

# Dispute over the King Abdullah Scholarship Program

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## Abstract

This paper provides an evaluation of the sociocultural impact of The King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Saudi Arabia and in the United States. The data provided for the evaluation was gathered over a two-month period through an online survey that was shared throughout the social media channels. The information which was collected for this paper represents the program participants' social experiences in the United States' campuses to assist the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, represented by the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) in the United States, in making a final decision in regards to the continuation of the program.

## Keywords

King Abdullah Scholarship Program, Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, The Sociocultural Impact of KASP, The Program Participants

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## 1. Introduction

In 2005, the late King of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, established the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which was given a five-year time limit. In 2007, King Abdullah extended the program for another 2 years, and in 2009 a further 3-year extension was granted. A few years later, in 2013, the Ministry of Education announced the new extension of the program to 2020. "The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) [began] with an agreement between King Abdullah and [former] President George Bush to increase the number of Saudi students in the US" (Ministry of Education, 2012) [1].

According to the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia's website, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program provides the financial resources to authorize Saudi students to pursue their degrees in bachelors, masters, doctorate, and medical fellowships, at the best universities around the world. This evaluation

will focus only on the 51.2% of Saudi students in the program who attend American universities. Academic disciplines and scholarships are selected based on the needs of the government ministries, national corporations and the private sector in Saudi Arabia. This selection aims to fulfill the requirements of the labor market across the kingdom's regions, universities and industrial cities. The program commissions qualified Saudi youth, who take an active role in developing all fields within government and private sectors (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010) [2].

### **1.1. KASP Vision**

The program's vision is to prepare distinguished generations for a knowledgeable society built upon a knowledge-based economy (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010) [2].

### **1.2. KASP Mission**

The program'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 in the different areas of scientific research. The participants will become highly qualified individuals for Saudi universities as well as the government and private sectors (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010) [2].

## **2. Program Goals**

- Sponsor qualified Saudis for study in the best universities around the world.
- Work to bring about a high level of academic and professional standards.
- Exchange scientific, educational and cultural experiences with countries worldwide.
- Build up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment.
- Raise and develop the level of professionalism among Saudis (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010) [2].

## **3. Significance of the Study**

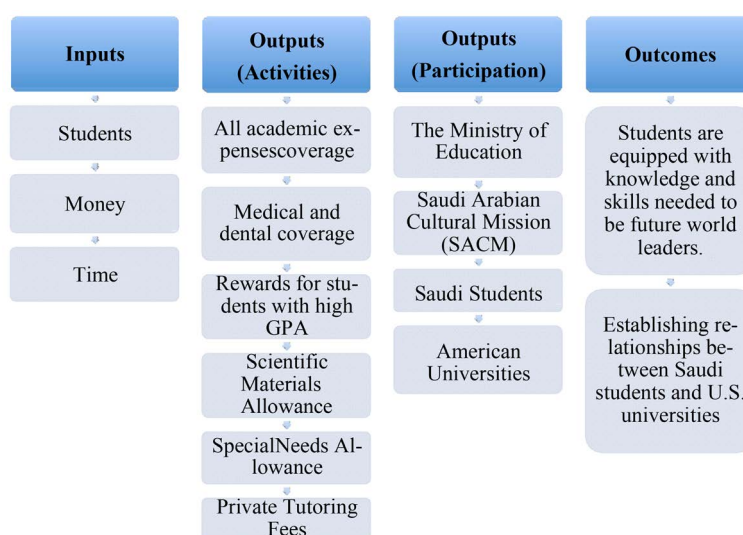
The King Abdullah Scholarship Program reflects the government of Saudi Arabia's strategies to improve the standards of education throughout the country. The Ministry of Education allocates a huge amount of money to help students pursue higher education at universities around the world (Ghafour, 2012) [3]. "Education researchers have called the King Abdullah Scholarship program the largest nationally funded higher education program in the world" (Molavi, 2015, para. 3) [4].

Although the King Abdullah Scholarship program may be viewed as progressive, it is also incredibly controversial. Saudi Arabia is considered the most conservative society in the world, as it "is the cradle of Islam... and arguably the most powerful Arab nation-state in global geopolitics" (Kraidy, 2007, as cited in Chakravartty & Zhao, 2007, 198) [5].

The extremist party in Saudi Arabia opposes the fundamentals of King Abdullah Scholarship Program with arguments based on the following points:

- The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia should instead invest funds in establishing and building new universities in their own country that can permanently serve more Saudi students generations.
- The foreign countries, where Saudi students reside during their studies, may sway their political views to claim more democracy and freedom.
- Girls, who cover half of the program population, may be influenced by the demand of women's rights in the western countries.
- This program may spark changes in social practices, tolerance for diversity, and acceptance of different cultures.

#### 4. Developing a Logic Model



#### 5. Establishing Evaluation Questions

This study focused on the sociocultural attitudes of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program participants. The controversy around this program has fueled the researcher's strong desire to emphasize the importance of the social aspects that the students gain from traveling abroad to study. This study was made to address the following research questions:

- Does studying abroad impact the Saudi students' loyalty to the royal family?
- Does the King Abdullah Scholarship Program encourage political and/or religious rebellion?
- Does The King Abdullah Scholarship Program encourage students to participate in a volunteer work?
- Does The King Abdullah Scholarship Program allow students to enhance their global perspective?

#### 6. Establishing an Evaluation Design and Measures

An evaluation was structured to examine whether The King Abdullah Scholar-

ship Program is changing the sociocultural attitudes of Saudi students and whether it is encouraging participation in global activities and volunteer works. Furthermore, the objective was to explore whether this program appropriately meets the needs of the educational sector in Saudi Arabia. Before establishing an evaluation design, the stakeholders' concerns were all about how to design an effective questionnaire that gathers the information they seek with a quick response rate from the proper population.

These arrangements for discovery have driven the evaluator to develop an oriented survey instrument. The choice of this instrument was made to cover the wide range of the program's participants. The usage of open-ended questions allowed the evaluator to eliminate the most concerning aspect of the survey: how to assess and gain knowledge about the change in behaviors and unexpected actions from the program participants.

The researcher prepared a survey for the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and distributed it to the range of participants in the population of interest through Facebook and Twitter. Fortunately, the survey collected 132 responses from different states and levels of education:

High School	20	(15.2%)
Associates Degree	9	(6.8%)
Bachelor's Degree	57	(43.2%)
Master's Degree	36	(27.3%)
PhD	10	(7.6%)

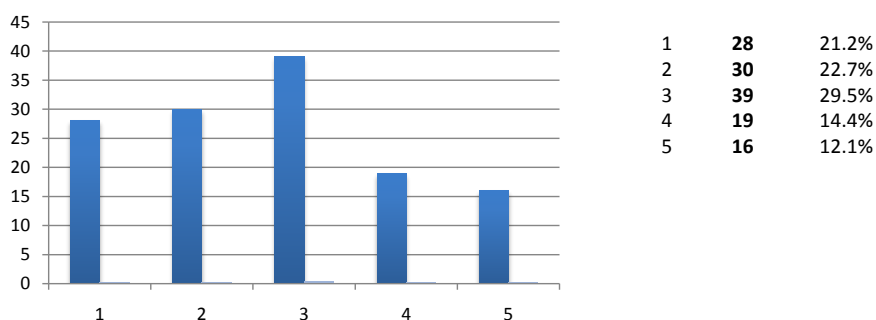
## 7. Survey Analysis

In order to gain an understanding of the sociocultural influences of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program from the participants, the survey included 20 questions in total. The survey results indicated many surprising facts: as shown in **Figure 1**, 21.2% of the survey participants believed that studying in the United States has made them more conservative in their view of Islam. Moreover, only 12.1% think that their view of Islam has changed to be more liberal. The highest numbers of the participants, 29.5%, believed that studying in American universities has had no influence on their perspective of Islam.

Another remarkable point gathered from the survey, as seen in **Figure 2**, was that 43.9% of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program participants believed that their experience studying in the United States had not affected their view of the Saudi government or of the royal family. Unexpectedly, 16.7% of the survey participants became more dedicated to the Saudi government and royal family and 12.1% started to seek to more liberality.

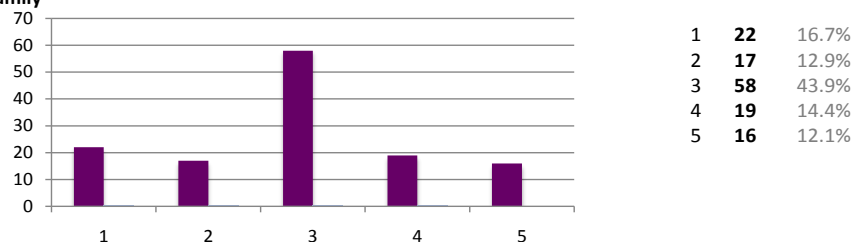
Additionally, it is obvious from the survey that the program intensely improved the participation rate of volunteer work among Saudi students. 29.5% of the survey participants strongly agreed that attending American universities encouraged them to contribute in volunteer work (**Figure 3**). Consequently, many

### My Experience studying in the United States has changed my view of Islam



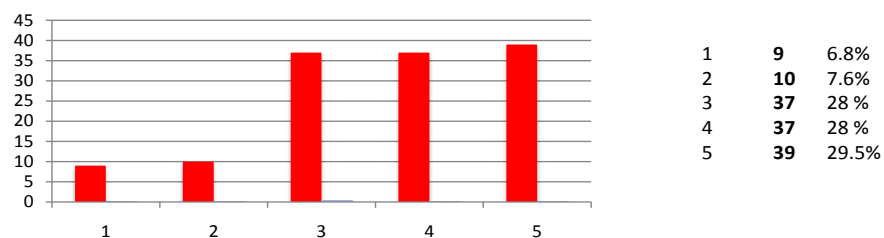
**Figure 1.** The experience of Saudi students, who are enrolled in King Abdullah Scholarship Program in the United States, about how studying abroad has changed their views of Islam.

### My experience studying in the United States has changed my view of Saudi Government or the Royal Family



**Figure 2.** The Saudi students' different perspectives towards the Saudi Government or the Royal Family.

### My Experience in the Unites states has changed my participation in volunteer work

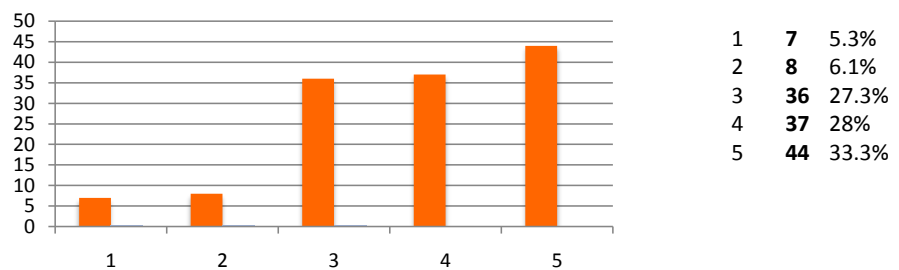


**Figure 3.** The American universities impact to the Saudi students in participating in volunteer work.

Saudi non-profit, student-based organizations have been created since the establishment of The King Abdullah Scholarship Program. “Hand by Hand” and “Us to US” organizations are the two largest Saudi student-based organizations in the United States providing compelling volunteer opportunities and effectively utilizing the individual talents of their volunteers (Us to U.S., 2013) [6].

The program implementers are satisfied with the current program based on the data collected from the survey. As shown in **Figure 4**, 33.3% of the participants have agreed that the program increased their cultural sensitivity towards other cultures, whereas only 5.3% have said that the program decreased their cultural sensitivity.

#### My experience studying in the United states has changed my global perspective



**Figure 4.** How studying in the US have changed Saudi students global perspective towards cultural sensitivity.

### 8. Comparisons of Saudi Student Sociocultural Attitudes before and after Implementing the Initiative

The purpose of this evaluation is to convince the Ministry of Education that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program should be continued. Research will support this argument by analyzing some cultural effects of the program in Saudi Arabia and the program's social influence in the United States.

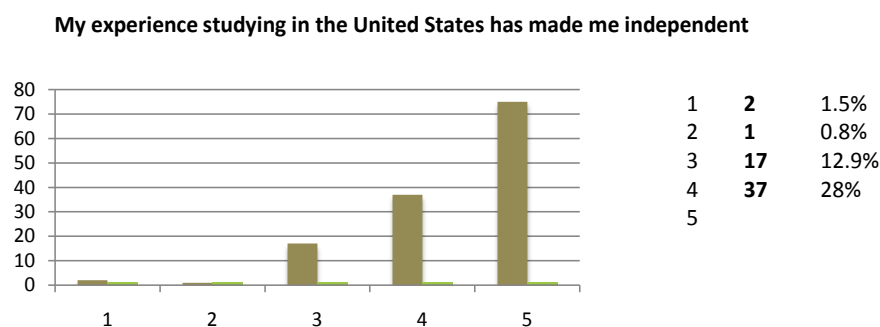
In a controversial move, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program opened equal opportunities for female students to enroll in universities overseas. The awareness of Saudi Arabia families toward female education has dramatically increased after the implementation of the program. Admittedly, despite Saudi families being aware of the fact that universities in foreign countries are amalgamated gender institutions, they still encourage their daughters or wives to apply to the program.

In addition to the female education awareness supported by this program, another fact that caught the attention of the stakeholders is that Saudi students tend to become more independent from studying abroad. Not surprisingly, the challenges of living away from home and interacting with new people in foreign countries results in increased independence, especially amongst women: "Saudi women abroad experience being independent and the ability of doing things on their own. However, after returning from abroad, the difficulty to cope with bureaucracy becomes a burden" (Pasquesoone, 2011) [7].

**Figure 5** presents a closer look at the personal development component of the program, which is represented by the independence level after enrollment. The illustration shows that 56.8% of the survey population became more independent after their enrollment, and only 1.5% of participants believed that the program has negatively affected their independence level.

### 9. Program Graduate Skills and Job Opportunities

This section was written based on job opportunities and employment demand conditions. There is a high demand of English language speakers in both sectors, governmental and private, due to the advancement of technology systems that require English language certification. Students who have graduated from



**Figure 5.** How KASP helped in developing the Saudi students' personalities into becoming more independent by studying abroad.

American universities through The King Abdullah Scholarship program are more likely to receive employment offers than students who have graduated from Saudi universities in these work fields. An increasing number of employers are requiring TOEFL or IELTS tests. Both of these tests require extensive studying and preparation in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in the English language.

Furthermore, every year since the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has been established, the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) has hosted a job fair in the US, which offers many work opportunities from the government sector and the private sector for the Saudi students who graduated from American universities. These students are sought after as employees for not only their language skills, but also for their advanced technology, social, and intercultural skills, as well as their acceptance of diversity. The survey shows that all program participants noticed an improvement in one or more of these skills (**Figure 6**).

## 10. Program Recommendations

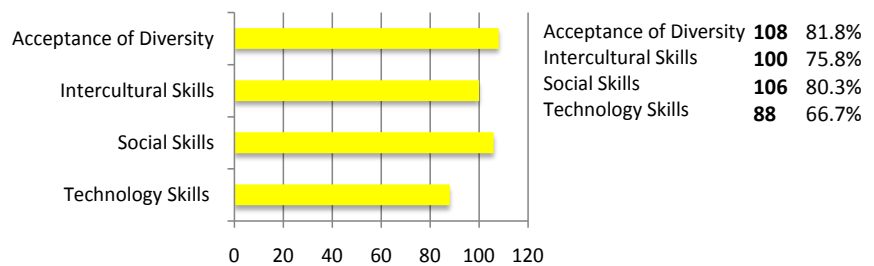
This evaluation was created to assess the cultural impact of The King Abdullah Scholarship Program on participants' sociocultural attitudes. In terms of the use of this evaluation, the evaluator has two recommendations:

- To help other researchers further develop this program.
- To help program graduates to transition back to Saudi society and culture when they return to their country.

## 11. Conclusions

The importance of this evaluation is in generating new understanding of sociocultural aspects of the program. Therefore, the usage of this evaluation should not only be provisionally in the duration of the program, but also revised and enhanced by additional researchers in the future. In a large-scale program like the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, in which thousands of students participate, researchers should invest their time and effort in gathering data and information to assist the improvement of the program outcomes.

### My experience studying in the United States has taught me new skills



**Figure 6.** The contribution of American universities in developing new skills in the Saudi students in different subjects.

This evaluation was produced to lead people to change their perspective of this program, and to encourage them to make greater efforts to address participants' needs before, during, and after their educational journeys in foreign countries. The information written in this evaluation is in support of convincing the Ministry of Education to continue the King Abdullah Scholarship Program indefinitely.

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## Appendix

### The Cultural Impact of the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program in Saudi Arabia and its International Social Impact

I am conducting this survey to gather data for an evaluation of the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program for my Outcomes Assessment and Applications in Organizations class. All information gathered from this survey will be confidential in that your name will remain anonymous. Thank you in advance for your honest participation.

**1. What is your highest level of education?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ High School
- ☐ Associates Degree
- ☐ Bachelors Degree
- ☐ Masters Degree
- ☐ PhD

**2. When did you begin your degree?**

If you do not know the exact day, please enter the month and year and select the 1st day.

*Example: December 15, 2012*

**3. When is your anticipated graduation?**

If you do not know the exact day, please enter the month and year and select the 1st day.

*Example: December 15, 2012*

**4. What is your most current cumulative GPA on the 4.0 scale?**

.....

**5. How are your grades?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ A average
- ☐ B average
- ☐ C average
- ☐ D average

**6. What is your major area of study?**

.....

**7. Is your major area of study available in Saudi Arabian universities?**

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No

**8. My experience studying in the United States has made me independent.**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Less Independent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	More Independent

**9. My experience studying in the United States has changed my view of Islam.**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
More Conservative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	More Liberal

**10. My experience studying in the United States has changed my view of Saudi Government or the royal family.**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
More Conservative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	More Liberal

**11. My experience studying in the United States has helped me to network and grow in my career field.**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree

**12. My experience studying in the United States has changed my global perspective.**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Less culturally sensitive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	More culturally sensitive

13. **My experience studying in the United States has changed my participation in volunteer work.**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Less participation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	More participation

14. **My experience studying in the United States has taught me new skills.**

*Check all that apply.*

*Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Technology Skills
- ☐ Social Skills
- ☐ Intercultural Skills
- ☐ Acceptance of Diversity

15. **How likely would you be to temporarily accept a low-paying work position?**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Unlikely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Likely

16. **What is the minimum salary you would accept after graduation?**

*Currency is measured in Saudi riyals.*

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ 3,000 per month
- ☐ 6,000 per month
- ☐ 9,000 per month
- ☐ 12,000 per month
- ☐ Higher than 12,000 per month

17. **How likely are you to return to Saudi Arabia after graduation?**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very Unlikely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Likely

18. **Which graduates do you believe are more likely to receive job opportunities?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Saudi Graduates of Saudi Arabian universities
- ☐ Saudi Graduates of American universities through the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program

19. **Would you be likely to recommend studying in the United States to others?**

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree


20. **Would you sign a petition to support the continuation of the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program?**

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No

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