

# **‘When we are at uni our minds are at home’: Saudi students worrying about wives**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper I report on one theme relating to international student adjustment that is not discussed elsewhere; namely the stress of worrying about dependent family members who have accompanied the student to the host country. The data for this paper were drawn from a larger study into the experiences of male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university. In two of five discussion groups, married men discussed the weight of responsibility they felt towards their wives who were struggling to adjust to Australian culture and therefore feeling lonely, isolated and in some instances very much afraid. These findings are an important reminder to be alert to the ever-present potential for misreading behaviour of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. I conclude by arguing for the need for on-going in-depth studies into the experiences of students from different backgrounds with a view to improving teaching and support practices.*

**Keywords:** International students, adjustment issues, family responsibilities, Saudi Arabian

## **Introduction**

After over a decade of teaching English as a foreign language in Japan, I returned to Australia in 2006 to teach in an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students) program at an Australian university. Half of the students in my first class were Saudi Arabian men. This was the first time I had ever met a person from Saudi Arabia, let alone had one in my classroom. I was used to coaxing answers out of rather reticent Japanese university students, and was taken completely by surprise by these Saudi Arabian students’ energy, enthusiasm and eagerness to be heard. I was in shock. I had no idea what to expect from these students, nor did I know what they expected of me. Turning to my colleagues for help, I discovered that others were equally uncertain. This was the first big wave of Saudi Arabian students to pass through this ELICOS program.

On the basis of this uncertainty, I decided to focus my PhD study on trying to understand a little more about these Saudi Arabian students. Given the complexity of cross-cultural research, and my own lack of knowledge about Saudi Arabia and the language, culture and religion of that country, I did not seek to discover generalisable findings along the lines of ‘Saudi Arabian students think...’ or ‘Saudi Arabian students need...’ Rather, my research had a more modest objective. My first research question was:

***What do male Saudi Arabian nursing students choose to discuss when talking with me about their experiences as international students in Australia?***

The wording of this question was intended to encourage the participants to discuss experiences that they thought it would be important to tell me (an Australian researcher and therefore, by proxy, the Australian education provider I was working for) with a view to enhancing their learning experiences. I acknowledge that there may be many more things that the Saudi Arabian students chose not to discuss with me. Those which emerged in the discussions for this study were ones which I believe these Saudi Arabian participants thought I needed to know in order to facilitate better mutual understanding. I begin this paper with a brief review of the literature on studies relating to this research question, followed by a discussion of one of the themes that emerged in my discussions with several Saudi Arabian students in the context of my broader PhD study. I conclude by discussing some of the implications of these findings.

## **Literature Review**

There is an extensive body of literature referring to studies on the adjustment experiences of students who travel to another country to study. In this literature review, I focus on three key areas: early Australian studies, current trends, and studies on Saudi Arabian international students. Early Australian studies are reviewed in order to provide an historical contextualisation of the present study, which is also focussed on international students in Australia. The section on current trends is not limited to studies conducted in Australia, in order to position the present study within the international body of research in this area. The final section documents the paucity of

studies on the experiences of Saudi Arabian international students, in order to highlight the timeliness and significance of studies that focus on this context.

### **Early Australian studies**

Although there had been some earlier publications on international students in Australia (e.g. Bochner & Wicks 1972), research increased rapidly in the late 1980s, concurrent with significant changes in Australian Government policies, especially the March 1985 'Policy on Overseas Students' which opened the doors to full fee-paying international students (Back 1989). Some publications sought to inform academic institutions of issues that were likely to arise with international students. Ballard and Clanchy (1991), for instance, argued that predictable problems for international students would include lack of language competence, homesickness and culture shock, gaps in background knowledge, housing problems, social relationship problems and difficulties fitting into Australian student life. Two other issues for teaching staff to consider were different expectations and behaviour of international students, and mutual stereotyping. A different perspective from that period focussed on student perceptions on issues of quality and ethics. The proceedings from the 9<sup>th</sup> National Education Seminar, for instance, contained a paper highlighting international students' concerns about low standards, poor facilities, low recognition, and concerns about ethics in the marketing of Australian programs (Mahmud 1994).

In an anthology of theory-driven research essays, Jones (1989) noted that most research on the experiences of international students in Australia until that time had been conducted using mailed questionnaires. He highlighted many problems with early applications of this method, including poorly designed questionnaires, and poorly timed use of the instruments (e.g. during exam periods), however an even more serious concern he raised was that many participants felt uncomfortable writing answers to very personal questions in this format. Jones concluded his survey of research until the late 1980s with a call for 'a diversification in research techniques, in favour of more qualitative methods including individual or group interviews and discussions, or studies based on wide experience with overseas students' (Jones 1989, p.36).

### **More recent trends in researching the experiences of international students**

Generalised accounts of international student experiences aimed at providing advice to potential students and teachers continue to be published (e.g. Carroll & Ryan 2005). Omeri, Malcolm, Ahern and Wellington's (2003) comprehensive review of literature on culturally and linguistically diverse students (which included international students) outlined eighteen educational issues, eight social issues and five personal issues that had been identified in a variety of different studies, in different contexts, using different methods. These characteristics are collected as a foundation upon which they develop strategies for meeting the challenges of cultural diversity in the academic setting.

However others, such as Koehne (2005), have argued that this generalising approach fails to acknowledge that international students are individuals with unique backgrounds, aspirations and identities. Kumar (2005) also argued against reductionist discussions of international students in university discourses, in favour of recognising hybridity and syncretic subjectivity. Dewaele (2005), speaking of second language learners in general, has questioned the positivist epistemology that sees language learners as static objects of study, and more specifically on the validity of studies that reduce individual human participants to 'bunches of variables' (Dewaele 2005, p.369).

One response to these criticisms may be found in Byram and Feng's (2006) anthology of research on the experiences of students living and studying abroad in a variety of different cross-cultural contexts, using a variety of different research methods. The cross-cultural contexts were Japanese in Britain, Irish in Japan, Chinese in the UK, Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong (and vice versa), British students in France and Danish students in various EU countries. Data were collected from questionnaires, interviews, journals, drawings, friendly conversations, historical documents, and elicited narratives, and analysed using a variety of methods including grounded theory, textual analysis, ethnography, narrative analysis, and Delphi technique. These innovative new research approaches in a variety of different contexts represented a promising response to the call of Jones (1989) almost two decades earlier for more in-depth qualitative research in a variety of different contexts, and with a variety of different methods. The study I report on below has engaged with this same research agenda, exploring the newly emerging context of large numbers of Saudi Arabian students in Australian universities.

### **Saudi Arabian students**

At the time I commenced my study, there had been no published studies specifically focussing on Saudi Arabian students in Australian or any other Western academic institutions. Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) investigated problems and coping strategies of 8 Middle Eastern students in the United States. Academic, personality, socio-

economic and language problems were explored using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The context of the study, however, was quite different to the present study. The participants were from Jordan, in the Middle East, rather than Saudi Arabia, an Arab Gulf State; the university was a major southwestern university in the United States, rather than a smaller university in regional Australia.

The closest related research program in publication at the time I commenced my study was that of Gauntlett (2006) who reported on ongoing research into the academic expectations of Gulf sponsored students in Australia, seeking to challenge the accepted explanation for academic difficulties of these students which is described as a lack of motivation to take responsibility for their own studies, or simply 'a lack of work ethic' (Gauntlett 2006, p.7). Gauntlett had started a longitudinal study of Omani students in Australia to track students' expectations and outcomes over the course of their studies, with a particular focus on students' motivation.

Early findings from my study were published this year (Midgley 2009), and at least two other papers/workshops due to be presented alongside this paper at the 2009 ISANA Conference in Canberra, Australia focus specifically on Saudi Arabian students in Australia and New Zealand. This paper, therefore, contributes to this body of research on a relatively new context for international education providers in Australia.

## Data production – narrative discussion groups

The data for my study include transcriptions of recordings that I made in small discussion groups. I called these discussion groups *narrative discussion groups* in order to emphasise the distinction between these groups and more formalised focus group discussions. As I discussed in the introduction, my aim was to encourage participants to raise and discuss issues that they felt it was important for me to understand. The groups were formed by a snow-ball process: I invited one Saudi Arabian student to bring a friend or two to the discussion. Therefore in each narrative discussion group, the Saudi Arabian students generally outnumbered me (the Australian researcher) by two or three to one, and each group was self-selecting.

Following the approach of German scholars who trace their roots to early work of Schutze (1977 [in German], as cited in Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000, p.59), I began the discussion groups with a narrative prompt question (see also Flick 2000, 2002, 2005). I have referred to this process as *data production* rather than *data collection* in recognition of the stance that I have taken as a co-producer of these narrative discussions, both as the primary audience of the stories, and also as an interlocutor (asking clarifying questions, affirming with back-channelling etc).

## Data Analysis – theoretical foundations

One common method for analysing qualitative data is to reduce the content of a large body of data to a smaller number of central themes or patterns (Patton 2002). In some research methodology texts, this is the only qualitative analytical method discussed (e.g. Creswell 2002) whereas in others, it is not explored at all (e.g. Seale et al. 2004). Those who discuss this kind of content analysis, generally explain it as a process which begins with immersion in the data (Marshall & Rossman 2006) in order to get a broad sense of it all (Creswell 2002). In a second round of analysis, the researcher begins to identify themes and patterns (Patton 2002), categories (Marshall & Rossman 2006) or topics (Creswell 2002) in the data. These are then reduced into codes that represent core elements that emerged in the second round of analysis, which are then described and demonstrated with excerpts from the data. Generally, the process is inductive; that is, the analyst does not work with a predetermined set of codes, but rather allows the codes to emerge from the data (Marshall & Rossman 2006). This approach is said to have the advantage of allowing for the discovery of the unusual or unexpected, however one noted disadvantage is that the discovery of the unusual 'may require the recasting of the entire research endeavour' (Marshall & Rossman 2006, p.154).

The approach to data analysis I have used in this paper, I have called a *bakhtinian<sup>1</sup> content analysis* to highlight two important distinctive features. Firstly, my study is founded on a bakhtinian epistemology that locates meaning in dialogic exchanges, and therefore my analysis focuses on data produced in dialogues. According to this model, learning occurs due to the potentiality created by a *surplus of seeing* or *transgression* (Bakhtin 1981). The surplus of seeing theory asserts that when two people come together in dialogic engagement, the distance between them creates opportunities for both people to learn something new. Transgression refers to the theory that because two people engaged in dialogue are not the same as each other, they have the potential to

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<sup>1</sup> I use the lower case 'b' in order to highlight my epistemological stance that the theory I adopt here has emerged out of my reading of the works of M.M. Bakhtin, as well as other 'Bakhtinian' scholars; it represents my interpretation of one stream of thought, rather than an attempt to represent an authentic or historic 'Bakhtinian' theory.

transfer to each other some aspects of themselves which brings some kind of ‘illumination’ (Morson & Emerson 1990, p.185). Jabri (2004) refers to this as a *surplus of meaning*. In both of these closely related theories, the *outsideness* of people in a dialogic encounter is an essential feature of coming to see or know something new.

The second important distinctive of this bakhtinian approach to content analysis is that it highlights the contextual nature of data produced in dialogues, therefore the data must be analysed in the context of the dialogues in which they were produced. Therefore, as I noted above, I do not present this analysis as a representation of a positivist or generalisable picture of a reified and immutable ‘truth’ but rather what I believe these male Saudi Arabian students wanted me to know at that time. This was the context in of our dialogic engagement. Regardless of whether what I or the Saudi participants said was ‘the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’ and regardless also of whether I have accurately represented the meaning exactly as intended by participants, I maintain that the findings represented in this paper are meaningful and important as constructions of truth that have the potential to improve mutual understanding between Saudi Arabian international students and teaching, support and administrative staff at their host universities. This assertion is based on the belief that the Saudi participants and I both had this as a common goal as part of the context of the dialogues.

Upon the basis of these theoretical foundations, I read and re-read the transcripts from the narrative discussion groups, looking for key themes that appeared to emerge. The discussion that follows outlines one of those key themes.

### **One theme: ‘When we are at uni our minds are at home’**

In our narrative discussion groups, Saudi Arabian participants discussed many concerns and difficulties they faced as international students in Australia. Perhaps of all of the struggles the Saudi Arabian participants shared with me, the issue I discuss in this paper is the one that impacted upon me the most. The struggle itself is a logical outworking of what I already knew (or at least thought I knew) about Saudi Arabian customs and culture, but I had never processed that line of thinking to its logical conclusion. Hearing the stories of these husbands also radically altered my understanding of the relationships between husbands and wives in these families.

Rashad<sup>2</sup> had only been married for a couple of months at the time of our narrative discussion group meeting. He began to tell me about the struggle he was having with his responsibility to look after his new wife who had just recently come back with him to Australia<sup>3</sup>:

*Rashad: It was very difficult the first time when I went (to uni). I stayed a week and couldn’t go even to university.*

*Me: Really?*

*Rashad: I was, if she heard a sound, because she didn’t know what’s going on in Australia, if she heard anything outside, she called me. ‘There is someone near the home’ or something like that.*

Rashad’s wife, in a new country with completely different customs, was afraid of all the noises that she could hear, but could not identify. Therefore she relied upon Rashad to be there to investigate the source of the noises, and to solve any problems that they may have resulted from. This drew him away from his university classes.

In a different narrative discussion group, Fadil and Ubaid noted that their wives were also afraid, and worrying about their wives at home occupied their minds whilst at uni. The discussion began with Ubaid noting how the houses in Australia were less secure than Saudi houses – made of wood, not concrete, and without metal bars on the windows:

*Ubaid: It’s hard, our wives said they are scared of living in these houses.*

*Me: Don’t feel safe?*

*Ubaid: To be honest with you yes, they are feeling it’s not safe, because... we are men, and it’s fine for us. It’s because they are women so they are not happy to live here. They are scared.*

*Basil: Anytime, maybe somebody can break the glass and come in the house.*

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<sup>2</sup> All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the original transcript, which contained details of errors, pauses, backchannelling, overlapping speech etc has been edited into a more traditional ‘play-script’ style to increase readability. Words I have added for clarity are in brackets.

At this point we began a long discussion trying to distinguish between flyscreens, security screens and barred windows. When we had finally settled on the meaning of the different words, Ubaid said that they used bars on their windows in Saudi Arabia, and the lack of bars on Australian homes caused them to feel unsafe:

*Ubaid: So we have, we use bars to make ourselves to protect from any intrusion.*

*Me: I can see how that would be concerning, especially like when you are away.*

*Fadil: Yeah.*

*Me: And your wife's here on her own.*

*Basil: Yeah.*

*Ubaid: Yes, yes and then when we are at uni our minds are at home, because we know our wives they are scared, like this. So it's also important point for us.*

From the time when I first met Saudi students on campus, I had noticed that they seemed to answer their cell phones as a high priority. Some would even walk out of a classroom to answer their phones. From my Western teacher's perspective, I considered this quite rude. However upon hearing these stories, I began to reconsider some of the cultural implications that may influence the Saudi participants' use of their cell phones. At the end of his story about having to comfort his wife, Rashad gestured to his cell phone and said,

*Rashad: You see now about two hours (gesturing to mobile phone) together and no call yet.*

*Me: And she hasn't called you?*

*Rashad: Yeah.*

The lack of a call from his wife for almost two hours was used by Rashad as evidence that she was settling well into Australia. This was startling to me. I had always thought that the Islamic laws and customs gave Saudi Arabian wives less freedom than Australian wives, but I had never stopped to consider how those same laws and customs might create a situation which also placed far higher expectations on the Saudi Arabian husbands to have to look after their wives, at least whilst living in a foreign country. If my wife heard a noise outside our home, she would normally investigate it herself. When these Saudi men's wives hear strange noises, they turn to their husbands to investigate, even if it means the men must leave their classes at university.

## **Discussion**

Upon reflection, it seems perfectly logical that in a cultural environment in which women are less independent, they must therefore be more dependent on someone. Isolated from their families and home communities as partners to international students living abroad, the wives of these Saudi men seem to have only their husbands to depend upon. It seems perfectly reasonable to me that in such a situation, a conscientious husband would do whatever he could to provide his wife with the support she needed. Therefore it should come as no surprise to hear Ubaid say, 'when we are at uni, our minds are at home'. Evaluated from within their own religious and cultural context, this would seem to be the attitude of an honourable, responsible and loving husband.

When a Saudi Arabian student rushes out of a classroom to answer his phone, he may be acting as a rude and irresponsible student (from the Western teacher's perspective) but possibly also as a responsible and loving husband (from his Saudi Arabian perspective). In trying to understand this situation better I tried to imagine how I might feel if I had had to leave my children at home alone when they were still quite young, in order to go to university. In that situation, had I received a call from my daughter saying, 'Daddy, there's a noise outside and I'm scared', I would have had no hesitation in leaving the class immediately to rush to my daughter's aid. It would not have mattered what my teacher thought; my daughter would have been a higher priority. I wonder whether this is similar to the kind of struggle faced by some of the married Saudi men whose wives are alone and scared in a foreign country, without the family and cultural support networks they would ordinarily turn to. Certainly, hearing these stories gave me cause to think.

## **Implications**

I am well-educated and concerned about social justice, and therefore had taken an interest in the affairs of Saudi Arabian students at the university in which I was working. I had read all that I could find, and had spoken to as many people as I could, in order to try to better understand their experiences. Nevertheless hearing stories like those I have discussed in this paper was surprising to me. I came to realise that there was a lot that I did not know about what was happening in the lives of these students, and how that could impact upon their experiences as international students. Upon reflection, I was challenged to reconsider the way I might have previously

evaluated some Saudi Arabian students' behaviour in class – behaviour that I might have attributed to a lack of commitment to study might have been better explained as a strong commitment to family responsibilities; failure to concentrate in class may not be due to lack of motivation, but rather to the stress caused by trying to support a distressed wife as well as comply to a demanding study load.

This study demonstrates at least two important things. Firstly, the complexity of the many inter-related facets of living and studying in a different cultural environment can dramatically impact upon the experiences of international students. Secondly, some of these complex inter-relationships, such as the one discussed in this paper, may not be immediately obvious even to the most well-educated and committed teaching, administration and support staff. This suggests a two-fold approach to improving support for students from different cultural backgrounds.

The first approach is to raise awareness of this complexity. Obviously, it is not feasible to discuss the experiences of every international student in the kind of depth employed in this study. I would suggest that it is important for staff working with international students to be continually cognisant of the fact that there may be more going on in the lives of international students than we are aware of. This may include proactively maintaining an attitude of open-mindedness and flexibility, and also acknowledging that there may be deeper issues at play that are not obvious on the surface. Indeed, we may never know what 'really' caused a problem. The best we can do is to seek to better understand students in the fullness of their own lived experiences. This approach is especially important, in my opinion, when dealing with major problems.

The second approach suggested by this study is to continue to promote ongoing in-depth studies of this nature in order to provide examples of the kinds of complex and inter-related issues that international students from different backgrounds face. I believe I have only really scratched the surface in the one context that I investigated. There are many other contexts as well. Exploring the depth and breadth of these issues may help to avoid building structures and solutions based on stereotyping, and create a greater openness to and awareness of the complexity of the issues at hand.

I do not have a definitive answer to the question of how universities might better support husbands who feel the burden of marital responsibilities like Rashad, Ubaid and Basil. However, I hope that by raising the issue, some of us might begin discussions on how we might help. This, I believe, is the reason that these men told me these stories.

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## Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the friendship, cooperation and enthusiasm of the Saudi Arabian participants in the research project upon which this paper is based.

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