

Engaging Arabic International Students in Higher Education: A review of the literature

Abstract

This paper calls for rigorous research examining the rapidly growing Arabic international student cohort in Australia. While current research across a range of contexts and fields has been undertaken to examine Muslims studying in Australia or international students generally, the same is not the case for Arabic students specifically. Timely and pertinent research involving Arabic international students as participants will inform practice and assist with policy development that is better able to engage the cohort while studying in Australia.

Keywords

Arabs, international education, culture, media, student engagement

Introduction

The tremendously rapid increase in the Arabic international student cohort demands urgent attention. Current research literature concerning Arabic international students in Australia is too sparse to be able to inform practically and effectively policy or practice. Despite current, rigorous research that examines Muslims in Australia generally (Rane et al, 2010) across diverse topics such as social integration and experiences of racism or alienation; cross cultural studies; educational background; and employment; the rapidly expanding Arabic student cohort continues to be poorly researched. A lone voice has made the call in Saudi Arabia for further robust research in the field of ESL teaching and curriculum development (McMullen, 2009); however no similar call has been made in Australia. This poor situation is the same no matter the context or research field in the Australian context. This paper presents two main points, firstly, it exposes the silences in the literature involving Arabic international students studying in Australia, and secondly, it calls for further robust research to examine the new Arabic international student cohort. Practical research will help educators of Arabic students engage effectively in their studies, with the goal of meeting both Australian institutions' education goals, as well as the study expectations and needs of Arabic international students.

Arabic International Students in Australia

Australia is one of the top three destinations for Arabic international students; along with the UK and USA; holding one tenth of the world's international education market (DEEWR, 2008). During the early years of the 21st century the increase of international students globally rose by 40% (Hughes, 2008), while in Australia, the number of Arabic students, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Gulf nations entering Australia for study purposes, rose by 50% during the period 2004 to 2005, with just over 2000 enrolments from Saudi Arabia alone. For the period 2008 to 2009 there has been an increase in Saudi student enrolments of over 100% with almost 5000 students enrolling (ABS, 2009). In fact, the number of enrolments has increased so dramatically, exceeding 12500 in total by the end of 2009 (DFAT), that Saudi Arabian students are no longer clustered under the umbrella term 'Middle East' enrolments, now comprising a new data category. While Arabic international student intake is not yet as large as it is from China, its rapid increase demands urgent attention to ascertain how best to cater for Arabic students' needs.

Literature Review

Further robust research urgently needs to be undertaken in order to develop a clearer, informative picture of how Arabic international students engage with the broader Australian community while

studying in Australia. In order to achieve this goal research needs to be conducted across a range of fields including international higher education, second language acquisition, psychology and motivation, media studies, as well as cross cultural communication.

It is from the author's research and personal experiences derived from conferences and workshops, as well as from discussions with colleagues in education, that the discourse concerning Arabic international students portrays the new cohort as problematic; to summarise, Arabic students do not understand Australian academic culture, nor do we understand Arabic students' educational goals and expectations. Similar sentiments are scattered across ESL discussion websites and blogs, as well as voiced in teachers' staff rooms. In order to resolve issues concerning the lack of mutual understanding, some researchers have examined ways to enhance cross-cultural communication and improve in class social interactions, such as programs in Australia (Rao, 2008; Shepherd, 2008). While such endeavours have been helpful, the lack of broadly based qualitative and quantitative research using Arabic international students as participants in Australian research projects needs to be addressed. Recently, in Saudi Arabia, a lone call for more robust and practical research was made in the field of SLA (McMullen, 2009), the author joins that lone voice, calling for broadly based research that examines the Arab student cohort in the Australian context to commence.

While undertaking research involving the new Arabic international student cohort there must be a foregrounding of how these students are viewed both in research literature and in practice. Firth and Wagner (1997) have strongly argued against the negatively framed discourses of problematic second language learners, as opposed to the idealised native speaker. In the Australian context Arkoudis and Ly (2007) identify how the 'Asian' learner is problematised in the higher education literature. They also argue that international students undergo complex adaptations in order to achieve academically in a foreign context, and that the solutions lies in the bridging of the gap between teacher and learner academic expectations. In order for future research to engage effectively with international students, the social and cultural contexts of learners must be taken into account, while for the Arabic student cohort, neither of these factors has been adequately researched.

This review of the literature concerning Arabic international students studying in Australia has been arranged into research areas, including academic, social, cultural, media and integration issues. The review presents the scant research in each area to date, which contrasts against pertinent current research that is being carried out in Australia involving other participant groups. Similar research conducted on the Arabic student cohort would be timely and also very informative for both practice and policy. The main focus of this review is not to merely present current research involving Arabic international students in Australia, but rather, to highlight the glaring research absences revealed by the literature portrait in relation to the recently arrived Arabic student cohort.

Academic Issues

Issues pertaining to Arabic students learning English has a broad literature base in Arabic (Al-Khatib, 2000), and while fairly extensive across a range of SLA topics, there remains little current research in the Australian context that is able to assist teachers and institutions develop practical strategies that will benefit both, as well as effectively engage Arabic students in Australia. Studies into how Arab students acquire specific elements of English have been conducted in a number of Arab nations, including United Arab Emirates and Qatar (Hoelker & Hashi 2005; Riazi 2007), Jordan (Khuwaileh & Al Shoumali 2000), and Lebanon (Bacha, 2001); while in a minority setting in Israel, motivation to learn English has been examined amongst Arab high school students (Keblawi, 2005). These studies have examined a variety of learning contexts and skills to assess English proficiency, however foreign socio-cultural contexts, such as in Australia have yet to be given a full treatment. While research into learning styles, strategies and preferences has been undertaken in overseas contexts such as Saudi Arabia (McMullen, 2009), broad based research has yet to be undertaken in the Australian context. Research examining how Arabic students learn and maintain English proficiency for higher academic purposes in Australia should be conducted to inform teacher practice and policy.

Love and Arkoudis (2006) indicate that there is little research concerning Chinese background international students in Australia, while the situation is even direr in the case of the Arab student cohort. Their research examined the stances that teachers hold towards Chinese international students undertaking years 11 and 12. No such research has considered attitudes or stances of Australian teachers towards the new Arabic student cohort in higher education. In order to engage effectively with

the new Arab student cohort it is imperative to undertake research in cross-cultural studies to further examine attitudes of teachers and students towards one another. Further research examining both teacher and student perceptions of motivation and demotivation along the lines of studies undertaken by scholars in the USA (Gorham & Millette, 1997) would prove useful for framing the stances that Australian teachers hold towards the Arab cohort, and vice versa.

Findlow (2006) found that Arabic students in the UAE view English as the language of science and technological advancement, while Arabic was viewed as the language of the home and the soul. For Arabic students in Australia, the acquisition of English has been identified as a powerful motivational driving force (Gauntlett, 2005) since English language is viewed as key to nation building and future employment opportunities. However research has been limited to small numbers of participants and has yet to examine the ways that Arabic students prefer to engage in the study of English. Learning styles and preferences have been examined for UAE students in particular (Thurogood, 2006), however, a broader base of similar Arabic background nationalities have yet to be examined in the Australian context. A broader cultural and nationality base should form part of a larger research project that examines learning preferences across a range of Australian learning contexts. Limited research has examined students' responses to the types of learning strategies and styles afforded Arabic students in Australia (Shepherd, 2008). Further robust research would be able to identify trends and preferences amongst Arabic students, and inform educators of how best to engage with this cohort.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) has been identified as an important topic in the field of SLA motivation (Dornyei, 2001). It has been examined in a range of cultural contexts, including Arab students. However, no research has yet identified WTC in terms of academic writing for Arabic students. It has been reported for decades that Arabic students have trouble with academic writing (Gallagher, 1989; Gauntlett, 2005), however, no research has been conducted in either the Arab or English speaking worlds to examine why Arabic students are unwilling to communicate using the medium of academic writing. Research needs to examine and inform programs and teachers of the deficits and strengths that Arabic students possess in relation to mastering academic literacy that is expected by Australian institutions.

Social Issues

Gauntlett's (2005) original contribution to the field identified that Arabic students expectations while studying in Australia vary considerably from Australian educational expectations. Other scholars have examined international students in the Australian context and warn that Australians may be naively misunderstanding the educational goals and needs of international students as being similar to Australian expectations (Neri & Ville, 2008). Gauntlett noted that the Arab student cohort based their decision to study in Australia on a range of social factors that include maintaining social connections, which is termed 'wasta' in Arabic (Weir & Hutchings, 2005) and the desire to create a stable future for the family (Gauntlett, 2005). Clearly this cohort is not learning in Australia simply because it is the flavour of the month, or for the sake of learning in English alone. Considering the work of Hofstede (2005), Gauntlett (2005) came to the conclusion that Arabic students' learning goals and expectations were based on a desire to avoid uncertainty and maintain social ties typical of the collectivist society.

The foregrounding of social needs over academic needs while studying in Australia has been identified as a problem in the literature. As a result Arabic students are sometimes viewed as being irresponsible towards their studies (Gauntlett, 2005; Sarsar, 2007), so much so that it has been reported that Arabic students are sometimes more concerned with their family situations than their studies (Midgely, 2009; Rao, 2008). The complex depth to which social forces impact on academic goals is poorly understood for the Arabic student cohort demanding further examination. While informative, Midgely's paper could be developed and extended to examine how Arabic students maintain family and other social connections using unmarried participants. Another group of participants using Arab women could examine how Arabic female higher education students maintain social connections with family members and others while studying in Australia.

It has been suggested that the motivations of international students to come to Australia to learn English may not be the same as our own naive assumptions (Neri & Ville, 2008). They also suggest that university policy on integrating international students with local students should be further examined in order to determine best practices and programs that assist with social integration of

international students. It is unclear as to the extent and willingness of Arabic international students to engage with social integration programs afforded by institutions such as universities.

When international students leave their homelands to study in Australia they are 'denuded' of their social capital (Neri & Ville, 2008). That is, in order to study and cope in Australia, international students seek out ways to re-establish their social capital, usually with others from a similar background as their own. The results of the research found that typically international students established 'bonding' social capital with other students, generally from their own background; while 'bridging' social capital was rare.

Furthermore, it was found that as international students re-establish and extend their social capital while studying in Australia there is an increase in well being, but no positive impact on academic achievement. In fact as duration of stay in Australia progressed it was found that academic achievement declined (Neri & Ville, 2008).

For the Arab cohort, students will tend to cluster together and renew social capital by bonding with others from the same nationality or another close background, from a neighbouring country or with others of the same religious background. Further research needs to examine where Arabic students re-establish 'bonding' or 'bridging' social capital while studying in Australia. It is unclear what the reasons for such trends are, and to what extent Arab students are willing to afford social integration programs such as buddy programs offered by higher education institutions. It is unclear how, and in which forms, Arab students re-establish their social capital while studying in Australia, and whether or not this impacts on their academic performance.

One way that Arabic international students have opportunities to interact with the broader Australian community is through the 'Homestay' program. This type of program is a form of student billeting, where an international student lives in the home of an Australian family. It is not yet clear whether the homestay program has a significant impact on academic performance for Arabic students. Further research should be established to examine if programs that assist with deep social integration, such as the homestay program, have a positive effect on academic performance, in comparison with students living in enclaves of Arabic students around the suburbs. Research in this area may develop a clearer picture of how Arab students view social interactions with the broader Australian community, and the level of willingness to engage in such programs. It will also accurately inform whether or not integration with the broader Australian community has a directly positive impact on Arabic international students' academic progress.

Cultural Issues

Kubota effectively argues against research literature and discourses of culture portraying foreign cultures in monolithic, fixed or essentialised terms (1999). The Australian media discourse of Arab students tends to portray Arabs in reductionist terms. This is further examined in the media issues section below. When discussing culture and cultural difference it is also important for researchers to consider issues of power, and how various cultures construct discourses of the other. Culture has been identified as an important factor in the context of international education (Kobuta, 1999), and it needs to be treated properly, avoiding reductionist views. There has been some discussion in relation to Arab students that while studying in Australia they will give preference to Arabic cultural norms over Australian norms, which can sometimes lead to cultural miscommunication (Shepherd, 2008: Rao, 2008). Further cross-cultural research will be able to identify those cultural aspects which may come into conflict with Australian culture by examining issues to do with gender issues, social roles and cultural traditions.

The international Arab student cohort is actually quite diverse. It is inaccurate to assume that all international Arab students are Saudis. Prior to 2007 the ABS recorded Saudis as part of the Middle Eastern market. Due to the rapid increase in Saudi student enrolments over the past few years, the ABS now record Saudi enrolments separately, however, a variety of nationalities are still present and enrolling at Australian institutions. The range of social, cultural, religious experiences, aspirations and backgrounds cannot be overlooked, thus essentialising the entire Arab student cohort would be erroneous. Some students are observant Muslims, attending regular prayer times, while others are not. Some students are reluctant to integrate and interact with cultural groups other than their own familiar

contacts, while others are not. Research has yet to be carried out that is able to present the varied portrait of the student cohort.

Cross-cultural politeness and norms have been identified as problematic, (Hondo & Goodman 2001: Rao, 2008) since behaviours that appear acceptable in one culture may be perceived as misbehaviours in another. Student perceptions of teacher misbehaviours are culturally variable by degree, but misbehaviours are viewed by students as 'belonging to' the teacher. It cannot be argued that 'perceived' misbehaviours vary cross-culturally, since all cultures agree that a teacher's misbehaviour is precisely that. What can be considered is the degree to which particular cultures interpret behaviours as misbehaviours. Arab students may perceive a teacher behaviour as a misbehaviour, while the same action is considered neutral or positive by Australian culture. Zhang's (2007) international study examined teacher misbehaviours as demotivators finding that teacher misbehaviours are interpreted precisely as misbehaviours despite cultural difference, while the only identified variable was the magnitude that it may have on demotivation. One implication that can be derived from the study is that expected behaviours may be more problematic than misbehaviours. Expected teacher and student behaviour roles are yet to be examined in the case of Arabic international students studying in Australia.

The importance of Chinese culture and its impact on education for Chinese learners was examined by Hui (2005). An equivalent study concerning Islamic traditions and its impact on Arabic learners has yet to be examined in Australia beyond beginning cursory examinations (Shepherd, 2008: Rao, 2008). While these two limited studies indicate that Islamic traditions and cultural norms are held very strongly by some students, the broader general portrait is yet unclear. It is erroneous to portray all Arabs as strongly religious, hailing from a homogenous cultural religious tradition, since great variety has been identified within the Arab and Muslim communities in Australia (Abdalla, 2010). The variety and depth of religious traditions and practices needs to be given a fuller treatment to be able to accurately inform teaching practice.

Media Issues

It has been argued that mainstream media reporting concerning Islam and Muslims in Australia has become the major source of information for the general public (Rane, 2010). The media constructed discourses concerning Islam and Muslims have a major impact on inter-community relations and how dominant Australian perceptions of Arabic people shape the ways that Australians interact with Muslim minorities. The situation for Arabic international students remains unclear, to date no research has examined how media discourses construct how Arabic international students are perceived by the general Australian public.

Sensationalised media reports have impacted Arabic international students in Australia. The Australian newspaper claimed that the Saudi government has taken steps to counter radicalisation amongst the students cohort (Kerbaj & Rout, 2008), however such sensationalist reporting overlooks the diversity of the Arabic student cohort since it simple essentialises them as a homogenous, monolithic cohort. The Muslim immigrant community has been described at length in current research (Abdalla, 2010) where every variation and facet of cultural and linguistic background, ethnicity, socio-economic and educational status, religiosity has been meticulously observed and noted. Clearly the essentialising of the Arabic student cohort in the mainstream Australian media, should not be the benchmark of knowledge that informs university policy and practice. Rather, robust research that highlights the diversity of the Arabic student cohort would be a timely and valuable addition to the pool of knowledge used to address issues pertaining to international education in Australia.

Sensationalist media reporting has also taken place in the Arabian Gulf (Mercer, 2009) and India (The Times of India), portraying Australia as an intolerant nation of bigots, chafing at the bit to harm Arab and other international students. To date research has not been undertaken to examine how Arabic international students perceive Australia as a host nation, nor how they perceive interactions with Australians generally.

Alienation and integration

Arabic international students in the USA reported social alienation and hostility (Shammas, 2009) while studying at university so much so that up to 50% of Arabic students enrolled in US universities abandoned their courses a short period of time after the September 11th terrorist attacks (McMurtrie, 2001). A similar situation has been reported by Arabic students studying in the UK (Rich and Troudi, 2006). In contrast with the USA and UK, Australia is viewed as a safe and stable destination, which is secure, offering high quality internationally recognised qualifications, and is relatively inexpensive in terms of tuition and daily living costs (Gauntlett, 2006). Arabic students have felt welcomed and safe studying in Australia (Shepherd, 2008) with students also preparing testimonials of their positive experiences on university websites (University of Queensland, 2010).

Asmar et al (2004) carried out research to examine the level of social integration and acceptance of Muslim women in particular and the Muslim community in general, however no such research has been undertaken to examine the extent to which Arabic students integrate into Australian society while studying here. Some research (Neri & Ville, 2008) has identified that social capital renewal takes place amongst international students, generally forming bonding connections with other international students, usually of a similar cultural heritage. The situation of Arabic students in particular remains unclear, while the extent to which Arabic students desire to form bonding or bridging connections with other international students or Australians also remains unknown.

Mansouri and Trembath (2005) identified systemic alienation and racism amongst Muslim immigrant families in high schools in Australia. It has also been reported that particular forms of behaviour were pathologised by the dominant social group, which is usually perceived as alienation or racism by Muslim immigrant families; to the extent where a mother explains that, 'all the kids hate school' (Markose & Hellsten, 2009). In the USA and UK, research has identified the perception that systemic or social alienation, which is perceived as racism, exists in the university context. In the USA perceived alienation led to a clustering of students based on ethnic or cultural ties (Shammas, 2009). The situation remains unknown for Arabic international students studying in Australia. Other research examining the Muslim community generally in South East Queensland, has identified that around half of the Muslim community has experienced racism to varying degrees, however there has been no research examining the experiences of racism amongst Arabic students, and how this may impact their study experience or impression of Australia generally. The potential for this to get out of hand is well known, where the Indian community was reported negatively in the media for an extended time. In fact sensationalised media reports of a racist, unsafe Australia do exist in the media of the Arabian Gulf, yet they are not the majority of reports.

It has been argued in the context of Australian Muslims, that positive contributions to Australian society can be measured in terms other than simple integration (Abdalla, 2010). Although international education is a multimillion-dollar enterprise, with Saudi Arabia as Australia's 16th largest trade partner (DFAT, 2010), it is still unclear as to ways that Arabic international students do contribute positively to Australia in economic, social or cultural terms.

Conclusion

It is clear from the review of the literature presented that there are many research gaps requiring further rigorous examination. While there is current research literature in Australia dealing with Muslims or with international students more generally, the same is not the case for the rapidly increasing Arabic international student cohort. In order to justly and accurately engage with the new Arabic international student cohort, the cohort must be demystified, using discourses that no longer construct them as problematic, or employ reductionist, essentialising theoretical lenses to portray and examine a student cohort that in fact possesses a wide variety of socio-cultural features.

This paper calls for further rigorous research examining ways to engage effectively Arabic students while maintaining Australian educational goals. Research needs to be undertaken in the fields of cross-cultural communication, cultural and social capital renewal, issues of racism or alienation versus social integration, teaching and learning styles, educational culture and expectations. Research examining these areas involving Arabic international students as participants is both timely and sorely needed; in order to accurately inform teaching practice to be able to engage Arabic students effectively.

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