and sometimes guide them . . . . Because they are students. Sometimes students don’t know where to go or what to do. (2; Q. 4.4)

Every week our lecturer would say that there was a field trip, an optional field trip. . . . It has to be compulsory. When it is optional, people sometimes tend not only not to come, but their schedule is not available for optional field-trips. (5; 4.4)

When I was in high school, one of the teachers showed interest in every student, not just in one, every student . . . . It would be good if professors showed a little bit of interest. (6; Q. 5.2)
I want [a] professor who sit[s] with me and explain[s] well for me about researches. (8; Q. 4.5)

In addition, 44% mentioned that independent inquiry was not encouraged in Saudi Arabia. One of these students expressed his thoughts about the dependence level in Saudi Arabia, which resulted in him experiencing difficulties at RIT with the independence level used in the classroom. He stated:

In Saudi Arabia, the teacher or the university or the schools didn’t push the student to search and have new idea[s] by themselves. They just give like a couple papers and the teacher will ask them about that particular papers. (7; Q. 4.1)

Thirty-three percent mentioned independent inquiry was more encouraged in the US than in Saudi Arabia. One participant stated:

[T]he online studying experience and the submissions of exams . . . . I think it is very positive because it encourages the students to write more, to read more, and it encourages the students to be a better writer. So I think that’s very positive. (2; Q. 4.1)

Thirty-three percent wanted the workload or language to be easier, including having fewer readings. This category of having an easier program was considered separately from the indications of the desire for support around PhD applications and research-track-specific tasks. The following quotes are ways in which the participants wanted the program to be easier.

[W]e do not have that time to read all of the materials given to us. But I think that if we had the time it would be easier. If the courses were focused on just the most important things, instead of giving us a lot of materials to cover. (5; Q. 4.1)

I think it’s unfair if they [professors] deal with them [international students] like American student. No, they have to explain to them more, and ask them if they understand or not, ask them if the language that the teacher uses is appropriate with them or not. (7; Q. 4.2)

You know, we are people, we want to play, we want to hang out with friends some time, we want to watch soccer games and other habits. For me, I can’t study like all my day. I can’t, I just can’t. I get bored quickly, and I want to do other things. (8; Q. 4.2)

The desire among Saudi Arabian students is for more support, including having teachers tailor the workload and language used in class to their English level.
Based on the findings of the study, it is clear that students’ experiences vary. In spite of the overall positive perception, the participants of the study illustrated several issues. Participants who were aiming to continue their studies at the PhD level provided suggestions different to those who aimed for industry. In the discussion chapter, this research provides recommendations based on the participants’ suggestions.
5. CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1. Discussion

The first research question, “How do Saudi students feel about their educational and social experiences at RIT?” analysis indicated three problematic areas. First, the findings indicate that for 89% of the participants, their level of English preparation was not sufficient for them to do graduate work without putting in significantly more effort than their American counterparts. In some cases, the difficulty significantly hindered the quality of their understanding and work, as students reported being unable to complete all of the reading assignments or complete writing assignments up to the expected standard. When the data was analyzed by grouping people into various categories according to where they had studied English before starting the HTM program, it was found that everyone had additional preparation besides their English classes in Saudi Arabia, and they still struggled once in the master’s program. This suggests a general mismatch between the level of English of the students being admitted and the level required to perform graduate academic work. This is consistent with Pavan’s (2013) finding that most students arrive in the US without the ability to speak and write English grammatically correct (Pavan, 2013).

RIT could be contributing to this phenomenon by setting the entrance bar low and waiving the language standardized test requirement and by only requiring that applicants complete the English Language Center (ELC) requirements at RIT. Based on the collected data, the ELC program offered by RIT, in lieu of a language entry test, is not bringing students up to the academic level where they can comfortably complete the required reading and writing in the program.

A student’s English level can be interpreted as mostly the student’s responsibility to prepare themselves; or it can be interpreted as mostly the university’s responsibility to make sure it only admits students who can function well enough in the language to reasonably do the work expected of them. This tension of interpretation points to the difference surrounding the level of independence generally expected in Saudi Arabian and American cultures. No matter which side should bear the responsibility, both parties are involved in creating the difficult situation, and the comprehension
problem with the English language level points to a way that RIT is not meeting the needs of the Saudi Arabian students.

Eighty-nine percent of the students wanted more practical experience: operations classes for specific businesses like spas and restaurants; internships; field trips; customer service classes. This was clearly expressed even among respondents who gave no indication that they were interested in a non-academic job in the tourism industry. This points to a second way RIT could better meet student needs.

One major finding was the significant number of students who would like to pursue a PhD and a research career. This is not consistent with the literature review, in which many articles indicated that gaining employment directly in the tourism industry was the predominant aim of Saudi Arabian students seeking a master’s degree in the United States (Alhazmi & Nyland 2013; Pavan 2013; Taylor & Albasri 2014).

These aspiring PhD students felt the lack of support and infrastructure in a comprehensive way, calling for more research classes, more skills, a program track, assistance in publishing, and assistance in getting into PhD programs. They also felt the tension in their relationships with their professors. In some cases, students reported that professors would not even entertain the idea that they might do pursue a PhD, telling them to not worry about it, to think about it later, or simply telling them that they cannot do it. This points to a third way in which the hospitality and tourism curriculum at RIT could better meet the needs of this group of students: by preparing a research-oriented track for them.

The second research question, “What type of pedagogical strategies are best implements to deliver a hospitality and tourism curriculum to students from Saudi Arabia?” returned initial findings that 78% of the participants had a positive experience with, and 89% felt a benefit from, the pedagogical strategies used in the US. The pedagogies mentioned include increased class participation, writing papers, and research presentation. These pedagogical strategies are consistent with the findings of Lawson et al. (2011) that US classrooms use more homework, group work, presentations, and projects. However, the high level of appreciation for the new pedagogical techniques is inconsistent with Shaw’s (2009) finding that, faced with new tasks like asking questions, doing group presentations, or participating in
class, Saudi students can feel unsure of themselves and even threatened (Shaw 2009). Based on the questions about teaching techniques, the optimal pedagogical techniques were and are already in use at RIT. However, the significant dissatisfaction registered, especially among the PhD aspirants, 67% of whom said they felt unprepared for a PhD program, prompted further searching to try to shed more light on Research Question #2.

Analysis of the data revealed a general expectation of an independence level among the Saudi Arabian students that was lower than the independence level expected by RIT. This is consistent with Denman and Hilal’s (2013) finding that in the US, students are expected to organize their own time and complete tasks like homework, research, and projects independently, while in Saudi Arabia, much less independent organization is required on the part of the student (Denman & Hilal, 2013). Participants indicated this phenomenon in a wide variety of ways, including wanting professors to more actively assess student needs and plan their curricula, wanting professors to trim reading lists and the language level used in class to meet students’ ability levels, wanting professors to take more personal interest, and wanting help with tasks involved in pursuing a research career like publishing and gaining admission to a PhD program. This is consistent with Razek’s (2013) finding that Saudis are accustomed to a more directed program of study, and figuring out their own projects and course of study can be bewildering. One possible recommendation would be for RIT to provide more guidance for the Saudi students. An alternative possible recommendation would be to address the difference in expectations around independence levels by teaching the Saudi students to be more independent.

The high incidence of problems with proficiency with the English language suggests a second pedagogical strategy: focusing on improving the students’ English level. RIT’s delivery of the HTM curriculum to Saudi Arabian students was significantly hampered by the difficulties students had with English. Providing or requiring a more thorough preparation in English is a second pedagogical strategy that could improve the delivery of the HTM program to Saudi Arabian students.
5.2. Limitations of the Study

Although the sample of this study was limited in size and only nine participants were interviewed, it could be argued that this is the nature of qualitative studies (Brunt, 1997). The first limitation of this study was the lack of English fluency on the part of the participants. This may have influenced the accuracy of the results of the study because some responses appeared confusing or off topic. It was challenging to make sure that the participants understood the questions correctly.

Second, the sample was taken from only the Saudi graduate students in the HTM program at RIT, out of 100,000 Saudi Arabian students studying in the United States. A larger sample size, spread across more universities, would produce more reliable results. A broader-scale, quantitative survey based on these results could reach more HTM Saudi students and ensure the population was accurately represented.

5.3. Directions for Future Research

This study has opened up several directions for future research. The question of whether these findings will be replicated with a larger sample population of Saudi Arabian students across a more diverse sampling of US universities is one. Another is how to best reconcile the reduced level of independence among Saudi graduate students in the US with the highly independent culture in US universities. A third direction might explore solutions for getting the English proficiency level in this population up high enough so the students can comfortably do graduate work in English.

5.4. Conclusions

Saudi Arabian students in the RIT/HTM program are primarily attracted to the US by the value of the US degree or by the mandate of their employers. Because of its easy admission process, these students have preferred RIT over other US universities. But once in the program, the students find themselves at a disadvantage due to their poor English skills. This has a negative effect on the students’ ability to absorb and benefit from the curriculum. Improving the English level of the students could improve RIT’s delivery of the HTM program to the Saudi students. RIT could do this by
making the in-house English preparation program more thorough, by raising the entrance bar, and requiring language exams, or RIT could institute a combination of these methods.

In addition, the study revealed a significant population of PhD-hopeful students that expressed the need for a research track that goes largely unmet. By providing such a research track is a second way in which RIT could better meet the needs of the Saudi graduate student population. Furthermore, almost all of the students expressed a desire for more practical operations classes and/or work experience. This constitutes a third area.

The Saudi students enjoyed and appreciated the benefits of the US teaching methods. However, a major area was the conflict between the level of independence desired by the Saudi students and that expected in the RIT graduate program. This suggests that while the pedagogical techniques currently in use by the RIT faculty do successfully meet the needs of the Saudi population, perhaps something more is needed. This something more could be an attempt to reduce the level of independence required in the program by offering the students more guidance, as requested by many participants. Or, the opposite approach would be to attempt to prepare the Saudi students for the increased level of independence expected at RIT.
References


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doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000985


Appendix 1

Invitation Letter

Dear Current Saudi Arabian Graduate Students,

I am a Master student in the Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) program at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). I am writing today to invite you to participate in my master’s thesis concerning the experiences of the current graduate Saudi students in HTM program at RIT. The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of the graduate students from Saudi Arabia studying hospitality and tourism in the United States and RIT in specific.

I kindly ask that you take part in an interview that would last approximately 30-60 minutes. I have gone through all the requirements of RIT’s institutional review board so that all appropriate research methods will maintain privacy of the findings. You are not required to take part in this study and all findings will be shown to respondents for review and approval prior to inclusion in my study. No mention of respondents by name will be used without prior written approval.

If you agree to take part in this study please sign the attached informed consent document and return it to my mail folder on the 4th floor of building 1 by April 6, 2015. Please select one of the following times to schedule the interview:

Tuesday, April 7, 2015

Wednesday, April 8, 2015

Thursday, April 9, 2015

Friday, April 10, 2015

Saturday, April 11, 2015

Sunday, April 12, 2015
Thank you very much for your time and consideration. Should you have further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at [email] or [phone] by phone.

I am looking forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Saleh Aljubaili
Appendix 2

Informed Consent Document

THESIS TITLE: Graduate student profile of Saudi Arabian students enrolled in the Hospitality and Tourism Management Program at RIT

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to join a research study to look at the experiences of the current Saudi Arabian graduate students in the Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) at RIT. This study will explore your reason for choosing RIT and to study hospitality and tourism in the United States. It will also seek to understand your experiences both in and outside the classroom regarding learning and living in the United States.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?
If you decide to participate you will be asked to share your educational experience in the U.S. and RIT in specific. Also, we are seeking to understand your reasons for choosing to study in HTM graduate program at RIT, as well as knowing your thoughts about the courses offered, and the teaching methods used in the classroom.

If you choose to participate in this study it will require a private interview on the campus at RIT. These time periods will be scheduled for 1 hour with interviews expecting to take 25-40 minutes. Your conversation will be recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes only. You then will be given a typed transcript for review and approval within 30 days after the interview.

The investigators may stop the study or take you out of the study at any time they judge it is in your best interest. They may also remove you from the study for various other reasons. They can do this without your consent.

DISCOMFORT AND RISKS

You can stop participating at any time. If you stop you will not lose any benefits. There are no risks in participating in this research.

BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?
Your participation in this study will help provide feedback to RIT and the School of
International Hospitality and Service Management in their effort to continually improve their program. Specifically you will help provide a unique understanding of the needs and experiences of Saudi Arabian students. This may help improve the future experiences of other foreign students studying in the US.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your participation in this research is confidential. The data/recordings will be secured in locked container in a private location. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. In addition, participants will be assigned with a code to refer to the audiotapes. No one but I and my advisor will have access to the data/recordings. The recordings will be destroyed upon verification of the transcriptions.

YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdraw from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

Please contact Saleh Aljubaili at [redacted], email at [redacted] or Mr. Rick Lagiewski at [redacted], email at [redacted] with questions or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you have any problems, unexpected physical or psychological discomforts, or think that something unusual or unexpected is happening.

Contact Heather Foti, Associate Director of the HSRO at [redacted] or [redacted] if you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant.

Consent of Subject (or Legally Authorized Representative)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Subject or Representative</th>
<th>Date</th>
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Appendix 3

Interview Questions

1) Profile questions

1. *Time, Place, Date of interview:*

2. *Pseudonym or name:*
   1. Where are you from in Saudi Arabia?
   2. What was your undergrad major?
   3. What school in Saudi Arabia did you attend?
   4. Is this your first visit to the U.S.? If not, where were you before and for how long?
   5. Are you taking a project, thesis, or comprehensive exam as your exit strategy? Why?
   6. Did you take English classes in Saudi Arabia or the US? If yes, how long?

2) Exploring reasons for choosing to study at RIT

1. Why did you choose to enroll in a Master’s in Hospitality and Tourism Management?

2. How did you choose your major?
   - Were you primarily looking for a degree that prepares you to continue onto a doctoral program or one that prepares you to work in industry? Explain.

3. Why did you choose to study at RIT?
3) Exploring reasons for choosing to study in the United States

1. What was your primary reason for choosing to study in the United States?

2. Would you describe your experience studying in Rochester as being mostly positive or negative? Explain.

4) Assessing learning and educational experience

1. What has been the major difference between studying in the US vs studying in Saudi Arabia?
   - Do you find these differences are mostly positive or negative?

2. Has your English ability impacted your ability to learn or achieve course expectations? Explain.

3. How would you describe your interactions and experiences with non-Saudi graduate students?

4. Have the subjects and topics of the courses in the hospitality and tourism program met your expectations? Explain.

5. Are there topics or skills you would like to see added to the hospitality and tourism management program?

6. How would you describe your overall experience taking courses in the hospitality and tourism management program?

5) Social and cultural interactions with faculty

1. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers?

2. Do you feel comfortable discussing with your professors your academic needs or goals? Explain.

3. How has taking classes with other Saudi students influenced your learning experience? Explain.
6) If you could make one change to your learning experience what would it be?
Appendix 4

List of Initial 65 Codes from Open Coding

1. Job opportunities in tourism in S.A.
2. Employment contract for an academic job in S.A. requires US degree
3. Need for hospitality training programs in S.A.
4. Hospitality related to undergraduate major
5. People with US degrees are more employable in S.A.
6. Desire for own business
7. RIT low bar for admissions
8. Came to RIT on friend’s recommendation
9. RIT provided supplementary language training
10. RIT did not require TOEFL, IELTS, or any language test (but to graduate from its own English program
11. RIT marketing was major factor in choice of university
12. Personal interest in hospitality major
13. Came with husband and wanted to do something useful
14. Desire to come to US to grow as a person
15. Research methods in S.A. are weak
16. English preparation outside of Saudi Arabia (to note level)
17. Inadequate English had negative impact on studies
18. Desire for academic/research skills track
19. Desire for more research skills courses
20. Not comfortable discussing problems
21. Want help/support with PhD admissions
22. Want dual MS/PhD program (guaranteed admission)
23. Expectations not met
24. Expectations met
25. Desire for more structure in academic program
26. Desire for profs to design specific program for students based on their needs
27. English education from Saudi Arabia inadequate
28. Assumption of adequacy of English level (for graduate study)
29. Faculty won’t recommend student for PhD program
30. Desire for internship/work experience
31. Scholarship requires study takes place in US
32. Trust in quality of US education
33. Desire for more classes in practical operations (hotel, restaurant operations, hotel finance, etc.)
34. Desire for field trips to give better practical idea of operations
35. Desire for professors to make program easier
36. Feeling unprepared for PhD
37. Other Saudi students are helpful
38. Other Saudi students are helpful specifically with overcoming language barrier
39. Western standards of research are lacking in S.A.
40. The necessary tools of research, like access to libraries, and a body of research, and the journals to publish that research, is all lacking in S.A.
41. Learning style difference (more interactive learning) was positive
42. Positive intercultural experience
43. US students positively impacted English level
44. US professors encouraged independent inquiry
45. Some RIT professors need more qualifications
46. Feel ignored by professors
47. Value of intercultural fluency
48. Weather was a negative
49. Plagiarism standard higher
50. Language misunderstandings occur in class
51. Little or no exposure to non-Saudis
52. Desire for help publishing (academic publishing)
53. Desire for core concentration in operations courses
54. Good interactions with faculty
55. Some professors were not encouraging about PhDs
56. Faculty did not always deliver information clearly
57. Faculty thought Saudis were lazy
58. Professors should take more interest in student’s future goals
59. Wants program to be easier so they can do social life things
60. Wants professor to decide thesis title and topic
61. Wants more preparation for research
62. Professors look for ways to help the students
63. US is expected to have highest quality education over all other countries
64. Independent inquiry
65. Professor were helpful in directing the student’s within the current program of study
66. (RIT should) expand faculty to increase diversity of courses
Appendix 5

Initial Codes Grouped into Categories

A. RIT had low barriers to admission

7. RIT low bar for admissions

10. RIT did not require TOEFL, ILETS, or any language test (but to graduate from its own program)

B. Independent inquiry not encouraged in S. A.

15. Research methods in S.A. are weak

38. Western standards of research are lacking in S.A.

39. The necessary tools of research, like access to libraries, and a body of research, and the journals to publish that research, is all lacking in S.A.

63. Independent inquiry (in US not SA)

43. US professors encouraged independent inquiry

C. Inadequate English preparation had a negative effect on studies

17. Inadequate English had negative impact on studies

27. English education from Saudi Arabia inadequate

28. Assumption of adequacy of English level (for graduate study)

37. Other Saudi students are helpful specifically with overcoming language barrier

42. US students positively impacted English level

D. Desire for researcher/PhD track program

18. Desire for academic/research skills track

19. Desire for more research skills courses
21. Want help/support with PhD admissions

22. Want dual MS/PhD program (guaranteed admission)

51. Desire for help publishing (academic publishing)

E. Feel unprepared for PhD/research career

29. Faculty won’t recommend student for PhD program

36. Feeling unprepared for PhD

54. Some professors were not encouraging about PhDs

60. Want more preparation for research

64. Professors were helpful only in directing the students within the current program of study

F. Feel unsupported personally by faculty

20. Not comfortable discussing problems

45. Feel ignored by professors

57. Professors should take more interest in students

G. Desire for more structure/less independence

25. Desire for more structure in academic program

26. Desire for profs to design specific program for students based on their needs

57. Professors should take more interest in students

51. Desire for help publishing (academic publishing)

59. Wants professor to decide thesis title and topic

H. Desire for program to be easier

35. Desire for professors to make program easier
51. Desire for help publishing (academic publishing)

22. Want dual MS/PhD program (guaranteed admission)

55. Faculty did not always deliver information clearly

58. Want program to be easier so they can do social life things

I. Desire for more practical operations experience

30. Desire for internship/work experience

33. Desire for more classes in practical operations (hotel, restaurant operations, hotel finance, etc.)

34. Desire for field trips to give better practical idea of operations

52. Desire for core concentration in operations

J. Feel unsupported by faculty around PhD

29. Faculty won’t recommend student for PhD program

54. Some professors were not encouraging about PhDs

64. Professors were helpful only in directing the students within the current program of study
Appendix 6

Categories Grouped into Core Concepts

Core Concept 1: Student Preparation: Categories A, B, C, E, H

Core Concept 2: Host Institution Program Design/Content Issues: Categories A, D, E, I, J

Core Concept 3: Independence Level: B, E, F, G, H, J