World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
Vol:8, No:10, 2014

International Student Recruitment in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of the Countries in the Middle East

Ali Arabkheradmand, Enayat A. Shabani, Shabnam Ranjbar Nikkhoo

Open Science Index, Educational and Pedagogical Sciences Vol:8, No:10, 2014 publications.waset.org/9999667/pdf

***Abstract*—**Historical and ancestral bonds of the countries in the Middle East have led to similarities in culture and context of their societies. In addition, economical resources, such as the oil industry, have generally been an integrative point in the region. Higher education of a country is influenced by different national and international factors and, regarding the mentioned bonds, it is inviting to study the development of the countries of the Middle East in higher education and draw some practical implications which can be used in the educational policymaking of the region. This review includes a data analysis on the population of international students in the countries of the Middle East. As its second objective, a review study on the successful countries, that is, those which host the highest number of international students, and the strategies they have developed to reach this state among the countries of the region, has been conducted. Suggestions are made as to the strategies in higher education systems of these countries which could prove useful and practical in the development of internationalization of higher education in the region, specifically with regard to the recruitment of international students.

***Keywords*—**Internationalization of Higher Education, International Student Recruitment, Countries of the Middle East.

I. Introduction

RECRUITMENT of international students, as a major trend in the international higher education system around the globe, has long been a major interest for admissions offices of numerous universities in various countries, especially since internationalization of higher education became a pervasive trend. Although there are numerous yet common reasons supporting the advantages of international student recruitment, each country defines its policies and purposes based on their needs, requirements and aims. The underpinning rationale for dedicating a significant amount of budget, time and human resources to this matter are academic progress, economic and diplomatic benefits, and cultural exchange [1]. To make these a reality, the need for a national policy on international education is a necessity which commences with building a structure that suits the context of the country.

At this point, the role of marketing signifies its importance. Higher Education marketing grows day by day, and higher education institutes and universities try to put themselves on the map in higher education marketing [2]. Student recruitment is one of the divisions included in higher education marketing. Recruitment of international students is an important concept to universities due to their competition in recruiting international talents. It is worth mentioning that internationalization of higher education faces challenges on different levels. Challenges of a nation can be rooted in economic, social and cultural difficulties and complexities [3]. Regarding such challenges, the focus of this paper is on the countries of the Middle East due to their historical and cultural ties. Not only are these factors important considering the internationalization of higher education but academic success is also influenced by macro environmental factors such as culture, economic performance and competitiveness level. [4]

In the following part, by analyzing statistical data [5], we first take a look at all the countries of the Middle East, and we then focus on those countries in the region with the largest population of international students. Afterwards, we trace their success to the policies and strategies they have put to use and learn how those countries of the Middle East which have not reached the highest rate in case of international student recruitment can play their part in the development of internationalization of higher education in the region.

II. Statistical Data

The below tables are based on the Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students statistics [6]. The statistics presented only include the number of students studying full-degree programs outside their country of origin.

Table I has listed the countries of the Middle East in order of the population of international students they host. The population of students studying abroad from each country has also been given a column. The population of international students of all the countries of the Middle East, excluding Iraq and Syria, of which no data was available, reaches a total number of 283,241. Palestine is not counted either, as the data shows its number of international students is very few.

The United Arab Emirates is the leading country in the region, having 54,162 international students; in other words, almost a fifth of international students in the Middle East study in the United Arab Emirates. With about 5,000 students less, Egypt is the second popular country among the international students whose destination has been this region. In comparison with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt sends about double the number of students to study abroad. In the

Ali Arabkheradmand and Shabnam Ranjbar Nikkhoo are with Tehran University of Medical Sciences, No. 21, Dameshgh St., Vali-e Asr Ave., Tehran, 1416753955, Iran (e-mail: kheradmand@tums.ac.ir sh.nikkhoo@yahoo.com).

Enayat A. Shabani is with Tehran University of Medical Sciences, No. 21, Dameshgh St., Vali-e Asr Ave., Tehran, 146753955, Iran (Corresponding author; phone: 218 889 6696; fax 218 885 2654; en_shabani@yahoo.com).

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third place, hosting 16.4% of international students in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia not only owns a good portion of the whole population, but also with 62,535 students, Saudi Arabia is the leading country in the region in sending students abroad. The fourth popular destination for international students in the Middle East is Turkey, hosting 38,596 international students. In addition, Turkey is the second country in sending students abroad. With a small difference, Jordan and Lebanon stand at the ranks of 5th and 6th, respectively. There is also a difference of 3,000 students between them in the population of students sent to study abroad. After Lebanon, a significant fall is evident in the number of hosted international student populations. Yemen possesses the small fraction of 4% of international students, and with a decrease of about 4,000 students, Kuwait and Qatar are in the 8th and 9th positions in the region. Iran, standing at the next rank by hosting 4,512 international students, sends the significant amount of 51,549 students to study abroad. Bahrain, Oman, Palestine, Syria and Iraq, due to the lack of information, are not presented.

TABLE I
POPULATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS HOSTED AND STUDENTS ABROAD FOR THE COUNTRIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST [7]

Rank	Country	Student Hosted	Percentage	Student Abroad
1	United Arab Emirates	54,162	19.1 %	8,526
2	Egypt	49,011	17.3 %	16,217
3	Saudi Arabia	46,566	16.4 %	62,535
4	Turkey	38,596	13.6 %	51,487
5	Jordan	27,931	9.8 %	16,825
6	Lebanon	27,230	9.6 %	13,089
7	Yemen	11,393	4.0 %	14,943
8	Kuwait	7,984	2.8 %	10,686
9	Qatar	7,154	2.5 %	3,410
10	Iran	4,512	1.5 %	51,549

With regard to Table I, the focus is on the most successful countries in the region in the recruitment of international students. Since dramatic differences in the proportion that the most successful countries possess have not been observed, for the sake of thoroughness of the study in the next part, the focus is on those countries that host more than one tenth of the whole international student population. They are the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Table II indicates the number of international students, categorized by nationality, in the four selected countries. Interpreting the data in this table, the geographical status of these countries has influenced the choices of international students. Social and geographical linkages, although not as important as the destination country's educational reputation, are influential in the recruitment of international students. [8] Considering the data presented in Table II, it is noteworthy that international students come from countries which are located at a short distance from the countries of destination; for instance, Turkey has students from European countries such as Germany. In addition, access to the country of destination is also a factor; as an example, India sends most students to United Arab Emirates, as the straight waterway between them, that is the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, facilitate this mobility.

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have students from the same six countries, namely, India, Pakistan, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Syria. However, Turkey and the UAE only have Iran as their common country from which they receive international students. It is noticeable that Oman is the second important country for the United Arab Emirates in terms of the reception of international students. None of the four successful countries receive international students from Oman except the United Arab Emirates.

III. STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS USED BY SUCCESSFUL COUNTRIES

There are four main categories in the QS Best Student City Rankings, namely, student mix, quality of life, employer activity, and affordability. Accordingly, this review has followed a similar approach, and its analysis has been based on the following six factors for each country: higher education system and rankings, language of country and language of instruction, visa and citizenship, student life quality and cost, institutional and study cost, and international student work limit.

TABLE II
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT'S ORIGINALITY IN FOUR SUCCESSFUL COUNTRIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST REGARDING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT [9]

	Country	International Students Countries of Origin							
1	United Arab Emirates	India 7,310	Oman 5,186	Jordan 4,313	Palestine 3,816	Syria 3,525	Iran 3,080	Pakistan 3,080	Egypt 2,948
2	Egypt	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3	Saudi Arabia	Yemen 5,539	Syria 2,669	Egypt 2,403	Pakistan 2,125	Palestine 2,104	Jordan 1,991	Nigeria 935	India 907
4	Turkey	Azerbaijan 4,412	Turkmenistan 4,167	Iran 1,488	Germany 1,383	Greece 1,322	Bulgaria 1,236	Afghanistan 1,122	Mongolia 958

A. United Arab Emirates

Higher education in the United Arab Emirates is divided into public or federal universities and private higher institutions. The UAE consists of 7 Emirates, ruled by 7 Sheikhs. They have all agreed to establish government-sponsored universities [10]. There are three public higher education institutions for Emirati citizens in which education is offered free of charge and sponsored fully by the government. Although the government tries to give women positions in society as equal to those of men [11], a large number of Emirati families do not allow their women attend mixed gender activities, so there are separate facilities for

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women and men in these public universities. National students tend to attend public universities because they are free of charge, and the environment in these universities is a part of their culture. [12]

The higher education system in the UAE is credit-based and semester-based. The duration of study for undergraduate degree programs is 4 years and Master's degree programs last for 2 years. The admission policies for international students is much the same as most universities who admit students from overseas. The applicant needs recommendation letters, he or she is required to indicate high performance in their previous level of study and might need to take a Standard English Proficiency test.

The Ministry of Education sets the policies of education, from kindergarten to the end of post-secondary education. There is a Higher Education Ministry which mostly focuses on running international scholarship programs. Universities are independent entities which do not report to the Ministry of Higher Education. However, the Commission for Academic Accreditation was established by the Higher Education Ministry with the mission of promoting higher education institutions, giving license to every institution and accrediting their programs. All the institutions need to maintain the standard quality defined by the Commission for Academic Accreditation. According to Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman [12], referring to the studies of Saafin in 2008, the majority of higher education staff and instructors in the country come from other countries regardless of the type of the institution, that is being public or private.

Universities from different countries have international campuses or programs in the UAE in special zones. They also have partnership with three US institutions which are New York University in Abu Dhabi, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Wharten School of University of Pennsylvania.

According to QS [13], the United Arab Emirates University is the oldest university of this country, founded in 1976 by the government; it ranks 421-430 in QS World University Rankings and 86 in Asia according to Times Higher Education [14]; it also has the highest rank in the UAE. This university does not offer programs for international students and only accepts exchange students. The Higher College of Technology, founded in 1988, is the largest higher education institution in the country and has 15 colleges, for men and women separately, plus a Centre of Excellence for Applied Research and Training and a Central Services building.

A Gulf dialect of Arabic is natively spoken by the Emirati people. English is their second language and is taught in all public schools from the end of kindergarten to the end of high school. English is a requirement for most jobs in the United Arab Emirates. Also, the language of instruction for all international campuses in the country is English.

International students need to obtain a visa according to UAE laws. Universities offer visa sponsorship to their international students and visa affairs are usually undertaken by International Student Services Offices (ISSOs) at universities. After applicants accept the admissions office's program offer, they pay their tuition fees, and they are officially enrolled in the program. For requesting their visa, the receipt of the tuition payment is required. After applying for a visa and paying its administration cost, students receive an entry permit which is valid for 60 days. Upon arrival, they need to take a medical examination; if a student fails this medical test, the process of issuing a visa stops and students need to go back to their country. Diseases such as AIDS can render this medical test failed. Upon passing the medical test, students receive medical insurance if they do not have a valid insurance supported by their countries. Students who get their visa through their university need to apply for an Emirates ID card. [15]

The modern life in the United Arab Emirates acts as a major attraction to international students. Students can become members of different sports teams and participate in the activities of different student communities. Markets, gyms, basketball and tennis courts, swimming pools, cafeterias, theatres, restaurants and libraries are available on campus in high quality for students. Students are satisfied with the social life and leisure activities as well as the quality of IT facilities and the learning environment. [16]

By looking at international campuses in the UAE, it can be assumed that the student life provided by these campuses is very similar to those available in European countries, and the Arab culture of the national Emiratis has not affected international student life.

Although luxurious lifestyle has developed in most cities of the UAE, it is possible to live economically as a student. Similar to living in other countries, students can decrease their expenses if they live in universities' dormitories and use the facilities and services offered on their campus. The economy of the country is dependent on oil exports but there are other investments that the country counts on such as pearling, agriculture, fishing and herding. International student recruitment is a market, too, and it brings notable revenues to the country as well as being beneficial in terms of publicity and advertisement. The UAE is not among the least expensive countries; however, it is found in the list of the most affordable countries in 2014 rankings. [17] As an example, compared to Germany, one of the leading countries in recruitment of international students in Europe, UAE is less expensive on a general scale and, except some items such as groceries, it is less expensive than Germany. [18]

Nonetheless, studying in the UAE as an international student in its universities is not inexpensive. By browsing international students' expenses, it can be assumed that, generally speaking, tuition fee for studying MA programs for 18 months is almost 24000 to 25000 US dollars and, for BA programs, tuition fee is nearly 10,000 US dollars per year. Tuition fees change according to universities, schools and departments. [19]-[21]

Regarding student employability, international students are not allowed to work part-time while studying. However, after graduation, they can change their student visa to a work permit and get a job in the UAE. [22] The United Arab Emirates is a fast developing country and new opportunities grow every

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day. Moreover, it should be mentioned that tax-free salary, although given under certain circumstances, is one of the attractions to graduate international students. [23], [24]

B. Egypt

The relation between the job market and higher education was constructive and fruitful about 50 years ago in Egypt. University graduates in different fields of studies had the opportunity to get jobs in the private sector or government sector related to their field of study. During a period, job security had become an issue, and graduates had to wait for several years to get a job in the government sector. From 1988 to 2006, the number of graduates increased, and finding a job became very competitive, and unemployment decreased by 2009. Thanks to technology development and the need for the modern and up-to-date skills, different projects were implemented in higher education policies of Egypt to develop and serve the job market. [25]

For state-funded universities, domestic students only pay registration fees but international students need to pay tuition fees as well. Private universities were founded by private organizations, and all students pay tuition fees. Private universities need to maintain a specific set of criteria so that the Ministry of Higher Education authenticates and accredits their certificates. Professors and officials in public universities are state staff but private universities hire their staff similar to private companies, that is by receiving the applicant's resume and application [26].

Graduates from high schools apply to universities which are in the same geographical location of their residence. Higher grades in school get students a place at universities of their choice [27].

Best universities in Egypt are the American University in Cairo, Cairo University, Al-Azhar University, Ain-Shams University and Alexandria University [28].

There are general admission rules for international students which focus on the issues of equality of the obtained certificates in their home country. International students are admitted to Egyptian universities according to the same condition Egyptian students are being admitted. They can apply to those programs for which they are qualified according to their obtained secondary education certificate. [29]

The official language in Egypt is modern standard Arabic. However, English and French are spoken in this country as well [30]. International students must prove their knowledge of English by taking the IELTS or TOEFL tests [31].

International students need to enter Egypt on a tourist visa which is valid for 3 months at most. They need to fill a Student Data Form for the Office of Admissions or the International Student Affairs Office of their university. Afterwards, they are required to pay the university tuition fee and complete the registration process to be enrolled in their program so that their visa process can progress [32].

Although there are modern urban areas in big cities of Egypt, there are rural areas where farmers run the agriculture of the country. The structure of Egypt's society is changing, and urban areas are expanding. Although Cairo, the capital of Egypt, is a safe city, students receive emergency contact cards upon their arrival. Universities offer on-campus residences which are less expensive [33]. According to the American University of Cairo, it is estimated that a student needs 3,500 US dollars for food, and 300 US dollars for textbooks per semester.

Tuition fees for international students alter between about 4,000 to 12,000 US dollars according to the program and the university. [34], [35]

Regarding employability during the period of one's studies, international students are not allowed to work with a student visa [36].

C. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, a country which formally acquired the status of a nation in 1932, has seen a fast-paced progress and expansion regarding its educational system. In the beginning, its higher education system, consisting of only 12 schools which were active in educating a mere figure of 700 students [37], was probably not a major academic destination for international students. However, in the 1940s, with the discovery of and extraction from the vast oil reservoirs in the Arabian Peninsula, the country's higher education system underwent an overhaul. According to Alamri [38], referring to the work of Simmons and Simmons, a student population of 42,000 was being educated in 365 schools by the year 1950.

One of the major lacks to this dramatic progress was that higher education was only for men, and, according to Alamri [39], pointing to the findings of Al-Rawaf and Simmons, it was not until 1960 that the first girls' school became operational in Riyadh.

The higher education system in Saudi Arabia is currently being governed by the Ministry of Higher Education. By 2011, Saudi Arabia was home to more than two hundred higher education institutes.

Higher education in Saudi Arabia is of the two types of university higher education and non-university higher education. In university higher education, students can usually follow a 3-stage path, acquiring a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree and a Doctorate. Bachelor's degree usually takes about 4 year, except in fields such as Medicine or Engineering where the Bachelor's degree takes a while longer. The Master's stage usually takes about 2 years, though an institute such as King Saud University offers one-year programs at this level which conclude in a General Diploma for Education [40]. Eventually, there is the doctoral level which usually takes 3 years.

Non-university type higher education, according to the World Education News and Reviews [41], is of four types: Technical Colleges (for a period of 3 years), Higher Technical Institutes (1 year), Higher Technical Institutes for Financial and Commercial Sciences (2 years) and the Institute of Public Administration (2 to 3 years) which aims to train civil servants.

In addition to the two types above, there are also numerous teacher training colleges across Saudi Arabia which specialize in training future teachers and instructors of all levels.

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Primary, secondary and higher education teachers receive their training in different contexts and places according to their level.

Saudi Arabia recognizes Arabic as its official language. In public universities and higher education institutes, Arabic is the language of instruction. However, private institutes which are more Western-oriented in their approach, tend to use English as their language of instruction.

For obtaining a student visa, besides the general requirements such as photos, valid passport and the relevant application form, a medical report confirmed by a physician is also required [42].

Life in Saudi Arabia for Muslim international students is not a challenging experience, though there are cultural and legal issues which international students need to observe and respect [43]. Big cities of the country run a modern life and infrastructure, and there are modern facilities for university students. All over the country, international students are expected to observe Islamic laws and boundaries [44].

Institutional costs in Saudi Arabia for international students range from 2,500 to 5,000 US dollars for undergraduate studies from 17,000 to 20,000 US dollars for graduate programs [45]. Life expenses are relatively high in Saudi Arabia, and students need at least 1,500 US dollars for monthly expenses. It should be mentioned that students are not allowed to work with a student visa [46].

D.Turkey

Higher education in Turkey started its major changes from 2000. The government tried to spread policies and plans for education throughout its related institutions and offices. Plenty of handbooks and booklets are distributed to get information about education in Turkey and its higher education system's visions and purposes. For example, one of the challenges that the Ministry of National Education in Turkey will face in the next three years is the large young population who will need proper higher education services and facilities in the near future. Policies which affect higher education start from earlier ages. For example, the ministry tries to provide students and their families with awareness about the job market, develop lifelong learning and improve teacher education. Turkey plans to develop its tertiary education according to European standards [47].

Higher education institutes in Turkey are of three types. State Universities receive no tuition fees; by 2013, there were 104 state universities all over the country. Higher Vocational Schools provide 2 years of undergraduate study for high school graduates and are similar to community colleges in the US. However, if the students want to further their studies to the 4-year school, they need to take an entrance exam after the previous 2-year period. Their GPA in their previous degree is also a factor. In addition, Private or Foundation Universities were established for development purposes and are active in international and global educational, and research networks. [48]

The Council of Higher Education is responsible for post-secondary studies in this country. It tries to promote its system according to trends and strategies used in developed countries [49]. This council publishes information, statistics and standard definitions on a regular basis [50]. In 2012, the Framework for Higher Education in Qualifications in Turkey was implemented in higher education. Moreover, the International Standard Classification of Education has been defined [51]. International students need to present their obtained degrees in previous studies, which need to be equal to those obtained by Turkish students at the same level. Scholarships are available for international students, for which they need to apply to the Turkish Ministry of National Education. Turkey's best university is Boğaziçi University which ranks 199 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings [52]. Istanbul Technical University and Middle East Technical University rank somewhere in the range of 226-257, same as Bilkent University [53]. Although it possesses these high-ranking universities, Turkey sends students abroad rather than receiving international students; especially highly qualified Turkish students leave their country for scholarships in European countries. [54]

The official language of the country is Turkish, and the main foreign languages are English, German and French. Correspondence with state universities' staff can be in English, German or French but the language of instruction is mostly Turkish. For those who know enough Turkish just to take the entrance test of a university, there are one-year language courses for better proficiency. In private universities, language of instruction is English [55].

Students need to apply for a student visa at the nearest Turkish embassy. They need to present their acceptance letter from their university and a valid passport [56]. A student visa is usually valid for a month, and students have time to register to the university and obtain their Residence Permit from Turkish National Police, Foreigners Unit [57]. A Residence Permit Number is needed to receive an identity number issued by the Turkish Republic [58]. This identity number is used when foreign students want to know their grades, receive certificates and graduate [59]. Also, without this identity number, they cannot benefit from the General Health Insurance services [60].

For becoming a Turkish citizen, one needs to live in Turkey for 5 years without interruption. If one is married to a Turkish national or is a foreigner but was born in Turkey, they can apply for Turkish Citizenship after 3 years of living there. [61]

Turkey is the bridge between Europe and Asia, and has developed its education system towards western systems [62].The government has had an important role in establishing international campuses by facilitating universities, having exchange students, scholarship programs for international students and joint programs. There are many student communities active in different fields in which students can become a member [63]. In the lively environment of Turkey's universities, there are many opportunities for students to develop academically, socially, culturally and physically. Sports facilities are available in campuses, and students can take sports courses during the period of their study [64].

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Student life costs per semester change according to international students' choice of living on campus or renting a room or apartment. Moreover, prices are not the same for all universities. For example, in Boğaziçi University, there is an entrance fee of about 116 US dollars for dormitories and monthly payments alter from 53 US dollars for 6-bed bedrooms to 207 US dollars for single bedrooms. General cost per semester for food is about 1,100 US dollars, transportation costs about 330 US dollars, and students need about 150 US dollars for books [65].

Tuition fees in state universities are not expensive. Per semester, for undergraduate programs in Turkish, tuition fees for national students is about 250-800 US dollars, and, for international students, fees are about 240-850 US dollars. For English programs in the same level, fees differ from 150 to 500 US dollars for Turkish nationals and stand about 450 to 1500 US dollars for international students. For graduate programs in Turkish, the rate for national students is 100 to 200 US dollars, and, for international students, they are from 300 to 600 US dollars. For graduate programs in English, the rate for nationals is 200-300 US dollars, and, for international students, the range is 600-900 US dollars [66].

Fees are very different in private or foundation universities. Undergraduate and graduate programs cost from 5,000 to 20,000 US dollars in Turkey. It is very interesting that in state universities, Turkic students from countries or federal subjects of Azerbaijan, Bashkortostan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Mongolia, Moldova, Nakhchivan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Tatarstan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine, pay the tuition fees of national students. [67]

The residence permit students receive is only for educational purposes. For part-time jobs during the period of one's study, international students need to apply for a work permit which allows them to work at most 24 hours a week [68]. After graduation though, graduates can apply for jobs in Turkey but the chance of getting a satisfying job is not as much as that of European countries.

IV. Conclusion

As it was presumed before the study, higher education policies are based on the cultural, religious, political, social and economic context of a country. In addition, several points are concluded from the strategies of the four countries, namely the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In all of these countries, any educational reform or change of policy was done by planning and support of governments.

In the UAE, higher education develops according to the international policies of the country; private universities were established with the aim of recruiting international students and creating an international environment. In Turkey, the government promotes higher education institutions for national purposes, which is also parallel with the development of the international aspect of its higher education. However, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with more traditional and Islamic environments, mostly recruit students from countries with more similar culture to their own. Turkey has focused on European students, and defines the policies which are more similar to western educational system. The United Arab Emirates has operated differently in this case and has invested in development of its international outlook, in addition to the preservation of the nationals' tradition and culture.

The direction of internationalization in these countries was mostly defined to the degree of change which the authorities planned for the higher education system. Accordingly, strategies to pursue higher education aims were put into action under the influence of the acquired changes. It is important for countries to decide on their international student market and study the social, academic and economic conditions of their target market. Such studies can be used for significant strategy making and will decrease the risk of investment in less advantageous approaches, which may have negative consequences for international student recruitment.

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