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

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Abstract

Students from the Arab world have chosen to study in Australia in rapidly increasing numbers over the past few years but remain understudied from an academic perspective. In contrast with Indian and Chinese students, Arab students generally do not seek to migrate to Australia indicating a student experience that often differs from other student cohorts. This paper presents the findings of in-depth interviews conducted with 30 Arab international students in Australia. It addresses the following four issues: 1) The value that Arab international students attach to Australian norms, systems, institutions, and laws; 2) The aspects of the Australian experience that are embraced by the Arab international students; 3) The aspects of the Australian experience that Arab international students would like and dislike to be adopted by their home country; and 4) The factors that Arab international students perceive to be likely to facilitate and inhibit this diffusion process. This paper also includes a series of recommendations in respect to improving the Arab international student experience.

Keywords

International students, experience, Arabs, values, enhancement, cultural diffusion

Introduction

Over the past six years the numbers of international students enrolling in Australian universities from the Arab World has rapidly increased from a mere few hundred to well over 12000 by the end of 2009 (DFAT) and well over 13000 in 2012 (Austrade, 2012; ABS, 2012). The increase was so rapid that a new category for Saudi Arabian enrolments was created out of a previously general Middle East category. The King Abdullah education scholarships program in Saudi Arabia is a significant factor behind the desire to study in Australia. The program has influenced neighbouring countries such as Oman and Emirates to also send students to Australia. Another significant factor that almost all participants described was the sense of security Australia offers in comparison with the USA or the UK. Umar[1], an Omani student in Brisbane explains, 'that in the UK I was the victim of racism daily. But, in Australia I have never felt racism at all.' Samar, a Saudi student in Brisbane also explains, 'I have never been attacked because I wear a hijab, head scarf'. Similarly, Nona, a PhD candidate in Melbourne who wears traditional Saudi style attire, including covering the face said, 'I have never been a victim of racism in Australia. I am safe here.' Our interviews have also found that positive personal connections recommending

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[1] All personal names used in relation to the quoted findings are pseudonyms.

Australia as a valuable destination are also a significant deciding factor for many Arabs. Initial interest in this new cohort was aroused by the rapid enrolment increase and the desire to explore what makes Australia a more desirable study destination than other English speaking countries such as the USA or UK.

Australian higher education institutions expect that international students will engage in and share in the cross cultural experiences of culture, religion and world view as part of the internationalisation policy (Hughes, 2008). This study examines the ways Arab students perceive Australian cultural norms and habits; how they express the desire to participate in cross cultural activities; which types of Australian cultural habits and social norms are desired or rejected; and factors impacting the adoption of positive cultural norms and habits in the Arab World. Due to the limited academic research involving Arab students in Australia (Shepherd, 2010) it is important to develop a portrait of Arab students that contrasts with sensationalist media reporting in Australia (Kerbaj & Rout, 2008; Rane, 2010) and overseas (Mercer, 2009; Times of India). We have deliberately avoided the theoretical error of constructing culture through discourse alone (Kobuta, 1999) and rather focussed on the evaluative acts Arab students elicit in cross cultural situations. Arab students' behaviour is more akin to cultural reflection and filtering, which has its origins in Islamic, (and by extension, Arabic) traditions (Abd-Allah, 2009). Participants have reported that cross cultural experiences have initiated self-reflection and a conscious desire to develop and enhance one's character and cultural perspectives of the world. Fatimah, a student from the UAE studying in Melbourne described her experiences, '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.'

Rizvi (2005) questions the 'use' that international students obtain from their international education experiences. We take up this thread to explore what Arab students describe about the 'use' they wish to make of their Australian experience with a focus on cultural interactions and impacts on worldview. Previous research dealing with Arab students from Oman explored experiences of academic performance and motivation to study (Gauntlett, 2005) while negative experiences at university have been reported amongst Muslim and Arab women at Australian universities (Asmar, 2004). Limited media reporting of how Saudi women experience British culture suggests that for some Saudis it would be of significant personal benefit to remain in Britain after graduation (Wagner, 2012), which is a significant contrast with the sense of exclusion reported amongst Arab post-graduate students in the UK (Rich & Troudi, 2006). US research has examined how Arabs perceive racism and American culture (Shammas, 2009) and has also reported on the negative experiences resulting from the 9/11 terrorist attacks (McMurtie, 2001). The lack of research literature dealing with Arab international students in Australia was reflected in our interviews as a general lack of familiarity on the part of Australians of Arabs, as well as Arabs of Australians. It is in this light that we decided to examine the situation amongst not just Saudis, but other Arab nationals in Australia, to specifically examine what they have to say about their experiences of Australian culture.

Significant differences exist between the Arab international student cohort and international students of other nationalities such as Chinese or Indian. For example, the overwhelming majority of Arab students are sponsored rather than self-funded. Close to 100% of the Arab student cohort do not desire to remain in Australia permanently, nor desire to obtain Australian citizenship. Hasan, a student from Libya in Melbourne stated, 'I don't think migration is an option. My country needs me.' Well over half of the cohort is undertaking post-graduate study as an opportunity to upgrade their careers or obtain a promotion in current employment. For example Mohammed a PhD candidate in Brisbane explains, 'I will get a promotion to professor from senior lecturer.' This is also echoed by Aya from Oman who said, 'of course I will get a promotion.' There are a significant number of students who are in Australia with their spouses and children, and for Saudi women, many of them are here with a chaperone, or *mahram*. When considered together these factors impact the ways that Arabs view and interact with Australian cultural norms and social institutions. Religious and cultural traditions also influence the ways that Arab students approach and perceive cultural interactions in Australia. We argue that Arab students are consciously and deliberately evaluative and selective of Australian cultural norms and social habits.

Methodology

Data was collected using a qualitative approach based on face to face semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with 30 Arab international participants from various universities in Brisbane and Melbourne. Participants were contacted through student clubs and by social connections, such as suggestions from friends or colleagues. Each interview took approximately half an hour and was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Transcripts of each interview were prepared and the interviews were analysed based of the transcripts. The central approach used in our data collection and analysis is narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky 1967; Clandinin 2007). Narrative approaches have been used by prominent scholars in sociology

(Riessman, 1993), psychology (Polkinghorne, 1996) as well as in education (Clandinin, 2010) A narrative approach was selected as it allows for a focus on experience (Polkinghorne, 2007) and qualitative approaches are best suited to this task. For this study we drew upon the concept of 'small stories' (Bamberg & Georgeakapoulo, 2008) Small stories refer to snippets of narrative, or 'breaking news' (Georgakapoulo, 2006) where participants use narrating as a means to create or express agency in the world. The powerful ability to express and create agency in small stories indicates that they are just as valuable and significant as other typically lengthier narratives. Agency also indicates that participants have the ability to evaluate their experiences. The interview questions were designed to elicit small stories in the form of episodes that deal with events that participants describe of their time while studying in Australia. When the small stories are considered together across all participants an emerging meta-narrative (Given, 2010) becomes evident as an emerging theme. The similarity of the narrated episodes, or resonant threads (Clandinin, 2010), reflect a general trend leading towards a generalizable observation within the Arab student cohort.

Lexical signalling (Cortazzi, 1993) was used to identify evaluative terms in the small stories (Bamberg & Georgeakapoulo, 2008; Georgeakapoulo, 2006) that Arab international students narrate of their Australian international education experience. Lexical signalling identifies the specific terms used in a body of text, in this case, the small stories, that have particular significance and explanatory power. Often times the terms used by participants are selected for their evaluative power and the agency that the participants manifest in their narratives. Interviews with Arab international students in Australia were conducted to identify perceptions of Australian culture and explore common themes of positive and negative norms and habits. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed out of the literature. In particular those gaps in the literature or silences indicated the areas that needed to be further examined. Findings and discussion are outlined in the following four sections. The final section includes suggested recommendations for developing strategies to enhance the Australian experience for Arab international students.

How Arab students perceive Australian norms, habits and systems

The international experience of higher education is a highly prized goal for many Arab students, as Reem, an Omani student in Brisbane stated, 'it is my dream to study overseas.' International education affords the graduate social and economic mobility and access to future opportunities, often leading to career development, increased salaries and enhanced social prestige, as Hisham, an Omani in Brisbane states, 'for us, someone who has studied overseas, it's like, woah.' Students from the Arab World have chosen to study in Australia for a range of reasons including security, affordability or course specialisation. Arab students expect that graduating with an Australian degree with afford them a brighter future. However, in contrast with Indian or Chinese international students, they are much less interested in migration to Australia or acquiring citizenship. This led us to the question, 'so what do Arab students make of their Australian experience?'

Almost all participants indicated that Australia is a much safer study destination that either the USA or UK. Hasan, a student from Libya said, 'Australians respect Islam and Muslims because of multiculturalism.' Nona, a Saudi student in Melbourne expressed herself as follows, 'this is a free country, I can were what I like, do what I like and go where I like.' Aya, a student from Oman said,' I feel really safe in this country. It's not like the USA where people are openly racist.'

Arab students report that they are enthusiastic to experience Australian culture while studying and living in Australia, however this needs to be qualified. It is rare that Arab students will completely and uncritically assimilate into Australian culture. Hasan, a Jordanian student in Brisbane explains, 'there are some red lines that we cannot cross', indicating that Arabs feel that their cultural traditions are to be maintained. There is also a significant demographic difference between the Arab students and those from other nations, in that a large proportion of Arab students are here with their spouses and children (Midgeley, 2009). Also, they do not wish to stay and raise their children in a foreign land, as Abdullah, a Saudi student explains, 'this is not our home. We don't want to bring up our children here.'

Student clubs organise excursions to experience Australia's natural environment, rather than specifically target Australian culture. Our findings reveal that Arab students value the skills, knowledge, expertise and English language skills as educational goals (Findlow, 2006) available from an Australian international education experience. For example Mohammed, a Saudi PhD candidate in Brisbane said, 'English language is where the research is.' This was echoed by Abdullah, a Saudi student in the Gold Coast, 'English speaking countries have the best research.' Hasan, a Libyan student in Melbourne also stated, 'If I want the skills in my field, I must

learn English.' On the other hand Australian culture and habits are not always highly valued, if at all. Mohammed, a student in Brisbane explained, 'the topics that people talk about. I just can't relate to them.' If Australian institutions are to engage with Arab students on a cultural and social level it will have to be done in a sensitive way that does not make them feel excluded or offended, for example, Abdullah, an Omani in Brisbane said, 'I felt terrible after I ate that hot dog. It will be the first and last time.' Catering for halal meals and offering a place to say daily prayers are affordances that Arab students are very grateful for. Meanwhile one should ask why there is little desire to explore indigenous culture, but more importantly, why are institutions failing to provide opportunities for cultural experiences?

Changes in world view are inevitable in an international education experience. A significant proportion of participants reported a positive view of government processes, the election and voting system, traffic laws and public structures. For example Hasan, a Phd candidate from Saudi studying in Melbourne said, 'the electoral system here is amazing. Everything is so orderly and there is no violence.' None of these Australian features impinge directly on Arabic cultural mores. As a result 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.

Ways of thinking academically also foster new ways of viewing the world without conflicting with ideologies or socio-cultural heritage. Fatimah a student from UAE in Melbourne explained that, 'it's great to meet so many people from different cultural and religious backgrounds.' This was echoed by, Said in Brisbane, 'I love meeting with students from China and other places I would never been able to go.' One possible method of enhancing the international experience in a way that Arab students find conducive could include a travel experience where students visit parliament house, art gallery, museum or town hall; to observe cultural and social institutions that do not impinge on cultural or religious traditions at a personal level. Such institutions that embody cultural heritage may be sites for reflection and introspection. Higher education institutions also need to consider ways to incorporate a genuine indigenous cultural experience for Arab students.

What Arab students like about their Australian experience

Our findings suggest that Arab international students in Australia employ evaluative strategies when they encounter social and cultural settings where Australian cultural norms and habits prevail. Drawing upon the recent experiences of modernisation, internationalisation and development in their homelands, they evaluate Australian cultural practices and norms in terms of benefit, both personal and cultural. Evaluating cultural habits in this way is typical of Islamic traditions (Abd-Allah, 2009), and by extension, this is what Arab students do when they encounter foreign cultures and traditions.

Participants indicated that elements of the Australian experience that involved systemic function were admired due to practicality and ease of adaptation in the Arab World. An example that many Australians would overlook due to its now well established commonplace nature is that of traffic laws and general public adherence to them. As Abdullah a Saudi student in Melbourne explains, 'the traffic system, I love it! We have many tragic accidents due to speed.' In a similar vein, convenient public transport systems are also admired due to the practical convenience that it offers. Female participants from Saudi, UAE and Oman all indicated the convenience that public transport systems offered them to freely attend classes and lectures at university.

Freedom of association and freedom of movement are also linked to the above systems. Participants indicated that the freedom to move unhindered has allowed them to attend to the task of studying and acquiring educational skills and knowledge. For example Saudi women have indicated that the freedom they have to learn how to drive or take public transport without a chaperone, or *mahram,* has permitted them the freedom to attend class or workshops at the university as they needed. Fatimah from Saudi said, 'I have learnt how to drive here so that I can get to class when I need to, without having to wait for anybody.' Students have also indicated that they are free to contact lecturers and tutors without any social constraints due to gender that they may otherwise have faced back home. Another example is Aya, who explained that despite being a lecturer at university in Oman, 'I cannot mix with and talk to my students in public.' Contrasted with this is her ability to freely approach her lecturers in Australia whenever she needs to clarify any issues. In sum, they are able to 'get the job done' without constraining social factors burdening the process.

All participants indicated that the Australian experience has had a positive impact on their view of the world. This has mainly been suggested in terms of the sharing and exchange of both scientific and cultural knowledge. For example, participants have indicated that they value the international environment offered by studying in Australia and the opportunities afforded to share social and cultural perspectives, both Australian and international.

In the context of higher education a significant element that is valued by Arab students is the acknowledgement of a wide range of learning styles, preferences and techniques, including more traditional and technology based forms of learning and instruction. Many participants praised the freedom to be able to access course materials, library items, workshop schedules and other study tools online, from the convenience of one's home or study desk. Constructive feedback from teachers and lecturers was also valued highly, in that it was described as an unusual and uncommon practice back home.

Arab students view positively the systemic procedures for redress in negative social situations, such as harassment or racism. Systems for communicating foundational or required information, such as course requirements or workshop registration procedures are also viewed positively. Some Arab student participants explained that they did not have experience of systematic routines to solve problems, rather have had to rely on the habit of 'wasta' (Weir & Hutchings, 2005) or social connections to 'get jobs done', a habit which ordinarily is only truly helpful to those who belong to higher social classes.

Equality before the law was described by participants as a very impressive feature of the Australian experience. In fact, the establishment of elements of law, such as laws to counter forms of harassment or vilification, socially or in the workplace, even sexual harassment laws, were described in positive terms, as Mohamed, a Saudi in Melbourne said, '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.'

There was ambivalence expressed towards issues of government. This is most likely a natural result of the general awareness amongst Arabs of the winds of revolution that are within very recent memory in the Arab Spring. Some participants indicated hope that elements of democracy and the electoral system may bring positive change to their homelands. Others indicated that they are satisfied to a certain degree that those who are in charge do in fact listen to public grievances and are willing to address them. Abdullah, a Saudi in Melbourne said, 'everyone uses Twitter. We can't stop criticism of the government.' The result being that some people indicated that the Arabs do not have experience with governing democratically, while others indicated that it is a positive aspect of governing, but are unsure how it could be implemented in their homelands.

What Arab students perceive as valuable and worthy of incorporation from the Australian experience

Participants indicated that cultural habits and norms that are typically identified as Australian that have no negative impact on Arabic cultural norms and traditions are welcomed. For example, the Australian idea of 'fair go', equality and justice for all, is a positive feature of Australian culture, a feature that is not only highly valued, but desired to be established in the Arab World.

On the other hand, those elements of the Australian experience that would have a negative impact on Arabic cultural traditions and norms are evaluated as requiring to be wholly rejected at best, or simply coldly observed. For example issues dealing with alcohol, nightclubbing and sexual relationships outside marriage fall into this category. This was described as causing conflict with the traditional religious and cultural norms that exist in Arab countries, which ordinarily would have significant negative social consequences. Umar, a Saudi in Brisbane explains, 'there are some red lights that we cannot cross. We cannot do those things.'

When examined in terms of capital, physical improvements to everyday life in terms of convenience are often highly valued. Social norms that have the capacity to enhance systems and organisation techniques are also valued for the convenience factor they offer. Systemic and organisational capital are usually valued, however in contrast, cultural capital is not always highly valued, if at all, due to the perceived lack of applicability in the Arab World. Only those cultural or social norms are valued if they do not negatively impact on established Arab cultural and religious traditions.

Factors impacting the integration of elements from the Australian experience into the Arab World

Participants indicated that 'the old rulers' amongst the monarchies and ruling elites are not malleable and do not take to change well. Often innovative ideas and techniques are rejected simply due to ignorance. In the work place poorly established social structures that were based on 'wasta' (Weir & Hutchings, 2005) or 'old school tie' are resistant to change, mainly because it would reveal weaknesses or ineptitude on the part of those who are supposed to manage and direct.

On the other hand participants indicated that the widespread use of online social networking over the Internet has facilitated the diffusion of both knowledge and news. As a result there is a growing trend in the Arab World to openly expression one's opinion of government, governing and rulers. Husayn, a Saudi studying in the Gold Coast described, 'change is inevitable, since everyone now uses Facebook and Twitter to criticise the government.'

Personal agency in the workplace leads to significant motivation to 'change the system'. Some participants reported a strong desire to change systems and attitudes in their workplace. Abdullah, a Saudi student of IT in Melbourne said, 'I want to implement this system back in my job.' Husayn, a Saudi in the Gold Coast stated, 'I have already managed to implement some of my research in my workplace back home.'

Recommendations for enhancing the Australian experience for Arab students

The following section is in part based on the suggestions offered by participants. Arab international students have chosen to study in Australia for specific goals. These include English language skills (Findlow, 2006), specific skills and knowledge for the workplace, expertise and state of the art techniques that can be used for nation building, as well as a genuinely international experience that positively enhances one's character and worldview. As a result, organisations and institutions should highlight or market the above goals as specific elements of their courses, programs and institutional vision, in order to attract and maintain the international education market in the Arab World.

Responses offered by participants in our research indicate that generally speaking Arab international students are not interested in migrating to Australian or obtaining citizenship. As a result they are not overly interested in absorbing all aspects of Australian culture. For Arabs this is not racist chauvinism, but rather it is simply the pragmatic view that not all Australian cultural norms or values can be transplanted into the Arab World. Arab students are therefore consciously selective of those elements of Australian culture and habits that they adopt and integrate into their world view. In many cases participants have stated that a particular Australian habit is fine 'for Australians', but is not useful in the Arab World, which is merely an acknowledgement of the contrast between collectivist Arab societies and a very individualistic Australian culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Since the vast majority of Arab international students are sponsored they are well aware of time constraints within which they need to complete their studies. As a result any element of study that is perceived as a waste of time will be avoided (Gauntlett, 2005). This includes activities that ordinarily would be viewed as positive, such as writing workshops or library tours. This is not to say that these activities are not valued at all, but within the time constraints that Arab students have, they are not the most productive use of study time **at that moment**. Rescheduling to the beginning of semester, or inclusion in the preparatory English program may prove more useful in their estimation.

Most participants have been impressed with the convenience and ease with which information, systems and programs are developed in higher education institutions in Australia. It would be valuable to market programs and units that offer the design and implementation of such systems and programs in the Arab World, not just social systems but also electronic. Furthermore, many aspects of modern city infrastructure are admired. Programs in town planning and infrastructure development, as part of a nation building program, would also prove valuable in the Arab World.

The *rihla*, or journey, is a well-known tradition in the Muslim and Arab World. It is a journey, often spiritual in nature that engages the student in practical contemporary experiences to enhance the individual's character. Such a model may prove helpful for Arab students in Australia. For example a *rihla* journey to Canberra to explore parliament house, national Art Gallery, War Memorial and other cultural hubs may be of benefit to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Australian. This can also be included as part of a broader program that incorporates exploring indigenous Australian cultures as well as the natural Australian environment.

Conclusion

The overall findings of the interviews we conducted with 30 Arab international students studying in Brisbane and Melbourne indicate that they are consciously and deliberately selective of elements of Australian systems, culture and values. Drawing upon their cultural tradition of seeing benefits in cultural practices (Abd-Allah, 2009) they will offer credit where credit is due. This occurs in relation to systems and values which do not impact on personal religious or cultural values, for example, admiring public transport systems, freedom of expression, or the use of online technologies to access important information for study. This must also be

understood in the light of the pragmatic nature of evaluating culture. That is, the observations and results of this research indicate that a cross cultural situation wherein an Australian value does impinge negatively on cultural or religious values, Arab students will call a spade a spade, and will refuse to participate or accept cultural practices or habits that they believe cannot be adopted for implementation in the Arab World.

While there are exceptions to the rule, our findings suggest that these are exceptional cases where some Arab students do partake of Australian culture in ways that would ordinarily be considered taboo, such as the consumption of alcohol or frequenting nightclubs, however students who do indulge in such activities will find it impossible, or at best extremely difficult, to adopt these behaviours in the Arab World, while being shunned by the broader cohort, since this behaviour is a departure from the prime goal of 'getting the job done' and studying effectively to get an Australian degree.

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