



## QUALITY OF ACADEMIC LIFE AT THE POSTGRADUATE STAGE: A SAUDI FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Vision 2030 (Saudi Arabia's national development plan) expects women (50% of all university students) to contribute to a viable economy and ambitious nation, meaning data about their quality of academic life (QAL) during their university experience are timely and significant. They are key players in the nation's future.
Background	This inaugural, exploratory study addresses this under-researched topic by exploring the spiritual, cognitive, physical, social, and psychological dimensions of Saudi female graduate students' QAL.
Methodology	Data comprised the lead author's reflections and reflexion and interviews with 17 Saudi female graduate students conveniently sampled from Imam Abdul Rahman bin Faisal University (IAU) (Eastern Province) in January 2020. A new Academic Quality of Life Schema was especially designed for this study and future research.
Contribution	A Middle Eastern country's perspective is shared about female graduate students' QAL from a holistic perspective (spiritual, mind, and body) and through the lens of a new QAL Schema (cognitive, social, and psychological).
Findings	Spirituality was the highest rated holistic QAL dimension (76.6%) followed with body (67.4%) and mind (intellect) (58.8%). Despite a generally positive QAL evaluation (67.6%), participants (a) lamented their inability to sustain previous levels of religious devotion and practice, (b) reported health issues with deep emotions and surprise, and (c) experienced dissatisfaction with the educational aspect of their QAL. Regarding the QAL Schema, (a) their lack of research savviness hampered their ability to learn and enjoy the graduate experience; (b) psychological anxiety hampered their ability to connect with the Creator and

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	poor time management and heavy academic workload compromised exercise and leisure with all three causing an imbalanced lifestyle; and (c) social peer camaraderie and positive classroom environments were appreciated.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Women's colleges should (a) collect subjective data about female graduate students' satisfaction with university services, specialization and teaching decisions, and faculty members' and peer colleagues' support; (b) provide and promote services related to places and means of recreation, leisure, and alone time; and (c) ensure that guidance and counseling offices develop strategies to reduce stress and anxiety factors hindering QAL.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future studies should use larger sample frames and, for comparative purposes, previously validated empirical QAL instruments. Saudi-based QAL studies should include religion. Mixed methods research designs are recommended as is a gendered comparative study for the gender-segregated Saudi higher education context.
Impact on Society	Deeper understandings of Saudi female graduate students' QAL will facilitate (a) tailored institutional and faculty support leading to higher enrolment levels, (b) stronger knowledge bases and more sophisticated research skills for students and (c) improved labor force participation.
Future Research	Over 1/3 of participants felt their academic gains were not as strong as anticipated, yet few commented about teaching staff or teaching methods. Future research should expand inquiries into the educational aspect of QAL as well as the underrepresented social aspect of QAL.
Keywords	Saudi Arabia, quality of academic life, quality of college life, female graduate students

## INTRODUCTION

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The first of its kind in the Saudi Arabian (SA) educational context, this exploratory study investigated the quality of academic life (QAL) experienced by Saudi female graduate students (masters and doctoral). Succinctly, QAL is “concerned with all the general feelings of satisfaction of a student who experiences university” (Pedro et al., 2016, p. 293). More than half of all Saudi university graduates are women (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA], 2016). This is a stunning accomplishment given that just 50 years ago, the literacy rate for Saudi women was 2%. Although as many women as men are now enrolled in higher education in the KSA, far fewer women are in graduate studies, a pattern repeated elsewhere (Leonard, 2001). In Saudi's gender-segregated society, they attend women-only colleges and campuses (Allahmorad & Zreik, 2020). Their unique experience as graduate students is under researched. Similarly, Paragas et al. (2019) affirmed the dearth of research about women's QAL in Saudi Arabia at the undergraduate level.

Insights into this phenomenon are necessary for four reasons. First, graduate studies are rigorous and demanding, so anything that can improve women's academic experience is significant and timely (Lent et al., 1994; Sturhahn Stratton et al., 2006). Word of mouth of positive experiences can entice more Saudi women to enter graduate studies. Second, the Saudi college-age population is growing rapidly intimating a possible increase in women graduate students (Allahmorad & Zreik, 2020). An appreciation of women's QAL as graduate students can benefit Saudi universities (Sirgy et al., 2007) and current and future KSA generations. Respectively, universities can use the information to improve their offerings, and the KSA benefits long term from a well-educated citizenry.

Third, Saudi's recent national development plan, Vision 2030, considers higher education a key driver of a thriving economy and ambitious nation. Vision 2030 promises to "continue investing in education and training" (KSA, 2016, p. 36). This national goal is more attainable with current and relevant education-sector information including data about Saudi women's experiences with academic life at the graduate level. Positive university experiences better ensure completion of graduate studies and labor market availability (Ahmed, 2019; Lent et al., 1994). Fourth, Saudi higher education reform initiatives are very aware of the role women can play as a corner stone for moving forward per Vision 2030. For this reason, this type of research is important to overcome any challenges that might hinder women's academic progress (Hamdan, 2016a; 2016b; 2017).

In short, for this paper, the research topic was the role of education in ensuring that the KSA can successfully implement its most recent national development plan (Vision 2030). Regarding the research problem, this paper reflects the authors' interest in how the quality of academic life for university students impacts higher education's ability to help the KSA achieve Vision 2030. High quality of academic life for postgraduate students will better ensure the preparation and graduation of healthy individuals who are the basis for the nation's prosperous future. Mentally healthy and happy citizens lead to building a stronger knowledge-based economy. For this particular study, the research questions concerned to what extent is the quality of academic life achieved in its three holistic dimensions (i.e., spiritual, educational, and health) among Saudi female graduate students, and what are their experiences regarding their academic quality of life in its three aspects (i.e., social, psychological, and intellectual)?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### *OVERVIEW QUALITY OF ACADEMIC LIFE CONSTRUCT*

The quality of academic life construct comprises two distinct dimensions: academic life and quality of life. Regarding the first, Hagedorn (2012) talked about the meaning of academic life but never defined it per se. Extrapolating from her work, academic life pertains to life experienced while working or studying in the academy, meaning higher education institutions. Academic life manifests in the (a) provision and receipt of education, (b) research generation and dissemination, and (c) service tendered to the university, academic disciplines and professions, and broader community.

Second, quality of life (whether in the academy or not) is normally defined as "the level of satisfaction or confidence in one's conditions, relationships and surroundings relative to the available alternatives" (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 2). Quality of life is very subjective and different for each person. People can better attain quality in their life (i.e., a general sense of well-being, fulfilment, and feeling valued and worthwhile) if they can learn to cope with and take control of changes in their life and guide their own evolution as a person. Perceptions of one's quality of life can affect feelings of self-worth, personal value, and autonomy (i.e., self-sufficiency and independence) (McGregor & Goldsmith, 1998).

The quality of academic life (QAL) thus pertains to people's perceptions of their experiences in higher education – their satisfaction with, confidence in, and control over the academic experience (Pedro et al., 2016, 2018). The quality of academic life is an important factor that helps students acclimate to and sustain involvement in the educational environment, and it influences their efforts and perseverance in satisfying their academic (curricular) obligations to satisfactory levels. Like generic quality of life, the quality of academic life is relative, differing from person to person (Ahmed, 2019). Each of faculty, administrator, staff, and student will have different perceptions of the quality of academic life. This study focuses on the female graduate students' experience in the Saudi Arabian context.

### ***HOLISTIC VIEW OF ACADEMIC LIFE***

This study also supports previous work that has focused on a holistic view of academic life, which includes spirit, mind, and body with spirit encompassing religion, spirituality, morality, and faith (Bennett, 2003; Braskamp, 2004). In a new twist, it also reflects Islam’s respect for the holistic perspective of spirit, mind, and body (El-Najjar, 2018; Helminski, 2017; Samier & ElKaleh, 2019). To that end, this study approached the assessment of QAL from three perspectives.

- (a) It explored the students’ evaluation of the quality of her academic life from the spiritual side regarding the satisfaction of her need to communicate with the Creator.
- (b) The educational (mind) aspect concerned QAL pursuant to obtaining academic support from the university; experiencing social interactions within the academic community; and gaining satisfaction with specialization and academic decisions, academic self-efficacy, and possession of the expertise and skills necessary to adapt to the educational environment.
- (c) The health (body) aspect focused on opportunities for physical exercise and maintaining a healthy diet and how these shaped her perceptions of the quality of her academic life.

### ***EXISTING QAL RESEARCH***

There is considerable research around the construct of QAL with the study herein addressing the lacuna of research about Middle Eastern (Saudi) female graduate students’ QAL ascertained from a qualitative research stance. Rather than separately addressing every artifact they found in their review of the literature, the authors analyzed them all, pulled out the most dominant lines of thought and profiled them in Table 1. After summarizing Table 1 in paragraph form (see next), those ideas specifically useful for developing the argument guiding this research were cited and explained in more detail in the text leading up to the research questions.

**Table 1. Dimensions of quality of academic life (QAL) construct**

Dimensions of Quality of Academic Life (QAL) Construct	Supporting Literature
Overall general sense of satisfaction and contentment with university life (i.e., a pleasurable emotional state)	Bean & Bradley, 1986; Hassan, 2011; Mansi & Kasem, 2010; Pedro et al., 2014, 2018; Yu & Lee, 2008
Satisfaction with experiences and level of skills needed to adapt to the educational environment, fit in and be compatible	Habib, 2016
Satisfaction with ability to meet one’s academic goals and needs and academically succeed	Abdin & Al Sharqawi, 2016; Alhusaynan, 2015; Ali, 2013
Satisfaction with ability to develop one’s educational life and use one’s mental and creative potential	Habib, 2016; Shafer, 2010
Satisfaction with academic support and future planning tendered by the university	Abdin & Al Sharqawi, 2016; Abdul-Muttalib, 2014; Ali, 2013; Mansi & Kasem, 2010; Sirgy et al., 2007
Feelings of happiness and completeness during religious practice	Alhusaynan, 2015
Ability to enjoy oneself during leisurely spare time through one’s cultural and value system	Alhusaynan, 2015

Dimensions of Quality of Academic Life (QAL) Construct	Supporting Literature
Satisfaction with ability to achieve needs, goals and expectations required for efficiency in life and enriching one's consciousness	Alhusaynan, 2015; Frisch, 2000; Maidinsah et al., 2016; Shaher, 2010
Satisfaction with social life and social relationships (on and off campus)	Alhusaynan, 2015

Per an analysis of the left column in Table 1, the QAL construct generally touches on a myriad of factors including students' contentedness with and ability to adapt to university life. As with quality of life in general, the QAL is very subjective. It has been conceptualized as relating to personal values, needs, expectations, and competencies for a successful and effective academic experience. It also ties in with students' leisure and spare time, reflects their sense of being able to develop the educational aspect of their life, and is affected by the level of support they receive from the university as a person and student. QAL is also affected by students' social life and relationships and religious practices.

### ***RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND QAL***

Relative to the Saudi educational context is students' satisfaction with religious practice while at university and how it ties in with QAL (Alhusaynan, 2015). Saudi Arabia is proud of its "status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds. We recognize that Allah the Almighty has bestowed on our lands a gift more precious than oil. Our Kingdom is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) to which more than a billion Muslims turn at prayer" (KSA, 2016, p.6). This religious reality is part of every Saudi citizen's essence thereby making one's ability to practice one's religion while at university a distinct aspect of the QAL in the Saudi university context.

### ***GRADUATE STUDENTS' QAL***

"There is little literature about graduate student life" (Sturhahn Stratton et al., 2006, p. 1). Extant studies tend to report that graduate students have positive perceptions of their quality of college or academic life (McFarland et al., 2010). That said, different kinds of academic pressure and challenges are sources of stress for graduate students and may mitigate a good university experience (Bireda, 2015; Speake et al., 2013). Loss of life balance can lead to health problems, strained personal relations, and it can raise "questions about their motives for undertaking this rigorous course of life" (Sturhahn Stratton et al., 2006, p. 2).

Compared to national statistics about citizens' stress levels, graduate students were more likely to report that stress-related problems negatively affected their academic studies leading to mental distress (Hyun et al., 2006). Studies have also found that that "graduate students had significantly higher stress levels, more thoughts of quitting their studies, and more mental health problems than did medical students" (McFarland et al., 2010, p. 186). They distinguished professional medical studies from postgraduate studies.

This study is about the QAL of female graduate students for which there is little research. What does exist on this phenomenon has shown that female graduate students have markedly higher stress levels than their male counterparts (Bireda, 2015); stress impacts their QAL. In her nascent study about female doctoral students, Bireda (2015) reported several insightful findings from the QAL literature. Others have reported that, more often than men, women graduate students have issues with the volume of academic work, lack of female instructors contributing to an unwelcoming atmosphere, and constrained supervisor relationships. They expressed doubts about self-expectations and self-efficacy about being a doctoral student and uncertainty about their role in the academy (i.e., compatibility and

belonginess). In other studies, female graduate students lamented the lack of time and energy leading to health problems, and some expressed a pressing sense of isolation, which can cause mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety) (see also Leonard, 2001; Raddon, 2002).

### ***ARABIC QAL STUDIES***

Although not yet a firmly established research trajectory in the KSA, Arab scholars beyond Saudi Arabia are interested in university students' QAL. Kazem and Al-Bahadly (2007) reported that the level of QAL for university students in Oman and Libya was (a) high on family and social life, and education; (b) average on public health and leisure time; and (c) low on mental health and emotions. Solomon (2010) measured QAL among students at Tabuk University in the KSA reporting (a) high QAL for family life and psychological life, (b) average on public health, and (c) low on educational life and time management.

Naisseh (2012) found low levels of QAL for students at Damascus and Tishreen universities. Saud (2013) reported high QAL levels for economic well-being and social relations but lower levels for health and psychological security for Iraqi students. Al-Nader (2017) reported that students at Al-Balqa Applied University's scientific colleges enjoyed a high QAL in the following dimensions: physical, mental health, social relations, and time management. Khafaji and Jassem (2018) found that Basra University students enjoyed high quality of psychological life.

### ***QAL AND THE SATISFACTION CONSTRUCT***

As a caveat, QAL and satisfaction are different but related. The term quality of academic life refers to students' feelings of satisfaction while they are at university (Pedro et al., 2014; Yu & Lee, 2008). Satisfaction can mean several things: fulfilment, gratification, happiness, and enjoyment regardless of context. At university, satisfaction is an attitude that students hold from their self-assessment of their academic and educational experiences. It arises from comparing their expectations with their actual experiences during their time at university (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Pedro et al., 2014).

Student satisfaction is thus "a pleasurable emotional state resulting from a person's enactment of the role of being a student" (Bean & Bradley, 1986, p. 398). Frisch (2000) concurred, describing it as "a person's subjective evaluation of the degree to which his or her most important needs, goals, and wishes have been fulfilled [while at university]" (p. 220). This self-assessment amounts to a subjective evaluation, wherein students themselves express their sense of what is going in their life compared to objective assessments by third parties (Western & Tomaszewski, 2016). In that spirit, the inaugural study herein strove to collect data directly from Saudi female graduate students instead of via third-party assessments.

### ***QAL PSYCHOSOCIAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS***

Ali (2013) identified three dimensions of academic quality of life. Academic self-efficacy refers to students' belief in their ability to organize and implement a series of measures to achieve a certain level of academic achievement. Academic support refers to their awareness of the interest and educational care received from others as well as obtaining directions and instructions that are useful in their academic progress. Third, progress in achieving academic goals concerns the student's pursuit of predetermined academic goals set by self, faculty members, the institution, or some combination. Recently, Moghadam et al. (2020), in their Iranian study on university students' QAL, examined the phenomenon of academic burnout, which comprises academic inefficacy, academic cynicism, and academic fatigue. Burnout signals the decline of students' aptitude to adjust to the stressful factors of education. Burned out students are tired of doing homework and studying, a stance that reflects their QAL.

QAL while at university is indeed influenced by psychosocial and contextual factors and students' comprehension of their learning and physical environment (Benjamin, 1994). Psychosocial factors

(i.e., interrelationship between individual and social factors) include demographics, emotional state, interaction patterns with surrounding society, students' goals and expectations, and their identities (Benjamin, 1994). Canadian students from higher socio-economic status who obtained higher GPAs were more satisfied with their academic life and personal/social relationships than were other students (Chow, 2005). Among personal life predictors, self-esteem was the most influential explanatory variable of Canadian students' quality of life on campus (Michalos & Orlando, 2006).

Several studies have investigated the relationship between the quality of academic or college life and situational events and contextual factors. For clarification, compared to QAL (i.e., general feelings of satisfaction with university experience), quality of college life (QCL) adds needs and is defined as "the degree of need satisfaction and the experiences that create positive emotions [by] which individuals judge the overall quality of their college life as a whole in a favorable way" (Hassan, 2011, p. 12).

Sirgy et al. (2007) claimed that American students' satisfaction with the academic aspects of their college experience (i.e., QCL) can spill over into overall feelings about their university experience. Hassan (2011) also employed bottom-up spillover theory to study QCL, reporting that it was affected by Middle Eastern students' satisfaction with both their academic and social life and institutional facilities and services. Regarding the latter, academic management, services, and infrastructure all played a part in forming the students' QCL. The higher the students' satisfaction with these institutional, administrative service aspects of their university experience, the higher their reported QCL (Hassan, 2011).

Other studies (American and Asian) have reported that the quality of academic or college life is more closely linked to the educational aspects of university life than administrative services (Sirgy et al., 2007; Yu & Kim, 2008; Yu & Lee, 2008). Astin (2001) identified several critical educational factors of academic life in American colleges that contribute to QAL: teaching staff, teaching methods, classroom atmosphere, student workload, the academic reputation of the program, and academic diversity. The study herein addressed a gap in the literature around Middle Eastern (Saudi) female students' assessments of their QAL as graduate students along many of these psychosocial and contextual factors.

### ***INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS OF POSITIVE QAL***

Studies have also shown that the university campus has an important effect on students' experiences and their satisfaction with those experiences (Lefever, 2012; Speake et al., 2013). A positive campus environment, healthy atmosphere, and integration into academic life can lead to memorable positive emotions, which in turn reinforce the student's motivation to study and succeed academically (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Pedro et al., 2018).

Conversely, universities can use information about students' satisfaction with the QAL to identify weaknesses and strengths and improve their academic programs, facilities, and student-related services (Pedro et al., 2020; Sirgy et al., 2007). Satisfied students view the university in a positive light and can help with university recruitment by positive word of mouth and recommendations (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Billups, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001). This loyalty-recommend behavior has been successfully explained by the cognitive-affective-connotative nexus by which QAL mediates student satisfaction and the student-loyalty relationship (Yu & Kim, 2008). Positive QAL also enhances students' propensity to return later for advanced studies (Elliott & Shin, 2002; Pedro et al., 2018).

### ***MEASURES OF QAL***

Although this qualitative study did not administer an empirical survey, several instruments have been devised to objectively measure the subjective quality of life of Western students while attending university: (a) the Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle (WEL) measure (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992); (b) the

Student Quality of Life and Satisfaction (SQOLAS) measure (Disch et al., 2000); and (c) Maggino and Schifini D’Andrea’s (2003) QCL measure.

The most prominent empirical measure for capturing quality of academic life, rather than overall quality of life, is the Quality of College Life (QCL) measure (Sirgy et al., 2007). This instrument operationalizes the overall satisfaction a student experiences during their studies along three dimensions: academic experiences, social experiences, and university facilities and services. Respectively, (a) academic experiences that influence QCL include faculty (quality of teaching and accessibility), pedagogy, classroom learning environment, student academic workload, and reputation and diversity of the university and professors. (b) Social experiences include satisfaction with residence life, spiritual/faith services, clubs and parties, athletics, and recreational activities. (c) University facilities and services concern such things as libraries, bookstores, technology, parking and transportation, and health care services (Sirgy et al., 2010).

Similarly, Koslowski (2006) conceptualized QAL as including (a) the reputation and expertise of academic staff (transcendent quality); (b) university service provision (manufacturing-based quality); (c) student academic achievement and success (product-based quality); (d) value-based quality (i.e., acceptable student performance at an acceptable price); and (e) user-based quality meaning students’ needs, wants and preferences. Our study brings qualitative data from a Middle Eastern context to already existing empirical data from other contexts.

## QUALITY OF ACADEMIC LIFE (QAL) SCHEMA

In the absence of an overarching QAL framework in the literature, a conceptual framework was developed for this study. After extrapolating insights from both Arab and international studies (see Table 1 and Lent et al., 1994), the following schema for academic quality of life was created (see Figure 1): (a) cognitive dimension: information and skills related to learning, and the development of knowledge, and self-regulation and self-efficacy as a learner; (b) social dimension: positive social relationships, effectual faculty member relationships, and obtaining support from the academic community; and (c) psychological dimension: facing academic pressure, academic satisfaction, and confidence in self-abilities and self-efficacy.

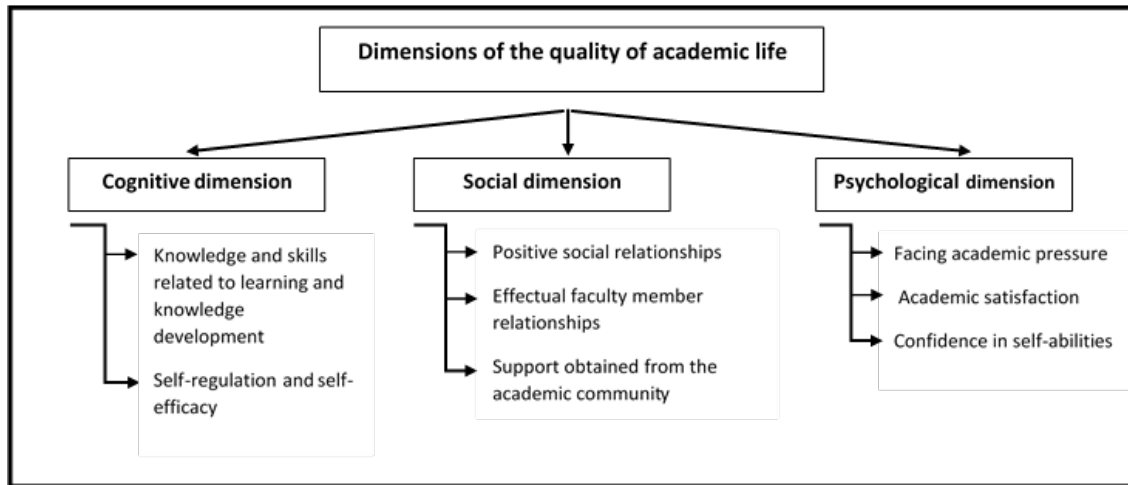


Figure 1. Academic quality of life (QAL) schema (author developed)

Per Figure 1, each of the cognitive, social, and psychological aspects of female graduate studies is recognized as impacting quality of academic life in varying degrees and combinations (Bireda, 2015). The cognitive dimension pertains to the workings of the mind and how this affects the human experience, especially when at university. Students’ ability to critically reason, analyze, evaluate, and pass judgement will affect the quality of their academic life. It fortifies their ability to internalize new ideas



and build new knowledge, which they then use to augment their graduate studies. Students who can self-regulate are able to respond to the ongoing demands of their university academic experience. Students with high self-efficacy are confident in their academic abilities (Lent et al., 1994; Mulhem et al., 2018).

The social dimension of academic life provides needed balance in the form of support, connections, and positive relationships. The social aspects of the university experience can pertain to social engagements, cultural events and festivals, and connections with the university and local communities. The social aspect can affect one's identity, sense of belonging and sense of place (extrapolated from Gobbato, 2016). The social aspects of university life can also include both personal friendships and faculty associations (especially research supervisor) as well as institutional support to bolster the graduate student experience. The latter support can include housing, spiritual programs, collegial clubs, and recreational programs (Sirgy et al., 2007).

A strong inner self completes the scenario (i.e., psychological, emotional state). Being able to deal with the stress and pressure associated with the rigor and expectations of advanced studies leads to self-confidence in one's self-abilities and better ensures academic satisfaction, academic achievement, and completion of graduate studies. From a position of self-assurance and self-reliance, graduate students are more likely to persist and graduate. That is, they can meet their academic performance goals and outcome expectations, which are positive expectations upon graduation with a doctoral or master's degree (Lent et al., 1994).

### ***RESEARCH QUESTIONS***

The study herein strives to fill several gaps in the literature: (a) the absence of a focus on female graduate students, (b) a lacuna of research from the Middle East context especially Saudi Arabia, (c) the imbalance of empirical and qualitative data around the QAL phenomenon, and (d) the availability of an overarching conceptual framework, mitigated in this study with both a holistic and newly designed academic quality of life schema capturing spirituality, mind (education), body (health), social, psychological, and intellectual dimensions of QAL. Two research questions guided this qualitative exploratory study:

1. To what extent is the quality of academic life achieved in its three holistic dimensions (spiritual, educational, and health) among Saudi female graduate students at Imam Abdul Rahman bin Faisal University (IAU)?
2. What are the experiences of IAU Saudi female graduate students regarding their academic quality of life in its three aspects (cognitive, social and psychological)?

### ***RESEARCH OBJECTIVES***

Research objectives constitute tasks to be completed to collect relevant data to answer the research question. They serve to operationalize the questions (McGregor, 2018). To that end, per the first research question, a collection of motivational questions was designed to solicit data about the holistic dimensions of their QAL (i.e., spirit, mind, and body). 'Stage of study' refers to postgraduate studies:

Spiritual dimension:

- Has this stage of study strengthened your relationship with the Almighty Creator? Explain.
- What difficulties, if any, did you encounter in achieving this aspect of academic quality of life?

Educational (mind) dimension:

- What do you accept as personal evidence that you belong in the academic life of post-graduate studies?

- What do you accept as personal evidence that you are compatible with academic life?
- What do you accept as personal evidence that graduate studies are important in your life?

Health (body) dimension:

- Does academic life in postgraduate studies have a negative or positive impact on your health (e.g., nutritious diet and enough exercise)?

## METHOD

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This exploratory study employed a qualitative research design that involved a combination of (a) the lead author's reflections and reflexion about Saudi female graduate students' experiences at university and (b) unstructured interviews with them about their satisfaction with the quality of their academic life. Explore means to tentatively probe or investigate, and this approach is useful when little is known about a phenomenon in a given context. Exploratory research does not strive to provide conclusive and final answers to the research questions; instead, using smaller samples and unstructured interviews, researchers strive to provide broad, initial understandings of a phenomenon and lay the groundwork for future, more conclusive studies (Dudovskiy, 2016; McGregor, 2018).

### *PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY CONTEXT*

Over the span of several years, the lead author taught or advised, in her role as Vice Dean of the female education section, close to 300 female graduate students at Imam Abdul Rahman bin Faisal University (IAU). Using convenience sampling, the lead author compiled a final sample frame of 17 Saudi female graduate students. Likewise, Sirgy et al. (2007) used a sample frame of 15 participants when developing their instrument to assess quality of academic (college) life. The female students in this Saudi study herein were aged 25-45 and specialized in Arts, Education, or Basic Sciences. Their time at the IAU academy ranged from four to seven years, and they were enrolled in either master or doctoral level studies.

#### **Study context**

Generally speaking, for every 77 male students at IAU, there are 22 female students, a gender ratio of nearly 4:1 (Times Higher Education, 2020). At the graduate level, there are currently 432 female and 213 male students (N=645). Most (48%, n=211) of the female students are in education and arts (humanities). There is a separate female graduation ceremony for graduate level master and doctoral students. IAU has many student support programs and services although not all are available to female students: student housing; student financing (loans, aid, employment); libraries (e.g., main library, girls' library, various disciplinary libraries); clubs (e.g., scientific, photography, health, intellect, life skills, community service); student activities (cultural, social, artistic, and sports-related); and scholarships ("IAU Deanship of Student Affairs," 2020). There is an Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies and an online graduate studies portal for access to nearly 65 master and doctoral programs ("IAU graduate studies portal," 2020).

### *DATA COLLECTION*

Data were collected from two primary sources to augment the extensive secondary literature review and resultant QAL schema (see Table 1 and Figure 1). This first source involved the lead author collating her experiences garnered over the last five years through (in)direct communication with IAU female graduate students about their quality of academic life. These reflective (improve practice) and reflexive views are a legitimate data source for qualitative research (Watt, 2007). Reflexivity entails "questioning [one's] own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand [one's] complex roles in relation to others" (Bolton, 2009, p. 13). Watt (2007) commented on "the enormous value of reflexivity" (p. 96) in qualitative research,

because it enables researchers to provide an inside view of a study. Their personal narrative provides study context and aids in making connections between practice and theory when discussing study findings.

Second, primary data from the female IAU graduate students were collected in January 2020. The lead author solicited oral narratives about their participation in graduate studies and their satisfaction with the quality of their academic life. This aspect of the research design protocol entailed the lead author using the collection of aforementioned motivational questions (see research objectives) to conduct taped (some sent via WhatsApp) and then transcribed and translated unstructured interviews or audios spanning 20-50 minutes for each participant.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

The students' interview data underwent a content analysis with findings reported using summative narrative with quotes and descriptive statistics (frequency and percentages). To clarify, descriptive statistics for small sample sizes (e.g., 5 of 20, 20%) are acceptable in qualitative research. They allow researchers to provide another line of evidence by efficiently sharing a succinct picture of the empirical data that enriches the qualitative narrative (Schreiber, 2008). The lead author's reflexive data were presented separately in the findings then integrated into the analysis and discussion. All data were interpreted using both the holistic perspective and the quality of academic life schema (see Figure 1) created after analyzing Western and Arabic literature pursuant to the research problem (see Table 1).

### **FINDINGS**

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An overview of the lead author's accounting of and reflection and reflexion on her experiences with IAU female graduate students prefaces the presentation of findings from the study participants' interviews. Per the two research questions, the majority (67.6%, 11 of 17) of study participants reported a positive QAL with degrees of satisfaction along each dimension.

#### ***LEAD RESEARCHER'S REFLECTION AND REFLEXION***

As a Saudi university female professor teaching master level Saudi female graduate students at IAU, the lead author became aware of some of the challenges students encountered during their studies. As they discussed their unique experiences as female graduate students with her, her curiosity developed. Over a period of five years or more, she learned that, in her own classes, students enjoyed (a) class discussions (often missing in their other courses); (b) guest speakers who brought alternative points of view that challenged conventional thinking; (c) class readings from non-Arabic sources, often lengthy and critical in nature; and (d) counselling and advice offered by her at their behest and discretion.

Regarding the quality of academic life in their overall university experience (beyond the courses she had taught them), her conversations with graduate students (in her additional roles as Vice Dean (VD) for the female education section and assistant to the VD of higher studies and research as the College of Education) revealed ongoing issues and concerns. The lead author deduced that, academically, IAU female graduate students had very limited experience with reading comprehensively, analyzing and synthesizing, thinking critically and judging others' scholarship, writing essays, managing their time, and doing research. She was concerned that encountering these limitations and not being able to deal with them effectively would hamper students' ability to grasp the real benefit of graduate studies. She tried to mitigate these limitations by guiding them to free online courses, books, and articles for self-teaching and self-learning.

The lead author also encountered both physiological and psychological issues amongst IAU female graduate students. They struggled with finding balance in their personal and academic lives. Very few of them exercised or walked regularly, and, unlike the male campus, the female campus lacked access to athletic or recreational facilities. Collectively, students reported obesity from sitting for long hours

with no exercise as well as stress, loss of sleep, hair loss, and fatigue – all signs of not leading a healthy and balanced lifestyle. She advised them that perfectionism is not possible, but balance is desirable. To get the best experience from and benefits of graduate studies, students needed to prioritize balance in their academic and personal lives.

Some postgraduate students suffered psychologically both because of health issues, and because they struggled academically due to inadequate cognitive skills. They were outside their comfort zone and not fully prepared for the rigors of graduate life. This stress was compounded by the recent requirement (within last four years) to pay tuition fees upwards of \$20,000-30,000USD (formerly government funded).

In short, the lead author's data pertained to the mind, body, and spirit of IAU Saudi female graduate students. She observed that most students worked hard to succeed in their academic studies with nominal attrition. But many were careworn and fraught with cognitive, physical, and/or emotional stressors that impacted the quality of academic life.

### ***PARTICIPANTS' INTERVIEWS***

This inaugural qualitative study explored the extent to which Saudi IAU female graduate students were satisfied with the quality of their academic life along three dimensions: spirit, mind, and body. Overall, findings indicate that the majority (67.6%, 11 of 17) of participants were satisfied with their QAL. Close to one third (30.2%, 5 of 17) were not satisfied. Virtually no one (2.2%, 1 of 17) took a neutral stance.

Of those who were satisfied with the QAL, they were most pleased with the spiritual aspect (76.6%, 13 of 17) followed with health (body) (67.4%, 11 of 17) and then education (mind) (58.8%, 10 of 17). Conversely, those dissatisfied with QAL were least happy with education (35.3%, 6 of 17) followed closely with health (32%, ≈ 5 of 17). About one quarter (23.4%, 4 of 17) registered disappointment with the spiritual aspect of their QAL. Virtually no one took a neutral stance on the spiritual or body (health) dimensions of QAL with education most likely to receive a neutral stance.

Qualitative interview data provided more nuanced insights into study participants' satisfaction with the three aspects of QAL measured in this study: spirit, mind, and body. Pseudonyms were used to protect privacy and ensure confidentiality.

### **Spiritual aspect of QAL**

Study participants were asked to reflect on how graduate studies affected their ability to communicate with the Creator. Over three quarters of participants expressed satisfaction with the spiritual aspect of university life. Narjes said, "I drew ... psychological comfort in contacting God Almighty." Goda said she had to "trust in God Almighty that we will pass this graduate stage of life in peace." Mayraim commented that "my studies in Quranic specialization and sciences were a great motivation for me to satisfy the spiritual side." Yousra said that "despite the grace, I felt that resorting to God is a good thing to complete the march [to finish my studies]." Goda astutely acknowledged that "the virtue of learning is very great in Islam. Therefore, graduate studies mean that the individual will go deep into thinking [and learning which] will enhance their relationship with the Creator."

Those who were dissatisfied with this aspect of QAL felt that their preoccupation with and pressure from academic work significantly impeded their ability to carry out religious duties or religious volunteering. This is exemplified in Elap's comment, "My anxiety caused me to stop volunteering, fasting, and I stopped the night prayers that I usually perform." Hala acknowledged that time pressure meant there were "very few opportunities for contacting the Creator [which is unfortunate because] my success is in the hands of God, the Almighty." When referring to spirituality and QAL, Mayraim said "education and those who practice it are far from victories for the soul."

### **Educational aspect of QAL**

This dimension pertained to whether participants felt they belonged in university, were compatible with academic life, and felt graduate studies were important. More than half (58.8%, n=10) expressed satisfaction with the educational aspect of the quality of their academic life. This is exemplified in Nana's comment that "managing my time and my ability to plan for each semester before its inception has always made me feel comfortable, relaxed and at ease."

However, over one third of the participants were not satisfied with the educational aspect of QAL – a stance that was expressed from several perspectives. Fatima said, "my lack of academic writing skills and my lack of knowledge of scientific research skills made me lose the fun of the entire exercise." Maria faulted instructors for not satisfying her query of "I wanted to know if I did not know about scientific research." Yousra commented that "a recurring feeling of failure and disorganization dominated my thoughts during graduate studies and led to constant anxiety." Anfal assumed a somewhat neutral stance. "I needed clarity as some of the faculty members provided a smooth and logical scientific subject while others offered everything that is far from specializing."

### **Health dimension of QAL**

Saly said, "because I was far from my family, I took every possible way to maintain my health and eat healthy food." As exemplified by this comment, most (over two thirds) study participants said they were satisfied with the health dimension of the QAL. However, the participants who registered dissatisfaction (32%) presented a litany of health concerns emergent from their academic life. Pertaining to physical activity, Anfal recounted that "good pre-planning for graduate studies helped me a lot, but I was unable to maintain a sports routine or any movement activity during my studies." Badra concurred, noting that "with the timing of evening lectures, I had no time left for the evening walk that I used to do every day."

Healthy food wise, Khloud lamented that "the constant dependence on fast food led me to gain weight." Regarding overall health, Nana said "the link to the computer screen and continuous reading caused eye and vision problems." In a powerful testament, Mesh said, "the negative effect of graduate studies on my health was very large and unexpected ... prolonged sitting ... weight gain ... sleep disorders ... irritable bowel syndrome." Mayraim expressed that "the severe psychological pressure while studying made me lose the pleasure of seeking knowledge, which in turn was reflected in my physical health. This experience has been very difficult for my by all accounts."

Findings pursuant to the cognitive, social, and psychological dimensions comprising the quality of academic life (QAL) schema (see Figure 1) were also harvested from the interview data.

### **Cognitive dimension**

To illustrate the cognitive dimension, Asia declared that the research process is "a special pleasure that can only be felt by those who have experimented with and anticipated eagerly the day of the lecture when they can display the fruits [of their labor]." In reference to self-regulation and self-efficacy, Nancy opined that without "a desire to learn [or] seek to be an active player in academic life [students will feel that they] do not fit this place." Regarding the degree of difficulty expected in graduate school, Asia strongly felt that required readings were far too simple and "mostly below the baccalaureate level [let alone] the capabilities of a graduate student. It was rare that I found [intellectually challenging readings]." Mayraim lamented the lack of a "neutral body to consider the problems facing graduate students."

Conversely, Nancy valued her academic learning experience (knowledge), which she described as "an atmosphere of pure scientific discussion." Similarly, Goda described graduate studies as "a journey of achievement and passion. ... Whoever has experienced this feeling will be addicted to it." Hala believed that, armed with a collection of cognitive skills, graduate students can succeed and have a high QAL. Her collection of skills included "good planning including contingency plans, organization,

being open to opposing opinions and ideas, a commitment to the literature, and continued research and investigation.”

### **Psychological dimension**

Along the psychological dimension (see Figure 1), Hala recommended that graduate students strive for “perseverance, not procrastinating, taking responsibility for [a shared] learning environment, self-control, and continued self-development and self-learning.” Nasiba referred to psychological comfort, saying “it certainly means related to pleasure. Psychologically ... I was more comfortable if I [felt] awareness of the degree of maturity and experience [expected by faculty members]. ... This helped me stay positive.” In reference to “the severe psychological pressure at the time of study,” Mayraim said, “I hope there will be some benefit in it.”

### **Social dimension**

Nancy spoke positively about the social dimension of QAL. “My female colleagues were all on a high level of manners and cooperation. ... The general atmosphere was good.” She was very pleased with the social camaraderie during her studies, noting that “dealing with female students for hours and compassion for hours, and the scientific information flowing freely... was very enjoyable.” A student’s relationship with her peers and supervisor is part of the social dimension of QAL (see Figure 1). Goda recognized “effective communication with individuals and the scientific supervisor and academic supervisor [as well as when] presenting scientific papers in conferences and forums” as something that must be effectively managed. Success at this relational management task is a strong indicator of one’s “compatibility with academic life.”

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

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This exploratory study adds to the dearth of research about female graduate students’ QAL (Sturhahn Stratton et al., 2006). It is the first of its kind in the Saudi graduate educational context with Paragas et al.’s (2019) recent work focused on Saudi undergraduate students. The 17 Saudi female graduate students self-reported a general sense of satisfaction with the quality of their academic life (per McFarland et al., 2010). Overall, they felt positive about their role of being a graduate student (Bean & Bradkey, 1986; Frisch, 2000). Virtually none expressed doubt about their ability to succeed as a graduate student, albeit some wondered if it was all worth it (Bireda, 2015).

But employing both the holistic perspective and the purposefully generated QAL schema (see Figure 1) to interpret the data yielded useful insights into which aspects of their QAL were lacking; there are always negative QAL experiences (Bireda, 2015; Moghadam et al., 2020; Speake et al., 2013). Analysis revealed how their graduate experience could be augmented especially along both the education and knowledge acquisition and the health dimensions, which received the lowest QAL ratings. The former pertains to inadequate or incomplete cognitive development and growth and the latter to consequences of an inability to deal with ever-present pressures and stress (Hyun et al., 2006; Leonard, 2001; Moghadam et al., 2020; Raddon, 2002).

### ***HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE***

The holistic approach (spirit, mind, body) (Bennett, 2003, Braskamp, 2004) for exploring female graduate students’ QAL proved very useful. It also reinforced Islam’s respect for the holistic perspective (El-Najjar, 2018; Hemlinski, 2017). This study is unique in exploring the QAL as it pertained to a student’s communication with God Almighty (Allah) the Creator and the role of scholastic life in enhancing or compromising the spiritual aspect of academic life. Study participants reported highest satisfaction with the spiritual dimension of QAL relative to education and health. Few studies have explored the spiritual dimension making these findings timely and meaningful in the Saudi context, where Islam is very entrenched in people’s lives including female graduate students (Alhusaynan, 2015). Students said that their connection with God Almighty (the Creator) gave them strength,

sustained them during the hard times and helped them persevere to complete their studies. In effect, it likely staved off academic burnout (Moghadam et al., 2020).

Despite a generally positive subjective evaluation of their QAL, female study participants did report issues and concerns around all three holistic dimensions (see also Bireda, 2015). Spiritually, some students lamented their inability to sustain previous levels of religious devotion and practice mainly due to time constraints (Bireda, 2015; Leonard, 2001). Health wise, those who reported issues did so with deep emotions and were often surprised at this unexpected consequence of graduate studies (Bireda, 2015; Leonard, 2001). Participants indicated they had experienced a lot of stress, which albeit is to be expected during graduate studies (Bireda, 2015; Hyun et al., 2006, McFarland et al., 2010). They reported sleep disorders, fatigue, anxiety, weight gain, and gastrointestinal problems.

These findings reinforce the urgent need for the women's college to establish self-management training to help Saudi female graduate students achieve a balanced life to improve the quality of their academic life. The college campus should also provide and promote health-related services including mental health services and treatment, and healthy food services. More specifically, the Center for Guidance and Counseling should develop strategies to help reduce stress and anxiety both of which hinder female graduate students' QAL (Paragas et al., 2019).

Study participants experienced dissatisfaction with the educational (mind) aspect of their QAL as previously reported in the literature (Astin, 2001; Sirgy et al., 2007; Solomon, 2010; Yu & Kim, 2008; Yu & Lee, 2008). This collection of researchers observed that the educational aspect of university life strongly affects QAL. In this study herein, this included intellectually unchallenging readings, lack of help clarifying readiness to do research and be in the academy, and lack of clear instruction on certain topics. It is problematic that over one third of study participants (1 in 3) felt their academic gains were not as strong as they had anticipated. This finding may reflect the lead author's similar observation that female graduate students were not academically adept or research strong, which can negatively affect QAL (Bireda, 2015; Lent et al., 1994).

Although some participants commented on a positive classroom atmosphere, many lamented the heavy academic workload. No comments were tendered about the teaching staff, teaching methods, the reputation of the program, or diversity within the academy, all aspects of the educational dimension of QAL (Astin, 2001; Koslowski, 2006). Future studies should expand inquiries into the educational aspect of QAL in the Saudi context to obtain a richer and deeper portrait. After all, Vision 2030 is depending on a highly educated populace, especially women (KSA, 2016).

### ***QAL SCHEMA***

The QAL schema (see Figure 1) developed for this study also proved useful for garnering insights into this phenomenon. It especially validated the lead author's lived experience with IAU female graduate students' QAL. Interview data corroborated her instincts that each of the cognitive, social, and psychological dimensions of QAL affected students' satisfaction with their university experience.

Regarding the cognitive dimension, the lead author had observed inadequate thinking and research skills required for the rigors of academic graduate scholarship. The participants who felt they had these skills shared positive comments along this dimension. Conversely, some were concerned that their lack of research savviness was hampering their ability to learn and enjoy the graduate university experience (Bireda, 2015; Solomon, 2010). Both Ali (2013) and Lent et al. (1994) concurred, noting that students who could self-regulate their learning and have high academic self-efficacy (confidence) reported higher QAL (see also Moghadam et al., 2020).

The second aspect of the QAL schema (see Figure 1) is the social dimension. The lead author commented on one aspect of this part of QAL, noting that students in her classes said they appreciated class discussions, guest lectures with different perspectives, and her availability for academic and personal advising. In their interviews, participants tended to speak positively of the camaraderie they

experienced in their course work and program of studies. Their comments reflected a positive learning environment with one student acknowledging the importance of a positive student/supervisor relationship and dynamic (Bireda, 2015).

About support offered and secured from the institution (social dimension), IAU has many student services (“IAU Deanship of Student Affairs,” 2020). That said, one student strongly lamented the lack of recourse to register complaints with her graduate experience, which is considered part of the social dimension of QAL (Sirgy et al., 2007). The women’s college could actively collect data (subjective indicators) about female graduate students’ satisfaction with the services provided at the university, specialization and teaching decisions and support from faculty members and peer colleagues. Some careworn students commented on weight gain and no time to exercise, and the lead author, who had also observed this dynamic, clarified that the women’s college did not have recreational facilities (although the men’s colleges did) (“IAU Deanship of Student Affairs,” 2020). The women’s college campus should provide and promote services related to places and means of recreation, leisure, and alone time (McFarland et al., 2010; Paragas et al., 2019; Speake et al., 2013).

Although other Arabic scholars have commented on the link between positive social relations and QAL (e.g., Al-Nader, 2017; Kazem & Al-Bahadly, 2007; Paragas et al., 2019; Saud, 2013), students in this Saudi study did not directly refer to social relationships (on or off campus). Researchers should focus on the Saudi college experience gained on campus (social life) beyond the classroom environment, which was positive in this study. Future studies should also explore a collection of social aspects of Saudi university life relative to QAL: cultural events, community connections, university connections, and social engagements (Gobbato, 2016).

Third, the lead author had encountered psychological and physiological issues manifesting in students’ inability to find balance in their academic and personal lives (Paragas et al., 2019). Those participants who commented on this part of their QAL when interviewed noted that their anxiety hampered their ability to connect with the Creator, and poor time management and a heavy academic workload left no time for religious practice, exercise, or leisure. This led to health problems reflected in an imbalanced lifestyle. This experience was so prevalent outside the study that the lead author had often resorted to directing students to self-help resources. She had concluded that although most students worked very hard and persevered to completion, many struggled with knowledge acquisition and psychological issues.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

As with any qualitative exploratory study, findings cannot be generalized to the wider population, but they serve the important role of providing broad, initial understandings of a phenomenon and lay the groundwork for future, more conclusive studies (Dudovskiy, 2016). In the future, researchers are encouraged to augment this exploratory qualitative work about Saudi female graduate students’ QAL with both a larger sample frame and the use of previously validated QAL or QCL empirical instruments, especially Sirgy et al.’s (2007, 2010) instrument. In the Saudi context, it would have to be augmented with religion and QAL. A mixed methods research design is especially recommended, because it excels at achieving data triangulation to address a complex phenomenon (McGregor, 2018). A gendered comparative study would also be beneficial in the gender-segregated Saudi educational context. And the sample frame should be expanded to include universities from the entire KSA.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

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Little is known about the quality of academic life of Saudi female graduate students. This inaugural KSA exploratory study revealed that while most study participants expressed a positive university experience, they registered real concerns pertaining to leading a balanced life while engaged in master and doctoral-level postgraduate work. Although most reported a positive spiritual dimension of



QAL, many issues arose around education and knowledge acquisition, and physical and mental health. Few commented on the social dimension of QAL, which is telling.

Future studies need to delve deeper into this complex phenomenon comprising spiritual, physical, social, psychological, and educational/cognitive dimensions that higher education institutions can aggressively address. The findings are timely and meaningful, because the KSA's national development plan (Vision 2030) depends on a well-educated populace including women. Deeper understandings of their university experience pave the way for (a) tailored institutional and faculty support leading to even higher female enrolment levels due to positive word of mouth, (b) stronger knowledge bases and more sophisticated research skills for female post graduate students, and (c) improved labor force participation of highly educated Saudi women.

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