

## Reconceptualizing the Writing Center in the Wake of Local Admissions: Redefining Writing Centers in Qatar

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### Abstract

The Open Admissions phenomenon in the 1970s at the City University of New York (CUNY) provides a historical example of how higher education institutions may handle vast numbers of underprepared students. This scenario is currently being replayed in the Middle East, specifically in Qatar, where elite American higher education institutions are flooded with underprepared students. The result is similar to what occurred at CUNY – students are directed to writing and academic support centers for remedial instruction, while both students and faculty at these institutions experience frustration. This article stems from a larger research project that took a sociocultural approach to exploring English faculty perceptions of a writing center at an American higher education institution in Qatar; this article examines the historical background of Open Admissions in the United States and the implications for language learners in Qatar and other international contexts.

**Keywords:** writing centers, ESL, international education, admissions, writing

**Introduction**

During the last decade or two, the Middle East, in particular the Gulf States, have witnessed a huge expansion of American higher education institutions. With these institutions has typically come some form of a writing, learning, or academic resource center. Research has shown that ESL students are often a high percentage of writing center clients and also most likely to receive a significant benefit from such utilization (Bruce, 2009; Bruce and Rafoth, 2009). English is not the first language for the majority of the students enrolled in these Western universities in the Middle East. With this in mind, one would expect the writing centers to be flooded with clients. Surprisingly, however, this has not always been the case; there appears to be little or no motivation for students, despite their language and writing needs, to visit writing centers.

This paper aims to achieve two goals: first, it will draw a parallel of the Open Admissions phenomenon at the City University of New York (CUNY) in the 1970s in the United States and how this is being replayed in the Middle East; second, drawing on this notion of Open Admissions challenges, it will explore the complex nature of motivation for linguistically diverse students to visit writing centers in American higher education institutions in Qatar.

**Social Context & Background**

In order to fully appreciate the role motivation plays in the Gulf States and why it is comparable to the Open Admissions era, it is necessary to understand the complexity of the educational arrangement in Qatar. Education City was established in Qatar in 1995 by an official decree of the Emir of the State of Qatar. Since its establishment, Education City has been chaired by the Emir's wife, Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al Missned (Qatar Foundation, 2009). Sheikha Mozah has been responsible for the vision and entire implementation of this wide scale educational endeavor. To date, six universities have established branch campuses from the United States by importing their educational systems to Doha. A significant part of the rationale behind this project was to benefit women – due to cultural norms and local laws, women are not allowed to freely travel abroad without a male chaperone. This has resulted in limited educational opportunities for females. Consequently, the importation of Western institutions allows for greater access to higher education regardless of gender. Sheikha Mozah is well-respected and simultaneously often criticized for her views and actions toward gender equality. Nonetheless, she has so far successfully chaired Education City and overseen the growth of the universities and other institutions within its bounds.

One of the recently established universities in Education City is Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar (SFS-Q); this is where the author's initial experience was situated. She moved to Doha in August 2005, the same time SFS-Q was welcoming its first class of students. Georgetown was the fifth American university to establish itself in Education City (preceded by Virginia Commonwealth University, Cornell, Texas A&M, and Carnegie Mellon). It is notable that each of these institutions was selected to import only one school from its larger home campus university. For example, VCUQatar only brought the School of the Arts, Texas A&M carried over the School of Engineering, and Cornell brought over its medical school. This specificity of selection aimed to achieve Her Highness's goal of bringing only "world-renowned universities" (Qatar Foundation, 2009).

Each institution has negotiated a lengthy and detailed contract with Qatar Foundation, the main administrative unit for schools in Education City. While each contract is unique, there is a common underlying principle for all agreements: institutions from abroad must not relax their

standards or vary their curricula in any way. The admissions process and subsequent education in Qatar must directly mirror the processes in the home campuses. In fact, students who graduate from these branch campuses in Qatar are awarded degrees with identical wording to those of their main campus counterparts. In other words, unless the student specifically discloses the information, it would appear to any reader that the student attended the institution in the United States.

While the agreement to maintain identical standards across campuses sounds reasonable on the surface, it is clouded by another particularly challenging mandate – to accept a quota of local Qatari students. Qatar Foundation itself cites that “roughly half of university students are Qatari”(Qatar Foundation, 2009). In a country with a relatively low percentage of Qatari nationals (figures vary but it is generally estimated that no more than 20% of the population in Qatar actually possesses Qatari citizenship), coupled with the fact that the system of education is relatively new and continuously developing, finding qualified applicants for so many elite institutions can be a significant challenge (Mills, February 2009; Mills, July 2009; Wasserman, 2009). The result of these contractual quotas has led to a new phenomenon of Open Admissions in the Middle East, where underprepared students dominate the system.

### Open Admissions

As previously noted, Open Admissions was a politically and socially motivated change to higher education institutions in the United States during the 1970s, with the most striking example of open admissions and its challenges at CUNY. After years of discussion and debate about how to use the increase in government funds to aid underprepared students, as well as increase minority representation in the system of higher education, “CUNY’s community colleges began to admit any student with a high school diploma” (Renfro and Armour-Garb, 1999, p. 6). The primary aim was to minimize the gap between educational achievement for learners from different social and economic backgrounds, while maintaining CUNY’s overall mission of excellence and access. However, as an official report from New York in 1999 explains, “over the past 30 years, the ‘access’ portion of the mission has overwhelmed the university at the expense of excellence”(Renfro and Armour-Garb, 1999, p. 6). This is a scenario that is being replayed in Education City universities now as they are required to fulfill quotas for local students. As the above-mentioned report states, “CUNY has essentially delegated its admissions standards to the New York City public school system” (Renfro and Armour-Garb, 1999, p. 118). The American higher education institutions in Education City are similarly reliant on Qatar’s relatively new and developing K-12 system. The Qatari government itself acknowledges that “Overall, 2008 performance levels are generally low. Some students perform at the very highest levels, but the majority are performing at moderate levels, at best.” (Institute, 2008, slide 7).

One of the greatest challenges resulting from the Open Admissions program in the U.S. presented itself in writing centers across the country. How could institutions effectively handle the significant number of underprepared students in the classroom? This is when and where writing centers became an even more notorious hub for remedial writing instruction. The Open Admissions phenomenon at CUNY is typically associated with Mina Shaughnessy’s name in the field of writing and composition studies. Her research, most prominently displayed in *Errors and Expectations*, focused on the challenge of working with underprepared students and what she defined as Basic Writers (BW). Through her research, writing, and teaching, Shaughnessy’s mission was not only to educate and empower students, but to develop and provide useful

teaching tools for the overwhelmed faculty at these institutions. She also emphasized the useful traits and skills that students already enter into the classroom with and tried to cast a more positive light on their abilities.

I have reached the persuasion that underlies this book – namely, that BW students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes. (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 5)

While Shaughnessy's work was groundbreaking and informative for the field in general, it was primarily aimed at working with native speakers from underprivileged backgrounds. Her work offered limited insight into work with non-native speaking students, which is one of the key differences between open admissions at CUNY and the nature of admissions in Education City. Qatari students fall on the opposite end of the spectrum with regard to wealth and privileges that are bestowed upon them by the government. Regardless, both environments share a commonality of students enrolled at institutions where they are not academically prepared to be successful without appropriate support.

As Williams (2002) suggests in her article "Undergraduate Second Language Writers in the Writing Center.", when students require individualized and remedial support, this burden and responsibility fall on the writing center. This is precisely the dilemma played out in American institutions in Qatar. Faculty are brought over from the home campuses and instructed that students in Qatar should follow and maintain standards as they would in the U.S. One English professor<sup>1</sup> who had been teaching at one of the American universities in Qatar for over eight years, talked about the importance of writing centers in helping students:

...helping them build those critical skills...um...dealing with the ESL mechanical grammar issues...that's the biggest help to us because we don't have the ability or the time or both to do that as much as we can, and there's really no room in the curriculum for teaching grammar...all the [course] outcomes are based on other things that assume that those elements are already in place...

Another faculty member noted the following:

The student should be...I think it's something that should be headed off at the pass in Admissions if that's an issue. And I think that we really haven't addressed it enough here, but... if a student's not capable of writing at the university standards coming in, then...they should probably not have been admitted to the school...if there's a student who's being told they must always ...they should not ever turn anything in before going to the writing center, they probably...I don't think that's fair to the student...and not that I don't think it's fair for them to seek help from the writing center but I don't think that it should.... it should be voluntary and something that works to...develop their writing not teach them [basic English] ....like teach them the most, the basics, the basics that they should have known coming in. So maybe that means a readjustment of expectations from the university and a changing of the curriculum of the lower level classes, or...um...restricting admission for students who aren't prepared...

Although many of these faculty have experience with international students or non-native speakers, rarely have they encountered a classroom full of ESL students. This often results in bafflement, frustration, and a suggestion to students to take their writing and "go to the writing center and get this fixed". The complexity is further enhanced in Qatar because of cultural topics associated with writing. For example, writing centers may also be the site for offering advice on

citation and plagiarism. Effectively teaching a student about all the complexities surrounding cultural notions of academic integrity and appropriate citation are more complex than a 30-minute tutorial session can achieve<sup>ii</sup>.

Although the situations in the U.S. and the Middle East are very similar – large numbers of underprepared students are accepted into institutions and need significant academic guidance in order to succeed – one of the critical distinctions is with regard to awareness and motivational levels of the students. During Open Admissions in the United States, institutions often faced challenges of obtaining resources. Faculty were (and continue to be) typically overworked and underpaid, and the availability of staff to address students' needs was limited. In Qatar, and in the Gulf in general, this is not the norm – quite the opposite, in fact. One of the reasons so many Western institutions accept offers to expand in the Gulf is precisely because of the financial benefits of these contracts. Faculty pay and benefits are significantly higher. Classes are often capped at 10 or 15 students – in comparison to 40 or 50 students on the home campuses. While this lower faculty-student ratio allows for more individual attention within the classroom, most faculty are not trained in identifying and assisting with the needs of these language learners. Therefore, just as in the Open Admissions phase in the United States, students are referred to the writing center to get specialized assistance. In Qatar, however, the resources and staff are available. Perhaps the biggest challenge, then, is how to get these students into the writing center. From over eight years of working in Doha, it is my experience that despite almost endless resources, the majority of these underprepared students are still unlikely to visit the writing center and take advantage of the support systems available. What is the reason behind this, and how can students be propelled into the writing center to enhance their educational and learning experiences as undergraduates? It is unclear what causes students to visit and utilize academic support services like the writing center, but a variety of motivational factors seem to be at work. The next sections will begin an exploration of motivational factors and the linguistic uniqueness of students in the Gulf that contribute to use of the writing center.

### **Who are these students? Generation 1.5? ESL? EFL? Basic Writers?**

Perhaps the most unique yet salient challenge of the undergraduate student population in Education City is its linguistic diversity. While Georgetown SFS-Q cites thirty-six of its fifty-four incoming students using a language other than English at home (Hussein, 2010), these statistics are not quite as simple as they seem on paper. Because of the varied linguistic backgrounds of the students, and the linguistic nature of Doha, it is particularly challenging to classify these learners into simply “native” or “nonnative” speaker categories.

First, it is critical to consider the context in which these students are situated. Qatar is a particularly unique linguistic environment. Arabic is the country's official language, yet English is the *lingua franca*. In fact, locals *must* learn English in order to facilitate basic transactions in their native country. The vast majority of laborers and employees in local shops do not speak Arabic; most speak English as their second or even third language. Additionally, the K-12 education system is undergoing vast reform; Arabic-medium instruction dominated the curriculum until sweeping changes came through in the past ten years and transitioned to English-medium schools. This language diversity in the local community clearly has significant ramifications on the classroom in Qatar.

Leki (2009) further highlights the challenges in categorizing students from different linguistic backgrounds in the United States. For example, many immigrant students are able to adopt native-like oral proficiency rather quickly, but their writing remains abysmal. Current

pedagogical practices, particularly within writing centers, typically aim for a focus on higher order (content) concerns rather than lower-order (grammar) changes. This can result in a distinct disadvantage for the students, as Leki notes:

While many would applaud this focus, not all accept the potential results. In one such case, the student arrives in college confident of his good writing skills because of the encouragement that he had received from his high school teachers' feedback on his writing. Unfortunately, he found that his new writing environment in college was not as willing as his high school to accept the errors in his writing, resulting in his not passing out of the ESL track after a term of work there. (Leki, 2009, p. 4)

While classifying students as native, nonnative, ESL, or other can be useful at times, these terms should also be used with caution. For example, Friedrich uses the term "linguistically diverse" to be inclusive of the wide variety of students in the classroom and writing centers (Friedrich 15). She rejects Harklau, Siegal, and Losey's (1999) use of the term Generation 1.5 because she says that these students are often:

Born to immigrant parents, who more often than not use a language other than English in the home, many such students are highly fluent and even native-like in oral English. They may be more acculturated than are internationally-based visa students – who have traditionally dominated the ESL student population – and consequently identify more with the United States than with any other nation. (Friedrich, 2006, p. 15)

What does this mean for our students in Qatar? How can we categorize them? And is it fair to categorize them at all? On a superficial level, it seems that some students can be directly boxed into one neat category – for example, the American student who was born, raised, and educated in the United States. Yet from my own experience in the writing center and as a professor, this type of student is rarely found in the Qatari context. More frequently, students had non-English-speaking parents and were akin to our Generation 1.5 learners. Thonus defines Generation 1.5 writers as those "who are long-term U.S. residents and English learners fluent in spoken English" (Thonus, 2003, p. 17). Matsuda elaborated on the development of Generation 1.5 students as they relate to international ESL students. Historically, immigrant ESL students were expected to achieve the same level of English as their native speaker counterparts. Although there were initial efforts to distinguish between immigrant ESL students and international students in pedagogical matters, little was done to effectively address the concerns. The result was:

some institutions had already enrolled a large number of immigrant ESL students by the mid 1950s, other institutions did not begin to admit immigrant students with severe language difficulties until much later. (Matsuda, 2003, p. 71)

It is clear from subsequent research and findings, however, that immigrant ESL students did and do require specialized attention and support. These Generation 1.5 students have a similar profile to those seen in American higher education institutions in the Middle East. Instructors are often struck with wonder and awe at their native oral skills, but shocked and disheartened when they read students' writing. It is critical to seek trained writing professionals to effectively address these learners' needs both in the classroom and in writing centers.

### Discussion & Implications

As research has demonstrated, language learners in the United States are likely to utilize writing centers for assistance with their work in higher education institutions and benefit from these instructional sessions (Williams, 2002). Surprisingly, this has not been the case in American higher education institutions in Qatar. Many of the students admitted to these elite universities, particularly those who have been educated in very different educational environments and contexts are in need of extra academic support<sup>iii</sup>. This replication of underprepared students being admitted to universities is reflective of the Open Admissions phenomenon in the U.S. in the 1970s. One of the crucial distinctions, however, is that students in the Middle East seem relatively unaware of their weaker skills or unwilling to avail themselves of support services. Admitted students are proudly congratulated and honored for achieving the level necessary to gain admittance. When these students enter the classroom and are told to get assistance at the Writing Center, there is confusion and frustration by both the student and the professor. The student is left wondering *What's wrong with my English? I got all A's in high school*, while the professor is left wondering *How did this student ever get admitted?* Subsequently, writing center staff are left to resolve these discrepancies and this disconnect in an atmosphere of low motivation.

One pedagogical implication of the research available is that tutors in a writing center must approach each case with a highly individualized and nuanced perspective. For example, an American English-speaking student born and raised in the U.S. educational system who visits a writing center in Qatar is much more likely to benefit from the non-directive methods prescribed in current writing center pedagogy. However, an Egyptian student who was born and raised in an Arabic-medium school in Doha, who learned fluent spoken English from television and the local community and considers himself “fluent” in English, may need much more assistance with inspiring basic confidence in academics while simultaneously progressing toward remedial writing instruction.

Writing teachers and tutors must understand and appreciate the ultimate complexity of students and take each individual case as such. One might look to Carino's cultural model of a writing center:

A cultural model might begin to elaborate, more than previous models have, a history accounting for the multiple forces at play at various moments and demonstrating that writing centers and those who work in them are always imbricated in the history of the writing programs, higher education, and public debate, as well as in local and even personal imperatives. (Carino, 1996, p. 39)

Carino provides a useful theoretical framework for situating writing centers and their role in history. Pragmatically speaking, this cultural model means work. Professors and tutors must work toward getting to know students. They must work toward getting to know and understanding the English language in all of its complexity. They must work toward developing the skills of each student through motivational techniques that will accommodate that student's needs. Faculty must understand the role of the writing center as staff who support and guide writers – not as proofreaders, editors, and language repairmen. This may come as a disappointment for many expatriate instructors in the Middle East, who have become accustomed to a comfortable and less demanding teaching lifestyle. The payoff of such dedication and commitment, however, will be deeply rewarding and beneficial for both the students and faculty.

### Conclusion and Future Research

This paper has drawn a parallel between the Open Admissions phenomenon in the U.S. in the 1970s and the expansion of American institutions in the Middle East in recent years. This historical parallel is one that should be carefully considered by all stakeholders in the search to find successful solutions and approaches to academic challenges. Writing research in Qatar should continue where Mina Shaughnessey left off, with an explicit focus on English language learners and the role of motivation in students' use of writing centers.

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<sup>i</sup> All identifying information has been removed. See McHarg reference for full details of study.

<sup>ii</sup> For more detailed explanation of the cultural complexity of these topics, see *Writing across Borders*, dir. Wayne Robertson, 2005. and Bouman (Kurt William Bouman, "A Phenomenological Investigation of College Students' Construction and Representation of Plagiarism," Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2009.).

<sup>iii</sup> This need for academic support covers a wide range of skills – everything from simple orientation to American academic expectations to research and writing skills and more.