Undergraduate Arab International Students'

Adjustment to U.S. Universities

Hazza M. Abu Rabia[1]

[1] University of Hartford, USA

Correspondence: Hazza M. Abu Rabia, University of Hartford, USA

Abstract

The adjustment process and issues of 16 Arab international students enrolled at two universities in the Northeast of the United States were examined through this qualitative, exploratory study. The participants were from Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and United Arab Emirates and had been in the US for 2 to 5 years. In-depth interviews were employed to document and analyze the experiences and challenges of these students on U.S. campuses. One-on-one interviews with the participants revealed multiple factors obstructed Arab international students' academic success and limited their socialization within the context of their postsecondary institution, their host community, and their host nation. Several prevailing themes were discovered among the participants, including culture shock, language barrier, cultural differences, and isolation. While further research is needed, these findings suggest that specific programming and outreach by U.S higher education institutions could be implemented to assist Arab international students' adjustment to the academic and social environment of their host campus.

Keywords: Arab international students, Culture shock, Cultural adjustment, Language barrier

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the number of international students enrolling in U.S. colleges and universities has increased dramatically, bringing economic gains and increased cultural diversity to campuses across the country (Tavakoli, Lumley, Hijazi, Slavin-Spenny, & Parris, 2009). In 2012, the United States was the world's most sought after postsecondary education destination, hosting 21% of international students (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2010), 547,867 international students were studying in the United States in 2000, comprising 3.6% of the total number of students in U.S. higher education institutions that year. That number increased in 2010 to 690,923 or 4.7% of U.S. postsecondary students. A more recent study by the IIE (2014) showed that the number of international students studying in U.S. institutions of higher education during the 2013-2014 academic year increased significantly to 886,052 students, or 8.1% of the U.S. postsecondary student population, with most of the growth driven by students from China and Saudi Arabia.

One rapidly growing population of international students in the United States comes from Arab countries. In general, "Arab" is a term that refers to persons whose familial ties originate in one of the Arab nations of the Middle East, Arabian Gulf, or North Africa who use Arabic as their primary language (Abualkhair, 2013). The Arab countries are considered to include Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

The IIE (2014) reported that in 2010, 33,797 students from the Middle East and North Africa were studying in the United States. This number increased to 92,618 Arab international students in 2014, which compromised 10% of the total international student population across the United States. In addition, the IIE reported that the majority of Arab international students came from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Like most international students, Arab international students seek higher education in the United States because U.S. universities provide opportunities not readily available in their native countries, and the prestige that accompanies a foreign degree qualifies students for better jobs with higher incomes in their countries of origin (Mostafa, 2006). Arab international students specifically see the U.S. higher education system as exemplifying high standards and offering high-quality education, democratic practices, opportunities for critical thinking, and advanced technology (Abualkhair, 2013).

Mostafa (2006) indicated that push and pull factors influence the decision of Arab students to study abroad. Push factors include students' unsatisfied outlook regarding their home environments such as "restricted economic resources, fewer world-class institutions, low degree of involvement in the world community, fewer doctoral and postdoctoral programs, lack of availability of specializations, limited access to funding, poor career prospects, and adverse social or political conditions" (p. 103). Conversely, pull factors include the features of a foreign country that students perceive as desirable such as the following:

> Better academic and technological facilities, better financial support, prestige of a foreign degree, social links and personal recommendations, life in a diverse culture, better working conditions, more opportunities for employment, the willingness of employers to hire well-qualified foreigners, and potential of higher salaries. (Mostafa, 2006, p. 103)

In addition, the Middle East has experienced an increase in educational institutions and students, but this has not been met by an equally growing teaching staff, which contributes to Arab students seeking education outside of their native countries. Arab students are sent to the United States by their government, their employers, or their families in order to pursue a degree in higher education (DeLuca, 2005; Suleiman, 1993). The largest scholarship program in the Arab world is the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), which was established in 2005 in an agreement with President George W. Bush to increase the number of Saudi Arabian students in the United States.   KASP assists more Arab students than any other scholarship program in the Middle East (Hofer, 2009). The United States receives the majority of KASP recipients, which currently exceeds 53,000 students annually International students, including Arab international students, bring significant economic gains to U.S. institutions and local economies and promote international understanding and collaboration (Hall, 2013).

Arab international students face a number of unique challenges when studying at U.S. postsecondary institutions. The most obvious of these challenges is difficulty learning and expressing oneself in English, but other challenges existed that extend far outside the classroom, such as experiencing a new culture and living far from family and friends. Looking specifically at international students from the Middle East, this study described the experiences of Arab international students in a U.S. postsecondary institution. This exploratory research study identified those factors that Arab international students report as facilitating or obstructing their academic success and promoting or limiting their socialization within the context of their postsecondary institution, their host community, and their host nation.

2. Literature Review

The majority of Arab international students arrive in the United States unprepared for the cultural conflicts (Al Anazy, 2013; McDermott-Levy, 2010; Suleiman, 1993) and language problems (Al Khatani, 2002; Al Khatib, 2010; Hamad, 2012; Moraya, 2013) that international students commonly experience. For Arab international students, the culture, language, religion, and geography of the United States are all new and foreign elements (Ryan & Twibell, 2000). The culture shock and barriers to adjustment that Arab international students face in the US may negatively impact their educational journey.

Macionis and Gerber (2010) defined culture shock as "the personal disorientation a person may feel when experiencing an unfamiliar way of life due to immigration or a visit to a new country, a move between social environments, or simply when traveling to another type of life" (p. 54). Rajasekar and Renand (2013) similarly described culture shock as the anxiety or stress that is caused by being in a new and foreign environment and the absence of the familiar signs and symbols of the home country. They identified 14 factors that contribute to culture shock: communication, dress, ethics, individualism/collectivism, food, language, structure, perception, power distance, religion, rules, time orientation, traditions, and weather.

International students generally experience the culture shock process in stages. Lysgaard (1955) described four stages associated with acculturation that are applicable to international students: (1) the honeymoon stage, (2) culture shock, (3) adjustment, and (4) mastery. He posited that acculturation is a process that happens over time that often follows a U-shaped curve. In other words, different stages may be experienced more than once, with the process rarely being linear. Furthermore, Lysgaard emphasized how adjustment that initially appears easy, is commonly followed by a "crisis" in which one feels less well adjusted, lonely, and unhappy. Eventually, one begins to feel more adjusted again, resulting in a more integrated individual.

Arab international students' adjustment experiences are similarly characterized by the four stages detailed above. Arab international students, like many other international students, are not normally accustomed to American architecture and transportation, nor are they used to the appearances and lifestyles of the American students around

them. Additionally, Arab international students are faced with the challenge of successfully adapting to their new environment in the absence of their family, which is a major element of support in their lives back home (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Without a supportive network, the culture shock experienced by Arab international students may be more extreme and leave students feeling helpless and isolated. Arab international students are best equipped to reach the stage of adjustment (also referred to as the stage of autonomy) when their host university offers programs that provide social and academic support. These programs are most successful when they also include meaningful opportunities for domestic students, faculty, and staff to learn about international students' home cultures and to interact with diverse students, including international students, outside of the classroom (Abu khattala, 2013). In terms of academics, providing English language fluency development programs and opportunities for students to develop their English writing skills also help students achieve biculturalism (Al Zubaidi, 2012).

Culture shock can cause a combination of feelings to arise such as anxiety, uncertainty, confusion, and isolation (Oberg, 1960). An individual who experiences these emotions can then develop a host of related symptoms such as the following: homesickness, loneliness, depression, more sleep than normal, compulsive eating, loss of appetite, lack of energy, disengagement from social activities, as well as stereotyping and feelings of hostility toward host nationals (Komiya & Eells, 2001; Oberg, 1960).

Many Arab international students encounter immense cultural differences immediately upon arriving in the US. Shattuck (1964) conveyed that the majority of the time, international students' overall ability to adapt is challenged by differing values, inherent behavior rules, and different means of communication. Shattuck further emphasized that major cultural differences often prove difficult throughout the international students' sojourn in the US. Rising and Copp (1992) reported that numerous studies regarding international students from different geographic regions found that students from non-Western and less-developed countries had a much harder time adjusting to their new academic work, new relationships with those from the host society, and to the American culture as a whole. Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) concluded that the closer a student's culture is to that of their host community, the easier the interactions and adjustment are for that international student.

Another primary adjustment and academic challenge among Arab international students is their limited proficiency in the English language, as well as U.S. institutions' instructional practices that differ greatly from what Arab international students are used to in their native countries (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). For example, universities in the US tend to place much more emphasis on class participation than do institutions in other countries. Kuo (2011) indicated that Arab students are often not accustomed to the teaching styles in the US, as well as professors' and educators' basic expectations such as note-taking methods. Similarly, Mostafa (2006) found that Arab international students had difficulty adjusting to their Canadian host culture due to the fact that they had not yet improved their English-language proficiency, which led these students to restrict their communication mainly to their fellow Arabs at universities, mosques, and Arab community centers in Canada. The study further revealed that even those students who had previously taken preparatory English language courses before arriving in their host country were still very limited in their English-language proficiency.

Abu kahtala (2013) found that Arab international students encountered many difficulties regarding the English language; they also had difficulty adjusting to their host country's education system, which differed from that of their home countries. Arab international students claimed that in the educational system that they were used to, they pursued a major that aligned with their grades. For example, if they were weak in science or math subjects they could not pursue a major that involved a curriculum with a high concentration of that subject.

3. Research Sites and Sample

The sites for the present study were two universities in the Northeast of the United Sates. One university was a midsize private university, and the second was a large public university. In 2015, there were approximately 5,000 undergraduate students enrolled at the private university and 11,000 students enrolled at the public institution. The number of international students attending both universities in 2014 reached 866 students from 68 countries. Over half of the international students were undergraduates. Furthermore, of those students, 263 were from Arab countries. Most of the undergraduate Arab international students at both universities came from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates.

For this study, a stratified random sample was used to select 12 undergraduate male Arab international students and 4 females; 2 from Kuwait and 2 from Saudi Arabia. The strata were divided into Arab countries: six students were selected from Saudi Arabia, four students from Kuwait, and two students from Jordan. One student was selected from each of the following countries: Iraq, Oman, Syria, and United Arab Emirates. The six students from Saudi Arabia and the other four from Kuwait represented each year of their respective undergraduate degree programs. It

was hoped this would capture a wider range of experiences as well as the different stages of international students' adjustment. For instance, fourth-year students may experience different challenges than first-year students. Additionally, the student participants represented different Arabic cultures and came from diverse educational systems.

4. Methods

This study utilized a common data collection method associated with qualitative case study research. Creswell (2007) defined data collection as "a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions" (p. 118). In qualitative case studies, the researcher seeks a "complex, detailed understanding of the issue," which can only be drawn by "talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature" (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Furthermore, Yin (2014) asserted that a case study requires that the researcher collect data from participants in their "everyday situations, not within the controlled confines of a laboratory, the sanctity of a library, or the structured limitations of a survey questionnaire" (p. 88), which requires the researcher to incorporate real-world events with the data collection method.

The data for this study were gathered from semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is defined as "an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" that is simply a structured conversation controlled by the researcher (Kvale, 1996, pp. 5-6). These interviews utilized audio recordings, researcher notes and rechecking to ensure authenticity. The data collected from the study were stored in a file on the researcher's password protected computer in the privacy of his office.

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face in a set location. The interview questions were designed in an open-ended manner to allow for Arab international students to have sufficient opportunities to express their experiences. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for a more detailed account of their experiences.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Emergent Themes

The analysis of the study results led to the following four themes: culture shock, language difficulties, cultural differences, and isolation. Each theme was developed based on the responses of the Arab international student participants and is discussed below.

5.2 Culture Shock

Seven students experienced a degree of culture shock. The Association of International Educators (NAFSA, 2014) defined culture shock as the "physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions that often occur when individuals are attempting to live, work, or study in unfamiliar cultural contexts. The challenge of adjusting to a new and foreign environment, in and outside of the classroom, was the biggest catalyst of culture shock for the seven participants.

The participants' culture shock experiences were consistent with the u-curve theory first developed by Lysgaard in 1955. Many variations of the model have emerged since. However, Lysgaard's notion of a "honeymoon" period followed by culture shock, recovery, and finally adjustment, coincides with the Arab international participants' adjustment experiences while enrolled at U.S. universities. Additionally, Mendenhall (1990) reviewed the empirical findings of numerous studies exploring the u-curve theory, and he found that 67% of the studies indicated support for the u-curve hypothesis.

The challenges only amplified the participants' prevailing feelings of homesickness. The majority of Arab international students were away from their families for the first time and not accustomed to the individualistic atmosphere of an American university. A male student from Saudi Arabia said, "After a short time from my arrival to the US, I felt homesick. I missed my family. I missed my mother's food and her love. I missed playing with my brothers too." Another student from Kuwait expressed similar feelings of loneliness and stated that he "started to be homesick from the first day." He also discussed his emotional response to the situation and shared the following, "When I was by myself, I cried and wanted to leave everything and go back home." A different student from Saudi Arabia felt "homesick" and also "had to deal with depression, especially in the wintertime." His initial excitement about the new environment was lessened because he felt "the weather was very cold, the winter was very long" and that he was "not used to the weather and being by [himself], far from [his] family." A female student from Kuwait said, "Whenever I felt homesick, I used to call home to speak with my family who always encouraged me to continue my studies."

Many of the participants expressed difficulties with social relations, which added to their perceived loneliness. A second-year student from Saudi Arabia said, "Most of my classmates were American, they were nice people and polite with me, but it was difficult to be in a friendship with them." Another first-year student from Kuwait shared his personal emotions in response to his loneliness in the US,

> Unhappiness was a part of my daily life. I woke up every morning and felt sad because I missed my family and my life back home. I was lonely and my few friends from back home that I met on campus were in the same situation.

The Omani student expressed that he did not "imagine [himself] living here . . . the area was beautiful but [he] missed [his] lovely country."

5.3 Language Difficulties

The English language barrier was the most prominent challenge among the Arab international students. The participants' problems with the English language resulted in writing and communication obstacles. Eleven Arab international students reported different degrees of language difficulties during their educational experiences. One male participant thought that Arab students are not taught enough English and that by the time they finish high school, they "don't have a good enough grasp of the language."

Three students mentioned that they faced many language problems when they started their classes. For instance, a third-year student from Syria felt strongly that one specific setting was the most difficult when it came to the English language:

> The main challenge for using English happened in class. No matter what I encountered outside of class, keeping up with the discussion and lecture of the instructor was a major task. In Arab countries, including my country, Syria, high school and college students are trained to listen attentively in order to understand the topic of the lecture. In a typical American classroom, lecturing can be as dominant as discussion. Yet I still had difficulties.

A first-year female student from Saudi Arabia stated, "As a Saudi student, I wasn't equipped with English language skills. I start to learn English in middle school and don't have a good enough grasp of the language by the time I finished high school." She shared her experience with language classes saying, "I spent three semesters in ESL classes and even that was not enough for me to be ready for a regular course." Another male student from Saudi Arabia also spoke of his frustration with the language barrier and his participation in the ESL program:

> I learned English in the US. I was in the ESL program for 2 years. I came here with very little experience with the English language. It is still a big challenge for me. I went to my regular classes after I finished the ESL program, and I didn't understand anything from the lectures. So many terminologies were foreign to me. I wanted to quit, but my cousin helped me to understand the material.

A female student from Saudi Arabia shared much of the same sentiment:

> I can describe my first day of classes in the university like being [a deaf person in the club]. In Saudi Arabia, schools don't have good English language programs. Most of the English language teaching is conducted in Arabic. I was enrolled in the ESL program for 2 years. I was happy with it, but later I discovered that my English wasn't sufficient enough to be ready for regular classes.

The language barrier that the Arab international participants reported is consistent with existing literature regarding international student adjustment. Heyn (2013) concluded that international students' primary academic challenge related to their proficiency in their host nation's language. Al Mulla (1996) similarly found that the English language was an immense challenge for Arab international students. Unfortunately, 80% of the students who participated in his study reported that their English language proficiency was very poor.

5.4 Cultural Differences

Twelve participants expressed recognizing and being impacted by the cultural differences they encountered during their sojourn. Cultural differences related to religion and cross-gender interaction were the most apparent for the participants. For the Arab international students, their religion was part of their everyday life, which was not the case for many host members of the universities and larger communities. For example, a female student from Saudi Arabia admitted, "In the beginning, I faced problems like being with males in the same classroom. . .. It is considered a sin in our society. . .. I didn't really understand why, and maybe that is from Islamic teaching, but I think it is a strict interpretation by some Muslim scholars in Saudi Arabia." Another female student from Saudi Arabia described similar experiences and feelings:

Arab women don't mix with men. My school back home is all females; we don't have a mix of gender schools. It is against the law in our country. Even my teachers were females. Male teachers don't teach females, and the opposite is true. Here, in the beginning, it was difficult for me to be with males in the same class and to be taught by male professors. But I got used to it later on. Now I don't see it as a problem. It was very helpful to be in group of males and females in class discussions.

A female student from Kuwait said, "I wasn't comfortable being with males in the same classes since Kuwait had separation between sexes in schools." Another female student from Kuwait talked about avoiding individuals of the opposite sex:

I was shy in my classes because of the males present. I never talked to a male in my class since we are not accustomed to it in our country. In many cases, I avoided my classmates when I saw them outside of the class, and I never asked them for anything.

Other Saudi males expressed how interacting with female students and faculty was unfamiliar and often uncomfortable for them. One student said, "Back home I only spoke either with my sisters or mother because of gender separation in my society. Here in the US, when I started to speak to females in class, I would look down toward the floor and not to her face." An Emeriti student was frustrated at first although he "didn't have any problem with women, but back home [he] did not converse with them. It took [him] a while to get used to."

An important cultural issue was raised by the participants in terms of cross-gender relations. Eight Arab international students reported that they were surprised by the blatant sexuality evident on campus and the openness and informality surrounding sexual relations. Four Arab female participants reported that relationships between men and women were not accepted in their home countries due to their religion and tradition. A female student from Kuwait detailed her viewpoint, "Arab culture does not fully accept relationships between men and women unless they are engaged, which equals dating in the American culture. I cannot accept any relationships with any man outside of marriage."

Another Kuwaiti student also expressed the same idea, "Spending unlimited time with one's beloved partner was not possible for an Arab couple unless both partners were married, which is the opposite in most cases in the US." This student continued, "There is no way for a woman in my society to be alone with a man that she is not married to. I respected the American way of life [but recognize that] my values as a Muslim woman are much different."

A male student from Syria discussed personal gender relations and how his religion played a role in his interactions with women at his U.S. university:

Many American students enjoy unrestricted freedom in their relationships with the other sex. In my case, I tried to stay away from any opportunity that might have led to an unacceptable relationship. That kind of relationships is against the teaching of Islamic faith.

A Student from Jordan shared the same attitude when he indicated he was a "practicing Muslim and having an American-like relationship with a girl is against my belief. . . I believe that any relationship should be an initial step towards marriage." A second-year student from Iraq shared his observations of cross-gender relationships as follows:

In my first year, I lived in a university dormitory. After a few months, I moved out because I couldn't tolerate the free relationships between males and females and seeing them party together. It is acceptable in American society, but not to Muslims.

5.5 Isolation

Ten participants described isolating themselves in response to their adjustment issues. As a result of this isolation, they placed the majority of their focus and energy on academic adjustment. Some participants chose to focus solely on their academic adjustment as a distraction from their foreign surroundings. Furthermore, participants tended to limit their social interactions to other international students with similar backgrounds and cultures. Participants admitted that they often avoided interacting with members of their host society due to fear.

The Emirati student spoke about his challenges trying to balance both his academic and social life:

After my first semester, I figured out how much time I needed to spend on work for my classes and in order to succeed, I had to use my time wisely. My assignments would take double the time compared to my American classmates. I did not really have time to build friendships with them. Most of my American classmates are nice people, but we did not interact together outside of class. Most of my friends are Arab students like me.

A Saudi Student said,

> Academically I limited my relationships with people in order to have time for my classes and to do my course work. I needed time to do that, and I isolated myself sometimes and this helped me to succeed in my classes.

A Jordanian student indicated,

> My first priority was to succeed in my classes. I came here to study and to work hard for my future and not to fail in my classes or to make friends. Additionally, I took more than one course with American students, and it was difficult to be in their circle. They [American students] never greeted me.

The Iraqi student also believed that it was difficult for him to make friends with host students. He said, "I don't have American friends. Their way of living is different than mine, and they had a different mentality than us [Arabs]." A Student from Saudi Arabia said, "I wasn't successful in making friends with American females since there was no common ground between me and them."

A female Student from Saudi Arabia discussed her academic focus as follows:

> The first year, I did not interact with American girls. I needed to concentrate on my courses. I was very embarrassed when I received a C- on my first exam. I studied hard for the exam, but many factors affected me. I found help from other international students. Americans don't like to help either because they don't have time or because they grew up like this.

The Omani student said although he lived in England and was used to being with Westerners, he did not have any American friends since American students have "different ways of thinking" than Arabs.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Most Arab international students experienced culture shock due to differences in lifestyle, beliefs, and language encountered in the United States. Consequently, Arab international students may not accept traditions of the host culture, which may impede their integration into the American society. U.S. college officials may be able to ease the anxiety and acculturation of Arab international students when they first arrive in the US by specifically preparing these non-Western students for the academic and cultural challenges they will likely encounter. Preparing them to face such challenges can ease their transition to their new environment. Additionally, officials and university community members must take into account the issue of culture shock regarding Arab international students. More thorough and immediate preparation will benefit the students after the initial period of excitement. If the degree to which students are familiar with their host culture is increased, the effects of culture shock on international students will be significantly reduced.

American university communities must take into account the extent of cultural differences encountered by Arab international students. Officials must take active steps to bridge the gap between the host culture and the cultures of origin of international students. By simultaneously acknowledging international students' cultures and backgrounds, as well as introducing them to the host culture, the adjustment transition will be facilitated immensely. Additionally, informing the students of the host university community about Arab students' cultures is vital. If both Arab and U.S. officials inform their students about the cultural norms of each other, this will lead to fewer misperceptions among Arab and U.S. students and a higher degree of mutual acceptance.

Another important factor that increases Arab international students' culture shock is language difficulties. Therefore, Arab international students should receive proficient English language education prior to coming to the US. If Middle Eastern officials do not provide the proper programs and tutors for their students, then the students must actively seek this particular kind of preparation before coming to the US. Moreover, if officials in higher education institutions in the US take the proper steps to improve and eliminate language barriers, Arab international students' English language and communication challenges will be minimized as well. Language proficiency and successful communication go hand-in-hand. Officials in the Middle East and officials at the universities in the US must invest in proper aid for international students in order to ensure a positive educational experience. Also, Arab international students should continue to attend writing workshops in their majors throughout their undergraduate degree programs in order to be best prepared and comfortable in writing in their field of study.

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