

Motivations for Studying in Saudi Arabia (Perspectives of International Students from Three Continents)

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ABSTRACT

The number of international students enrolling in higher education institutions is steadily increasing each year, including in Saudi Arabia. This study aimed to explore the motivations behind international students' decisions to attend public universities in the country. A qualitative approach was used, relying on interviews as the primary data collection method to address the research question. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 male international students at a Saudi public university. The findings of the study revealed that the most significant factor attracting international students to public universities in Saudi Arabia is the educational scholarship program funded by the Saudi government. This program offers numerous benefits to international students, including free tuition, a monthly stipend, free housing, and other advantages. Additionally, the study identified other appealing aspects, such as factors related to the Islamic religion, the Kingdom's positive global reputation and humanitarian role, and the overall quality and advancement of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: international students, higher education, reasons to study abroad, higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

The world has witnessed a growing number of international students pursuing higher education in recent decades. These students are motivated by various factors, including the desire to obtain a quality education and gain multicultural experiences (De Wit et al., 2018; Farrugia & Bhandari, 2020; Teichler, 2017; Yin & Zong, 2022). This new wave of students represents a distinctive element in the global higher education landscape, with seven million students enrolled in 2022 (UNESCO, 2024). International students are recognized for their significant contributions to industry, innovation, and cultural diversity within universities, as well as for enhancing the international relations of educational institutions (Albeshir, 2022). Their presence fosters a rich diversity that benefits the institutions they attend and strengthens the connection between nations through cooperative engagement and a shared commitment to learning (Al-Mutawa, 2024). Moreover, international students enrich the learning environment by sharing their artistic traditions, engaging with a wide range of academics, and contributing to scientific research and commercial activities. This influx of distinguished students has prompted substantial educational developments in many countries noted for their global academic participation (Albeshir et al., 2024).

The first higher education institution in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1949, namely, the College of Sharia in Makkah Al-Mukaromah, which was also the first higher education institution in the Arabian Gulf region (Al-Zahrani, 2007; Al-Salman, 1999). The college was affiliated with the General Directorate of Education, which later became the Ministry of Education. It was then affiliated with King Abdulaziz University in 1972 before being incorporated into Umm Al-Qura University in 1981. The Kingdom subsequently witnessed an expansion in the establishment of higher education institutions, with the establishment of teachers' colleges in Makkah (1952), the College of Sharia in Riyadh (1953), and the College of Arabic Language (1954), until the first Saudi university, King Saud University, was established in 1957 (Ministry of Education, 1972). By 2021, the number of public universities in the Kingdom had reached 27, with more than 1.2 million students, 54% female (Ministry of Education, 2021). The private sector included 15 private universities and approximately 23 private higher education institutions. Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University had the highest student enrolments among universities, with more than 139,000 students, followed by King Abdulaziz University, with 124,000 students, most female. King Faisal University ranked third with over 112,000 students, including approximately 41,000 female students. King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences was the smallest public university in terms of student enrollment, founded in 2005. Its enrolment in 2021 reached approximately 11,266 students, including 6,098 female students.

Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia witnessed an early influx of international students, dating back to the first half of the 1950s. The first recorded appearance of these students was at the College of Sharia in Riyadh, which was the

initial nucleus for the establishment of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. According Albeshir et al., (2024), through a careful review of historical sources and graduate records of Saudi higher education institutions during their founding stages, a student from Pakistan named Muhammad Sharif is likely the first international graduate from a Saudi educational institution. He graduated as part of the second class of the College of Sharia in Riyadh in 1958. He may also have been the first international student officially accepted into a Saudi educational institution, given that documents indicate that the first launch of higher education in the Kingdom began in 1949 with the establishment of the College of Sharia in Mecca. The book "University Graduates Guide 1376-1401 AH" issued by Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, confirms that the College of Sharia in Riyadh, founded in 1953 alongside the College of Arabic Language, the Higher Institute of the Judiciary, and other scientific institutes, graduated its first class in 1957. The number of graduates at the time was 22 students, all of whom were Saudi citizens. The next class, in 1958, graduated 20 students, including international student Muhammad Sharif, whose name was recorded as "Muhammad Sharif Pakistani," and he was ranked sixteenth among his classmates. Another international student, Saaduddin Ahmad from India, graduated from the college's third class in 1958. Another Pakistani student, Abdul Karim Murad, graduated from the same college in 1959. International students were not limited to Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University but also included other educational institutions, such as King Saud University, which, since its first class in 1957, accepted three international students out of a total of 21 students, representing over 14% of the total admissions—a high percentage for a newly established university at the time. Sources indicate that King Saud University's first class of graduating students was in 1961 and included 15 students, including two international students from the Republic of Malawi. This East African country was then under British colonial rule. The two students enrolled in the History Department of the College of Arts. Abdullah al-Hajj Nasri earned a bachelor's degree in history with a "good" grade, placing sixth among his classmates. The second, Ahmed Tayeb Abdul Raouf, earned the same degree, achieved an "acceptable" grade, and placed eighth and last in the rankings (King Saud University, 1987).

The number of non-citizen students in higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2021 reached approximately 64,874 students, of whom approximately 46,723 enrolled in public universities, while the remainder enrolled in private educational institutions. According to the Ministry of Education data, public universities accounted for the most significant proportion of international students, constituting approximately.

Research Problem

Saudi Arabia aims to enhance its status as a regional and international hub for higher education in line with the Kingdom's Vision 2030. One of its strategic objectives is to increase the percentage of international students enrolled in its universities, through which the "Study in Saudi Arabia" initiative was launched. Attracting international

students is one indicator of the quality of higher education, and they are widely viewed as a "soft power" that influences cultural, diplomatic, and economic relations between countries (Albeshir, 2019; Al-Mutairi, 2024). These students acquire knowledge and convey the image of the country in which they studied to their communities, contributing to building bridges of communication and influence between cultures. Despite the efforts in this area, understanding the reasons that drive international students to choose Saudi Arabia as their higher education destination still requires in-depth study and analysis. The lack of a thorough understanding of these motivations may undermine the effectiveness of policies and initiatives to attract and retain international students at Saudi institutions. Accordingly, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of international students and analysing the factors that influenced their decisions. This study supports the Kingdom's efforts to enhance its international educational presence and utilize education as a strategic tool for soft power.

Study Question:

What motives influence international students' choice to study at public higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

Study Objectives:

1. To identify the main motives that influence male international students' decision to choose Saudi Arabia as their higher education destination.
2. To analyze the academic, religious, economic, and social factors that attract these students to Saudi universities.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it is, to the researchers' knowledge, the first qualitative research that explores and understands the motivations behind why male international students choose public higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study uses a qualitative approach and interview analysis to explore the individual experiences and cultural, religious, and educational contexts that influence students' decisions.. The study represents a scientific contribution that fills a significant research gap, as this group of learners has not received sufficient attention in previous literature despite the increasing number of international students in Saudi universities and their connection to the goals of the Kingdom's Vision 2030. It also contributes to providing accurate knowledge that can help decision-makers and Saudi universities improve recruitment strategies, develop services provided to international students, and enhance the role of education as a means of human and cultural communication at the international level.

Literature Review

James & Yun (2017) conducted a study aimed at understanding the factors influencing international students' decisions when choosing a small higher education institution, with a particular comparison between Chinese students and students of other nationalities in terms of information sources used, their usefulness, attractive

motivations, and influential reference elements. The study was conducted on a sample of international undergraduate students at a small higher education institution and included students holding study permits or temporary visitor visas, whether full-time or part-time and from various disciplines. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, using questionnaires and interviews as research tools. The results revealed that the "university website" was the most frequently used source of information, while "direct communication with the institution" was considered the most useful. Students also viewed the "educational environment and facilities" as among the strongest pull factors and "the institution itself" as the most influential reference in their decision, with noticeable differences between Chinese students and others in the influencing factors.

Zhai et al. (2019) conducted a study aimed at analyzing the factors that motivate Chinese students to choose higher education institutions in Australia, in addition to the motivations behind their return to their home country. The study relied on a systematic review of 68 studies published between 2000 and 2017 and concluded that the main reasons for choosing Australia include academic requirements and academic achievement, future job opportunities, the host country's environment, and social ties. Meanwhile, the motivations for returning to China were emotional needs, cultural integration difficulties, and job opportunities within China.

Gutema et al. (2023) conducted a study aimed at analyzing the scholarly literature related to the factors that influence international students' decisions to study abroad through a systematic review of 43 studies published between 2010 and 2022 based on specific criteria and relied on the push-pull model of international student decision-making. The results revealed five main themes in the reviewed studies: improving quality of life, host country policies, the role of educational institutions, return to the home country, and socio-economic, environmental, cultural, and individual factors. The study showed that the most prominent drivers for studying abroad include education quality, visa requirements, academic reputation, tuition costs, scholarship availability, and job opportunities, in addition to social and cultural factors. The study also indicated that language, residency policies, and integration difficulties are among the most significant challenges students face after graduation.

Nikou & Luukkonen (2023) conducted a study aimed at understanding the intentions of international students in Finland regarding staying or leaving the host country after graduation, using the push-pull factors theory and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). The researchers relied on a conceptual model tested with data from 292 international students, analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results showed that factors such as the host country's economic and social environment, the role of educational institutions, and social norms directly influence students' inclination to stay. This tendency acts as a mediator between pull factors and the intention to remain. In contrast, challenges such as difficulty with the local language, limited job opportunities, and weak social integration reduce students' desire to stay after graduation. The study recommends providing comprehensive support for international students that takes into account their needs and experiences to ensure both attraction and retention in the host country.

Borodina & Pereira (2023) conducted a study aimed at analyzing the benefits of studying at a Hungarian university from the perspective of international students in light of increasing globalization driving the internationalization of higher education. To achieve this objective, a questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 100 international students aged between 18 and 38 years. The results showed that international students seek multiple benefits from the study abroad experience, most notably personal development, cultural exposure, career prospects, and travel opportunities. Students also pointed to social and economic benefits such as access to distinguished academic programs, the country's positive image, safety levels, and low living costs in Hungary. The results also revealed that the decision to study at a Hungarian university was influenced by factors such as the availability of the desired specialization, a comfortable environment, a flexible study schedule, ease of admission requirements, improvement of English language skills, the university's good reputation, obtaining a European degree, a supportive environment, affordable costs, and future job opportunities. The study also indicated that the benefits valued by students vary according to their age groups and social status.

The study by Al-Dayel and Al-Omari (2024) aimed to identify the reality of implementing cultural diversity management at King Khalid University from the perspective of international students, focusing on the dimensions of cultural diversity (internal, external, and applied). The study relied on the descriptive analytical approach, where a questionnaire was applied to a sample of international students at King Khalid University, numbering (330) male and female students out of a total population of (772) international students. The researchers used the questionnaire tool to collect data, and the results were analyzed using the SPSS program. The results showed that the level of implementation of cultural diversity management at the university from the perspective of international students was average across all dimensions. The internal dimension had the highest arithmetic mean of (3.89), followed by the applied dimension, then the external dimension. The results showed no statistically significant differences in students' responses attributed to the variables of specialization or college. In contrast, differences were attributed to the nationality variable in favor of African students. The study concluded with recommendations, the most important of which are supporting initiatives to engage international students in university activities, activating cultural communication, and promoting multicultural practices on campus

Fathi's (2024) study aimed to identify international students as a soft power in Egyptian universities and their role in enhancing Egypt's soft power internationally. The study addressed the concept of soft power in depth by reviewing its characteristics, conditions, goals, and requirements and the indicators and theories that explain it. The study also addressed the concept of international students, their characteristics, roles, and the problems that may hinder their performance of these roles within Egyptian universities. The study relied on the descriptive and analytical approach to present the roles of international students as a soft power through their academic, cultural, social, political, and economic roles and the problems they face

during their studies at Egyptian universities, which impact their academic experience and personal lives. Given the importance of the role of international students as soft power, the study focused on the need to work to solve these problems to create a supportive and appropriate educational environment for all students and enhance their ability to represent Egypt in a manner that serves its international standing. The study proposed several implementable approaches and measures to address these issues. It also presented a set of mechanisms to enhance the role of international students as a soft power, encompassing multiple stages, such as pre-study, reception, and study. Key recommendations included providing a supportive and multicultural educational environment, developing academic programs directed at international students in Arabic and English, allocating appropriate budgets, appointing specialized advisors, and providing diverse services that meet their needs.

Al-Mutairi's study (2025) aimed to identify the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's image among international students using the "Nation Branding" model. This was accomplished by applying a qualitative questionnaire to a sample of international students at King Saud University. The study adopted a qualitative approach, a critical analytical methodology based on analyzing details and contexts from various sources and dimensions. It relied on analytical tools capable of deconstructing the elements of the mental image associated with the cultural identity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia among students and distinguishing between the factors influencing the formation of this image, both within and outside the educational environment. The study sought to understand how impressions are formed, the impact of social interaction and the exchange of experiences among students in shaping this image, as well as the role of cultural and religious discourse in strengthening national identity and the extent to which this relates to communication with the local community. The study used focused interviews with a purposive sample of 12 students of different nationalities to explore the cultural and diplomatic dimensions influencing international students' impressions. The study concluded that spiritual and religious ties, educational roles, and student services strengthen the Kingdom's positive image. The study recommended developing quality programs that enhance international students' interaction with the local community and contribute to building an institutional, cultural discourse that supports soft diplomacy and the Kingdom's global image.

The current study benefited from previous literature on international students, particularly those that focused on the reasons behind their choice of higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These studies helped expand understanding of related concepts, as well as facilitate the process of analyzing results and formulating interview questions with international students. The current study shares its objectives with some previous studies, but differs in the geographical location of the survey and the methodology used. It is also the first to use a qualitative approach to study the reasons why international students choose to study in the Kingdom, adding new value to the literature in this field.

Study Sample and Methodology:

The study sample was selected purposively and consisted of 35 male students: 26 from African countries, four from Europe, and five from Asia. Of these, 12 were undergraduate students, while the majority were graduate students at a public university in Saudi Arabia. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 38 years. All students received a full scholarship from the Saudi government. All students receive a full scholarship from the Saudi government. After obtaining the sample's consent, the primary researcher conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom, with some interviews conducted in person between 2023 and 2024. The audio interviews were transcribed, and peer review was used to ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, which is important given the ongoing debate over the reliability of qualitative data.

The study used a qualitative approach due to its suitability for the research objectives. Qualitative research helps us better understand topics through qualitative data collection tools such as interviews. The phenomenological study methodology was also used, focusing on understanding the phenomenon under study rather than generalizing the results (Al-Rashidi, 2018). The study followed the information analysis methodology proposed by Bingham (2023), which consists of five stages. In the first stage, interview data were organized, and coding was developed for common themes. In the second stage, the data was sorted, followed by the third stage, which involved understanding the data. In the fourth stage, the data was interpreted, and patterns and themes were identified. In the fifth and final stage, the data were explained.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed several key themes that framed their motivations:

1. Fully funded scholarship programs from the Saudi government were crucial, offering financial support and stable living conditions.
2. The Kingdom's strong reputation for humanitarian efforts created a positive image that attracted students.
3. High-quality higher education, with modern infrastructure and diverse programs, appealed to the students.
4. Proximity to the Two Holy Mosques and a disciplined religious environment were significant motivations for many participants.

The existence of a scholarship program funded by the Saudi government

Interviews with 35 male international students revealed that scholarships provided by the Saudi government were a key factor in their decision to pursue a university education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Almost all participants confirmed that these scholarships were not merely a secondary incentive or an additional benefit but represented the primary condition that enabled them to pursue higher education outside their home countries. This was especially significant given their severe

financial difficulties, weak educational infrastructure, and lack of high-quality university education opportunities. The students were particularly impressed by the comprehensive support offered through the Saudi scholarships. These scholarships, which went beyond just tuition waivers, included a range of benefits such as university housing, subsidized meals, comprehensive medical care, annual airfare, and rewards for academic excellence. This comprehensive support not only met the students' financial needs but also contributed significantly to a stable and enriching environment for study and academic success.

Another significant aspect that emerged from the interviews was the role of the scholarships in supporting entire families. Many students used the financial support to cover their expenses and sent a portion back to their families. This underscores the humanitarian and social dimension of the scholarships, showing that they are not just about individual students but about supporting entire families. Participants emphasized that these scholarships offer more than just financial support; they encompass a complete experience that includes academic, living, and psychological care, making students feel that they are in a nurturing educational environment that genuinely cares about their success and progress. Some noted that this comprehensive care positions the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a leader compared to many other educational destinations, which may only offer partial scholarships and lack organization and sustainability. By analysing the interview results, the study concluded that Saudi educational scholarships are among the strongest and most influential factors driving international students' decisions to study, regardless of age, educational level, or social background. This factor has proven to be remarkably consistent in its impact. It is a common point of attraction for various student groups, making the scholarship a strategic driver for inviting international students and talent from around the globe.

The quality of higher education in Saudi Arabia and the availability of specializations in educational institutions

Data from qualitative interviews with 35 male international students displayed that a key motivation for studying in Saudi Arabia's higher education institutes was the availability of scientific and religious disciplines that were either difficult to access or completely unavailable in their home countries. Participants confirmed that the academic environment in Saudi Arabia provided them with opportunities previously unattainable—whether in terms of the diversity of disciplines, the depth of content, or the strength of the regulatory framework for higher education. Among the disciplines prioritized by most participants, religious studies—particularly those focused on Sunni doctrine—emerged as essential. They found Saudi Arabia a distinguished academic hub, offering rigorous curricula, balanced presentations, and robust content. Several students noted that their home universities either did not offer these fields at all or presented them from different sectarian perspectives or in a non-academic manner, lacking scientific and methodological rigor. Consequently, these students viewed Saudi universities as a valuable opportunity to study religion, according to a moderate Sunni authority recognized widely in the Islamic world. Moreover, students

highlighted that the Arabic language was a significant motivation for their choice to study in the Kingdom. With Arabic as the language of instruction—especially in Sharia and humanities colleges—they could deepen their understanding of religious texts in their original language and engage directly with jurisprudential and Quranic texts without translating. Many considered learning and mastering Arabic not only as a study tool but also as a pillar of their identity and religious identity, enhancing their comprehension of Islamic religion and culture. In other academic fields, such as educational administration and educational studies, students emphasized that Saudi Arabia offers these programs within a clear institutional framework, featuring modern curricula and academically qualified faculty. Some indicated they had tried to enroll in similar specializations in their home countries but faced weak or absent programs or a lack of technological capabilities and academic libraries. Students expressed great appreciation for the advanced academic infrastructure provided by Saudi universities, which includes modern educational facilities, electronic databases, and extensive digital libraries. They praised the stimulating learning environment characterized by organization and discipline and faculty members who possess global academic expertise, many of whom hold degrees from prestigious international universities. Additionally, many participants indicated that degrees from Saudi universities are highly respected and valued in their home countries. These degrees are recognized qualifications that provide graduates with a competitive advantage in the job market, especially in religious, educational, and administrative positions, where graduates from Saudi universities are regarded as having received a high-quality education. Analyzing these testimonials and qualitative narratives leads to the conclusion that the decision of international students to study in Saudi Arabia was not random. Instead, it was a response to several interconnected motivations, primarily the availability of scientific and religious specializations that are difficult to pursue in their home countries, the strength of the Saudi academic system, the use of Arabic as the language of instruction, and the reputation of Saudi university degrees internationally. These factors create an attractive and conducive educational environment for students aspiring to develop their academic and religious capabilities simultaneously.

Religious factors

Interviews with 35 male international students revealed that religious motivations were among the most significant factors for their decision to study in Saudi Arabia. Their choice went beyond conventional academic considerations and took on a deeper spiritual meaning. Most participants described their time in the Kingdom as a holistic religious and spiritual journey, rather than just an academic experience. The students noted that Saudi Arabia's unique religious status as the home of the Two Holy Mosques significantly influenced their decisions. They regarded their presence in this holy land as an opportunity to deepen their religious rituals and strengthen their connection to their faith. Many indicated that the proximity to Mecca and Medina and the chance to visit the Two Holy Mosques fostered a sense of inner peace and contentment that they had not previously experienced in their educational journeys. The interviews revealed that none of the participants had performed Umrah before

they arrived in Saudi Arabia. However, most were able to perform Umrah several times during their studies, and a significant number attended Hajj. Others expressed hope to perform Hajj before completing their education. They described these experiences as among their most significant personal achievements, blending their educational pursuits with their spiritual journeys. Regarding the university environment, students praised the integrated Islamic atmosphere within Saudi universities. They highlighted the quality of academic programs, particularly in specializations such as Sharia, Islamic studies, and Qur'anic sciences, which knowledgeable scholars teach committed to the Prophet's Sunnah. Many expressed admiration for the professors, the depth of the curriculum, and the variety of accompanying activities, including free religious lectures and study circles. These components contributed to a holistic experience that engaged both mind and spirit. Students observed that the evident religious commitment in daily campus life—like hearing the call to prayer at scheduled times, facilitating congregational prayers, and organizing ongoing religious lessons—helped them maintain discipline, develop a sense of identity, and achieve psychological stability. Participants also appreciated the easy access to religious resources, including copies of the Quran, scholarly books, reliable websites, and lectures available to all students. This accessibility made the educational process a comprehensive life experience in which academic knowledge was closely tied to religious and spiritual growth. Analyzing these results highlights that religious commitment was not merely a cultural or personal aspect for these students; it was a fundamental element in their perception of education and a direct reason for choosing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The students believed that studying in an environment that valued their religion and strengthened their faith identity would help them achieve a balance between reason and faith, as well as between academic success and spiritual tranquility.

Saudi Arabia's good reputation in the humanitarian and relief field

Results from interviews conducted with 35 male international students indicated that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's positive reputation for humanitarian and developmental work was a significant factor in their decision to choose the Kingdom as a destination for higher education. Participants' accounts revealed that their perception of Saudi Arabia extends beyond domestic offerings; it also includes its initiatives in international development, humanitarian aid, and educational partnerships. Many students noted that the Kingdom is recognized in their countries as one of the world's leading nations in humanitarian efforts. It supports development projects, builds schools and health centers, and provides food and medical aid during disasters and crises. This perception, shaped by exposure to local media, community experiences, and development programs, contributed to a general impression that the Kingdom is not only a donor country but also a partner in enhancing the lives of individuals in developing nations. Some participants mentioned that governmental and non—profit Saudi organizations directly supported educational institutions in their countries. This support included funding school infrastructure, providing printed educational materials, and awarding scholarships to outstanding students. One

participant even noted that the books he studied in high school were printed with Saudi support, which introduced him to the Kingdom early in life as a nation dedicated to education and knowledge dissemination. Participants highlighted the Kingdom's positive role in international relations, facilitated by its embassies and cultural attachés. This presence presented an image of a country open to the world, welcoming talent, and investing in human development. They praised the organization and the respect they encountered while interacting with Saudi authorities responsible for international student affairs. This fostered a sense of inclusion and seriousness even before they arrived in the Kingdom. Some students noted that Saudi Arabia not only provides scholarships but also ensures a stable living environment, comprehensive health care, educational services, and ongoing support throughout their studies. They described this comprehensive care as "unmatched by what is offered in some other countries," reinforcing their belief that the Kingdom views international students as a long-term investment in human and social development rather than just a statistic in university enrollment. In analyzing the qualitative results, it becomes evident that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's humanitarian and developmental reputation plays a crucial role in shaping a positive image among international students. This image influences their educational choices, motivating them to enroll in its universities with confidence and enthusiasm. The humanitarian dimension underscores the Kingdom's position as an educational destination that combines quality education with deep values and a commitment to human well-being.

Results from interviews with international students showed that distinguishing between Saudi universities based on international rankings was not a priority in their decision to pursue higher education in the Kingdom. Most participants expressed deep respect for the Saudi higher education system, emphasizing that studying at any university in the Kingdom is a valuable opportunity, regardless of the institution's international rankings. The students' accounts indicated that gaining admission to a Saudi university—especially with a fully funded scholarship—was regarded as a significant achievement, overshadowing concerns about the university's ranking. Students showed little interest in comparing universities or analyzing the nuances between them. Instead, their confidence in Saudi higher education was rooted in a positive overall image of the system, focusing on the quality of education, relevance of majors, and professionalism of academic staff. Some students mentioned that they were unaware of the substantial differences between Saudi universities in rankings or specializations, as the application process usually prioritized available seats and scholarships over a detailed evaluation of university performance indicators. This approach contributed to a general perception among students that Saudi universities, regardless of their location, provide a reliable educational environment with advanced academic programs and adequate academic support. Despite this general sentiment, a few students noted that after starting their studies, they became more aware of differences between universities, including facilities, range of specializations, and levels of academic activity. However, these differences did not alter their initial positive outlook; instead, they viewed them as minor details that did not diminish the

fundamental value of their educational experience in the Kingdom. These qualitative findings suggest that international students perceive higher education in Saudi Arabia as a cohesive system reflecting an integrated national educational quality rather than a collection of institutions with varying performance levels according to international rankings. Consequently, the key factors influencing their decisions were admission and the support they received rather than a precise comparison of universities.

Key Study Findings:

1. The most significant factor influencing international students' decision to study at public universities in Saudi Arabia was the availability of government-funded scholarships.
2. Religious factors played a prominent role in students' choices, particularly the proximity to the Two Holy Mosques and the Islamic environment.
3. The quality of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and the availability of both scientific and religious specializations were key reasons for selecting the Kingdom as a study destination.
4. Saudi Arabia's strong reputation and its notable contributions in humanitarian and relief efforts also encouraged students to pursue their education in the country.
5. International students showed little interest in the rankings of Saudi universities or their global standings; instead, they focused on admission opportunities and the support available to them.
6. There were no differences in responses based on students' age, educational level, or country of origin, suggesting that the appealing factors were generally shared among the participants surveyed.

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