



Experiencing Australia: Arab students' perspectives and perceptions informing enhancement strategies



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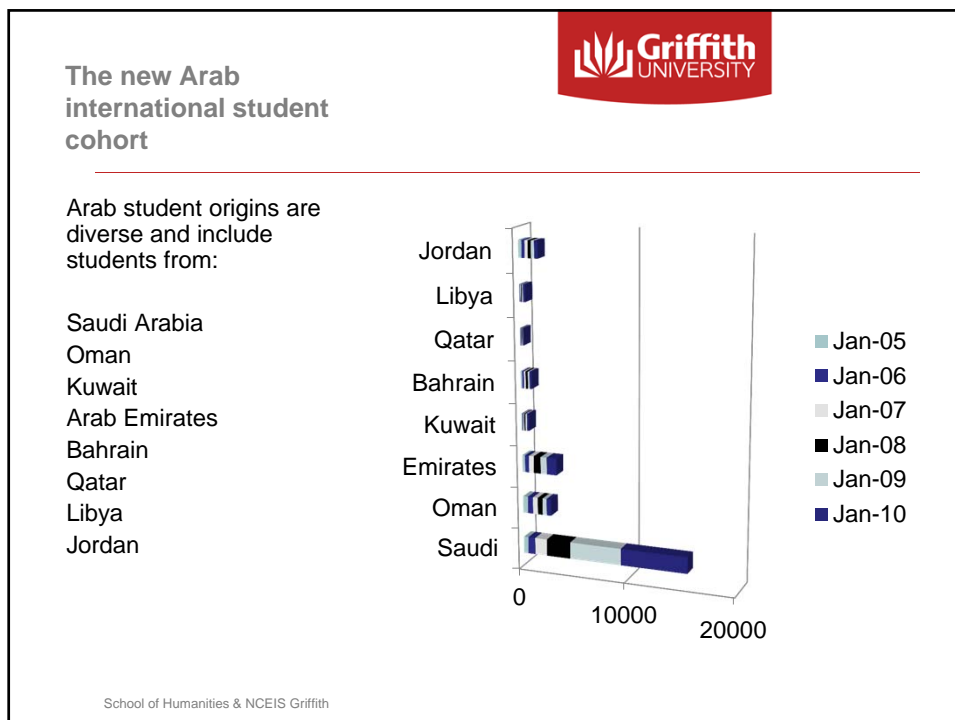
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Presentation overview

- New Arab international student cohort
- Research rationale
- Research focus points
- Methodology
- Findings
- Implications for institutions
- Discussion and questions

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Research rationale

Research Gaps:

- Uninformed policy and practice
- Unclear view of Arab students' expectations of study in Australia
- Unclear view of what is attracting Arabs to Australia, in terms of marketing strategy



Research dealing with the rapidly expanding Arab student cohort is extremely sparse across all fields

There are significant differences between students from the Arab World and other major groups such as from China or India

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Focus points

- How do Arab students perceive Australian habits, values and norms?
- What do Arab students like about their Australian experience?
- What do Arab students consider valuable and worthy of adoption from Australian culture and norms?
- What are the factors impacting the integration of positive experiences, values and norms?

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Methodology

- Face to face Interviews – seeking depth
- Research literature positions the researcher and prompts specific questions
- Semi-structured interview protocol based on the literature
- Reviewed and modified based on preliminary piloting and feedback
- Participants
- Men and women
- Undergraduates and postgraduates
- Married and single people
- A variety of national backgrounds, while Saudis around half



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Methodology: Narrative analysis – small stories

- ‘Small stories’, Bamberg & Georgakopoulos (2008), are the basic units of analysis
- Each participant’s responses to interview questions and survey questions are examples of small stories
- Viewing the episodes in sequence develops a larger narrative
- Narrative model based on the work of Labov & Waletzky (1967) and Cortazzi (1993)
- Elements of narrative used for analysis include, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution and coda
- Lexical signalling is used to identify the elements of the narrative in all levels of narrative
- Viewing all participants narratives together leads to meta-narrative



- Meta narratives draw upon the work of Given (2008) and Clandinin (2007)
- Meta narratives create a portrait of the themes emerging from the narrative episodes and larger narratives

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Findings

- Select findings are presented based on the four research focus points
- Presented below are both direct quotes and the emergent themes relating to the data
- This presentation is a snapshot of a larger body of interview data dealing with studying in Australia
- Significantly different than Chinese or Indian students
- Overwhelming majority are sponsored
- Majority of students are post graduates
- Many students are married and most come with their family, especially Saudis
- Australia has a growing reputation internationally
- Australia is perceived as safe and high quality
- Specialised courses are valuable



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What Arab students like about Australia

- 'I love meeting with students from China and other places I would never been able to go.' Said, Oman.
- 'It's great to meet so many people from different cultural and religious backgrounds.' Fatimah, UAE.
- A desire for genuine international interactions.
- Sharing knowledge and skills with a range of cultural groups is important. Expressing and sharing Arabic culture and traditions is also important.



- 'This is a free country, I can wear what I like, do what I like and go where I like.' Nona, Saudi.
- Freedom of movement, expression, association

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What Arab students like about Australia

- 'The traffic system, I love it! We have many tragic accidents due to speed.' Abdullah, Saudi.
- 'I have learnt how to drive here so that I can get to class when I need to, without having to wait for anybody.' Fatimah, Saudi.
- 'I feel confident that I could leave my pregnant wife alone in this country. Something I cannot do back home, because I know that Australian law will protect her.' Mohamed, Saudi.
- Convenient systems and regulations are valued. This is important to reduce uncertainty.
- Autonomy, independence, ease. These are important factors for enhancing social and cultural experiences.
- Confidence in the legal system and the process of law. This can be extended to any institution and its policy for addressing any problems.



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Australian habits, values and norms through Arab eyes

- 'We argue that Arab students are consciously and deliberately evaluative and selective of Australian cultural norms and social habits.' (S & R)
- 'Studying in Australia has allowed me to reflect on my nature and personality. I have a chance to think about who I am, and what I want in life.'
Fatimah, UAE



- Arab students highly value their culture and traditions. In cross-cultural settings they 'cherry pick' aspects that appear valuable and useful.
- Arab students have 'a conscious desire to develop and enhance one's character and cultural perspectives of the world.' (S & R)

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Australian habits, values and norms through Arab eyes

- 'The topics that people talk about. I just can't relate to them.' Mohammed, Saudi
- 'Australians respect Islam and Muslims because of multiculturalism.' Hasan, Libya
- 'I feel really safe in this country. It's not like the USA where people are openly racist.' Aya, Oman
- Systems to 'get the job done'. Online information, the ability to contact people directly to solve problems. Public transport systems and the ability for women to drive and travel alone.
- 'A significant proportion of participants reported a positive view of government processes, the election and voting system, traffic laws and public structures.' (S & R)
- Cultural awareness and sensitivity help to bridge the cross-cultural gap
- Multiculturalism and visibility of Islam and Muslims in Australian society is perceived in a positive light
- 'We argue that is quite likely that these systems and features are regarded highly and a desire exists for such things to be established in the Arab World.' (S & R)
- Arab students 'are consciously and deliberately selective of elements of Australian systems, culture and values.' (S & R)

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Factors that impact adopting cultural values

- 'There are some red lines that we cannot cross.' Hasan, Jordan.
 - 'This is not our home. We don't want to bring up our children here.' Abdullah, Saudi.
 - 'I don't think migration is an option. My country needs me.' Hasan, Libya.
 - 'I felt terrible after I ate that hot dog. It will be the first and last time.' Abdullah, Oman.
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- Maintaining culture and traditions is very important.
 - There is a plan to return home so citizenship or migration is not an option.
 - Less desire to assimilate into Australian society. This is not due to racism, but rather, pragmatism.
 - Religious observations are significant. Halal food and prayer facilities are greatly appreciated.

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Implications and recommendations

- What do the findings indicate for other English speaking countries?
- Do these findings indicate anything for other cultural student groups?
- What do these findings mean in terms of marketing courses and institutions?
- Arab students have strong social networks. How can institutions tap into these?
- Do institutions have 'family friendly' or 'halal' services?
- What types of cross-cultural activities exist or need to be developed?
- How do institutions enhance their reputation in the Arab World?
- How well informed are Arab students of the systems and institutions that exist?
- Are there cross cultural interactions where Arabs both experience other cultures and express their own?
- Although the cohort does not wish to remain permanently, they wish to live in a safe affordable host country.
- Word of mouth and personal advice have extremely high value and cannot be underestimated.
- Personal and institutional reputation is highly valued amongst Arabs.
- Decisions are significantly influenced by personal advice and contact to the point it appears volatile to non-Arabs.
- Everyday systems and values that are often overlooked by Westerners are valued extremely highly amongst Arabs, for example, traffic laws and public transport.

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Discussion and questions

- What can institutions do to enhance the experience for Arab international students?
- How can the findings inform existing policy and practice?



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