The Personal and Professional Benefits and Challenges for Saudi Academics after Postgraduate Study Abroad: Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Toni Joanne Pikos-Sallie

BA (Economics & History), University of Western Australia
GradDipEd (Secondary), University of Western Australia
MEd (International & Comparative), Murdoch University

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**School of Education
Murdoch University
Perth, Western Australia**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Toni Joanne Pikos-Sallie

Abstract

The King Abdullah Scholarships Program commenced in 2005 and replaced all previous government scholarship programs in Saudi Arabia. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of Saudi citizens studying abroad, with over 200,000 Saudis, male and female, receiving their bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees from overseas universities through this program. Currently, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, respectively, host the largest numbers of sponsored Saudi students.

This study focuses on Saudi academics who completed their postgraduate studies abroad and returned to work at public universities in Saudi Arabia. Its purpose is to broaden current knowledge of the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad and the implications of these for the project of higher education reform in Saudi Arabia. The data for this qualitative study were drawn from in-depth interviews with nine Saudi academics, five males and four females. This study examines both etic and emic perspectives and provides a detailed and oftentimes privileged analysis of participants' experiences before, during and after postgraduate study abroad.

The gains of study abroad for participants included: increased independence and confidence, particularly for females; intercultural competence; higher salaries and rapid promotions; improved English language skills; improved pedagogical awareness and practice; and, increased research knowledge and skills. Challenges for participants included: reverse culture shock; obstacles to producing quality research; and, resistance to change. Based on the findings, implications for the way forward in Saudi higher education are discussed to assist the Kingdom's Ministry of Higher Education and public-sector universities to further capitalise on the knowledge and skills that sponsored academics bring home from abroad. The study also contributes to a growing body of research related to the use and efficacy of postgraduate study abroad to improve higher education in emerging economies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Study

> "The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable
> of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations
> have done - men who are creative, inventive and discoverers."
> Jean Piaget (Duckworth, 1964, p.499)

The present study brings to the fore that Saudi academic returnees possess the aspirations and capabilities to raise the standard of public higher education in the Kingdom. It also demonstrates that a range of complex systemic, social and cultural factors pose challenges for returnee Saudi academics and inhibit change. In this study I gathered, analysed, interpreted and presented the personal experiences, reflections and recommendations of male and female Saudi academics who completed their postgraduate studies abroad and then returned to work at public universities in Saudi Arabia. The insights of Saudi academic returnees have the potential to assist key decision makers at Saudi universities, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education[1] (MoHE)

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[1] In 2015, the Saudi Arabian government merged its Ministry of Higher Education, which was responsible for post-secondary education, with its Ministry of Education, to become one entity, that is, the Ministry of Education (Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, 2017). Although this change

and international higher education institutions to develop ways to maximise the benefits that Saudi academics can gain from postgraduate study abroad, as well as to enable Saudi public universities to fully capitalise upon the knowledge, skills and ideas that academics bring from abroad.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a highly traditional and conservative nation, proud of its tribal and religious heritage, keen to maintain its status quo and often described as resistant to rapid change (Cordesman, 2003; Elsheshtawy, 2008; Montagu, 2015). Hence, whilst overseas trained Saudi academics are capable of doing new things, they re-enter an environment where cultural and systemic factors at times coerce them to maintain and repeat what previous generations have done.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge related to the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics employed at public sector universities in Saudi Arabia after completing postgraduate study abroad. It also adds to the body of knowledge about how overseas postgraduate study can enhance the personal and professional

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occurred in 2015, I have chosen to leave all references to the Ministry of Higher Education as they are, to avoid any confusion that might arise from using the title, Ministry of Education. Especially given that participants' study abroad and returnee experiences relate to the period 2005-2011.

attributes of academics, particularly in the context of emerging economies that seek to enhance their human capital through higher education abroad.

In this qualitative study, Saudi academic returnees were asked to identify the perceived personal and professional benefits, as well as the personal and professional challenges they faced since they returned to work at public universities in Saudi Arabia after postgraduate study abroad. Saudi academics possess an insider view of postgraduate study abroad, as well as an insider view of Saudi Arabian culture and the Saudi Arabian higher education system. Saudi academics were also asked to share their emic perspectives on the effectiveness of the scholarships program for academics in contributing to the project of higher education reform in the Kingdom, as well as provide their suggestions on how the gains from postgraduate study abroad could be further capitalised on by Saudi universities and the Ministry of Higher Education for the benefit of higher education in Saudi Arabia. The detailed first-hand experiences, reflections and insights provided by Saudi academic returnees during the in-depth interviews that were conducted for this study constitute the primary source of data for this inquiry.

The growing presence of Saudi Arabian international students at Western universities has resulted in a slowly increasing body of literature related to

Saudi citizens studying abroad. However, to date, this small body of literature has primarily focused on Saudi students' perspectives and experiences during the early or middle stages of their studies abroad. The main aim of these studies has been to understand students' educational experiences and/or needs during the period of their studies abroad, rather than to understand students' long-term personal and professional goals, as well as the ways in which study abroad benefits students and the home country when they return. The majority of studies about Saudi overseas students, such as those conducted by Alhazmi (2010), Almotery (2009), Kampman (2011), Midgley (2009 a & b), Shaw (2009) and Shepherd (2010) fall within the aforementioned category.

I am of the view that the impact of study abroad can only be fully realised *after* completion, that is, once the graduate or postgraduate enters or re-enters the home-country's workforce and re-integrates into the home-society. It is within these contexts that overseas students can fully realise and reflect on changes in their knowledge, skills and values, as well as any challenges they may face as a result of these changes. In other words, this study seeks to understand what happens beyond the overseas learning experience itself, within the contexts of life and work after study abroad. Whilst there is a growing amount of literature related to the Saudi scholarships program, I have

only been able to locate three studies that are closely related to the current research topic and that deal specifically with the experiences of returned Saudi academics: two are predominantly quantitative and one is qualitative (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Zahrani, 1986). The insights and limitations of these studies will be discussed at length in the literature review. Due to a paucity of extant research on the topic, this inquiry takes a qualitative exploratory approach whereby the outcomes were not hypothesised prior to the study, but rather were allowed to emerge from the detailed first-hand experiences and insights of participants themselves. The data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews to provide detailed, rich descriptions and reflections from participants about how they perceive postgraduate study abroad to have affected them personally and professionally, the personal and professional challenges they faced as returnees, as well as the potential implications of their experiences for higher education reform in Saudi Arabia. As a relatively untouched area of research, this study provides a suitable foundation for future studies.

1.2 The Researcher's Positionality

The identity of the researcher has an indelible impact on the way research is conducted and produced. Hence, a familiarity with the researcher's identity is essential for readers to understand the advantages and insights that the

researcher brings to their research, as well as the limitations and biases they possess. It is likewise beneficial for the researcher to also be cognizant of their positionality and how this informs and influences their choices throughout the research process, from its inception to its conclusion.

It is a very challenging task to articulate the various aspects of one's identity, as we are not usually consciously aware of how our ways of thinking, feeling, believing and knowing have been shaped by our personal and social contexts. In fact, I believe that one does not truly know one's self until they have lived outside of their familiar surroundings and are faced with situations whereby their ways of thinking, feeling, believing and knowing are challenged. It was during my time working in the education contexts of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) that I came to learn more about who I am.

I was born in Sydney and raised in Sydney's outer suburbs by my Australian-born mother of British and German descent and my Greek father who had migrated to Australia at the age of 10. Despite my fair skin and freckles and my *Australian*-side of the family, I still experienced some racism as a child growing up in the 1980s. The town where I grew up was just beginning to transition from rural to urban and was a predominately white, working class

town. My Greek surname invited regular racist jibes and there was one incident in primary school where my dark, curly-haired father walked us to school and we were greeted by a small group of boys throwing stones and saying, "Go home you wog!". Whilst I looked the same as my peers on the outside, I always felt different. At that time, religious/scripture classes were still being taught in public primary schools and my brother and I were the only children in my primary school who identified as Greek Orthodox Christians. As a result, we had to attend Catholic scripture classes instead. In addition, our family structure was very patriarchal, and my father held very conservative and traditional views about females. I developed a strong sense of empathy for those who were different, and I would go out of my way to make friends with and look out for other children from minority backgrounds that joined our school. I recall being awarded a certificate in primary school for befriending a girl whom no-one else would befriend because she was different.

After completing Year 12, I was accepted to study at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales. University was much more cosmopolitan than high school and it was much easier to find people who had a similar background to mine. At university I had a large circle of friends from a variety of backgrounds: Greek, Lebanese, Egyptian, Sudanese and so on. At first, I

did not pay any attention to the fact that these friends were from a variety of religious backgrounds; until one lunch time a small group stood up and excused themselves so that they could go and pray – it turns out that they were Muslims. I was impressed by their self-discipline and apparent commitment to God. I had always regarded myself as a religious Christian, but I had never given up my lunch time to go and pray. I wanted to know more about this faith, so I started reading an English translation of the Qur'an (Koran). I did not discuss my interest in Islam with my father, as he would never have accepted the idea of me studying a religion outside our own. I used to read the Qur'an on the long bus journey to university and back each day. I felt I could relate to the simple monotheistic message of the Qur'an, but I was in no position to embrace the faith at this stage.

After completing my second year at university, my parents separated, and I moved to Perth with my mother and two younger siblings. I took one-year leave from my university studies and worked as a restaurant manager in Perth city. There I made friends with two young Indonesian ladies who introduced me to a whole new circle of friends. Through this circle of friends, I met my future husband; a South African who had migrated to Australia in the late 80s. Once again, my new friends and my future husband happened to be from a Muslim-background. They were not religious by any means, but they

shared some common traditions like abstinence from pork and alcohol and they celebrated their religious holidays.

In 1996, three months after meeting my husband, I decided to convert to Islam. Six months later we were married, and we lived a regular, non-religious lifestyle – no dress code, prayers now and again, both busy working full-time jobs, etc. However, after about six months of marriage I started to study the faith quite intently and shortly after, I decided to commit to the five daily prayers, fast in the month of Ramadan, adopt a modest dress code and so on. With some effort, I encouraged my husband to do the same. I was convinced that there was more to life than to simply go to work, acquire some material possessions and then depart this world. I accepted the notion that human beings were created for a higher purpose – to worship God and to achieve nearness to God by practicing prayer, charity, patience, kindness, self-restraint, selflessness and by espousing those attributes that are pleasing to God.

Becoming a Muslim in Australia in the 1990s was almost a non-issue. People would sometimes look out of curiosity at my attire and this occasionally led to questions like, 'Is that a special raincoat you are wearing?', 'Are you a nun?', etc., but rarely was anyone abusive or rude. The following year I returned to

university as a practicing Muslim to complete my bachelor's degree at the University of Western Australia and I never faced any major issues. There was a real sense of 'live and let live' among the majority in Australia at that time.

Then the September 11, 2001 tragedy happened. Intense coverage of the incident and images and articles on Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban dominated the mass media daily. In addition, the unhelpful rhetoric of former US President George W. Bush created the idea that we lived in a dichotomous world, which consisted of two parties, 'us' and 'them'. Subsequently, the patriotism of American Muslims and by default, Muslims throughout the Western world, was questioned and held in a shadow of doubt. The day after the incident, my bearded, dark-skinned husband was coming down the elevator of our apartment block, when the doors opened, a woman waiting on the other side saw my husband and started screaming hysterically until she looked down and saw my husband holding the hands of our two small children, aged 3 and 4 at the time. Realising that her response was irrational, she then started apologising profusely to my husband. This is just one of many, many unfortunate experiences that were to happen after that day.

'Go back to your own country!' would regularly be yelled out from passing cars, even at the drive-thru of McDonald's. My family and I did not feel safe and I dreaded the idea that my children would grow up being ostracised in this way. There was so much negativity towards Muslims at this time, that I would actually become emotional whenever someone was polite to me – a passersby, a shop assistant, anyone.

In 2002, the Bali bombings occurred, and the situation continued to appear bleak. Every morning, a man riding his bicycle would spit the most grotesque spit on the driver's door handle of my car parked at the front of our townhouse. It became a daily chore to wash this off the door handle before I could drive my children to school each day. At this point, my husband and I decided that it might be best to look for work abroad and leave Australia. In 2005, I was offered a teaching job at an affluent British curriculum school in the UAE. We were of course elated at the opportunity for a new beginning. In the period 2005-2011 I worked at three schools in the United Arab Emirates and two universities in Saudi Arabia.

As mentioned at the beginning of this subsection, it was being immersed in these educational contexts abroad that taught me a lot about who I am as a person *and* as a professional. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia, I was known as

the 'Australian teacher' and I was respected for my country of origin. Likewise, I evaluated my experiences abroad based on the knowledge, experiences, customs and values that I had acquired growing up in Australia. My ideas about what 'good' education looked like was informed by my own experiences being educated in Australian public schools and universities. My ideas about what 'good' behaviour management looked like was based on the same. Hence, one of the things I found difficult to accept was the formality, bureaucracy and the overt social stratification based on race, heritage and class that characterised these contexts abroad.

The time I spent abroad certainly brought my 'Australian-ness' to the fore. I learnt that even though I had felt marginalised in my home country because of my 'Muslim' attire, the time I spent in the Muslim-majority countries abroad showed me that key features of my identity and the way I see and evaluate the world around me are heavily shaped by my Australian background, and this deepened my appreciation of my roots. Further, I learnt that my attire did not serve to assimilate me into the Emirati or Saudi cultures, but rather, despite my attire I was always viewed as a Western expat, albeit that my conversion to Islam inspired the interests of my Emirati and Saudi hosts. Hence, one could liken my positioning in this research to an 'outsider' who holds a VIP pass. I was not privy to all aspects of the foreign culture and

experience, but I was able to go places and meet people that many others were not. Through this privileged positioning I was able to get to know the people and the society more intimately than any ordinary outsider, thus giving me a deeper insight and understanding of the research context.

1.3 The Catalyst for this Research

I believe there is often a critical incident, encounter, observation or experience that forms the spark which ignites a researcher's interest or desire to investigate a particular matter in depth. An elaboration of the origin of a research project helps to explain the rationale for conducting the research, as well as the background and context of the study. Furthermore, the background and context of the study reveal the researcher's connection to the phenomenon of interest. Hence, in this section I provide a brief account of the experiences and observations that prompted me to undertake this inquiry. The purpose of this account is to demonstrate the rationale for conducting the study, and to outline the cultural and institutional contexts of the study participants, as well as to highlight my position in relation to the research.

In August 2006, I commenced work as an English language instructor at the female branch of a newly established pubic university in the north of Saudi

Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, all public educational institutions are strictly

segregated into male and female branches/campuses (Doumato & Posusney,

2003). I taught in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP), which provides

intensive English language courses to first year undergraduate students at

the university. English is the medium of instruction at universities in Saudi

Arabia for most disciplines or courses of study. In Saudi public schools

(primary, intermediate and secondary) the medium of instruction is Arabic,

which is the official language of Saudi Arabia (Central Intelligence Agency

(CIA), 2011). English language is a compulsory subject within the Saudi

public intermediate and secondary school curricula (both 3 years in duration),

although the quality of these six years of English language instruction has

rarely been adequate to produce students who are proficient in the English

language (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Al-Subahi, 1991; Al-Zahrani, 2008). Hence,

Saudi students who want to pursue tertiary studies in Saudi Arabia are

required to complete a preparatory year of intensive English language

courses prior to commencing their undergraduate studies. The structure of

universities in Saudi Arabia is much like universities in other parts of the world.

However, the socio-cultural context and academic culture of Saudi

educational institutions that results from a complex interplay of historical,

economic, political, cultural and religious factors makes Saudi higher

education somewhat dissimilar from Western educational settings.

As a non-Saudi teacher, whose training and experience were largely limited to Western educational settings, it was clear from the outset that I had much to learn in order to participate effectively within the Saudi educational environment. Through my Australian teacher training I had developed a strong belief in the principles and benefits of the student-centred active learning approach. I held close to heart 'ideals' such as the belief that learning experiences should be linked to the real-world, they should be relevant to students' needs and interests, they should cater for a range of learning styles and abilities, they should develop students' practical and analytical skills, and cultivate skills for independent life-long learning. However, I came to realise that my Saudi students often had different goals, motivations, expectations and approaches to learning from those common among students in the West – and a shift in my approach was necessary to ensure a harmonious and effective learning environment.

A traditional rote memorisation approach to teaching and learning has characterised education throughout the Middle East since the establishment of modern forms of mass educational institutions (Whitaker, 2009). It is my experience in Saudi Arabia that university instructors have some leeway when it comes to choice of teaching style; however, a single textbook was usually regarded as the core syllabus and students expected teachers to

heavily revise the core syllabus content prior to exams, as examinations were designed to test students' recall of the content. I found that my students were not accustomed to being asked to think critically about the material presented and were uncomfortable with activities that required the use of independent learning skills. Furthermore, the large lecture-style classrooms and large student-to-teacher ratios made language teaching even more challenging. The system was such, that although most students could not accurately construct a basic sentence in English, due to the 'recall' nature of the written examinations, the majority of students were able to pass through the course.

Additionally, I observed an apparent lack of interest in academic study among a large number of the female students at this university. It seemed that for many of the female students, university was simply an opportunity to meet and socialise with friends. Curiosity prompted me to ask the students to explain this phenomenon. The three most common answers I received included: many of the female students at this university enrol in tertiary study simply to receive the monthly financial allowance that all Saudi university students are provided by the government; a lack of job prospects for females after the completion of their studies impacts their motivation to take their studies seriously; and the limited range of available fields of study open to females also has a negative impact on motivation levels. These answers gave

me better insight into the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing the learning environment.

I also observed another factor at this university that seemed to influence the academic behaviour of some students; a phenomenon called 'wasta'. Wasta is an Arabic word that refers to a form of corruption involving the use of one's connections and influence in places of power to circumvent normal procedures and get things done (Gauntlett, 2006). Cunningham and Surayrah (1994) identify two types of wasta: mediation and intercession. That is, to have connections with a powerful or influential person who can either 'mediate' to resolve a conflict or 'intercede', that is, act on a person's behalf to help them obtain whatever it is that they are seeking. This phenomenon is well known in the region and has become more openly discussed in the media in recent times (Al-Sulami, 2016). The wasta phenomenon has also been known to influence the allocation of jobs and promotions in public and private institutions within the Kingdom (Al-Maeena, 2001; Al-Zahrani, 2009), as well as throughout the Gulf region (Cunningham & Surayrah, 1994). The relevant literature indicates that the Saudi Arabian government recognises the harmful effects of this phenomenon and has taken steps to try and curb its occurrence (Al-Maeena, 2001; Al-Sulami, 2016; Dunne and Ottaway, 2007).

In October 2009, after spending some time outside of Saudi Arabia, I took up a second post as an English language instructor at a less remote government university in the south-west of Saudi Arabia (2 hours' drive from the economic hub of Jeddah). At that time, the study abroad scholarships program was in full swing and talk about going abroad was abuzz among Saudi students and teachers at this university. Many Saudi academics had returned from study abroad, while many more had plans to go in the near future (Ahmed, 2015).

I was part of the first small batch of female Western teachers to join the newly established English Language Centre (ELC) at this university. Thus, Saudi students and teachers commonly asked me questions about Australia and the universities there. It was my fourth year working in the education sector in the Middle East, including one year as a teacher-trainer in an education reform project for the Ministry of Education in Dubai. Over that time, I had worked under the leadership of Saudi men and women, many of whom (particularly the men) had studied abroad, and I had interacted closely with large numbers of Saudi students and teachers in the Saudi higher education context.

However, despite the massive scale of the study abroad movement and the significant number of Saudi academics who had studied abroad, I saw very little visible change in the nature and quality of higher education in Saudi

Arabia at this time. In other words, the curriculum, general policies, practices and procedures all appeared to be relatively unchanged. Furthermore, study abroad was not a new phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, it was simply occurring on a much larger scale (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013; Schryer, 2007). These surface observations led me to question the efficacy of the study abroad program for Saudi academics. As a teacher within the Saudi higher education sector I wanted Saudi students to have access to the best quality of education possible. Thus, I was interested to know how sending Saudi academics to complete their postgraduate study abroad was benefitting higher education in Saudi Arabia, and if it was not, then why.

During the preliminary phase of this research I approached three distinct groups at my workplace to discuss this topic: Firstly, I shared an office with five female Saudi 'teaching assistants' (partially qualified instructors - all holding bachelor's degrees) who had plans to do their postgraduate studies abroad. Each one had signed an agreement with the university that they would obtain their postgraduate degrees (master's and/or PhD's) from a recognised university outside the Kingdom. I engaged in a number of informal group and one-to-one discussions with these teachers on this topic.

Secondly, I held in-class discussions with female Saudi university students that I was teaching a course titled 'Debate in English' (in the Department of Foreign Languages), to understand their perspectives on the benefits of study abroad. I did this with around 200 hundred female students in total (in different classes) - I split them into groups of four, assigned them to the affirmative or negative side of the discussion and conducted debates on the topic 'Studying outside of Saudi Arabia is better than Studying inside'.

I also engaged in informal discussions and email exchanges with Saudi colleagues and superiors (male) who had completed their studies abroad. I asked questions about its impact on them personally and professionally, and whether they faced any challenges when they returned from study abroad.

The insights I had gained from these preliminary interactions helped me to realise the enormity and complexity of the research problem. Saudi society is characterised by complex social, cultural and bureaucratic structures, and thus, although I was a teacher within the Saudi higher education sector, I did not possess the deep and complex socio-cultural, political, economic and historical insights of my Saudi counterparts. The following small excerpt is from an email conversation about the challenges Saudi academics face after returning from abroad. These challenges identified by a male Saudi academic,

who completed his master's and PhD degrees in Australia, exemplify the

valuable insights gained through the emic positioning of Saudi academics

who have studied abroad:

> A permanently returning postgraduate can highly encounter several
> challenges. Having spent a great deal of my life in and off SA [Saudi
> Arabia], I may suggest the following challenges:
> - Structural challenges (policies and settings)
> - Linguistic challenges (especially for kids and those who left home
> soon after puberty)
> - Social challenges
> - Educational challenges
> (Same challenges can apply to the postgraduates' families and kids).
>
> (Personal communication, May 10, 2010)

My preliminary investigations indicated that there was a myriad of complex

factors to consider, including perhaps an unseen or intangible element to this

phenomenon. For instance, how many of the potential benefits of overseas

postgraduate study are not seen in the practice of Saudi academics due to

existing institutional, systemic or societal barriers? Thus, a more appropriate

focus for my research evolved that was directed towards the insights and

experiences of Saudi academics, rather than focusing directly on the

outwardly observable situation within the Saudi higher education system itself.

Overall, preliminary investigations involving Saudi academics and university

students within the Saudi higher education sector, together with a review of

the relevant literature and feedback from my thesis supervisors and my research proposal review panel helped me to narrow and refine the focus of my research topic to: The Personal and Professional Benefits and Challenges for Saudi Academics after Postgraduate Study Abroad: Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

1.4 The King Abdullah Scholarships Program

The government of Saudi Arabia has long recognised the importance of having a robust educational system to achieve a globally competitive economy and stable society (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington, DC, 2009). To achieve this, the government has provided study abroad scholarships to its citizens since as early as 1927 (Alomar, 2010). However, after the September 11, 2001 tragedy in America whereby fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were identified as Saudis (Johnston, 2011; Murphy & Kinzie, 2006), the Saudi government also recognised a pressing need for Saudi citizens to have a better understanding of other cultures, and likewise for foreign countries' citizens to have a better understanding of Saudis (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington, DC, 2009). Thus, with these objectives in mind, the Saudi Arabian government through its Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) initiated the King Abdullah Scholarships Program (KASP) in 2005 for qualified Saudi citizens.

The KASP scholarships are open to Saudis who have graduated from secondary school, as well as those who have completed undergraduate degrees. The KASP also covers the existing scholarship program that provided scholarships specifically to Saudi university faculty to undertake postgraduate study abroad (MoHE Portal, 2011). This initiative has enabled thousands of Saudi citizens to undertake their higher education abroad under the full sponsorship of the MoHE (MoHE, 2011). The goals of the King Abdullah Scholarships Program as articulated by Dr. Mohammed A. Alomar (2010), Assistant Cultural Attaché at the Saudi Cultural Mission in Washington, DC are shown in Figure 1.1.
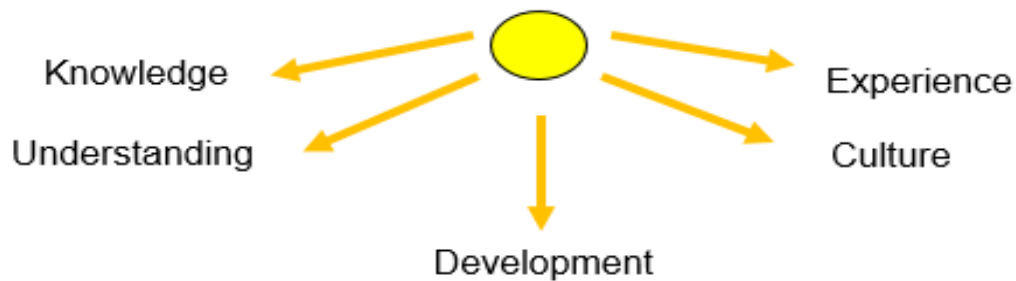
Figure 1.1: Goals of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program[2]

The objective of the scholarships program specifically for government university faculty stated in Article 1 of the 'Regulations of Scholarships and Training for Faculty Members', Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia,

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[2]http://www.washcouncil.org/documents/pdf/WIEC2010_PENN_STATE_Presentation.pdf

1996 "… is to qualify faculty members academically to obtain a degree, and *develop their academic, administrative, and technical skills* through training in fields that meet the university needs." (Italics added)

The goals of the scholarships program were summarised by Dr. Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Mousa (General Supervisor of the Department of Scholarships and Scholarship Programs for the Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia) at the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education 2009, as follows:

> The most important specific aims of the scholarship programs are: sending qualified Saudis to study at the best universities in various countries around the world; achieving high academic and professional standards; exchanging scientific, educational and cultural expertise with various countries around the world; building qualified, professional cadres; and raising levels of professionalism among them. (Al-Mousa, 2009, p. 717).

Hence, the Saudi Arabian government's purpose for investing in the scholarships program is comprehensive and goes beyond raising the quality of the academic programs at Saudi universities. In addition to improving academic standards, the identified goals of the scholarships program encompass the personal transformation of Saudi academics by

enhancing their levels of professionalism, intercultural competence and familiarity with foreign structures, systems and ways of functioning.

1.5 The Research Questions

This research explores participants' goals and expectations prior to postgraduate study abroad, the perceived personal and professional gains and challenges experienced after postgraduate study abroad, as well as participants' views on how to overcome the challenges and maximise the gains that result from postgraduate study abroad. The research questions are designed to provide a holistic and contextualised view of the benefits and challenges experienced by returnee academics after postgraduate study abroad and the implications for higher education reform in the Kingdom. Hence, the results of this research have the potential to influence the future direction of policies and practices at Saudi universities, as well as the policies and practices of the MoHE, international higher education providers and of countries that also use overseas higher education to build the capacity of their universities.

Concurrent with the research topic, the key questions that drive this investigation are contained in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1 – The Research Questions

Research Questions	Research Aim	Data Source & Method
1. What are the motivations of Saudi academics for undertaking postgraduate study overseas?	To understand the aims and motivations of Saudi academics for undertaking postgraduate study abroad. To what extent do these aims and expectations align with the MoHE's scholarship goals? Subsequently, are academics' goals likely to lead to benefits for Saudi higher education?	In-depth interviews with male and female Saudi academic returnees who have completed postgraduate study abroad, together with the researcher's etic-emic knowledge and experience in Saudi higher education, and the relevant literature on this topic.
2. What personal and professional benefits do Saudi academics perceive that they have gained as a result of completing postgraduate study abroad?	To identify enhancements to Saudi academics' personal and professional attributes, such as language development, teaching approach, research activities, etc.	
3. Have Saudi academics experienced any personal or professional challenges after returning from postgraduate study abroad?	'Challenges' refer to the difficulties academic returnees face as a result of societal or institutional barriers that prevent the implementation of new ideas or practices.	
4. What recommendations would Saudi academics make to their university and the MoHE that would assist them to further capitalise on the things that academics learned during their overseas study?	Participants hold an emic view of higher education in the Kingdom *and* overseas postgraduate education. From this insider perspective academics can provide valuable ideas to improve the efficacy of the scholarships program for academics.	

1.6 Delimitations of the Study

Saudi university faculty are sent abroad to study in a diverse range of fields,

including medicine, information technology, linguistics, engineering, and so on,

depending on the needs of the higher education sector (MoHE Portal, 2011).

The main objective of the present study was to identify the common and unique themes that emerge from the insights and experiences of male and female Saudi academics employed in the Saudi public higher education sector who completed their postgraduate studies abroad. As such, no restriction was placed on the academic discipline of participants. However, this study limits its focus to master's and doctoral degree holders only. The rationale for this approach is multi-layered.

The MoHE has itself acknowledged the importance of postgraduate study abroad for higher education in the Kingdom via its requirement for Saudi university faculty to undertake their postgraduate studies abroad. Secondly, my position as a teacher in the Saudi higher education sector at the time, meant that such participants were highly accessible, and I had firsthand familiarity with the research context. Furthermore, I was able to observe higher education policies and practices, as well as to informally liaise with Saudi academics to develop my knowledge and understanding of the pertinent factors surrounding the research topic. Finally, Saudi academics with postgraduate degrees from abroad often held senior teaching and leadership positions within Saudi universities. Thus, by limiting the scope of the inquiry to the experiences of postgraduates only, connections could be

made between overseas postgraduate education and how it is applied within the context of teaching and administration in the Saudi public higher education sector. Narrowing the focus of the study also makes the task of investigation more 'manageable' and enables the researcher to utilise the most accessible means to address the research questions within a given timeframe (Andrews, 2003).

1.7 Definition of Terms

Study Abroad - The term 'study abroad' has been used with various meanings throughout the literature and will be defined within the context of this inquiry as: study which is undertaken at an institution outside of one's home country for the purpose of completing an entire degree, rather than just one or a limited number of units as typical in student-exchange programs.

Academic - The term 'academic' is used in this study to refer to Saudi citizens who are employed at public universities in Saudi Arabia, and who perform teaching and/or administrative roles. For the purposes of this study, academics in teaching roles must hold the academic rank of 'lecturer' or above (since lecturers in KSA are master's degree holders and above), and academics in administrative roles will include those who hold positions up to the level of chairpersons, program directors and heads of department (which

are positions that can be and are often held by newly graduated PhD holders in KSA).

<u>Benefits and Challenges</u> - Due to the highly subjective nature of the terms 'benefits' and 'challenges', as well as the overlap between the spheres of 'personal' and 'professional', it is necessary to define these terms for the purposes of this research.

In this study, personal and professional 'benefits' are defined as the positive attributes gained by Saudi academics through postgraduate study abroad, such as gaining proficiency in a foreign language, intercultural competence, technical knowledge and skills, teaching skills, research skills, administrative skills and so on.

'Challenges' for returnees after postgraduate study abroad are considered from the perspective of Saudi academics and refer to difficulties that the returnees face or experience in the personal or professional realm due to changes in their knowledge, skills, values or practices as a result of postgraduate study abroad.

1.8 Structural Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters, each containing several subsections. This first chapter provided an introduction to the study including the purpose of the study, the researcher's positionality, the catalyst for this research, the King Abdullah scholarships program, the research questions, the delimitations of the study, and the definitions of key terms. In Chapter 2, I provide the background information that is pertinent to setting the context of this study. This includes information about the history of Saudi Arabia, the religion of Islam, the impact of religion and culture on higher education in Saudi Arabia, women and higher education in Saudi Arabia, and higher education reform in Saudi Arabia. In Chapter 3, I review the research literature related to the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by returnee academics from a range of countries after postgraduate study abroad. This literature review helps to tie together the concepts and findings relevant to the aims of the present study, as well as to identify gaps in the current research. In Chapter 4, I discuss the methodological issues and research design providing the philosophical foundations, study context and the tools used to collect, analyse and present the data. In Chapters 5 and 6, I present the findings of the data analysis organised into four categories respectively; presage factors, process factors, the learning product, and the product in practice. These four categories are

based on a modified version of Biggs' 3P Model of Learning (1993). Within

each of the four categories, a range of applicable themes and sub-themes

that emerged from the data are discussed. Finally, Chapter 7 presents the

conclusions of the study, answers to the research questions, the contributions

of the study, suggestions for future research, and some final reflections and

comments pertinent to the study.

Chapter 2: Setting the Context

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The context of this study is a difficult and complex one to describe, yet knowledge of the context is vital to achieving a meaningful understanding of the issues that this study explores. Relevant aspects of the context include Saudi Arabia's history, culture, social norms, religion, and governance system. Knowledge of these aspects facilitate a deeper understanding of the structure and operation of the Saudi higher education system, the Saudi government's rationale for higher education reform, its approach to reform, and the forces and factors at play within Saudi universities and wider Saudi Arabian society affecting reform and change within higher education. It also provides insight into the possible future direction of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

2.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF SAUDI ARABIA

Prior to 1932, the geographical area known today as Saudi Arabia was divided into separate regions that were ruled by various tribal chiefs; some of which were nominally affiliated with the Ottoman Empire (Blanchard, 2010). The first region to be conquered by Abdul-Aziz Al Saud (founding king of Saudi Arabia) was the Najd region (known today as Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's capital) in 1902, which his family had previously ruled before their exile to

Kuwait in 1891. After securing Najd, Abdul-Aziz gradually took control of other nearby regions until in 1932 all the areas under his control were declared as a newly founded nation called 'the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', of which Abdul-Aziz was the first king (MOFA, 2015). Thus, Saudi Arabia is a very young nation whose history spans 86 years, at present.

After the death of King Abdul-Aziz in 1953, Saudi Arabia has been ruled by six of Abdul-Aziz's sons consecutively. As at 2018, there are a handful of remaining sons of Saudi Arabia's first king and after their passing (or perhaps before due to their health and advanced age) the leadership of Saudi Arabia is expected to transfer to Abdul-Aziz's grandsons. The wives of King Abdul-Aziz came from various tribes and as such his children have varied lineage on their mothers' sides, which has at times been the cause of internal rivalry (Stenslie, 2012). Further, there are a very large number of third-generation princes that qualify as potential candidates for the position of king. It has been predicted for some time that Saudi Arabia will face political instability in the near future (Butt, 2015; Guzansky and Goldman 2012). Nevertheless, the descendants of Abdul-Aziz have so far been able to set aside their differences and maintain relatively smooth transitions in leadership as they are aware of the inextricable relationship between stability in the country's

leadership, the survival of the monarchy and the stability of the nation as a whole.

The current king of Saudi Arabia is King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz who ascended the throne in 2015 (Hubbard, 2015). He controversially appointed his son Mohammad bin Salman as Crown Prince (and heir apparent) in 2017, who has rapidly become known as a revolutionary, who has spearheaded the push for women's rights and created a proposal for highly ambitious economic and social reforms known as Vision 2030 (Law, 2016; Tisdall, 2017).

Geographically, Saudi Arabia covers 80% of the Arabian Peninsula (Almazroui, Islam, Athar, Jones, & Rahman, 2012). In 1932 when Saudi Arabia was founded it was one of the poorest nations in the world (Aldukheil, 2013). Due to the discovery of crude oil in 1938, Saudi Arabia rapidly became one of the richest nations in the world. Saudi Arabia's current GDP puts it in the top ten percentile of world nation's gross domestic products (Robehmed, 2014). Prior to the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia's main source of revenue was derived from the annual pilgrimage that is held each year in the city of Mecca. This pilgrimage, known as the Hajj (or the fifth pillar of Islam), attracts

2-3 million pilgrims every year and as such is still a robust source of revenue for Saudi Arabia (Bhala, 2011).

Modern-day Saudi Arabia has thirteen administrative regions or provinces (SAMIRAD, 2016) that are usually ruled by a member of the royal family and are united under a monarchial system of government. Despite the social and cultural practices and norms that characterise Saudi Arabia as a nation, the individual provinces also have characteristics that are unique to their own particular region (Alandejani, 2013). I have lived in two different regions in Saudi Arabia and visited a total of six out of the thirteen provinces, some of them multiple times, experiencing first-hand the very unique nature of these provinces. Saudi Arabia's provinces are not only distinct in their geographical features, but also in their histories, dialects and cultures. Thus, it is important to note that whilst there are commonalities between the experiences and challenges faced by Saudi academic returnees, there are also differences, some of which can be attributed to the unique culture of the province or region they are situated in.

The development of Saudi Arabia indicates its deep tribal origins and its rapid transition from a largely nomadic society into a predominantly urban one (Abir, 1993). In addition to its tribal origins, its monarchial leadership structure and

its rapidly accumulated wealth, another crucially important aspect of Saudi Arabia is the role that religion plays in its political and social spheres.

The state religion of Saudi Arabia is Islam and the Qur'an (the holy book of Muslims believed to be the word of God) and the Sunnah (the teachings, sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) are the primary sources of law used for governing the country and are also regarded as the country's constitution (Vogel, 2000). For Muslims, divine law (known as 'Sharee'ah' in Arabic) governs all aspects of human life including marriage, divorce, inheritance, business ethics, individual and governmental responsibility towards the needy and vulnerable (social welfare), crime and punishment, dietary laws, manners and methods of worship, and so on. Thus, in traditional Islamic societies there is no separation between church and state, although there are law making mechanisms in place to deal with issues that are not explicitly addressed in the primary sources of law.

There are several reasons why the religion of Islam plays such an important role in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Firstly, Islam has been the dominant religion in Arabia since the seventh century when the Prophet Muhammad proclaimed to have received revelation from God. Muhammad's message (of monotheism) eventually took root and began to spread until most of Arabia had become

Muslims and the once rivaling Arab tribes were united as 'brothers in faith' under one God. Within one hundred years of the death of Muhammad, Islam had spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, North Africa and into Europe. Hence, the religion of Islam had a major and enduring influence over the people of this region for more than 1300 years before the establishment of the state of Saudi Arabia.

Further, over the centuries leading up to the time of Ibn Saud, the fervor and religiosity of the Arabs had waned significantly from what it had been in the early days of Islam and by the 18th century, tribal and pagan customs had begun to re-emerge in Arabia (Commins, 2006). This situation provided fertile ground for a revivalist movement such as the 'Wahhabi' movement that was initiated by Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab in Najd (Riyadh) in the 1740s (Commins, 2006). As such, the ruling family of Najd at the time, the Al Saud family, formed a political-religious alliance with the family of Ibn Abdul-Wahhab that survives until the present day (Commins, 2006; Lacey, 2009; Pennell, 2011). The stated aim of the Wahhabi mission in Arabia was to revive the practice of pure Islamic monotheism and adherence to the divine law as taught by the Prophet Muhammad and to remove the re-emerged practices of idolatry, superstition and tribal sectarianism that were present in pre-Islamic Arabia. In addition, the leading authority in the Muslim world, the

Ottoman Turks (early 14th century - 20th century) (Shaw & Shaw, 1977), were in a period of major decline and were steeped in corruption by the 18th century when Ibn Abdul-Wahhab gained religious influence in Arabia. Thus, the Wahhabi mission to revitalise Islam in Arabia also formed the justification for the Saudi removal of the political-religious influence of the Ottoman regime from Arabia in the early 1800s; predominantly in the holy lands of Mecca and Medina (Quataert, 2005).

Thirdly, by encompassing and having sovereignty over the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia holds a special status throughout the Muslim world. Prompted by the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979, Saudi's King Fahd began using the title 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques' when he became king in 1982 (Fakkar, 2015) to emphasise the important station of the Saudi government as maintainer and protector of the holy sites. Therefore, it is Islam, above all other factors that gives the Saudi royal family its legitimacy to rule the region known today as Saudi Arabia.

2.3 OFFICIAL RELIGION OF SAUDI ARABIA: ISLAM

Islam pervades almost every aspect of Saudi Arabian society including its political, social, economic and education systems and is intricately connected with Saudi Arabian culture. This subsection provides a brief overview of Islam,

including a summary of the basic beliefs and practices and an explanation of the role of religious scholars in Islam and their role in the governance of Saudi Arabia.

What is Islam?

The Arabic word 'Islam' literally means 'submission' or 'surrender' (to the Will of God). The word 'Muslim' literally means 'the one who submits or surrenders' (to the Will of God). The word 'Quran' literally means 'recitation' and refers to the sacred book of the Muslims, believed to be the verbatim word of God.

Islam was introduced into Arabia in the 7th century by the Prophet Muhammad, who at the age of 40 stated that he had been visited by the archangel Gabriel who brought revelation from God. In the early stages, the Prophet Muhammad and his followers experienced persecution at the hands of their people. However, once Islam had taken root, it spread rapidly throughout the region. Islam had a simple, compelling and progressive message comparative to the prevailing beliefs and practices of its time. The concept of one all-powerful God, the Creator of everything, was more cogent to the Arabs than their customary belief in man-made idols. Islam called for an end to tribalism, racism and classism and placed all people as equals before God and as such,

many of Muhammad's early followers were from among the poor and outcast.[3]

Islam consists of six basic beliefs, including to believe in God ('Allah' in the Arabic language); to believe in angels, an 'unseen' creation of God that do not have free-will and follow the commands of God; to believe in the divine books, that is, all the scriptures that God revealed to His messengers including the Torah given to Moses and the Gospel given to Jesus (the Qur'an is regarded as the final and only preserved scripture); to believe in all God's prophets and messengers, including the first man Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and the final messenger Muhammad; to believe in Judgement Day, where all people will be resurrected and judged according to their deeds; and to believe in divine decree, where everything that happens is in the knowledge of God (past, present and future).

Islam consists of five basic practices, including the testimony of faith - 'I bear witness that there is no God worthy of worship except Allah and I bear

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[3] All facts relating to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad can be verified by referring to any of the biographies of the life of Prophet Muhammad. Examples: 1. Lings, M. (2006). *Muhammad – His life based on the earliest sources*. Vermont, United States: Inner Traditions Bear and Company.; 2. Al-Mubarakpuri, S. R. (2002). *The Sealed Nectar*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers.

witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah'; the five daily prayers; annual compulsory charity, 2.5% of excess wealth; fasting during the month of Ramadan, on the lunar Islamic calendar; and the pilgrimage to the city of Mecca once in a lifetime, where Muslims commemorate and emulate the actions of Abraham and his wife Hajar.

Women in Islam

Of all the world's major religions, Islam carries the greatest stigma with regard to its treatment of women. This is because the religion of Islam is often viewed through the practices of individuals or cultural communities, rather than through a direct knowledge or understanding of the religious teachings themselves. From a purely scriptural and historical point of view, Islam arguably stacks up as one of the best in terms of the status and rights it gives to women. The Qur'an and prophetic narrations are filled with verses and statements that honour women, wives and mothers. To mention a few:

> 'And We have enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment. His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship…' (Qur'an 46:15)

> A man came to the Prophet and said, 'O Messenger of God! Who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship? The

Prophet said: Your mother. The man said, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Your mother. The man further asked, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Your mother. The man asked again, 'Then who?' The Prophet said: Your father. (Bukhari; Muslim).

The Prophet Muhammad said: 'The best of you are those who are the best to their wives….' (At-Tirmidhi, 3895; Ibn Maajah, 1977)

In the 7th century, the era of the Prophet Muhammad, the status of women globally was very dismal. Women were regarded as nothing more than the property of men and had no right to hold wealth, own property, inherit, choose whom they would marry, seek divorce and the list goes on. However, Islam elevated the status of women and granted women all these rights, against the norms and trends of society at the time.

In contrast, it took women more than a thousand years after the Qur'anic injunctions to obtain these basic rights in the West. A small glimpse at the chronological achievement of these rights indicates the extent to which the Qur'anic stance towards women was ahead of its time:

Table 2.1 Historical Glimpse at Women's Rights

Year	State / Country	Law
1848	New York, USA	Married Women's Property Act 1848 passed; all states by 1900. Married women were granted 'separate economy' – the right to own and manage property.
1857	UK	Matrimonial Causes Act – divorce was made possible for both sexes.
1857	Maine, USA	Married women granted the right to control their own earnings.
1870	UK	Married Women's Property Act - the right to own and manage property.
1872	California, USA	Married women granted trade license.
1878	UK	Women granted the right to separate from husbands on grounds of cruelty.
1973	England & Wales	Matrimonial Causes Act - made forced marriages voidable. Also, divorce allowed on grounds of irretrievable breakdown.
1975	Australia	Family Law Act – made divorce possible without having to prove fault.

The question then arises: Is there a gap between Islam's teachings and the treatment of women in some Muslim-majority countries today? Absolutely, yes. With this it must be understood that Islam was adopted into numerous and diverse cultures, some of which are ancient, such as the rich Hindu culture that pre-dates Islam in India, the strong tribal Bedouin culture of Arabia and the various ancient African cultures throughout Somalia and the Sudan. This is precisely the reason why Islam is practiced so differently between Muslim nations. Consider Indonesia and Saudi Arabia; the practice of Islam is extremely different. Similarly, the treatment of women from one

Muslim nation to another varies greatly and is influenced heavily by the social, economic, historical, cultural and geographical context of those nations.

As a Western female convert to Islam, my experience of living Islam has been one of liberation. Living as a Muslim woman in Australia and the Middle East for the past twenty-one years has been eye-opening and has led me to realise our propensity to analyse foreign beliefs and cultures through an ethnocentric lens. Hence, for example, public discussion and political rhetoric in Australia are loaded with the assumption that the headscarf is 'regressive' and the absence of the headscarf is 'progressive'. Yet, this biased perspective prevents any genuine inquiry into the lived experience or agency of Muslim women.

As a young woman I felt the need to conform to what I believed were society's expectations of my external appearance. I was concerned about putting on weight, needed to wear a different outfit each day, all outfits had to be tight and show the shape of my body, I couldn't leave the house without covering my imperfections with make-up, I had to have the latest hairstyle and the list goes on. During my first year at university I developed bulimia and almost became anorexic. I slavishly tried to earn the approval of others, believing that my value was based on my external appearance. My self-esteem was

rock bottom and I was not satisfied with the way I looked, because my looks did not conform to the magazine images of flawless 'beauty'. And this was before the days of photoshop, Botox, lip injections and breast implants! Recent research has revealed that 89% of Australian women are not satisfied with how they look (Brown, 2016).

When I first embraced Islam, I was not comfortable with the idea of wearing the headscarf. Not because I thought it was oppressive, but because I felt that people would judge me based on my appearance (same old problem really). In any case, I gave it a try and within a short period of time I felt a sense of liberation. I realised that, for the first time in my life, I was finally free, and I did not care what people thought of my appearance. The size of my hips and the rest of my body was nobody's business, but mine. I was no longer a slave of the fashion or cosmetics industries and getting dressed in the morning was as simple as pie. Hence, for me the headscarf is a symbol of liberation not repression. Every woman's lived experience is influenced by the complex interplay of a broad range of factors and cannot be properly understood when analysed through a culturally biased lens.

What is the role of Religious Scholars in Islam?

Religious scholars hold a very important status in Islam. Firstly, those who possess religious knowledge are regarded as 'the inheritors of the prophets' (Sunan Abu Dawood, no. 3641). In other words, scholars are seen as the receptacles of the divine knowledge that was given to the messengers of God that is to be imparted to mankind.

In the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, people would travel from far and wide to acquire this divine knowledge. Some individuals spent most of their time in the company of the Prophet to capture his every word and action. Narrations of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings, actions and approvals are known as 'hadeeth'. Collectively, these sayings, actions and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad are known as the 'Sunnah' (lexically this means 'path'/'road'/'way') of the Prophet.

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and in the centuries that followed, many individuals became known for their strengths in the various branches of religious knowledge. Traditionally, once an individual became known for their scholarship in a particular field, Muslims would travel from far and wide to avail themselves of this specialised knowledge.

However, there is no concept of 'clergy' or 'religious hierarchy' in orthodox Islam. Scholars are not seen as infallible or divinely inspired; however, they are revered and respected for their acquired knowledge. When a Muslim becomes a religious scholar, they are obligated to pass on this knowledge to others (Qur'an 2:159-160) and as such most scholars spend a great deal of their time teaching others. In addition, whenever an issue arises where a clear directive cannot be found in either of the two primary sources of law (i.e. the Qur'an and Sunnah), a scholar who possesses the required level of religious knowledge can apply an intellectual effort (ijtihad) in order to derive a legal opinion or ruling (fatwa) on that matter (Sunan At-Tirmidhi, no. 1327). However, a fatwa must be based on the principles that have been established in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and can never be in contradiction to these two sources. A fatwa is not legally binding, and individuals have the choice of whether to adhere to a fatwa or to seek an alternative scholarly opinion on the matter (Kabbani, n.d.).

To become a scholar, one is generally required to study under recognised religious scholars until they become recognised by their teachers as a scholar in their own right. Most scholars, past and present, study under a number of scholars; however, they tend to be closely connected to just one or two main

teachers within a particular school of thought (mathhab) within Islamic jurisprudence.

In order to issue a fatwa, a scholar must be recognised as possessing the required level of knowledge and must also be regarded as righteous and trustworthy. Scholarly views vary as to the minimum amount of religious knowledge that a scholar should possess to be qualified to give a fatwa; a broad list of criteria exists in the online Encyclopedia Britannica (2017). Nasser (2013) states that the lack of clear standards as to who can and who cannot issue a fatwa sometimes leads to rulings that are detrimental. A person who issues a fatwa is known as a 'mufti'.

Religious scholars traditionally played a significant role within the leadership structure of early Muslim societies, such as holding the position of a governor or judge. Such positions were granted based on the individual's level of Islamic knowledge and piety, as well as other factors such as their personal traits, skills and capacity to perform these roles (Vogel, 2000). As Islamic law encompasses all aspects of life and there was no separation of church and state in the early governance framework of Islamic societies, it was essential for one to possess a high level of religious knowledge to perform an administrative role within Islamic governments. During this period, a Muslim

leader held wide ranging responsibilities, including adjudicating disputes,

leading the congregational prayers, giving sermons, managing the treasury,

looking after social welfare and overseeing the annual pilgrimage. However,

as time progressed, and the geographical frontiers of the Muslim community

continued to expand, leaders and administrators within Islamic communities

became more numerous and their roles became more specialised. Gradually

these roles shifted and became either distinctly temporal or spiritual in nature

(Al-Adhami, 1963). Though Islamic systems of government were largely

regarded as theocratic up to the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the trend

towards the separation of what came to be known as religious and secular

matters, began very subtly after the death of the fourth caliph of Islam, Ali ibn

Abi Talib in 661CE (Al-Adhami, 1963; Esposito, n.d.). The Islamic world

shifted gradually in this direction, starting as early as 661 CE with the

Umayyad Dynasty and culminating with the decline, transformation and

dissection of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a completely

secular state in 1923, known as the Republic of Turkey (Koni, 2013).

After 660 CE a series of dynasties evolved in the Muslim world whereby

rulers were no longer selected according to their levels of religious knowledge

and piety, but rather, they inherited their positions based on bloodline. Hence,

a number of religious scholars chose to become independent from the Muslim

governments of their time. For example, after a short stint as an Abbasid

governor in Yemen, famous jurist Imam Al-Shafi'i resolved to never again

work in the service of the government (Khadduri, 2011). Famous jurist Abu

Hanifah repeatedly declined the post of Chief Judge offered by the Abbasid

ruler in 763 CE, choosing to remain independent (Firdausi, 2014).

A number of power struggles and battles occurred among the different

factions within the Muslim communities over time and the centre of power

shifted from region to region and from dynasty to dynasty. Some dynasties in

the history of the Muslim world include the Umayyad Dynasty (661–750 CE),

the Abbasid Dynasty (750-1258 CE) and the Mamluk Caliphate (1250-1517

CE). Whilst religion was still a thread within the structures and cultures of

these dynasties, the idea of rulers being God's vicegerent on earth was

superseded by a strong desire for personal power and wealth. Thus, from this

time onwards, religious scholars played a much less prominent role in relation

to governance and largely became independent teachers, advisers and

guides to the general public (Vogel, 2000).

The relationship between religious scholars and Muslim governments shifted

once again during the time of the Ottoman Empire (1301-1922 CE). Up to this

time, a scholar's influence had "always derived more from his following

among ordinary people, based on reputation for scholarly attainment, status among peers, and personal devotion and integrity, than from possessing official positions." (Vogel, 2000, p. 5). However, during the Ottoman Empire, an official status via the title 'Grand Mufti' was conferred upon a single mufti by the government and this tradition was subsequently adopted by a number of later governments in the Muslim world.

The official recognition of the Grand Mufti by the government carries with it the implication that the Grand Mufti is the highest-ranking scholar in the land. Subsequently, this means that some citizens hold the religious edicts of the Grand Mufti to be superior to the rulings given by an 'ordinary' scholar or mufti. Others are skeptical about such scholars, regarding them as mere tools of despotic regimes used to leverage religion for their own political longevity (El Fadl, 2015). Since the establishment of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the Saudi royal family has always had a close alliance with religious scholars. However, it was not until 1993 that Saudi Arabia conferred the status of Grand Mufti onto one of its religious scholars, that being Sheikh Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah ibn Baz (d. 1999), who was already one of Saudi Arabia's most popular muftis (Vogel, 2000).

There are fifty-five Muslim-majority countries in the world today (Daniels, 2017) and these constitute a range of modern systems of government including republics, monarchies and parliamentary democracies (Systems of Government by Country, 2011); only a handful utilise Islam as their main source of law. Saudi Arabia is considered the most conservative Muslim country in the world today (Peterson, 2014) and is one of the few countries that implement Islamic law (Vogel, 2000). However, Saudi Arabia has also be known to breach human rights, in contradiction to Islamic Law (Sparrow, 2015).

2.4 RELIGION, CULTURE AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Within one hundred years of its inception, Islam spread across the Arabian Peninsula and then beyond to places such as India, China and Southeast Asia. It was absorbed into the various and sometimes ancient cultures and civilisations that existed in these lands. Whilst the basic core beliefs and practices of Islam are common to Muslims worldwide, the practice of Islam has taken on a variety of forms that reflect a blend of beliefs and practices that vary from region to region. For instance, the practices of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent reflect a synthesis of aspects of ancient Hindu traditions, Indian culture and Islamic beliefs and practices. This is reflected in the

clothing, wedding customs and dietary habits of Muslims in this region.

Likewise, Muslims in China are culturally very different from Muslims in Africa

and so on. Often, the merger between culture and religion exists to the point

where they are regarded as one and the same. Saudi Arabia is no exception

to this phenomenon, whereby traditional Arab and tribal customs, beliefs and

practices have been merged with Islam. For instance, specific dress styles

and the custom of marrying within one's own tribe can be attributed to culture

and not religion. However, Saudi Arabia presents itself as a nation founded

upon religion, and thus, religious scholars play a special role in the

functioning of the nation.

What is the role of Religious Scholars in the Governance of Saudi Arabia?

The Basic Regulation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 1992 states:

> "Article 1. The religion [of Saudi Arabia] is Islam, its constitution is the
> Book of God Most High and the Sunnah of His Prophet, may God
> bless him and give him peace." (Vogel, 2000)

As mentioned in the previous sub-section, all matters that have not been

explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet

Muhammad (Sunnah) can be referred to Muslim religious scholars ('ulema),

to derive rulings that are based on the principles laid out in these two primary

sources. In Saudi Arabia, only religious scholars that are appointed or approved by the government can officially issue religious rulings (Boucek, 2010). The highest religious body in Saudi Arabia is the 'Senior Council of Scholars' and all members are appointed by the Saudi King (Boucek, 2010). Whilst there has been a long history between the Saudi royal family and the Saudi religious elite, the relationship between these two entities is a complex one. It could be said that in effect they legitimise each other, whereby the government confers certain authority to the 'ulema and the 'ulema demonstrates the authority of the government through the use of religion. Religion was after all, the basis for the initial unification of the various tribes under Ibn Saud's leadership. How religious scholars fit within the governance structure of Saudi Arabia has been a matter of ongoing review, complexity and debate within Saudi Arabia.

Over time, the relationship between the government and the 'ulema in Saudi Arabia has become somewhat more complex than it was back in the early days when Saudi Arabia was a largely nomadic and underdeveloped society. Given its nomadic and impoverished context at the time, the preservation of its culture and traditions was a simple feat. However, after the discovery of oil and Saudi Arabia's rapid development into a largely urban society, the needs and aspirations of the government and society have shifted and are much

more diverse. This has led to varied perspectives within Saudi society about

what the nature of the country's development should be. The government has

tried to pursue an agenda of modernisation without Westernisation (Zain,

Kassim & Ayyub, 2016), to ensure that the country's traditional identity,

customs and culture remain in tack. However, certain governmental decisions

over time have not been well-received and have caused consternation within

Saudi society; sometimes for conservatives and sometimes for liberals.

Further, at times, it is the absence of change or a lack of decision that causes

discontent. Hence, there are strongly diverse views within Saudi society about

the ideal nature, direction and pace of change, including divisions within the

religious sector and in the government. Over the last two decades there has

been a growing sentiment in Saudi Arabia that the religious establishment is

an obstacle to progress in Saudi society, although, overall it remains a highly

respected entity (Gardner, 2016; Hamdan, 2005).

The Relationship between Religion and Modern Education in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the 'ulema (religious scholars) have been given significant

authority in the areas of justice, education and family matters, whilst being

distanced from matters of national defense, foreign policy and international

affairs (Boucek, 2010; Teitelbaum, Karsh, & Har-Zvi, 2010). The role of the

'ulema in the Saudi education system is one that has been rethought by the

Saudi government in recent years and the 'ulema's involvement in education is seen in some respects as an obstacle to the reform and advancement of education in Saudi Arabia. A few critical incidents including a fire in a girls' school in Mecca in 2002 that caused the deaths of fifteen girls, the intense scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's school curricula by the United States after the September 11, 2001 tragedy and the public criticism of Saudi Arabia's first gender-mixed university by one of Saudi Arabia's senior religious scholars in 2009 (Hoteit & Radsch, 2009) have contributed to the rethinking of the Saudi religious scholars' role in the Saudi education system.

In 2002 a fire in an all-girls' school in the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia brought into question the role and authority of the religious establishment over girls' education. All public schools and universities in Saudi Arabia are strictly gender-segregated. Hence, on the campuses of girls' schools and women's universities, female students are not required to wear their black head-to-toe cloaks, headscarves and face veils that are worn outside in the presence of non-related men. Female school and university campuses are similar to those of male campuses, except that they are surrounded by very large walls and they are fully staffed by females (that is, teachers, assistants, cleaners and internal security). Male security guards are stationed at the outside gates of all female schools and universities to keep watch and to ensure that men do

not enter. When a fire broke out in the girls' school in Mecca and girls tried to

flee the premises without their outer garments, some members of the

religious police who were outside the school instructed the girls to go back

inside, because they were not veiled. Unfortunately, fifteen girls died as a

result of the fire and many members of the public held the religious

establishment responsible for what happened, calling into question their

authority over girls' education ("Saudi police stopped fire rescue," 2002). By

late 2003, the Presidency for Girls' Education was dismantled, and female

education was placed under the authority of the Ministry of Education

alongside male education (Alharbi, 2014; Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission,

2013).

In 2009, the establishment of a mixed-gender university near Jeddah in Saudi

Arabia by the late King Abdullah, called the 'King Abdullah University of

Science and Technology' (KAUST), caused a stir among Saudi Arabia's

conservative sector. One of Saudi's senior religious scholars publicly objected

to the mixed-gender university (Matthews, 2012) and was swiftly removed

from the Senior Council of Scholars (Hoteit & Radsch, 2009). This

demonstrates the pushback from the government to curtail the social

influence of religious scholars.

Perhaps the largest catalyst for change in Saudi Arabia's education system has been the tragedy of September 11, 2001 in the United States, whereby the majority of plane high-jackers were identified as being Saudi citizens (Elyas & Picard, 2013). This brought the Saudi Arabian education system into the spotlight, triggering major changes to domestic education. It also led to the establishment of the King Abdullah Scholarships Program that has enabled almost 200 000 Saudi citizens to study at universities abroad, particularly in the United States, in an effort to bolster cross-cultural understanding (Ahmed, 2015). The September 11, 2001 tragedy prompted calls from within the United States, as well as from within Saudi Arabia itself, to review its school curricula and textbooks to ensure that students were not being taught intolerance and hatred towards others (Ansary, 2008). In 2006, Prince Faisal Al-Turki, the Saudi Ambassador to the United states at that time, announced that a major review and overhaul of education in Saudi Arabia was underway. This included a review of school curricula, textbooks and teacher training to ensure the removal of "any element that is inconsistent with the needs of a modern education" (Shea, 2006). This critical self-reflection by the Saudi government led to the realisation that major educational reforms were needed, as well as greater interaction between Saudi Arabia's citizens and others to improve mutual understanding and respect across cultures and to combat terrorism (Hausheer, 2014). Hence,

the King Abdullah Scholarships Program was established in 2005 to support these aims.

The King Abdullah Scholarships Program is one of the largest government-funded scholarships programs in the world (Mohammed, 2013). The scholarships program is open to males and females; however, it can be more challenging for females to avail themselves of this opportunity due to the legal requirement that female students be chaperoned by a male relative when they travel abroad to study (HRW World Report, 2016). A large number of Saudi married couples choose to study abroad together under the scholarships program. However, single Saudi females who do not have a father or brother available to accompany them, often miss out on the opportunity to study abroad. The current ratio of males to females studying abroad under the scholarships program is 3:1 (Ahmed, 2015).

The fact that the current ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education in Saudi Arabia is 0.99 (World Bank, 2014), just over half of students at university in Saudi Arabia are female ("More women than men in Saudi universities," 2015) and almost 50 000 Saudi women are currently studying abroad in a variety of fields via government scholarships (Ahmed, 2015), indicates a major improvement in female education over a relatively

short period of time. In 1970, 98% of Saudi females were illiterate (UNICEF, 2013) and according to the CIA World Fact Book, as at 2015 literacy rates for females in Saudi Arabia were 91.1% and for males were 97% (CIA, 2015). Finally, whilst culture and conservative religious views have clearly impacted the Saudi education system and the nature and pace of educational reform in the Kingdom, it is evident that the Saudi education system has improved significantly since its inceptions and continues to develop. The current Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, has signaled his intention to enhance the rights of women in Saudi Arabia and has voiced the view that the rigid interpretations of religion by members of the Saudi religious establishment have denied women rights that they were entitled to since the beginning of Islam (Law, 2016; Waldman, 2016).

2.5 WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA – CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Saudi Arabia's higher education sector has developed rapidly over the last two decades and this has led to greater professional and economic opportunities for Saudi men and women. However, Saudi women continue to face unique challenges within the realm of higher education that result from Saudi Arabia's complex social, cultural and political structures.

Saudi women have undoubtedly come a long way since the 1950s when they were unable to access public education. In 1970, literacy rates were 15% for men and 2% for women and by 2012 they were 99% for men and 97% for women (UNICEF, 2013). Today, more than half of students at university in Saudi Arabia are women ("More women than men in Saudi universities," 2015), 30% of study abroad scholarship holders are women (Ahmed, 2015) and Saudi Arabia has an impressive array of Saudi female scientists, academics and businesswomen.

However, despite these incredible advancements, Saudi females still face a limited range of course specialisations to choose from at university (Alharbi, 2014; Alwedinani, 2016), a restricted job market with limited promotion opportunities (Chew, 2015), limited access to study abroad opportunities ("Farewell my guardian," 2017) and other obstacles. As a Western female convert to Islam employed in the public higher education sector in Saudi Arabia during the period 2006-2011, I was in a privileged position to acquire a deeper understanding of the challenges and achievements of women in the Saudi higher education sector through my firsthand professional and social interactions with Saudi women.

Prior to 1951 there were no publicly funded secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. There were a small number of private institutions that offered secular education; however, the main type of education that existed was in the form of Qur'an (scripture) memorisation classes and the study of other religious texts. These classes would often be held in the local mosque or a private tutor would be brought to the home; private tuition was the most common method for teaching girls (Metz, 1992). During this time, there was a widely held view in Saudi society that other types of knowledge were not needed and that believers in God simply needed to know God's laws and live their lives in accordance with them. It is important to note that this was not the understanding of Muslims during the earlier centuries of Islam who made major contributions to the fields of science, medicine, mathematics and geography.

Large-scale publicly funded education for boys commenced in 1951 and the first university that taught non-religious subjects, Riyadh University (later renamed King Saud University), also for men, was established in 1957 (Metz, 1992). Girls' education formally commenced in 1960 and was initiated and developed by then Crown Prince Faisal and his wife Iffat Al-Thunayan (Hamdan, 2005; Metz, 1992). Initially, there was massive resistance to public education for girls, as this was seen by the deeply conservative and

patriarchal society as being opposed to women's traditional role at home as wives and mothers. Acutely aware of the prevailing attitudes within his society, Prince Faisal made measured and moderate changes to ensure social stability and a lasting impact. About Prince Faisal, it was said: "He struck a skillful balance between modernisation and the conservatism of a deeply religious society" (Vassiliev, 2013).

Prince Faisal invested time to convince tribal elders and religious leaders that Islam is not opposed to the education of women (Huyette, 1985). Further, to allay fears about the purpose and intent of girls' education, Prince Faisal established the General Presidency for Girls' Education to specifically oversee female education and to ensure that all religious requirements pertaining to females were met (Al Yousef, 2016), rather than placing female education under the Ministry of Education.

This very skillful move encouraged many Saudi citizens to allow their daughters to leave their homes and participate in formal schooling. On the other hand, it also meant that certain restrictions were placed on female education, many of which endure until today. These include, women are restricted from studying in certain fields that would lead them to work in a field alongside men and they are restricted from studying in fields that are seen to

be in contradiction with their natural disposition as nurturers and caregivers (Alharbi, 2014). Thus, women in Saudi Arabia predominately work in the fields of teaching and nursing, although this has diversified somewhat over the last decade (Alwedinani, 2016).

Whilst over half of students at university in Saudi Arabia are female, women make up only 16% of the Saudi workforce (Chew, 2015). With little likelihood of obtaining a job, particularly in the more remote parts of Saudi Arabia, higher education is often seen by women as a means of socialising and getting paid a monthly stipend that the government gives to students, rather than for pursuing a career (Alwedinani, 2016). I spent a year teaching at a remote university in the north of Saudi Arabia, where I was surprised by the highly social, non-academic atmosphere. Students came to university with their tea and coffee pots, dates, cake and picnic rugs and spent most of their time on campus socialising. Classes were over-filled and the students had very little exposure to or interest in learning the English language. This was a very challenging situation for any teacher that sought to achieve real educational outcomes.

Prior to 2005, study abroad opportunities were relatively limited and largely available to Saudi men (Albasri & Taylor, 2014). Degrees from Western

universities were held in high esteem and these degrees led to rapid job

promotions for Saudi returnees and generous financial rewards. In 2005, a

meeting took place between the late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and

former US President George W. Bush, to discuss ways to increase the

number of Saudi students in the United States, and subsequently, the King

Abdullah Scholarships Program (KASP) was conceived (Hausheer & LeBaron,

2013). At this time, major changes occurred within Saudi Arabia's domestic

education system and study abroad became heavily emphasised for both

men and women (Alnahdi, 2014).

Whilst the scholarship program is open to both male and female Saudi

citizens and the selection criteria are the same, Saudi women can only avail

themselves of the opportunity to take up a scholarship if they have a male

guardian to escort them to the study destination and remain there throughout

the duration of their studies ("Farewell my guardian," 2017). For many Saudi

women, this is a non-issue; they study abroad along with their husbands who

are also studying abroad, or they study abroad along with their brother who is

also studying abroad. However, there are many women who simply do not

have a male guardian to accompany them whilst they complete their studies

abroad. If they are married, their husband might have a secure job in Saudi

Arabia and cannot take extensive leave; likewise, if they are unmarried and

their father has a secure job and other responsibilities he will not be able to accompany his daughter to study abroad. Further, a number of Saudi women do not have any near male relatives, that is, they are unmarried, their fathers have passed away and they do not have any brothers. Life is particularly challenging in Saudi Arabia for these women.

Since 2005, there has been a major emphasis on Saudi academics obtaining degrees from abroad; particularly postgraduate qualifications. The university that I worked at in the southwest of Saudi Arabia from 2009-2011 made their Saudi education assistants (that is, lecturers without PhDs) sign a contract which stated that they agreed to obtain their postgraduate qualifications from abroad within a certain timeframe, otherwise they could not progress to the rank of lecturer. I worked with a number of talented Saudi women who could not progress in their academic careers with their locally earned degrees and were unable to study abroad. I asked if they could explain their case to the university leadership and perhaps be granted permission to obtain their postgraduate qualifications locally, but they told me that this was not allowed.

Some Saudi women take desperate measures to obtain the opportunity to study abroad. I worked with a Saudi woman who went through a very elaborate wedding and divorced three months later after gaining a scholarship

and travelling to America. Her friends informed me that she did so just to be eligible to study abroad. I attended the wedding; it was the most luxurious wedding I had ever experienced, and I was shocked to learn what had happened a short time later. Such situations result in enormous financial and emotional cost for the many people involved, including parents and the unsuspecting spouse. Some women would also remain in a potentially unhappy marriage to gain the degree from abroad ("Wanted: Husbands wanted for women planning overseas studies," 2015).

Saudi's guardianship law impacts on many aspects of the lives of Saudi women and this law has the potential to be grossly misused, depending on the character of the guardian (Human Rights Watch, 2016). For instance, a Saudi woman requires her guardian's consent to receive medical treatment in Saudi Arabia. I am also aware through discussions with Saudi women and a female doctor in Saudi Arabia that some husbands do not allow their wives to receive medical treatment. The majority of doctors in Saudi Arabia are men and some husbands do not want their wives to be seen to by a man. Hence, it is not unheard of for the husband of a sick woman to attend the hospital on her behalf and describe her symptoms to the doctor.

Saudi Arabia's strict gender segregation laws lead to both job creation and job restrictions for Saudi women. Whilst Saudi women are not able to work in positions that put them in direct contact with men, many jobs for women are also created for this very reason. Hence, all major banks in Saudi Arabia have a women's branch and a men's branch. Similarly, schools and universities have separate male and female campuses. This means that these institutions are fully staffed and run by women. The professional opportunities for women in these institutions are excellent. Inside these all-female institutions, women are not required to wear the black outer gowns and face-coverings they do when out in public. Fashion, hair and make-up are the norm in the Saudi-women's workplace. My personal experience has been that these are very enjoyable, relaxed environments where women are free to look after their own matters. However, whilst these institutions are headed by women, for women, they are supervised by the leadership within the male campus. Thus, the female campuses of public universities are effectively run via 'remote control', as female leaders are required to get the approval of the male leader before any major decision is finalised. Again, if the character of the male leader is sound, this role is nominal, and an approval constitutes nothing more than a formality, but if not, the female leader may find her decisions being overturned.

Some of Saudi Arabia's female talent is attracted to work for companies outside of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi female brain-drain is a real phenomenon. Some famous examples include, Dr Hayat Sindi, a Saudi Arabian medical scientist who was appointed as Senior Lecturer at the International school of Medicine in the Cambridge Overseas Medical Programme, UK, and an Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Biological and Chemical Science, Exeter University (Bilal, 2011). She is currently a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University where she works with Professor George Whitesides at the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology; Dr Ghadah Al Mutairi, a professor of pharmaceutical chemistry and Director of the Center for Excellence in Nanomedicine and Engineering at the University of California, San Diego; and Dr Rasha Al-Bawardy, a cardiologist who works for the Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School (Royston, 2016). These women have made amazing contributions to their fields, but sadly not within Saudi Arabia. This situation has been dubbed, "The Kingdom's loss, humanities' gain" (Royston, 2016), particularly given the government's substantial investment in study abroad scholarships to enhance its human capital, reduce reliance on foreign labour and increase job opportunities for women.

Since the reign of the late King Abdullah (2005-2015), Saudi Arabia has been

increasingly commended for making measured improvements in the condition

of Saudi women. These improvements include, the inclusion of women in the

Shura Council (the King's highest advisory body), allowing women to

participate in municipal council elections, improved responses to violence

against women, greater employment opportunities and access to government

services (Powell, 2015). However, it is important to note that in my experience

these benefits are largely enjoyed by Saudi women of privilege; those of high

socio-economic status or lineage. Ordinary Saudi women, particularly those

from poor families and those who live in remote parts of the Kingdom do not

necessarily have access to the changes that are being celebrated in the

international media (Perkins, 2015).

Despite the challenges faced by Saudi women in the realm of higher

education, it is important to acknowledge that the advancements for Saudi

women achieved to date were once unimaginable. Further, it is important to

note that the lifestyle of Saudi women is not as dismal as the West often

imagines it to be. External observers of Saudi Arabia must be mindful of

evaluating Saudi Arabia through a narrow Euro-centric lens. Saudi women

are often very proud of their nation's culture, heritage and traditions and do

not desire for their society to be transformed to fit the Western mould (Alamuddin, 2017; Macias, 2016).

Without negating the challenges that do exist for women in Saudi Arabia, there are many equally enviable aspects of the Saudi women's lifestyle. Saudi women are rarely burdened by housework due to the abundance of inexpensive foreign house-help and, as such, have plenty of time to dedicate towards leisure, including visiting the beauty salon and shopping for dazzling garments in keeping with their highly social lifestyle (Hausheer, 2014). Saudi Arabian society operates at a relatively slow pace, male and female Saudi citizens have very high job security, particularly in the public sector where 70% of Saudis are employed, and as such there is less stress and certainly no rat race in Saudi Arabia (Estimo, 2015; Alkhalisi, 2016). Hence, it is no wonder that Saudi women studying abroad often complain of responsibilities, housework and a lack of leisure time compared to their lifestyle back home in Saudi Arabia (Alandejani, 2013). Major pastimes in Saudi Arabia are desert picnics and riding quadbikes in the sand dunes. Saudi women have always been able to ride off-road quadbikes in Saudi Arabia and on 26th September 2017 a royal decree was issued by King Salman to allow women to drive on-road cars too (Samuel, 2017).

The complexities of the Saudi female condition, which simultaneously exhibits both achievements and challenges, demonstrate the need to broaden the lens through which we seek to understand and appreciate the current position of Saudi women within the higher education realm and within Saudi society itself. Saudi women are often highly protective of their culture and their nation's rich traditions and customs. Whilst Saudi women are eager to ensure that their talents and abilities are put to best use to serve their nation, their aim is not to change the identity of Saudi Arabia.

2.6 HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA

When considering higher education reform in Saudi Arabia, it is important to note that the Kingdom's education system developed rapidly over a short period of time, resulting from the discovery of oil and subsequent rapid urbanization (Roy, 1992). The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) was established in 1975 (Saudi Ministry of Education, 2017). By 2003, there were only eight universities to serve a population of 20 million people (Krieger, 2007). It was at this point that Saudi Arabia seriously embarked on its mission to develop and reform its higher education system and began allocating a significant proportion of its budget towards this goal. The bulk of higher education spending has been allocated to opening new universities and

colleges (Krieger, 2007). In 2009, King Abdullah provided $10 billion of his own money to establish a private research university, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), and a previous ban on the establishment of private higher education institutions was lifted, with public financial support given toward these initiatives (Krieger, 2007; Mervis, 2007). Nolan (2011) posits that true higher education reform in Saudi Arabia, as opposed to window dressing reforms designed to appease external observers, relies heavily on the role of 'peripheral' institutions, such as international partnerships and private education providers, that can initiate controversial reforms and "allow the regime to circumvent its own bureaucracy" (p.7). Whilst Nolan's assertion is in evidence with the establishment of KAUST and the role of other non-government institutions in modernising higher education in Saudi Arabia, the government has recently taken a bolder stance towards higher education reform since the introduction of Vision 2030 in 2016 by the new Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (Vision 2030, 2016).

2.6.1 Higher Education Reform Strategies

(a) Foreign Expertise

A key strategy that has traditionally been used by Saudi Arabia to help build the capacity of its universities is the recruitment of foreign academics, particularly from native-English speaking countries, such as the United States,

United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. Western academics have always been held in high esteem by Saudi Arabia's higher education sector and in my experience, many Saudi students prefer Western academics to locally-trained Saudi academics and academics from other non-Western countries, as Western universities are regarded in Saudi Arabia as having the most advanced higher education systems in the world (Alhammad, 2010). As a teacher at two different universities in Saudi Arabia, I saw students reduced to tears when their names were taken off my class-list and they were placed on the list of a non-native English speaker. The high esteem given to Western Academics in Saudi Arabia is also reflected in the salary and employment package differentials between Western academics and non-Saudi academics of Arab and Asian nationality working at Saudi universities (Harper, 2012).

However, critical factors such as falling oil prices and high levels of public sector spending (DiChristopher, 2017; Henderson, 2017); high unemployment rates among Saudi citizens and a heavy reliance on foreign workers (D'Cunha, 2017); and large numbers of Saudi graduates steadily returning from abroad courtesy of the government's study abroad scholarships program, have forced Saudi Arabia to strongly implement the Saudization of jobs policy that was first formulated in 1994 (Ahmed, 2016; "Taking Another Stab at Saudization", 2016). The Saudi ministry of civil service has recently instructed

all ministries to terminate the employment of all foreign workers in Saudi Arabia within the next three years (Al-Ghamdi, 2017). Hence, the number of foreign academics employed in the Kingdom is expected to fall dramatically over the coming years.

(b) Partnerships with Foreign Universities and Higher Education Providers

Another reform strategy that has been used increasingly over the past fifteen years is the establishment of partnerships between Saudi universities and renowned foreign universities and organisations. In fact, in 2010-2011 during my employment at a Saudi university, the English language centre that I worked for established a partnership with the English Language Centre at Australia's Monash University. Monash University sent a team of experts who travelled back and forth between Saudi Arabia and Australia to work with the leadership of our language centre, to help develop and improve the quality of its English language programs. The Monash team carried out English language tests on students to assess their levels of language proficiency and areas of weakness, provided professional development to the university English language instructors to enhance their teaching knowledge and skills and they produced a series of specially tailored English language textbooks to be used as part of the English language program.

Many of Saudi Arabia's universities have established partnerships with renowned foreign universities, including an agreement signed in 2008 by Stanford University with the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) to help develop its applied mathematics and computer science departments (Stanford Report, 2008). The University of California also signed an agreement with KAUST in 2008 to help develop its mechanical engineering department (Kanellos, 2008). Western Australia's Murdoch University entered an agreement with Saudi Arabia's Taif University in 2008 to assist in the area of biotechnology (Murdoch, n.d.). In 2010, Australia's Monash University signed agreements with a cluster of universities in Saudi Arabia worth $14 million, including King Abdulaziz University, Islamic University of Madinah, Taif University and Ha'il University to assist in a range of areas and fields (Monash University, 2010). More recently, in 2016 the University of New Haven, United States signed an agreement with King Fahd Security College, Riyadh to collaborate in the development of an undergraduate degree in security studies (University of New Haven, 2016).

Saudi Arabia's strategy of forming partnerships with foreign universities to help develop its academic staff and programs appears set to continue as part of its repertoire of higher education reform strategies.

(c) Study Abroad Scholarships for Academics

Since 2005 when the King Abdullah Scholarships Program began, Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars sending its citizens to study abroad (Paul, 2016). Thus far, over 200 000 Saudi citizens have availed themselves of the opportunity to study abroad under the scholarships program (Paul, 2016). Saudi Arabia allocated 25% of its budget to education during the years 2013-2015, making it the highest spender on education in the world (Kottasova, 2016; Mohammed, 2013).

However, given the very large number of recipients and the generous scholarship provisions, including full tuition, medical insurance, a monthly allowance to cover living expenses, school fees for dependent children and annual airfares for the scholarship recipient and their dependents, Saudi Arabia has decided that the current rate of spending is unsustainable and as such, significantly reduced its allocation of scholarship funding in 2016 (Kottasova, 2016; Walcutt, 2016). Abujami (2016) attributes Saudi Arabia's cut in scholarship funding to four key factors, including a very large budget deficit, the cost of Saudi Arabia's war with Yemen, a major fall in oil prices and the new economic reforms introduced by its Vision 2030.

Therefore, unless Saudi Arabia's economy dramatically improves, the number of scholarships provided to Saudi citizens to study abroad will continue to fall until 2020 when the scholarships program expires (Walcutt, 2016). Nevertheless, study abroad scholarships will remain an important means to qualify Saudi academics in fields that are unavailable or largely underdeveloped in Saudi Arabia, as well as for cross-cultural exchange.

2.6.2 Challenges for Higher Education Reform in Saudi Arabia

(a) Accreditation

In 2004, Saudi Arabia established the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). The NCAAA has the responsibility of overseeing the quality of education provided by post-secondary institutions in Saudi Arabia and issuing their accreditation (National Center for Academic Accreditation & Assessment, 2017). The NCAAA was set up due to concerns that higher education institutions in the Kingdom lacked accountability and the quality of education was low. As such, a monitoring mechanism was needed, as well as a clear set of standards for all universities to follow. The aim NCAAA is to raise academic and administrative standards and hold universities accountable (Alshayea, 2012).

According to Albaqami (2015), the vast majority of universities in Saudi Arabia have failed to comply with the standards set by the NCAAA and only 3 out of 33 universities were able to achieve full accreditation in 2012. Studies conducted by Albaqami (2015) and Alghamdi (2016) both identify a similar set of factors that are responsible for inhibiting quality assurance implementation within Saudi universities. These include, private universities often strive harder to maintain their standards and reputations than public universities; faculty resistance; infrastructure limitations, including financial and human capital constraints; and the backgrounds and qualifications of staff.

Despite indications that many Saudi universities struggle to meet the quality assurance standards set by the NCAAA, Al-Mohaimeed, Midhet, Barrimah, & Saleh (2012), Abaqami (2015) and Alghamdi (2016) have all demonstrated through case studies of various universities in Saudi Arabia that the NCAAA quality assurance and accreditation process has led to significant improvements in the quality of educational and administrative processes, as well as curriculum implementation within the respective universities.

Therefore, the accreditation process introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2004 has helped to raise the academic and administrative standards at public and private universities throughout Saudi Arabia; however,

a range of factors serve to inhibit the implementation of quality assurance practices and hence limit the progress of reform at a number of Saudi universities.

(b) English Language Learning Issues

The official language of Saudi Arabia is Arabic (New World Encyclopedia, 2017). Daily life in Saudi Arabia often involves very little exposure and usage of the English language (Khan, 2011). Attending shops, banks and restaurants largely requires communication in the Arabic language, with the exception of some of the major shopping centres in Saudi Arabia's larger cities. Arabic is also the main language of communication at Saudi Arabia's main airport in Jeddah. In Saudi Arabia, the English language is introduced at secondary school level, as a subject within its Arabic-medium curriculum (Alresheed, 2008).

Outdated and highly ineffective teaching methods are used to teach the English language subject in Saudi secondary schools (Al-Nasser, 2015; Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017; Sofi, 2015). The English language subject is taught by non-native speakers who sometimes struggle with the English language themselves (Almaeena, 2014; Al-Nasser, 2015). The translation method is most commonly used whereby teachers translate the contents of the textbook

into Arabic and students are simply required to rote memorise the words and their meanings in English, without needing to understand (Al-Nasser, 2015; Pullen, 2009; Sofi, 2015). Students rarely use English in authentic or real-life situations and rarely have the opportunity to utilise and consolidate what they learn due to the context of Saudi society as an Arabic speaking country (Sofi, 2015). Hence, once Saudi students reach university, their grasp of the English language is often weak (Qahtani, 2018).

This situation has meant that most Saudi universities run a one-year intensive English language program for students (preparatory year) before they can commence an undergraduate degree program. The quality of these university level English language programs varies between universities and regions throughout Saudi Arabia. Unlike Saudi secondary schools, Saudi universities usually endeavour to recruit native-English speaking or suitably qualified instructors and are often equipped with better resources; however, recently, with the strong implementation of the Saudisation of jobs policy and the large numbers of Saudi graduates returning from abroad, university English language centres will soon be staffed by predominantly Saudi English language instructors. Hence, the success of these programs will depend heavily upon whether these instructors utilise teaching methods that

maximise student engagement and avoid translation, as well as being dependent on learner attitudes and motivation levels.

(c) Bureaucratic Obstacles

The organisation and functioning of Saudi Arabia's government departments have failed to keep pace with the rapid development of its economy. Despite modern buildings and access to the latest technology, government departments are run according to formal sets of rules that are onerous, largely unnecessary and outdated, thereby reducing the efficiency of their operations (Al-Jassem, 2013). In the higher education sector, this impacts researchers who sometimes face bureaucratic obstacles to accessing or ordering equipment or getting permission to attend conferences abroad (Alami, Bhatti, & Dumalaon, 2014). Therefore, bureaucratic obstacles contribute to an environment that discourages academic returnees from optimally utilising the new knowledge and skills they acquired abroad. Academic returnees faced with a constant struggle to access the necessary equipment and resources to conduct quality research or implement more effective teaching strategies may find it too cumbersome to continue pushing for change.

(d) Corruption within Saudi Universities

Corruption within Saudi Arabia's universities is an issue that can affect staff and students and can pose challenges for higher education reform in the Kingdom. Corruption in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia takes on a variety of forms. These include the use of connections to secure employment, as well as job promotions and academic qualifications ('wasta' in Arabic). There is also systemic and societal pressure on teachers to pass students, regardless of their levels of competency.

The concept of *wasta*, that is, the use of familial or tribal connections to gain employment, promotions or qualifications, has been discussed in Chapter 1. This is a problem that exists in higher education and other facets of life in Saudi Arabia and is a hindrance to higher education reform. It can prevent the most capable and qualified individuals from obtaining teaching and administrative positions, and it enable students to obtain degrees that they are not competent to hold.

A key strategy employed to ensure the social and political stability of Saudi Arabia is to keep its large population of youth actively engaged in work or study, which thereby adds pressure to universities to enrol and graduate high numbers of students. With more than 60% of the Saudi population under the

age of 30 (Chulov, 2017) and high unemployment rates, there is significant pressure on faculty and staff within Saudi universities to facilitate student success (Ahmed, 2016).

Further, conceptions of cheating and plagiarism are often viewed through a cultural lens and as such are often not clearly defined within higher education policy in Saudi Arabia. Ryan (2007) states that "… the academic construct of a scholar or researcher owning words and ideas may seem unnatural, nonsensical, or even ethically indefensible".

It was a culture shock for me to observe a very blasé attitude towards plagiarism among students and teachers while teaching at university in Saudi Arabia, as plagiarism is taken very seriously in Western higher education institutions. At this time, university policies on plagiarism were virtually non-existent (Heitman & Litewka, 2011; Matson, 2012). Thus, the only recourse I had to curb this practice was to try and convince students that it was morally wrong. Whenever I raised the issue of plagiarism with my colleagues, they were perplexed as to why I was taking such a seemingly minor and irrelevant issue so seriously. However, despite the widespread acceptance and practice of plagiarism in Saudi universities, there have been an increasing number of Saudi voices calling for reform in this area.

Saudi female blogger, Maha Elahi (2010), stated: "We are not a thinking society and hence, we don't consider stealing ideas a theft…". Further, she said:

> In a society that has such a careless attitude towards plagiarism, I don't blame students who cheat from the internet or during exams! What they see in their supposed-to-be educational surrounding encourages them to lead an academic/professional life of 'copy and paste' without a feel of guilt or shame. (Elahi, 2010).

Al-Sibai (2014) reported from Dr. Sahar Al-Khashrami, professor of special education at King Saud University, the profound impact that plagiarism can have on the development of higher education in the Kingdom:

> Unfortunately academic fraud and cheating is very common in the Kingdom and it takes on many forms. Getting excellent but undeserved grades in school, getting a promotion at work, copying research papers, and obtaining a forged degree are all forms of cheating. As long as universities and institutions refuse to address plagiarism, fraud, and cheating as serious crimes, these activities will continue in our society. (Al-Sibai, 2014, para 17)

It is apparent that over the past few years Saudi citizens have become much more vocal about their frustrations regarding corrupt practices, making it increasingly taboo in Saudi society and triggering government action to tackle it. A case in point is the removal of the civil service minister Khaled Al Araj, who is said to have exploited his position to employ his son ("Saudis celebrate removal of minister who exploited position to employ son," 2017). If this positive trend continues, there will be increased transparency and accountability in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia; staff and student selection and progress will be merit-based and higher education in the Kingdom will ultimately prosper.

(e) Academic Dishonesty among Saudis Studying Abroad

Academic dishonesty among Saudis studying abroad prevents the acquisition of the knowledge and skills required to positively contribute to the Saudi higher education sector and undermines the scholarship goals, thereby inhibiting higher education reform in the Kingdom. Chapman and Lupton (2004) state that "academic dishonesty in post-secondary education is a widespread, insidious and global problem" (p. 425).

The issue of student cheating is one of the most challenging issues faced by educational institutions around the world. Cheating is not dependent on

nationality, cultural or linguistic background or whether students have domestic or foreign student status. However, in the case of Saudi scholarship holders, the progress and development of the nation relies on the attainment of the knowledge and skills that the government has sent its citizens abroad to acquire.

There are a range of factors that contribute to academic dishonesty among Saudis studying abroad. These include the struggle to learn English and complete university-level courses in a foreign language, difficulty adapting from the traditional rote-learning style and cultural conceptions of plagiarism and cheating.

In 2012 the Saudi Gazette newspaper published an eye-opening article titled "To cheat, any which way you can…". This article discusses the problem of cheating among Saudi students studying abroad. The article praises the goals of the scholarships program and states, "unfortunately, not every young adult selected for a scholarship views it as an opportunity to study and work hard. Some are cheating their way to a degree" (Ba-Isa, 2012, para 3).

The article then narrates a troubling example of academic fraud involving a Saudi student studying at a British university. The student's father, a wealthy

businessman, approached a well-known IT company in Saudi Arabia to purchase an eCommerce website created from scratch for his son's course assignment. When the staff realized what the website was for they made it clear to the father that they did not want the job. One of the IT staff members stated, "as a recent graduate from a US university I've seen how much cheating is going on. I know one guy that had an online service write every assignment" (Ba-Isa, 2012, para 13).

The Saudi father's assistance to his son in the act of cheating in an assignment may indicate a collectivist, cultural conception of cheating. Saudi Arabia has a collectivist culture (Country Comparison, 2017), where individuals strive for the advancement of the 'group', rather than simply for the advancement of one's self. Hence, in the context of studying abroad, a husband who completes his wife's assignment for her or a friend who shares his test answers with a compatriot, may view their actions in the sense that they are helping with the advancement of members of their group (e.g. family / tribe / country) (Matson, 2012). However, in an individualist culture, each person is considered responsible for their own advancement and thus, this type of 'assistance' is viewed negatively by society.

Therefore, a student's cultural framework can clearly affect how they view the concept of academic dishonesty and can influence the way that they approach the fulfillment of their assessment requirements, as well as how they deal with their family members or compatriots who may be struggling with their studies abroad. Academic dishonesty among Saudi students is a highly important phenomenon for stakeholders to consider. Ba-Isa (2012) states that "cheating students will return to Saudi Arabia without skills and yet their graduation certificates will enable them to sit in positions of responsibility where their decisions could harm us all" (para 5).

Academic dishonesty is an issue that perhaps has the greatest potential to undermine the benefits of the scholarships program and higher education reform. Academics are sent abroad to study in crucial fields, such as medicine, pharmacy and engineering. Academic dishonesty does not only impact on specific fields of knowledge, but on the overall progress of higher education. Overseas qualifications are held in such high esteem in Saudi Arabia that Saudi academic returnees are often quickly promoted into administrative / leadership positions upon their return from study abroad.

(f) The Commoditisation of International Higher Education

Pressure on university faculty and staff to pass students is an issue that is not just confined to universities in Saudi Arabia. Global economic pressures and the major financial contribution of international higher education to university revenues has meant that faculty and staff at universities globally are facing a similar kind of pressure (Chang, 2015).

There is a wealth of literature detailing concerns about the commoditisation of international tertiary education and the pitfalls of education for profit (Altbach, 2002; Habu, 2000; Noble, 1998). A 2012 survey of Saudi graduates that aimed to shed light on the issue of why 'a large number of young Saudis spend between three to five years in the UK to attend university and many of them graduate and return home with university degrees, yet they still have poor English language skills' (Al-Sibai, 2012), also raised the issue of unethical practices among host institutions in the UK:

> The problem is that many of these English language schools are commercial in nature and their main goal is financial gain and they fail to give the Saudi student the head start he/she needs to dive into the English language. (Al-Sibai, 2012, para 3)

Similar sentiments have been echoed by Japanese students studying in the UK:

> I no longer believe in the value of an MA in this country (UK) now that I have done one myself… The University tends to give foreign students degrees regardless of what they do. Even though their dissertations were no good, the supervisor rewrites them and makes them acceptable… People say that there is pressure not to fail overseas students, whom it relies on financially, it would be difficult to recruit students for the following years. (Habu, 2000, p. 59)

Since 2010, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has narrowed the universities that scholarship holders can attend abroad to a specified list of approved institutions and has also set quotas on the number of Saudi students that can attend each approved university (Tronsoun & Le Grand, 2010). This decision affected a number of American, British and Australian universities, who lost a significant number of enrolments of Saudi students as a result.

> On the advice of the Saudi Cultural Mission in Canberra, the Saudi Minister for Higher Education Khaled bin Mohammed al Ankary has directed its universities to limit international scholarships for trainee

academics to those studying at Australia's so-called Group of Eight.

(Tronsoun & Le Grand, 2010, para 6)

Concerns over education quality led the Ministry to select universities based on their international reputation or ranking (Smith, 2015). Additionally, student quotas were put in place because it was found that high numbers of Saudi students enrolled in the same program had a negative impact on the students' learning (Tronsoun & Le Grand, 2010). When Saudi students are placed in the same class as their compatriots, they are prone to communicate in their native language (rather than in English), limiting their cross-cultural interactions and second language socialisation (Collett, 2010; Morita, 2012; Summers & Volet, 2008; Tan & Goh, 2006). Thus, the measures taken by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education in cooperation with the Saudi cultural missions abroad indicate that they are actively implementing measures to ensure that scholarship holders receive the optimal quality of education abroad. I am not aware of any follow-up studies that have been conducted to evaluate whether these measures were effective in improving the educational outcomes for Saudis studying abroad.

(g) Lack of Freedom of Thought and Expression

> According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of
> expression is the right of every individual to hold opinions without
> interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas
> through any media and regardless of frontiers. (Freedom House, 2017).

Restrictions on individual freedom to question, analyse, criticise and to openly express one's views, creates an environment of fear and conformity, which serves to inhibit institutional reform and improvement. Although freedom of thought and expression is a fundamental human right, this right is not a given in Saudi Arabia. The Human Rights Watch, World Report 2017 affirms that freedom of expression is still highly restricted in Saudi Arabia. This situation poses difficulties for higher education reform in Saudi Arabia, as the freedom to question, examine, explore, scrutinise and critique the world around us is essential for promoting an academic culture that encourages honest and useful research.

The Saudi government is clearly aware that freedom of thought and expression are essential ingredients for a thriving research culture; this is why the private research university, KAUST, established in 2009, was structured very differently to Saudi's other universities and was granted immunity from a

number of restrictions that normally would apply. The university is headed and staffed by largely foreign experts from around the world and has state-of-the-art facilities (Selingo, 2011), there is greater academic freedom (Butler, 2015) and scrutiny from religious clerics is off limits (Joffe-Walt, 2009).

2.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided the background information needed to understand the context within which the present study is situated. This information is vital to achieving a meaningful understanding of the issues that this study explores, which include the impact of postgraduate study abroad on the knowledge, skills and ideas of sponsored Saudi academics, as well as the challenges they face after their return from abroad. It also helps readers to deconstruct their preconceived and ethnocentric views on life in Saudi Arabia and facilitates a better appreciation of the participants' experiences from their perspective. Further, it facilitates an informed view of the status of Saudi men and women and shows from a cultural and historical perspective, the progress that has been made in the Saudi social, economic, and educational spheres, as well as some of the issues that remain. Finally, it sheds light on Saudi Arabia's higher education reform efforts, the barriers to reform and the possible future direction of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

The next chapter reviews the research literature related to the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by sponsored academics from a range of countries after returning from postgraduate study abroad.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This review examines previous research on the experiences of academics who completed their postgraduate studies abroad and returned to work in their home countries' higher education sector. Specifically, it focuses on what is known about the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by academics after postgraduate study abroad, and the implications of these for higher education reform in returnees' home countries. An extensive search was conducted that yielded relatively few studies on the returnee experiences of sponsored academics in general and only one known qualitative study that examines the experiences of Saudi academic returnees specifically. Of the scarce extant literature, some studies date back several decades to the 70s and 80s and relate to a range of cultural contexts. The present study seeks to build on current knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by sponsored Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad and the impact of these on higher education reform in Saudi Arabia.

The related literature is dominated by studies concerning the experiences of Chinese academic returnees who were self-funded students abroad, although

much can be learned from their reentry experiences. There are a small

number of studies that examine the experiences of graduate returnees from

various countries and cultural contexts, including Brazil, Malaysia, Thailand,

Korea, Japan and Saudi Arabia. Most of the studies related to Saudi Arabia

do not focus on *academic* returnees specifically, although a small portion of

the participants were academics.

International higher education contributes a massive amount of revenue to

the economies and host institutions of receiving countries (Altbach & Knight,

2007; Hare, 2016). Hence, there has been considerable interest from a range

of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and anthropology, in the

acculturation and adjustment experiences of foreign students whilst they are

abroad (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, & Le Metais, 2006; Takeuchi, 2008). On the

other hand, sending countries rarely conduct any formal studies to evaluate

the effectiveness of the scholarships programs in achieving their stated goals

(Engberg, 2014; Rumbley, 2014). For instance, Takeuchi (2008) asserts that

prior to her research, no previous study had been conducted on the

experiences of male or female Thai academic returnees. This chapter

presents a review of the literature related to the personal and professional

benefits and challenges experienced by academics after postgraduate study

abroad, as well as the factors affecting the efficacy of study abroad scholarships programs for academics.

3.2 BENEFITS FOR ACADEMIC RETURNEES

Sponsored academics who obtain their postgraduate qualifications from abroad experience a range of personal and professional benefits that are often only fully realised once they return (Potts, 2016). These benefits can potentially be transferred to their home country universities in the form of innovative ideas, more effective teaching techniques, and increased knowledge and research capacities (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Potts (2016) states that investigating the personal and professional impacts of study abroad on returnees "is the most difficult research to undertake both logistically, in terms of contacting former participants, and methodologically, considering many other factors that need to be taken into account in the analysis" (p.7). The present study intends to mitigate some of these difficulties with the etic and emic positioning of the researcher, which enabled firsthand familiarity and experience with the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia, and a unique access to both male and female Saudi academic returnees. The key benefits of postgraduate study abroad that were identified in the related literature include improved knowledge, skills and attitudes, intercultural

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competence, improved English language skills, higher salaries, and fast-tracked job promotions.

3.2.1 Improved knowledge, skills and attitudes

The scarcity of research on sponsored academics' learning outcomes after postgraduate study abroad and the rate of timely course completion being the main indicator of the success of the scholarships programs used by sending countries, suggest that an in-depth understanding of academics' technical knowledge and skills has not been a major priority (Engberg, 2014). In fact, very few studies have deeply investigated the nature and extent of the knowledge and skills that sponsored academics acquire as a result of postgraduate study abroad (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, & Le Metais, 2006; Szkudlarek, 2010). Further, Shin, Jung, Postiglione, and Azman (2014), state that while returnees with foreign degrees from advanced Western countries tend to be perceived as "well trained and more research productive", this commonly held belief "is rarely tested with empirical data" (p. 467). Hence, present knowledge with respect to the personal and professional benefits of postgraduate study abroad is limited.

For instance, the related literature demonstrates that foreign educated Chinese academics are strongly believed to possess superior technical

knowledge and skills compared to those who are locally trained (Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Grove, 2016; Wang, 2014). However, these studies do not refer to any observation, inventory or in-depth discussion with overseas academics to identify the tangible differences in the knowledge, skills and practices of overseas trained academics, as compared with their locally trained counterparts. There is, however, additional support for this contention. Xu (2009) conducted a review of papers published in two representative Chinese journals over a three-year period and found a significant increase in the quantity and quality of research, stating that this was "much due to the contributions made by the Western educated returnees" (p. 29).

Conversely, Shin, Jung, Postiglione, and Azman (2014) conducted a broad quantitative study, which surveyed 1942 returnee academics based in Korea, Hong Kong and Malaysia and measured the research output of returnee academics over a three-year period in refereed journals, authored or edited books and book chapters that were identified in the survey data. Interestingly, the study "found that foreign degree holders are not more research productive than their colleagues with domestic degrees" (p. 467). This finding indicates the need for further research on the benefits of postgraduate study abroad, as to date these have largely been assumed by sponsoring countries and

employers of academic returnees (Engberg, 2014; Rumbley, 2014; Shin, Jung, Postiglione, and Azman, 2014).

Namgung (2008) conducted a comprehensive mixed methods case study involving four Korean universities that investigated the impact of returned scholars on Korean higher education, surveying 75 locally trained and 152 overseas trained Korean academics, as well as conducting 57 in-depth interviews involving 1 official, 6 administrators, 12 heads of school, and 38 academic staff. Namgung (2008) found that Korean academic returnees acquired "research and work experience in advanced research areas" whilst they were abroad and subsequently became "direct sources of Korean knowledge developments" (p. 8). Further, Namgung (2008) stated that Korean academic returnees' contributions to the activities of "teaching, conference attendance, publication, conducting international research projects, supervising students' international research projects, receiving financial support and conducting research collaboration with overseas scholars" (p. 9), were greater overall, than that of locally trained academics, although there was some variance in the results according to the home university in focus.

Zahrani (1986) surveyed 164 male Saudi overseas graduates (50% with

postgraduate degrees) from a range of professional backgrounds who had

returned to Saudi Arabia a minimum of 2 years prior to the study. He also

surveyed 48 work supervisors of Saudi overseas graduates and interviewed

10 Ministry officials. Zahrani found that the returnees demonstrated improved

professional conduct, including greater punctuality, being more responsible

and having an improved work ethic. Supervisors reported that the graduates

had also obtained specific tangible benefits, such as "modern expertise in

medicine, engineering, electronics, teaching, and research" (Zahrani, 1986, p.

125).

Alandejani's (2013) qualitative study involving five female Saudi academic

returnees, found that participants had adopted a learner-centred teaching

style; less power distance between the teacher and student; were less

focused on written examinations and tended to use more formative and

informal assessment methods; and were more attentive to students' learning

needs after postgraduate study abroad. The participants also reported

enhanced interpersonal skills, being less judgmental of others, as well as

greater confidence and independence after postgraduate study abroad.

Takeuchi (2008) conducted a mixed methods study that included in-depth interviews with 10 Japanese and 10 Thai female returnees who completed their postgraduate studies abroad, as well as surveys with 42 Japanese and 46 Thai females who were currently engaged in postgraduate study abroad. Like Alandejani (2013), Takeuchi (2008) found that female academic returnees were more independent and assertive after postgraduate study abroad.

Most of the research cited herein has been conducted from an emic perspective and used a variety of quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Further, scant attention has been given to gender-based differences in the benefits experienced by returnee academics, which is unsurprising given that several of these studies were conducted with participants of a single gender (Alandejani, 2013; Takeuchi, 2008; Zahrani, 1986). In addition, most studies tended to brush over the benefits of postgraduate study abroad without providing in-depth information, regardless of their methodological approach. This may be because studies on academic returnees have largely been concerned with the challenges they experience on return, rather than with the benefits of postgraduate study abroad (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Chen, 2015; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Namgung, 2008; Szkudlarek, 2010; Takeuchi, 2008). In the present study, the

personal and professional benefits of postgraduate study abroad is an area

that will be focused on extensively, taking a broad view of participants'

learning journey before, during and after postgraduate study abroad.

3.2.2 Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence refers to "the ability to develop targeted knowledge,

skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are

both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions" (Deardorff, 2006,

as cited in McKinnon, n.d.). Intercultural competence is given considerable

importance by both sending and receiving countries and is an expected

attribute of international students who graduate from Australian universities

(Shepherd & Rane, 2012).

McKinnon (n.d.) notes that intercultural competence cannot be acquired over

a short space of time and "is not a naturally occurring phenomenon", but

something that needs to be explicitly taught (p. 1). Further, she states that

"critical reflection" is an important means by which intercultural competence is

achieved (p. 1). The role of critical reflection in achieving intercultural

competence can be demonstrated with an example from Tagg (2014), who

conducted a qualitative study involving five male and four female Malaysian

academic returnees. When discussing a compulsory pre-departure program

designed to increase sponsored Malaysian academics' loyalty to their country

and increase the chances of their return, one participant reflected on how

study abroad had impacted their worldview. He said, it "makes most of them

[academics] when they go abroad, get exposed more and then opens [our]

mind[s] about the truth about our country" (p. 54). Thus, the participant

engaged in critical reflection and subsequently developed an appreciation for

an alternative way of life to what he was accustomed, particularly the political

freedoms and conditions that existed in the host country.

Some studies have reported that academic returnees' intercultural knowledge

and skills have been utilised to benefit the home universities in various ways

(Chen, 2015; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001; Malczewska-Webb, 2014; Namgung,

2008; Shepherd & Rane, 2012; Tagg, 2014). For instance, according to Chen

(2015) who conducted a qualitative study involving 52 Chinese academic

returnees, participants reported becoming more "open-minded, mature and

independent, tolerant", and had a "better understanding of culture," and were

more "internationally aware" (p. 92) after postgraduate study abroad.

Namgung (2008) surmised that Korean academic returnees' "long–term

foreign experience should assure a high degree of international and

intercultural competency" (p. 8). Further, he cites as evidence of returnees'

intercultural competence, their involvement in "the development of

international strategies and implementation" and the fact that "the directors of [the] international offices" of the Korean universities included in his study, were all returnees (p. 11). However, statements like "improved cross-cultural awareness" and "should assure a high degree of … intercultural competency" do not reveal the extent of individual levels of intercultural competence or the extent of intercultural competence across the cohort of academic returnees, or how intercultural competence may differ according to age, academic discipline, cultural background, or gender. The present study intends to take an in-depth look at participants' levels of intercultural competence and how this may be influenced by age, discipline and gender.

Other studies have found that international students tend to remain within their own cultural groups and rarely socialise with students from the host culture (Summers & Volet, 2008; Ward, 2001), forgoing valuable opportunities to enhance their intercultural competence and improve their oral communication skills. For instance, Shepherd and Rane's (2012) study of Arab students studying in Australia found that these students were highly selective in the way they interacted with Australian cultural norms and social institutions due to a worldview heavily influenced by culture and religion. Sponsored Saudi students tend to stick strongly within their own cultural group whilst abroad (Ngow, 2013; Welikala, 2015). This strong cultural bond

among Saudi students and the type of thinking about the host culture is exemplified by an excerpt from Alandejani's (2013) study, where a female Saudi academic said: "I still talk to my friends in America—not the Americans, forget it, they are not long-term friendships—the Arabs are" (Alandejani, 2013, p. 82). Commonalities in language, culture and religion tend to draw international students of the same or similar cultures together, leading to limited interactions outside of their cultural group (Summers & Volet, 2008).

Therefore, whilst intercultural competence is a highly anticipated and demonstrated outcome of study abroad, the nature and extent of overseas graduates' intercultural knowledge and skills has not been fully explored. As such, the present study uses a qualitative case study approach to obtain in-depth information about the types of cultural knowledge and skills that sponsored Saudi academics obtain abroad and the ways that these are used to benefit their home country higher education sector.

3.2.3 Improved English language skills

Along with the acquisition of technical knowledge and skills, and intercultural competence, another highly anticipated and sought-after benefit of study abroad is the acquisition of English language skills (Rumbley, 2014). The related literature indicates that academic returnees regardless of nationality,

acquire improved English language skills as a result of their postgraduate study abroad (Chen, 2015; Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015; Namgung, 2008; Takeuchi, 2008; Xu, 2009). In an increasingly globalised world, the English language has become a highly desirable asset within non-English speaking countries, particularly in the fields of higher education and business (Naved, 2015). English is widely accepted as the language of science and technology and is essential for accessing the most up-to-date research and knowledge in a range of fields (Foyewa, 2015). Hence, in Saudi Arabia, the majority of tertiary level courses at public universities are offered in English, even though the national language is Arabic (Almaeena, 2014). Academics require a strong command of the English language to access the latest knowledge in their field, to publish in international journals, and to extend their knowledge by interacting with global experts, international professional networks and international programs.

The related research identifies some of the benefits of improved English language skills for returnees and home institutions but does not provide information about the extent of returnee academics' language improvement or their before and after proficiency levels. For instance, Hilal, Scott and Maadad (2015) stated that sponsored Saudi students achieve "competency in the English language" (p.261). Namgung (2008) mentioned that "foreign-

educated scholars have better opportunities to develop academic

relationships with colleagues in other countries because of their previous

connections with foreign academics and language skills" (p. 2) and "the

usefulness of their foreign experience and foreign language fluency in

research and teaching are also practical in administrative work" (p. 11). Tagg

(2014) mentioned that "there was a widespread belief that significant

academic and non-academic benefits were associated with completing an

overseas-based doctorate" (p. 57), that extend beyond acquiring good

English language skills. Xu (2009) alluded to Chinese academic returnees'

English language skills in a discussion about whether returnees should

publish in Chinese or international journals. Hence, the related literature does

not provide an in-depth understanding of the extent of academic returnees'

English language acquisition or the ways that their newly acquired English

language skills have been used to benefit their home institutions.

Further, a number of studies suggest that English language acquisition is one

of the greatest hurdles for international students (Andrade, 2009; Ashton-Hay,

Wignell, & Evans, 2016). This raises important questions about the impact of

limited English language skills on the academic progress and intercultural

learning of overseas students, and their levels of English language proficiency

at the completion of their studies abroad. Li and Campbell (2006) conducted a

study of Asian international students in New Zealand and found that "the language barriers prevented Asian students from effectively communicating with lecturers and other students, listening to lectures, following instructions, understanding assessment criteria and procedures, completing assignments, doing exams and tests, and socialising with domestic residents" (p. 303). Zahrani (1986) mentions that a "lack of English language proficiency was the most important difficulty encountered by Saudi students" (p. 88) abroad. The Saudi Gazette newspaper reported that a large number of sponsored Saudi students return home at the completion of their studies abroad with weak English language skills (Al-Sibai, 2012). The Saudi Ministry of Higher Education was aware of this situation and subsequently made changes to their scholarship rules to prevent Saudis from enrolling in institutions outside of the world's top universities and also set quotas on the number of Saudis that could enrol in English language programs within the same institution (Tronsoun & Le Grand, 2010). It is unknown whether these measures have led to improvements in Saudi students' learning outcomes, particularly their acquisition of the English language.

The reality is that the majority of overseas students tend to successfully complete their studies abroad, despite the fact that so many struggle with the English language. The Saudi Minister of Higher Education reported that the

failure rate among all Saudis sponsored to study abroad was a consistently low 2 percent over an 8-year period (2005-2013) (Saudi king's scholarship program, 2013). One factor contributing to the low failure rate amongst sponsored students could be that the majority are sent abroad to study in the fields of "science, technology, engineering and mathematics" (Rumbley, 2014, para 6). Vinke and Jochems (1993) found that "on the whole, the level of foreign language proficiency required for academic success tends to be lower for technology and natural sciences than for social sciences or the humanities" (p. 277).

Therefore, the related research indicates that overall postgraduate study abroad has a positive impact on academics' English language proficiency. English language acquisition has also been identified within the literature as one of the greatest hurdles faced by international students. However, the literature about sponsored academics cursorily deals with the issue of academics' English language proficiency at the completion of their studies abroad. Thus, the present study intends to contribute to the body of knowledge with respect to the impact of postgraduate study abroad on sponsored academics' English language development, by exploring participants' self-reported before and after study abroad English language abilities, together with my own observations at the time of interview.

3.2.4 Fast-tracked promotions, higher salaries and enhanced social standing

An advanced degree from a Western country with a reputable university system is highly regarded in countries that seek to develop their higher education systems using higher education abroad (Rumbley, 2014; Shin, Jung, Postiglione, & Azman, 2014). The research indicates that foreign educated academics who return to emerging higher education systems often enjoy speedy promotions and higher salaries as a result of their new credentials (Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Grove, 2016; Wang, 2014; Xu, 2009). China's recent higher education reform efforts have meant that Chinese academic returnees now receive higher salaries and generous state funding for research (Wang, 2014). Chinese academics can also expect better career opportunities and faster promotions compared with locally trained academics (Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Grove, 2016; Wang, 2014; Xu, 2009). Further, Xu (2009) states that the variances in salary and performance expectations of Chinese locals compared to returnees has been the cause of internal tensions. Gama & Pederson (1977) similarly found that Brazilian academic returnees felt that their locally trained colleagues were jealous of them, because of their rapid promotions and other advantages. Takeuchi (2008) reports that a Western education is highly regarded in Thai society and directly enhances an individual's social status. Indian returnees

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who have graduated from elite foreign universities can expect greater job prospects than locally trained academics, albeit with less financial reward than would be received abroad (Altbach, 2014). Tagg (2014) states that Western educated Malaysian academics enjoy rapid promotions to senior positions, which is not surprising given that less than half of faculty employed at public Malaysian universities hold a PhD degree, according to Tagg (p. 40). Shepherd and Rane (2012) found that Arab students undertaking postgraduate study in Australia held an expectation of certainty that they would be promoted to superior roles when they returned from abroad, quoting one PhD candidate who said, "I will get a promotion to professor from senior lecturer" (Shepherd & Rane, 2012, p. 2). Further, Saudi Arabian academics are some of the highest paid academics in the world (MacGregor, 2008). Zahrani's (1986) study found that 66% of Saudi returnees perceived that their social standing had been enhanced by having a degree from the United States and 92% of returnees' supervisors perceived that returnees' social standing had been enhanced, and also that their United States' degrees had improved their chances of obtaining their current positions.

Therefore, postgraduate study abroad results in a range of personal and professional benefits for academic returnees, including improved technical knowledge and skills, changes in attitudes and values, intercultural

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competence, improved English language skills, higher salaries, and fast-tracked job promotions. Many of these benefits have the potential to be passed onto home universities. However, most of the related research to date has provided only a basic understanding of the benefits academics gain from abroad, indicating that there is a need for a more in-depth understanding of the nature and extent of the benefits of postgraduate study abroad. The present study intends to contribute to filling this gap in the relevant literature by taking an in-depth qualitative approach to exploring the personal and professional benefits experienced by Saudi academic returnees.

3.3 CHALLENGES FACED BY ACADEMIC RETURNEES

Most of the countries referred to in this literature review with respect to returnee academics who obtained postgraduate degrees from abroad, are classified as 'emerging market economies' (Pacheco & Martin, 2018). These economies are said to be "progressing toward becoming more advanced, usually by means of rapid growth and industrialization" (Erokhin, 2018, p. 99). Academic returnees from emerging economies who obtain their postgraduate qualifications abroad, have been found to face a number of personal and professional challenges when they return home. These challenges can inhibit the transfer of knowledge, skills, and ideas, as well as the production of quality research at home institutions. As mentioned in the section above,

much of the research that has been conducted on the post-scholarship

experiences of academics has been done from an emic perspective. This is

due to the emic researchers' ease of access to the research participants and

their familiarity with the research context (Potts, 2016). However, despite the

important advantages of the insider perspective, many of the countries that

sponsor their academics to study abroad are characterised by cultures that

curtail free speech and discourage criticism of their political and social realms

(Lesh, 2017; Tagg, 2014; Young, 2016). Thus, a major disadvantage of emic

research on the challenges faced by academic returnees is the potential for

participants to avoid breaching social taboos and not fully disclose their

thoughts and experiences on matters they perceive as contentious

(Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984). The present study, conducted from

both an etic and emic perspective, intends to overcome this limitation. The

challenges for academic returnees after postgraduate study abroad identified

within the literature include reverse culture shock, work culture shock, a lack

of research equipment and research culture, bureaucratic university

administrations, resistance to change by superiors, colleagues and students,

and a lack of freedom of expression.

3.3.1 Reverse culture shock

Research has found that re-entry experiences are often more difficult for returnees than the adjustment that is experienced going abroad (Milhouse, Asante & Nwosu, 2001). Al-Mehawes (1984) study of Saudi male graduate returnees identified "nine demographic characteristics that influence returnees' readjustment - age, marital status, wife in the United States, region of residence in Saudi Arabia, academic major, degree earned, number of years spent in the United States, financial position, and length of time back in Saudi Arabia" (pp.12-13). The significance of each of these nine factors was tested through a quantitative survey. Age was identified as a crucial factor affecting participants' adjustment to the host country, as well as their readjustment coming back home. "Younger students were found to undergo more change than older students" (p. 45) and "older returnees had less difficulty with readjustment factors compared to the younger returnees" (p.176). The study also identified that being accompanied by a spouse while studying abroad positively impacts the experiences of adjustment and readjustment for participants. The study further identifies that returnees' location within Saudi Arabia can positively or negatively impact returnees' readjustment experiences, as the provinces vary significantly "in many aspects such as climate, location, customs and traditions" (p. 45) and from my firsthand experience, in their levels of conservatism. Similarly, Zahrani's

(1986) study of Saudi returnees found that bachelor's degree holders are the least culturally prepared for study abroad, as did Alandejani (2013), Al-Mehawes (1984), Al-Musaiteer (2015) and Gama and Pederson (1977), and surmises that "this difference might be attributed to the youthfulness of those preparing for a bachelor's degree" (p. 86). Gama and Pederson (1977) found that younger scholarship recipients "experience a more intense and traumatic reentry crisis than older grantees (professors and lecturers)" (p. 47). The present study intends to further test this assertion.

In Alandejani's study (2013), the reverse culture shock identified to occur within the personal and professional lives of female Saudi academic returnees is quite unique to Saudi females. The lifestyle that female Saudi academic returnees lived abroad and the typical lifestyle of women in Saudi Arabia is a major contributing factor to their reverse culture shock. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia is a patriarchally structured society and Saudi women face many restrictions that they did not encounter abroad, such as, the need to obtain their guardians' permission to travel and receive medical treatment (Raghavan, 2017). However, women in Saudi Arabia also enjoy a number of perks that are absent from the average Western lifestyle, such as having maids and assistants to cook and clean and other helpers to run errands

outside the home, providing ample time for social and leisure engagements. For instance, one of Alandejani's (2013) participants stated:

> We came back and we saw how much people are dependent on others. What comes with it is this comfort, but there is also the waste of resources, energy, and effort. The whole concept of not doing it yourself becomes annoying. I think people are normally lazy, they need something to make them work and to move. I think the lifestyle here helps you to be even lazier than you are, because you don't have to take care of the house. You can sit and relax and just enjoy your time. (p. 73)

In addition to adjusting to the change in lifestyle given their newly formulated outlook, female Saudi academic returnees must also readjust to their traditional role and position within Saudi society and family structures, unlike their male counterparts. The present study intends to provide a platform where participants may feel that they can more openly share their experiences and thoughts on readjustment to the home culture, through in-depth interviews with me as a non-Saudi researcher, and thereby facilitate a deeper insight into the readjustment experiences of female and male Saudi academic returnees. Gama and Pederson (1977) found that Brazilian female returnees who studied in the United States faced more problems with

readjusting to their home country than their male counterparts. In particular, Gama and Pederson (1977) found that "men perceived themselves as being more adequate in coping with family expectations and in coping with family supervision. Women experienced more administrative red tape and found value conflicts with their family to be much more of a problem than men did" (p. 54). Hence, Gama and Pederson (1977) aptly conclude that "perhaps women change their values and feeling regarding interpersonal relationships and sexuality while in the United States, becoming more liberal, and experience problems readjusting to their families' more conservative values and life-style when they return" (p.55). This description of the re-acculturation process for female Brazilian academic returnees fits equally well for female Saudi academic returnees, which the present study will further examine. Interestingly, research by Takeuchi (2008) found that the reentry experiences of female Japanese academic returnees were easier than those of their male counterparts and only minor reverse culture shock was reported by female Thai returnees.

Therefore, the literature suggests that reverse culture shock is commonly experienced by individuals who have spent an extended amount of time abroad for study. Reverse culture shock can be more difficult for returnees to cope with than their initial shock of going abroad. Various factors have been

found to influence individuals' levels of reverse culture shock, including age, marital status, levels of dissimilarity between the home and host culture and gender. Women from traditional and conservative home cultures tend to experience a range of re-acculturation issues that their male counterparts do not. As the present study involves both male and female Saudi academics, it will highlight and compare apparent gender-based differences in Saudi academic returnees' experiences of reverse culture shock.

3.3.2 Work culture shock

Cao (2008) describes a process of *work culture shock* that Chinese academic returnees go through because of the marked differences between the work and research culture they were accustomed to abroad and the culture of universities in China. If the work culture at home is void of other like-minded academics with whom to share knowledge and ideas and seek help when needed, such an environment presents significant difficulties for academic returnees (Cao, 2008). In fact, Chen (2015) mentions at least two pertinent cases of suicide by Chinese academic returnees that were found to have resulted from work-related difficulties; Dr. Cao, a Harvard-educated returnee at Beijing's Renmin University committed suicide in March 2012 (p. 11), due to "work pressure and relationships with colleagues in his department" (p. 12) and in "2009, a 32-year-old returnee, Dr. Tu, at Zhejiang University, jumped to

his death, three months after he returned. In his death note, he wrote, 'The

reality of China's academic circles: [is] cruel, faithless and heartless….'" (The

Death of an Overseas Returnee, 2009, as cited in Chen, 2015, p. 104).

Gama and Pederson's (1977) study found that male and female Brazilian

academic returnees experienced serious difficulties adjusting to their work

environment and relatively few difficulties readjusting to their personal lives

with their families. Brazilian academic returnees reported "a lack of intellectual

stimulation, lack of facilities and materials, excessive red tape, lack of

opportunity and time to do research in their sponsoring universities", some

returnees also felt that their colleagues were jealous of them (p. 52).

The work challenges for female Saudi academic returnees highlighted in

Alandejani's (2013) study include, a lack of respect from their female students,

resistance from staff including leadership, jealously from colleagues, a lack of

punctuality of students and colleagues, a competitive atmosphere and no

team work, and being appointed to leadership positions that did not match

well with their qualifications.

Conversely, Takeuchi (2008) found that work culture shock was minimal for

female Japanese academic returnees due to the large number of academic

returnees working in Japan's higher education sector, which has created an environment of like-minded individuals. Similarly, Namgung (2008) states that "overall, Korean scholars who obtained their highest degree overseas were the majority" (p. 7) at many of Korea's universities, serving to reduce work culture shock.

Work culture shock is a phenomenon experienced by many academic returnees and can be exacerbated or minimised depending on the presence of like-minded individuals and support structures within the home work environment. The literature indicates that work culture shock is minimal for returnees whose home universities have a high proportion of overseas trained academics. There is also evidence to suggest that work culture shock can be extremely challenging for academic returnees who have little support. Work culture shock can be a significant obstacle to the transfer of knowledge and skills within such university environments. The present study intends to further explore this phenomenon with respect to male and female Saudi academic returnees, as currently only the female perspective is available.

3.3.3 Resistance to change by superiors, colleagues or students

According to Lucey (2004), resistance to change refers to a "restraining force" that seeks "to maintain the status quo" (p. 107). Resistance to change is

common in workplaces that are undergoing organisational transformation and can occur at multiple levels within these organisations, particularly when individuals feel that their security or status are at risk (Bolognese, 2002). Public universities in countries where the education sectors are tightly controlled by their governments and tend to play a key role in shaping the national identity of their societies, are particularly prone to this phenomenon. For instance, Lee (2006) notes that in contrast to "the academic traditions in the West, the governments in Southeast Asian countries have considerable power over higher education" (Cited in Tagg, 2014, p. 50). Further, "Brown (2007) argues that in Malaysia, rather than 'being taught a critical attitude to authority, [school] pupils are constantly barraged with terms such as respect (hormat), loyalty (kesetiaan), and obedience (taat)'" (Cited in Tagg, 2014, p. 57). Thus, the Malaysian education system plays a significant role in ensuring the stability of the ruling regime. Education serves a similar function in Saudi Arabia, that is, as a powerful indoctrination tool that ensures obedience to the ruling regime and the construction of a strong Saudi identity (Prokop, 2003; Vassiliev, 2013). Prokop (2003) states:

> Religious subjects in particular place heavy emphasis on rote learning; lessons are very repetitive and often use complex language not always appropriate to the age of the students. This philosophy of teaching

inculcates passivity, dependence, an a priori respect for authority and

an unquestioning attitude. (p. 80)

Like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, China is another country that tightly controls

its education sector, which likewise takes a rote learning approach that

encourages students to be passive and unquestioning (Ricci, 2015). Such

education systems are likely to experience transition difficulties and

resistance to change by staff and students who are accustomed to a long

legacy of this type of teaching and learning.

The literature indicates that resistance to change occurs at Chinese

universities, despite the Chinese government's efforts to attract talented

overseas academics back to China (Cao, 2008; Chen, 2015). Cao (2008)

describes a scenario where locally trained leaders of some of China's higher

education institutions have viewed returnees, who might be more

knowledgeable or capable, as threats to their positions and leadership.

Alandejani (2013) found that female Saudi academic returnees experienced

resistance to change from among their colleagues and students. Brazilian

academic returnees also reported a type of resistance to change when

describing their colleagues as displaying jealousy in the workplace (Gama &

Pederson, 1977). Resistance to change serves as an obstacle for academic

returnees in their efforts to implement new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. The present study intends to use an etic-emic approach to dig deeper and develop a more detailed understanding of how and why resistance to change affects returnee academics' abilities to transfer the new knowledge, skills and ideas they bring from abroad.

3.3.4 Obstacles to quality research

The literature reveals that many returnee academics complain about the poor state of research facilities, laboratories and the overall research environment within their home institutions. This has been the case for returnee academics from countries such as India, Korea, Brazil and Saudi Arabia (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Altbach, 2014; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Namgung, 2008).

Namgung (2008) reports that Korean academic returnees "listed 'scarce resources and poor facilities' as the second most important factor" that inhibited research (p. 12). While "excess teaching and administrative workload" were the main inhibiting factors (p. 12). Similarly, Brazilian academic returnees reported a "lack of intellectual stimulation, lack of facilities and materials, excessive red tape, lack of opportunity and time to do research in their sponsoring universities" (Gama & Pederson, 1977, p. 52)

Al-Mehawes (1984) found that male Saudi academic returnees "emphasised a lack of facilities and resources to conduct scholarly research once back in Saudi Arabia" (p.77). Zahrani (1986) also identified the need to provide Saudi academic returnees with "essential research tools, create an appropriate social climate to encourage research, and establish and maintain a professional network to keep contact with others interested in the same fields" (p. 132). Further, Alandejani's (2013) study found that female Saudi academics' "home institutions lack the appropriate environment and tools to help them transfer their acquired knowledge successfully" (p. ii).

Thus, the literature not only identifies a lack of research equipment and resources, but also mentions another equally important aspect that affects the research capacities of home country universities; that is, the *research culture*. Evans (2007) defines *research culture* as "shared values, assumptions, beliefs, rituals and other forms of behaviour whose central focus is the acceptance and recognition of research practice and output as valued, worthwhile and pre-eminent activity" (p. 2). A research culture that truly supports the conduct of quality research must permeate all levels of university management starting at the very top.

Another factor that significantly hinders the production of quality research is overly bureaucratic university administrations (Alandejani, 2013; Chen, 2015; Dickson, 2002; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Rathore, 2017). In practice, this means that academics can face significant hurdles when they require equipment, funding or resources to conduct research or to attend conferences interstate or abroad. Application processes to gain approval for such activities can be arduous, lengthy and subsequently prohibitive.

In the absence of suitable resources and a positive research culture, some universities have turned to unethical means to manufacture their research and boost their university rankings. Over the last decade China has rapidly increased its research output, yet has progressively earned a reputation for producing a large amount of fabricated research (Huang, 2017; Qui, 2010). Qui (2010) states that "Chinese universities often award cash prizes, housing benefits or other perks on the basis of high-profile publications, and the pressure to publish seems to be growing" (para 2). Whilst academic misconduct is not unique to the developing world, a lack of English language skills and the subsequent outsourcing of written work to be edited, as well as cultural views on plagiarism, are thought to play a partial role in this phenomenon (Smith & Koehlmoos, 2013).

A Saudi Arabian university has been in the spotlight for taking a different approach to enhancing its research record and boosting its rankings; a strategy that saw "King Abdulaziz University (KAU) ranked seventh in the world in mathematics — despite the fact that it didn't have a doctorate program in math until two years ago" (Messerly, 2014, para 3). KAU has a policy of aggressively recruiting professors with the most frequently referenced papers, as part of its "highly-cited researcher program" (para 9). These researchers are hired as adjunct professors on a temporary basis to collaborate on research projects with local researchers (Masserly, 2014). The researchers are also required to update their "Thomson Reuters' highly cited researcher listing to include a KAU affiliation" (para 13) and "occasionally publish some scientific journal articles with the Saudi university's name attached" (para 13), in exchange for extremely attractive remuneration packages. This situation is a possible symptom of the rapid rate at which Saudi Arabia has endeavoured to modernise its higher system. The first university in Saudi Arabia was opened in 1957 (Saudi Embassy Washington, n.d.), with rapid growth occurring in the Saudi higher education system in the last 20 years (Alamri, 2011; McKie, 2018). This means that Saudi universities are in their infancy relative to universities in other parts of the world that have evolved over centuries and have had the luxury of time to develop their systems, resources, human capital and reputations. Such a situation may be

putting pressure on Saudi Arabia's relatively new universities to find innovative ways to compete in the international higher education arena. The present study will be further exploring this phenomenon to better understand the impact of this rapid growth on the experiences of returnee Saudi academics.

The literature presents a number of obstacles that hinder academic returnees from producing quality and authentic research. The most basic obstacle is the lack of appropriate research equipment and the necessary resources to carry out research. Another serious obstacle to research is a lack of research culture. There is an absence of recognition within some institutions of the importance of research and academics are not provided adequate time away from teaching and administrative duties to conduct research. Further, overly bureaucratic university administrations have also played a key role in hindering the production of quality and authentic research, making application and approval processes arduous and prohibitive. Finally, some university environments foster an atmosphere in which academic misconduct flourishes by putting pressure on academics to rapidly produce research that can be published in reputable journals without providing them the necessary equipment or time. The present study seeks to extend current knowledge on the obstacles to quality research for male and female Saudi academic

returnees, including any apparent gender-based differences in academics' experiences.

3.3.5 Lack of freedom of expression

Freedom of expression refers to 'the power or right to express one's opinions without censorship, restraint, or legal penalty' (Mason, 2013). A number of countries are characterised by a lack of freedom of expression. For instance, China imposes severe restrictions on free speech, which permeate China's higher education system (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Cao (2008) reported that in China, it is not uncommon for Chinese social scientists to be arrested for conducting research on sensitive issues. Furthermore, the Chinese government's monitoring of the written and spoken ideas of its citizens, even extends to Chinese citizens who are studying abroad. This overseas monitoring of Chinese students has raised concerns in Australia in recent years, as it is believed to be having a negative impact on academic freedom at some of Australia's own universities (Lesh, 2017). In 2016, the Chinese government implemented new rules banning foreign media from publishing online (Young, 2016), further dampening China's research environment. In other words, Chinese citizens based in China cannot freely access foreign produced online publications, whether they be in the form of press, radio or television.

Tagg (2014), who conducted a study involving nine Malaysian academic returnees, had "three potential participants refuse to take part in the study" and noted that they may have been afraid to speak up because of the government's power over higher education (Lee, 2006, as cited in Tagg, 2014, p. 50). He further states that "indeed, in Malaysia, government university academics are considered civil servants and have limited freedom of speech" (p. 50). Tagg (2014) additionally notes that limitations on free speech in Malaysia also include "restrictions on what can be researched and what the academic community can express to the public" (Lee, 2006, as cited in Tagg, 2014, p. 50).

Al-Mehawes (1984) found that the Saudi male participants in his study were not willing to discuss readjustment challenges that were related to the political situation in Saudi Arabia. Alanadejani (2013) found among female Saudi academic returnees those who actively worked to preserve the status quo: "Nahla recommended that returning scholars should "think twice" before transferring their newly acquired knowledge and ask themselves if this knowledge will offend their culture or religion." (Alandejani, 2013, p. 84). Further, she said:

> There are people who come back to their country and reject everything and disguise who they really are. They reject their culture and want to

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live the culture they lived abroad. They want to be like the people of

the country they studied in... (Alandejani, 2013, p. 86)

It is important to note the situation in Saudi Arabia, whereby Saudi religion

and culture are two areas not open for public discussion; often described as

two of the *red line* topics in Saudi society (Hassan, 2017). Public critique of

these topics can lead to serious repercussions, such as imprisonment or

other forms of punishment (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The limited extant

literature indicates that in Saudi Arabia there is an atmosphere where

returnee academics might hesitate to transfer their new knowledge,

particularly when they feel that it could encroach the *red lines*. This hesitation

can go to such an extent that the returnee might choose to completely hide

their transformation from their compatriots altogether.

Hence, there is evidence that a lack of freedom of expression in certain

countries can pose a serious challenge for returnee academics, as it can

significantly hinder the transfer of new knowledge and ideas from abroad, as

well as stifle the production of relevant and authentic research at home

country universities. One of the advantages of the present study is my unique

positionality as a non-Saudi researcher with experience teaching in Saudi

universities, who is of the same faith-background as the participants. This

positionality may facilitate a more open discussion with participants on the impact of limited freedom of expression on academic returnees' professional practice and the transfer of their new knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad.

3.4 FACTORS AFFECTING THE EFFICACY OF STUDY ABROAD SCHOLARSHIPS PROGRAMS FOR ACADEMICS

In addition to the personal and professional challenges experienced by returnee academics, three key factors emerge from the relevant literature as having the potential to affect the efficacy of study abroad scholarships programs for academics. These factors include academic dishonesty, brain drain, and the failure of sponsoring governments and universities to fully capitalise on what academics have learned overseas.

3.4.1 Academic dishonesty

International students face a range of hurdles as a result of being in a new academic, cultural and linguistic environment. These hurdles include the task of learning a new language for communication and academic purposes, learning the rules and requirements of a new educational environment and learning how to function competently in a new cultural environment. Sometimes these challenges can seem insurmountable and have led to cases of intentional and unintentional academic dishonesty among international students (Qing, Harney, Stecklow, & Pomfret, 2016). Bista (2011)

reports that "when international students experience psychological, social, and academic pressures, they may be at greater risk of not following the standards and guidelines of American academic honesty requirements" (p. 164). Chapman and Lupton (2004) describe academic dishonesty as "a widespread, insidious and global problem" (p. 425). Simpson (2016) states that "concern over dishonesty among international students is growing" (p. 1).

Academic dishonesty can also occur because of different cultural perceptions of plagiarism, whereby utilising the intellectual work of others without acknowledging the source is acceptable in the home country but is not tolerated by the host institution (Chapman, Lupton, & Weiss, 2000; Marshall & Gary, 2006). Academic dishonesty can also be the result of language difficulties, for instance, when a foreign student engages the services of an external party to tidy up assignments and remove grammatical mistakes to the extent that the final product differs greatly from the student's original work. Such services target their advertising toward international students and are readily available online (O'Malley, 2016; Qing, Harney, Stecklow, & Pomfret, 2016). There is also the phenomenon of *rich kid syndrome* amongst certain groups of international students, whereby assignments and examinations are outsourced for a fee, in lieu of the effort or academic ability (Kampman, 2011; Zuo, 2015). Many cases of academic dishonesty are not detected or are

simply overlooked (O'Malley, 2016) and thus, the true scale of this phenomenon is not really known. However, the literature does identify that academic dishonesty is more common among international students than domestic students and is quite prevalent (Chapman, Lupton, & Weiss, 2000; O'Malley, 2016), which raises concerns about the quality of learning outcomes for overseas students.

Zuo (2015) reports that a high number of Chinese students studying at American universities are expelled each year, with the top three reasons being poor academic performance, academic dishonesty and lack of attendance respectively. The two key factors identified as contributing to this phenomenon were: irresponsible attitudes among Chinese students who look for inappropriate ways to achieve high scores, and poor academic discipline among some wealthy Chinese students who believe they can pay their way through their studies (Zuo, 2015).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Saudi students have also been found to engage in academic dishonesty for reasons that include different cultural perceptions of plagiarism, difficulties with learning English and a belief that it is acceptable to pay others to do the work for them. Kampman (2011) observed the latter issue in her research involving five female Saudi international students

studying at Portland State University in America. During in-depth interviews with the students, Kampman found that one of the students had her brother who was living in London complete her assignments for her and when another student was asked about her lack of note taking in lectures, she commented, "I don't need to learn that. I can pay someone to do it" (p. 33). Further, Kampman interviewed a person who had been hired as a private tutor for one of the participants to assist with her online Arts degree. The tutor had soon discovered that the female Saudi student did not actually want to be tutored, but rather expected the tutor to complete the online degree on her behalf. Kampman identifies this scenario as a case of transferring the cultural practices of the home university and a failure to adapt to the culture of the host university.

Family pressure has also been found to contribute to academic dishonesty. Qing, Harney, Stecklow, and Pomfret (2016) narrate the following explanation of a female Chinese international student who was caught cheating, as follows:

> "My family is very strict with me and has very high expectations for my grades," she said. Her mother teaches at a university back home in China, she said. "My mother's health is not good, too, and I didn't want

to disappoint her, which led me to make a wrong decision." (Qing,

Harney, Stecklow, & Pomfret, para 65, 2016)

Similarly, Saudi scholarship holders face significant pressure to pass their

overseas courses as the stakes are very high. A Saudi scholarship provides

recipients and their dependents with very generous benefits, including the full

payment of tuition fees, a monthly living allowance, medical and dental

coverage, annual roundtrip flights, and the continuation of salary for

government employees (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2013). The pressure

on scholarship holders to pass their courses comes not only from the

potential loss of such lucrative benefits, but also from the shame or

embarrassment that failure could bring upon the individual and their family

back home in Saudi Arabia; a collectivist and tribal society (Khoury & Kostiner,

1990). In collectivist societies, individuals view themselves as parts of a whole.

Within Saudi culture, the 'whole' is the individual's extended family and

sometimes their tribe as well (Triandis, 1995).

Therefore, the true extent of academic dishonesty among international

students is unknown, though the literature confirms that it is a serious

problem. Some international students find themselves overwhelmed by the

new cultural, educational and linguistic environment or face pressure due to

financial expenditures, family or sponsor expectations (Bista, 2011; Qing, Harney, Stecklow, & Pomfret, 2016). There is also the proliferation of online services that target their advertising toward international students and offer an easy solution to the stress and effort of completing assignments and exams (Kaktins, 2018). In some cases, wealthy sponsored students hail from a culture where money can buy academic success and this practice has been transferred from the home culture (Kampman, 2011; Zuo, 2015). Regardless of the reasons for academic dishonesty, its prevalence threatens the efficacy of government sponsorships programs and means that an unknown number of overseas graduates return home without possessing the knowledge, skills and values that they were sent abroad to acquire. This phenomenon is highly pertinent to the present study, which seeks to understand the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad, with a view to better understanding the wider implications of these for higher education reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study will further explore the issue of academic dishonesty with the research participants to better understand the nature and extent of this problem with respect to sponsored Saudi academics and the implications for higher education reform in Saudi Arabia.

3.4.2 Brain drain

Brain drain is a serious concern for countries that send their academics

abroad to develop their higher education sectors, as sponsored scholars can

potentially remain abroad after their studies are complete (Rumbley, 2014).

Brain drain refers to "the departure of educated or professional people from

one country, economic sector, or field for another, usually for better pay or

living conditions" (Bowe, 2017). The literature indicates overall that this is not

a significant problem for sponsored overseas students, though it is commonly

the case with self-funded students, such as those from China and India (Cao,

2008; Goyal, 2014; Takeuchi, 2008). Due to government initiatives to attract

Chinese intellectuals back to China, recent rates of Chinese students

returning after completing their studies abroad are up to 80% (ICEF Monitor,

2016).

In the case of sponsored Saudi students, there is anecdotal evidence that a

number of students remain abroad after the completion of their studies. I am

aware of a number of Saudis who have married Australian citizens and

remained in Australia after study abroad, in breach of their scholarship

conditions. Al-Melhem (2016) similarly mentions that a number of sponsored

Saudi students get married and remain in America after study abroad,

although he states that there are no reliable statistics to indicate the scale of this phenomenon, which largely applies to Saudi males.

On the other hand, there are also concerns about the phenomenon of brain drain among female Saudi academics (Jawhar, 2008; Wagner, 2011). Takeuchi (2008) similarly found that female Japanese academics were more likely to contemplate remaining abroad after the completion of their studies than their male counterparts. Nejad (2013) conducted a quantitative study on the effects of women's rights on the gender-gap in high-skilled migration, which found significantly higher rates of brain drain among highly-skilled women from developing countries. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, there are several reported examples of brain drain among prominent Saudi female intellectuals. However, to the best of my knowledge, there are currently no empirical studies that investigate the magnitude of brain drain among female Saudi academics. Interestingly, Nejad's (2013) study, which involved the analysis of migration data related to 195 countries, showed that brain drain was lowest amongst females who had the lowest levels of women's rights, yet even slight increases in these rights led to disproportionate levels of brain drain. In other words, although women who are afforded the least rights are logically expected to have higher levels of brain drain, these women often do not have the privilege, finances and

freedom to go abroad, thus their levels of brain drain are quite low. However, once the rights of women from developing countries are improved marginally, there is a massive increase in female brain drain according to Nejad.

Shepherd and Rane (2012) conducted a study of international students from a range of Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Libya and Oman and found that almost one hundred percent of these students intended to return home when they completed their studies, citing reasons such as, "my country needs me" (p. 2). Zahrani (1986) reported that rates of brain drain are particularly low for overseas educated Saudi males. Takeuchi (2008) found that female Japanese academic overseas graduates were more likely to remain abroad than Thai female graduates. Namgung (2008) reported "relatively high returning rates of Korean academics after completing" postgraduate studies abroad, compared with Chinese, Indian and Japanese overseas postgraduates" (p. 1). Namgung (2008) found that the main reasons why most overseas trained Korean academics returned home included a good job offer, commitment to family and a desire to contribute to their country's development. Tagg (2014) states that return rates for Malaysian academics is very high, except among the ethnically Chinese, due to "Malaysia's policy of promoting Malay unity" (Cummings, 1984, p. 255, as cited in Tagg, 2014, p. 47).

Therefore, brain drain can pose a serious risk to the efficacy of study abroad scholarships programs, when a country's most talented intellectuals choose to remain abroad. Although precise figures on the rates of brain drain from sponsoring countries are not available, the research indicates that it is relatively low. There are some concerns about the loss of female intellectual talent from sending countries, which could stifle women's intellectual contribution and ultimately slow the progress of women's rights within these countries. The present study intends to further explore this phenomenon with male and female Saudi academic returnees to develop a better understanding of the risk it poses to the Saudi higher education sector.

3.4.3 Failure to capitalise on what academics have learned overseas

The relevant literature identifies several key areas that have been overlooked by sponsors and have led to academic returnees' new knowledge, skills and ideas being under-utilised, inappropriately utilised or not utilised at all. Given the massive investment governments and universities make to train their academics abroad, this situation can equate to serious financial loss and affect the efficacy of study abroad scholarships programs for academics.

Zahrani's (1986) study of Saudi male overseas graduates (50% postgraduate) concluded that stricter selection criteria be used to choose scholarship recipients and pre-departure training be provided to ensure that recipients understand their role in the nation's development.

Al-Mehawes (1984) and Zahrani (1986) both suggested that a follow-up program be offered to returnees to assist with their readjustment to life and work in Saudi Arabia. Such a program, they assert, would reduce the levels of reverse culture shock and garner suggestions from returnees' about how institutions could make the most of what they learned abroad. These researchers also assert that if the challenges faced by Saudi returnees are not addressed, then much of the benefits of their study abroad would be lost. Such a follow-up program was suggested once again, 29 years later in Alandejani's (2013) study involving female Saudi academic returnees.

Al-Mehawes (1984) states that, "upon the return to their homeland, students attempt to put into practice what has been learned during their time abroad. In spite of the heavy investments of time and money, they have had to make this transition without the benefit of special programs designed to ease their re-entry" (p.9).

Alandejani (2013) states that, "the government is sending students with no preparation and receiving them back with no preparation. To prepare the student who is being shocked and thrown into a strange culture and then thrown back into her own culture is very hard" (p. 92).

Follow-up with returnees after postgraduate study abroad, as discussed by Saudi researchers Zahrani (1986), Al-Mehawes (1984) and Alandejani (2013), will be a significant focus of the present study.

Al-Mehawes (1984) also advises Saudi institutions to ensure that returnees are allocated to a job role that suitably matches the knowledge and skills of the returnee. This could be applicable to cases where the academic has studied abroad in an academic field that has not yet been developed at Saudi universities or when an academic returnee is given a senior position upon return without considering their level of professional experience and qualifications. The prevalence and impact of this phenomenon will be further explored in the present study.

Tagg (2014) found that there was "significant evidence to suggest that the pre-departure training programs failed to adequately prepare participants for their overseas study and, in some cases, also failed in their objective to foster

patriotism and encourage Malaysians to serve the nation upon graduation" (p. 58). Takeuchi (2008) raises a pertinent question about returnees' professional goals and reports that "the question of whether the students also regard themselves as media for transferring knowledge and skills from study abroad to their home countries has not been well researched" (p. 20). This question is highly pertinent and presents the rationale for the first research question in the present study, which enquires about sponsored Saudi academics' motivations for studying abroad with a view to checking the alignment with the scholarship goals.

Chen's (2015) comments on China's approach to higher education reform, provide some useful suggestions for other countries seeking to improve their higher education system. He states, "Many top universities are mimicking what American universities do by providing better resources, encouraging research and publications, and introducing the ideas of efficiency, competition, and accountability of faculty performance. In this way, the western model of higher education is greatly influencing the direction of university reforms in China" (p. 8).

Saudi Arabia has likewise focused much attention on building the capacity of its university infrastructure (Mohammed, 2013). However, the Saudi

government has used large-scale study abroad scholarships programs for over 40 years to enhance the human resource capacity of its citizens and the knowledge and research capacities of its universities (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Zahrani, 1986), yet it remains unclear how successful this strategy has been. The only indicator currently being utilised by the Saudi government to measure the success of the scholarships program is the number of scholarship recipients who complete their studies on time, "no other measurements have been put in place" (Engberg, 2014, p. 44).

The few studies that have looked at the benefits and challenges after postgraduate study abroad for Saudi returnees, identify a number of obstacles that prevent the transfer of knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad, including insufficient support provided to returnees and institutions that are not fully capitalising on what academics have learned overseas. Leading Saudi reformist, Mohammad Qahtani, stated that "'Saudi universities need to become independent of the government, and academic freedom needs to be respected.' 'Until then', says Mr. Qahtani, 'Let's say we transfer the whole Harvard University to Riyadh--it still wouldn't make a difference'" (Lindsey, 2011, para 7). This concurs with the notion that "changing culture is more significant and more difficult than changing structure"; it is easy to restructure an organisation, but "hard to reconfigure the hearts, minds and values of

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individuals" within the organisation (Robbins et al., 2008, as cited in Marchant, 2009, p.6).

Similarly, with respect to higher education reform in China, Chen (2015) states:

> It can be argued that it is relatively easy for the government to publicize a policy for attracting overseas talent, but far more difficult to alter the institutional culture to make it not only welcoming to returnees, but also conducive to their growth. Therefore, it is necessary for policy makers and university administrators to learn specific perspectives of the returned academics, and to hear their difficulties, needs, and suggestions, in order to better incorporate them and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of current talent policies. (Chen, 2015, p. 15)

Therefore, the sentiment that has been echoed in the examined literature is that the mere act of sending academics to study abroad is alone not sufficient to ensure the effective transfer of knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad. Sponsors can benefit from knowing the challenges and obstacles that returnees face, as well as listening to their recommendations in order to develop policies, practices and programs that facilitate their readjustment and support institutional change. The literature indicates that academic returnees

from countries such as China, Brazil, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia have not been able to make full use of the knowledge, skills and ideas they gained from abroad. The present study aims to better understand the ways that the Saudi government and public universities can further capitalise on what academics learn overseas.

3.5   CONCLUSION

This chapter has reviewed the literature with respect to the benefits and challenges experienced by academics after postgraduate study abroad. An extensive search revealed that there is a scarcity of relevant literature, and the subsequent review of the extant literature identified pertinent gaps within current knowledge related to the research topic.

The key benefits of postgraduate study abroad for returnees identified within the literature include improved knowledge, skills and attitudes, intercultural competence, improved English language skills, fast-tracked promotions, higher salaries and enhanced social standing. Previous studies have tended to deal with this issue at a very basic level, confirming the acquisition of various benefits, but without providing a deep understanding of the extent to which academic returnees acquire and utilise the benefits of postgraduate study abroad. The present study aims to address this gap through an in-depth

exploration of the perceived personal and professional benefits of postgraduate study abroad with both male and female Saudi academic returnees.

The key challenges for academic returnees identified within the literature include, reverse culture shock; work culture shock; resistance to change by superiors, colleagues, and students; obstacles to quality research; and, lack of freedom of expression. Previous studies were predominantly conducted from an emic perspective. The present study takes a unique etic-emic perspective that may mitigate some of the limitations of an emic-only perspective and potentially provide a fuller, more candid understanding of the challenges experienced by Saudi academic returnees.

Factors that can undermine the efficacy of study abroad scholarships programs for academics include academic dishonesty, brain drain and the failure of sponsoring governments and institutions to fully capitalise on what academics have learned overseas. Studies that explore the impact of these factors on the efficacy of scholarships programs are rare. The present study intends to develop a deeper understanding of these issues within the Saudi public higher education context via in-depth interviews with male and female Saudi academic returnees.

The research approach will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Research Approach

4.1 INTRODUCTION

My observations and experiences as a non-Saudi teacher at two universities in the Kingdom over a five-year period, roused my interest to learn more about the benefits and costs of sending Saudi academics to study abroad and the impact on higher education reform in Saudi Arabia. This in turn led me to envisage a study that involved classroom observations of locally and overseas trained Saudi lecturers, analyses of locally produced research and university practices and policies, and an evaluation of changes in university equipment and resources since the launch of the King Abdullah Scholarships Program. I soon realised, however, that this approach was fraught with issues, including time and access limitations, as well as the inherent bias of using myself as the primary evaluation instrument. I initially thought that this would be a way to evaluate the effectiveness of the study abroad scholarships program without directly consulting academics themselves, whom I perceived as potentially biased and unreliable sources of information. That was until I began having open and informal discussions with my Saudi academic colleagues to find out their thoughts on the benefits and limitations of study abroad and the implications of these for higher education reform in the Kingdom. I then realised that the most valuable and rich source of data I

could possibly tap into was in fact Saudi academics. Our conversations

revealed the depth and complexity of the topic that I was contemplating.

Subsequently, I was able to reshape and refine my research topic into

something more focused, credible and achievable. My refined aim was to

explore and develop an understanding of the post study abroad experiences

of Saudi academic returnees, rather than attempt to evaluate Saudi

academics' teaching capabilities and publication records. In other words, I

realised that in order to understand the broader issue of the role of

postgraduate study abroad in contributing to higher education reform in the

Kingdom, I first had to develop an in-depth understanding of the personal and

professional benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics when

they returned from study abroad. This chapter explains in detail the research

approach for this study, including the philosophical assumptions that underpin

the research, the research design, the data collection methods, the data

analysis and interpretation, the ethical considerations and the limitations of

the study.

4.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

According to Caelli, Ray and Mill (2003) "the central aim of research is

knowledge development" (p. 4). However, knowledge is a highly complex

term which has no precise or universal definition. Plato defined knowledge as

"justified true belief" (Turri, 2012). Whilst objective knowledge does exist on one level, much of human knowledge can be described as perceptions of the truth, rather than as black and white facts. The subjective nature of knowledge means that researchers and research participants bring their own ideas to bear on the processes and products of inquiry. Interpretive frameworks have subsequently been developed to guide researchers through the inquiry process in a philosophically consistent manner. An interpretive framework or a paradigm can be defined as "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in the choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 17). An interpretive framework helps investigators to articulate the aim or purpose of their inquiry, as well as to select their methodology and data collection methods. Connecting these key decisions to a particular theoretical framework helps the researcher to maintain the focus, consistency and cohesion of the inquiry. The set of beliefs that underlie any paradigm can be regarded as "human constructions" (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 22) and as such, "there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness" (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 21). Hence, researchers who operate within the qualitative realm of research must rely on "persuasiveness and utility", as opposed to "proof" in order to justify their position (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 22).

The philosophical assumptions that underpin this research are in line with a constructivist worldview. According to constructivism, reality is subjective and experiential (Macleod, 2009). Thus, as a constructivist researcher I believe that returnee academics' voices are indispensable for understanding the benefits and challenges experienced by academics after postgraduate study abroad. Saudi academic returnees possess an emic perspective of study abroad and Saudi higher education, and as such, a qualitative approach enables this issue to be understood from the point of view of those who have lived it (Ali, 2015; Schram, 2003). Whilst I acknowledge my role and influence throughout the research process, from the selection of the research topic, to describing the contextual background, examining the related literature, selecting and constructing the data collection tool, conducting the interviews and analysing and interpreting the data, my ultimate aim has been to rely on the participants' constructions of their experiences--their reality--as much as possible, only adding information where gaps and ambiguity existed.

Research methodology consistent with the constructivist paradigm can be described as "hermeneutical and dialectical" (Guba & Lincoln, 2004, p. 27; Mertens, 2015, p. 19). According to Mertens (2015), the term hermeneutics is used by historians to mean the interpretation of "historical documents to try to understand what the author was attempting to communicate within the time

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period and culture in which the documents were written" (p. 16).

However, constructivist researchers see "hermeneutics as a way to interpret the meaning of something from a certain standpoint or situation" (Mertens, 2015, p. 16). In this case, the emic perspective of Saudi academic returnees is indispensable for understanding the role of postgraduate study abroad in contributing to higher education reform in the Kingdom. The dialectical dialogue between the researcher and the research participants intends to challenge existing ideas on both sides to produce a more informed, robust and better construction of reality. The constructivist paradigm is congruent with the aims of the present study, which seeks to develop a detailed understanding of Saudi academics' experiences before, during and after postgraduate study abroad through the mechanism of semi-structured in-depth interviews, with a view to better understanding the role of the scholarships program nested within the broader phenomenon of higher education reform in Saudi Arabia.

4.3 CASE STUDY

Case study methodology is encompassed within a broader qualitative research approach and constructivist worldview and enables the researcher to explore the issue of interest in the context of its natural setting using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills,

2017). In the present study, male and female Saudi academic returnees who work at various public universities throughout Saudi Arabia were the primary sources of data. These participants were purposefully chosen to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015). The participants varied in terms of gender, age, location in Saudi Arabia, academic discipline, rank, length of time spent abroad, and country of study abroad. The qualitative case study approach enables the study of complex issues and allows the many facets of an issue to surface and be understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008), making it an appropriate fit for the present study.

The relevant literature shows that a case study can be defined in several ways. According to Merriam (1998), the defining feature of a case study is that the object of study, the case, has distinct boundaries. However, the term 'case study' can also be used to refer to the actual process or way an investigation is carried out (Yin, 2014), and alternatively, case study has also been defined as the end-product of an investigation, that is, the detailed description and analysis of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 1998).

In the present study, the case or the issue of interest was the study abroad

scholarships program for Saudi academics, and most specifically, the role of

that program in contributing to higher education reform in the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia. For the purposes of this study, the manifestations of this case

were nine Saudi academics who had been sponsored by the Saudi Ministry of

Higher Education to complete their postgraduate studies abroad. The case

study approach facilitated a detailed description and analysis of the context of

the study and the study abroad experiences of the participants, as well as

their experiences in Saudi public higher education after postgraduate study

abroad. This made possible a more holistic understanding of the impact of

postgraduate study abroad on the personal and professional development of

Saudi academic returnees, as well the challenges they faced in implementing

their new knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad, and by extension, the

implications of these benefits and challenges for higher education reform in

Saudi Arabia.

Previous related studies were limited by their approach, which included the

use of participants of a single gender, and/or participants from a single

location in Saudi Arabia, or participants from a single host institution abroad,

and/or the use of data collection tools with predefined responses, such as

surveys, which did not allow for multiple perspectives to surface. For instance,

Alandejani's (2013) qualitative study involved five Saudi academic returnees who were all female and Kampman's (2011) qualitative study involved five sponsored Saudi students studying at the same university in America who were also all female. Further, most previous studies were conducted from an emic-perspective; the advantages and disadvantages of this will be discussed in the following section.

4.4 ETIC-EMIC PERSPECTIVES

Most of the research concerned with Saudi academic returnees has been conducted from an emic perspective. These studies were largely carried out by sponsored Saudi academics completing their postgraduate studies abroad who had an interest in the returnee experiences of their compatriots and in Saudi higher education (Alandejani, 2013; Alhazmi, 2010; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015; Zahrani, 1986). The reason that such studies are seldom carried out by outsiders is that Saudi Arabia is a very closed society and is not easily accessible to foreigners, including social or educational researchers (Lacey, 2009; Ozerov, 2018).

According to Fetterman (2008), "an emic perspective is an insider's view of reality" (p. 249). Such research conducted from an emic perspective has several advantages, including the researcher's intimate knowledge of Saudi

culture, the Saudi higher education system and the issues affecting academic

returnees. Further, the emic researcher is able to recognise the hidden

nuances, meanings and concepts within their culture that otherwise could

only be gleaned through interviews and observations (Olive, 2014).

The emic perspective also has several disadvantages, including a tendency

towards researcher bias, participants providing socially desirable responses,

and cultural conformity by the researcher and participants. Researcher bias is

an inclination or prejudice wherein the researcher "influences the results, in

order to portray a certain outcome" (Shuttleworth, 2009, para. 1). In the case

of Saudi researchers, a lack of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia means

that they must ensure their findings remain within safe boundaries (Alabdi,

2017). Likewise, Saudi research participants are also likely to exercise

caution when providing responses on potentially contentious issues.

Further, Saudi Arabian culture is very conservative and private, and immense

importance is placed on reputation and the opinions of others within Saudi

society (Commisceo Global, 2017). As such, Saudi research participants are

likely to remain guarded during discussions with a fellow Saudi researcher,

particularly if they are strangers to the participant. This was evident in the

present study when Saudi participant Raeesa offered to interview her

colleague Huma on my behalf. Interestingly, Huma was the only participant

who declined to answer one of the interview questions. In addition, Saudi

researcher Alandejani (2013) said of her female Saudi academic participants:

"I felt that Rafa was not telling me everything. Though to some extent, I had

that feeling with all the participants…" (p. 99). Similarly, Al-Mehawes (1984)

reported that most of his participants were not willing to discuss their

difficulties readjusting to the political situation at home. Finally, from my

experience, Saudi participants are likely to interact with a Saudi researcher in

accordance with Saudi cultural norms and expectations, whereas this is not

necessarily the case with a non-Saudi researcher. One example of this

cultural restriction is the expectation that the researcher will be of the same

gender as the participants. This was the case in the aforementioned studies

conducted by Saudi researchers, whereas the current study involved both

male and female participants.

The present study was conducted from both etic and emic perspectives and

provides a detailed and oftentimes privileged analysis of participants'

experiences before, during and after postgraduate study abroad. As

mentioned in Chapter 2, one could liken my positioning in this research to an

'outsider' who holds a VIP pass. I was not privy to all aspects of Saudi culture

and experience, but I was able to go places and meet people that many

others were not. Through this privileged positioning I was able to get to know the people and the society more intimately than any ordinary outsider, thus giving me a deeper access, insight and understanding of the research context and the relevant issues. Most participants showed a high level of trust for me as a fellow Muslim and saw me as a well-intentioned researcher. This was evidenced by participants' very open, frank and detailed responses, as well as the many comments and responses that acknowledged our mutual understandings on various topics. For example, when discussing the dangerous driving situation in Saudi Arabia, participant Abdul Kareem said: "*You have been here and you have been there, so you know the situation.*" Further, on some occasions I was able to correct the participants or point out instances that they had not mentioned, such as Saudis' different levels of exposure to the English language in Saudi Arabia's different regions. Yet, at the same time I was sufficiently distanced to identify the similarities and differences between Saudi culture and Western culture, as well as between the Saudi higher education and Western higher education systems (Oudenhoven, 2017). Thus, the combination of etic and emic perspectives facilitated a broader and deeper exploration and analysis of the present research topic than could have been achieved using a single perspective.

4.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to Zamboni (n.d.), a conceptual framework refers to a set of specific ideas "that are used to define research and evaluate data". Maxwell (2005) defines a conceptual framework as "the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research" (p. 39). In addition, Miles and Huberman (1994) state that it can take a visual or written form and it depicts the key features of the phenomenon being studied, that is, "the key factors, concepts, or variables" and "explains the presumed relationships among them" (p. 18). A modified version of Biggs' (1993) three phase model of learning was chosen as the conceptual framework for the current study, as it unpacks the learning process and highlights the various stages and factors that influence learning outcomes.

To date, the Saudi government has not engaged in any formal evaluation of its scholarships program (Engberg, 2014) and thus, little is known about the impact of the program on higher education in Saudi Arabia. Course completion rates and scholarship recipients' numerical grades alone are not sufficient to gauge the knowledge, skills and ideas that sponsored academics bring from abroad or the extent to which these are transferred to the home country higher education system. Biggs' (1993) three-phase model of learning

that illustrates the interconnected relationship between the presage factors,

process factors and the learning product appears below.
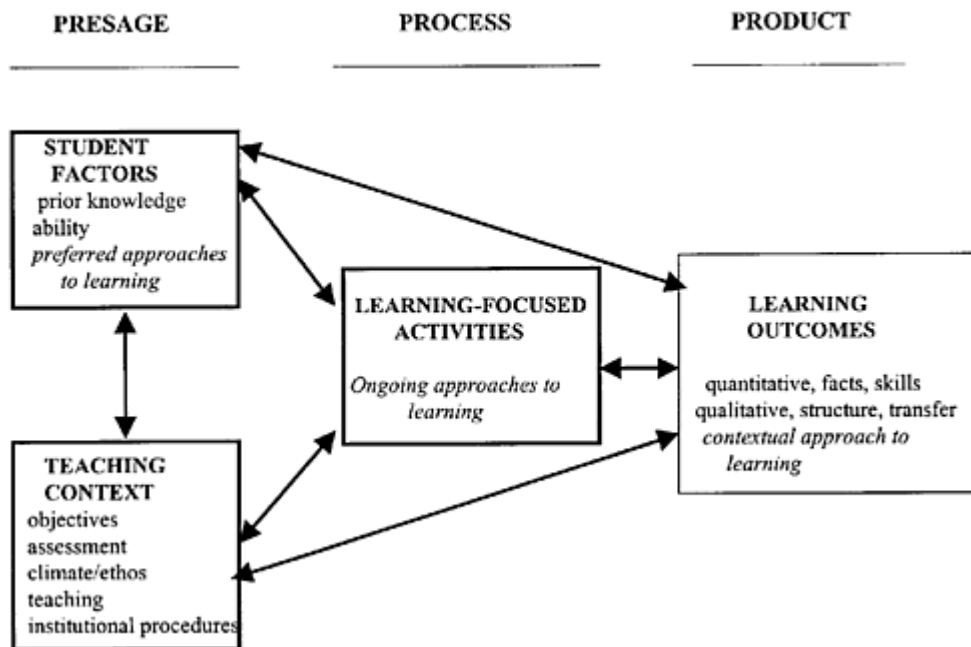
Figure 4.1: Biggs's 3P model of teaching and student learning (Tran, 2015)

Subsequently, I developed a modified version of the Biggs' (1993) three

phase model of learning to better represent the current research problem.

The first three phases (presage, process and product) are congruent with

those outlined by Biggs (1993) and the fourth phase (product in practice) has

been added to describe participants' newly acquired knowledge,

understandings, skills and ideas (i.e. the learning outcomes) as applied in real contexts upon their return to the Kingdom. The four-phase modified version of Biggs' model is given in Figure 4.2.

Presage
(Personal factors in home country and situational factors in international study environment)

Process
(Strategies and approaches to learning – influenced by presage and new study abroad context)

Product
(Outcomes of study abroad - personal and professional attributes)

Product in practice
(The application of learning outcomes in home country higher education context)

Figure 4.2: The Process of Learning and Applying Learning Outcomes in Practice (adapted from Biggs 1993)

The presage stage comprises the personal and situational factors that are present before the learning experience takes place (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001). In the context of this study, the personal factors are those that existed prior to studying abroad and the situational factors (teaching context) are those that existed in the foreign learning environment. Personal factors for

participants in this study include students' prior knowledge, beliefs, values, learning styles, personalities, learning goals, English language proficiency, job and sponsorship. "Situational factors include course structure, curriculum content, methods of teaching and assessment, and rules and regulations pertaining to institutional and classroom situations" within the host institution (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001, p. 334). Taken together, these factors create the environment in which learning takes place. Further, "a student's approach to learning is influenced by the interaction of the student's personal characteristics and the teaching/learning environment" (McCormick & Ramburuth, 2001, p. 334). Hence, the complex array of factors that characterise the student and their learning environment combine to create the background for the type of learning that will take place in the next phase of the learning process.

The second phase of Biggs' model is the process phase, which encompasses students' approaches to learning. This phase is directly impacted by the factors present in the presage phase and includes students' learning goals and the strategies they employ to undertake their learning. According to Biggs, there are three key approaches to learning: "the deep approach, which aims to understand meaning and utilise information; the surface approach, which involves the memorisation of facts and recall of information; and the achieving

approach, which is focused on obtaining the highest possible grades"
(McCormick and Ramburuth, 2001, p. 335).

The product phase occurs when learning outcomes have been attained. The nature of the learning outcomes will depend on the approach adopted by the learner in the process phase. For instance, the learning outcome achieved might involve a deep understanding of the content and an ability to utilise the knowledge and skills effectively in real-life contexts. Conversely, the learning outcome might involve a surface understanding of the course content, which can only be reproduced within a limited or artificial context. For example, a language student who has rote memorised certain sentences in a new language, without fully grasping the meaning of the vocabulary or the mechanics of the grammatical structures, will not be able to utilise this knowledge in real-life contexts, even if it can be reproduced correctly in a written examination (Tsedendamba, 2014). Likewise, it is not uncommon for students, whether international or domestic, to enrol in courses with the aim of attaining marketable credentials and yet, have little interest in the course content. In such cases, it is typical for the information that is acquired to pass the course to be quickly forgotten. This reality has largely been overlooked by higher education importers and researchers (Engberg, 2014).

The final and additional phase, referred to as the 'product in practice' phase, is particularly critical for this study and occurs when the outcomes of overseas postgraduate study have the potential to be applied in the home country context. This phase is affected by three main factors: the learning product achieved, the personal and professional goals and aspirations of the individual, and the situational factors that exist in the returnees' home country work environment. As the learning outcome is influenced by the learner's approach to learning (i.e. deep, surface or achieving), it is evident that study abroad will have a minimal impact on individuals who employ a surface approach, simply aspiring to pass their course. Conversely, a returnee who applies a deep approach to learning and subsequently acquires transferrable knowledge and skills, will be highly valuable for their home country's higher education advancement, given the appropriate situational factors.

The professional goals and aspirations of the returnee will play a strong role in whether they seek to improve their professional practice and contribute to the advancement of their field, or whether the returnee is satisfied with the status quo once they return. How strongly returnees feel about the idea of giving back to their home country and making a positive contribution, will influence the role they play within the higher education system, which could potentially influence policy and practice.

The situational factors in this phase determine whether the home country work environment is conducive to the transfer of new knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad or whether it presents barriers to change. For instance, if an academic in the field of science returns from overseas with advanced scientific research skills and the home country work environment does not provide the necessary research equipment or support for quality research production, such factors prevent the learning product from being put into practice.

Therefore, this conceptual framework, adapted from Biggs, demonstrates that learning is not a simple input-output arrangement but involves a series of interconnected stages that are affected by a complex array of factors throughout. The four-phase model facilitates a holistic view of the participants' learning and return to work experiences by highlighting the critical factors that underpin each phase of the learning process. This model facilitates a deeper understanding of how learning outcomes are achieved, as well as what happens when learning outcomes are put into practice. This four-phase model was therefore used to guide the construction of the research questions, as well as the interview questions, which tapped into each phase of the participants' learning experiences, as well as their experiences of transferring the knowledge and skills from abroad to the home country's higher education

context. The construction of the in-depth interview questions are discussed in detail below, after providing a description of the participants who took part in this study.

4.6 PARTICIPANTS

4.6.1 Description of Participants

Nine Saudi academics, four female and five male, participated in this study. The participants varied in age, gender, length of professional experience before and after study abroad, amount of time spent abroad, academic discipline, host country for study abroad and location in Saudi Arabia. The selection criteria for participants were based on Al-Mehawes' (1984) identification of eight demographic characteristics that impacted Saudi students' adjustment to the host country, the changes they experienced as a result of study abroad and their readjustment experiences when they returned home. The eight characteristics included age, marital status, region in Saudi Arabia, academic major, level of degree earned, number of years spent abroad, financial position, and the number of months and years back in Saudi Arabia. According to Al-Mehawes (1984), the returnees' region in Saudi Arabia was found to impact individuals' overseas and return experiences, because the customs, traditions and levels of conservatism differ greatly between regions of the Kingdom. The participants in the present study hailed

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from three different regions in Saudi Arabia. The role of gender was not investigated in previous studies and thus, no information was available on the ways gender impacts the experiences of returning Saudi academics. The participants' demographic information is provided in Table 4.1.

As shown in Table 4.1, two participants were in the 26-30 age range, one participant was in the 31-35 range, four in the 36-40 range and two (both female) were 40 or above. Thus, seven of the participants were under the age of forty, reflective of Saudi Arabia's predominantly youthful population (Stares & Ighani, 2017).

Participants studied in a range of host countries, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia; these four countries host the largest numbers of Saudi overseas tertiary students. Three participants had completed only their master's degrees abroad, four had completed both their master's and PhD degrees abroad, one participant had completed her bachelor's, master's and PhD degrees abroad and one participant had completed only her PhD abroad. The distribution of Saudi students studying abroad according to academic level is approximately: 60% bachelor's degrees, 24% master's degrees and 5% doctorate degrees (Ahmed, 2015).

Table 4.1 - Summary of Participants' Demographic Information

Participant Name*	M / F	Age Range	Host Country	Level of Study	Position before Study Abroad & Years of Experience	No. of Years Spent Abroad	Field of Study
Ebtisam	F	36-40	Australia	Master's	Teaching Assistant - 4 years	2 years	Food Science
Raeesa	F	36-40	UK & USA	Bachelor, Master & PhD (+ 2 year Diploma from Saudi University)	No experience (before Master's degree) / Lecturer - 4 years (after Master's degree)	12 years (9 years in USA + 3 years in UK)	Bachelor: Computer Information Systems (USA) Two Master's: Master of Computer Science (USA) / Master of Education (UK) PhD: E-Learning /Blended Learning (UK)
Huma	F	40+	USA	Master's & PhD	Middle School Teacher - 10 years	6 years	Curriculum and Instruction of ESL
Fatima	F	40+	USA	PhD	Lecturer & Administrator - 5 years	3 years	Science – Cell Engineering
Abdul Kareem	M	36-40	USA & Canada	Master's & PhD	Teaching Assistant - 1.5 years	7 years	Radiation Physics
Mazen	M	31-35	Australia	Master's	Secondary Teacher	4 years	Linguistics
Numan	M	26-30	Australia	Master's	Primary Teacher - 1 year + Teacher Educator - 1 year	4 years	Mathematics Education
Mateen	M	36-40	USA	Master's & PhD	Teaching Assistant - 1 year	7 years	Linguistics
Ahmed	M	26-30	UK	Master's & PhD	Teaching Assistant - 1 year	7 years	Science /Nanotechnology

This study focuses on those who have obtained postgraduate degrees abroad only, as this level of study is what is required for a Saudi to hold a teaching or administrative position within Saudi Arabia's higher education sector.

The participants in this study specialised in a range of academic fields, including food science, computer science, cell engineering, radiation physics, linguistics, mathematics and nanotechnology. The wide spread of specialisations provides a sense of the important and essential knowledge and skills Saudi academics can potentially bring to Saudi higher education from abroad. Seven of the nine had some form of work experience in their field while they were abroad, though this was minimal. Interestingly, two of the four female participants did not engage in any work experience while abroad, which could be related to cultural reasons that make it taboo for Saudi women to work in mixed-gender environments. Finally, the length of time spent abroad varied widely among participants, with the minimum being two years and the maximum length of stay abroad being twelve years.

The participants were purposefully selected for this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academic returnees after postgraduate study abroad. The participants viewed their experiences through a range of lenses, including gender, age, location,

subject specialisation, rank, length of time spent abroad, and host country of study. Further details about the recruitment of participants are discussed in the next section.

4.6.2 Challenges in Recruitment of Research Participants

When I commenced the data collection stage for this research, I encountered a number of unexpected challenges. Firstly, it was my intention to conduct in-depth interviews with participants in person, as I was living and working in Saudi Arabia at the time. However, shortly after my research proposal had been accepted and my ethics application had been approved, personal circumstances necessitated that I return to Australia and thus, much of my data collection needed to be conducted at a distance using the internet.

I thought that the distance and use of the internet to conduct the interviews would help to overcome the sociocultural taboo in Saudi Arabia of non-related male and female face-to-face interaction. To my surprise, the distance and use of the internet to conduct the interviews made it more difficult to recruit participants, particularly female Saudi academics. Of the four female Saudi academics to participate in this research project, one refused to speak over the internet using Skype, but instead opted to type her answers and send them to me via email. Another hesitated in accepting my invitation to

participate, even though she was very eager to share her experiences and insights on the research topic, because she thought that I was a male by the name 'Toni' (not realising that Toni spelt with an 'i' is typically for females). This female academic was so eager that she subsequently recruited one of her own female colleagues to participate (snowball sampling), yet she informed me that she needed to provide her colleague with strong assurances that no-one but me (the researcher – a female) would listen to the recording of her voice. In order for me to transcribe the interviews verbatim, it was necessary to record the interviews. I assured participants that the recordings would be deleted after the transcription had taken place.

When I began my research project and I still lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, I had access to an apparently large number of willing participants. Many colleagues and friends of colleagues had eagerly agreed to participate. Unfortunately, in the short time between my research approval and my departure from Saudi Arabia, I only had the chance to conduct one face-to-face interview with a female Saudi academic. Once I arrived back in Australia and emailed those Saudi academics who had agreed to participate, communication quickly came to a standstill. In the beginning, some potential participants led me to believe that they would get back to me with a suitable

time for the interview and then they eventually stopped responding to my emails completely. Others disappeared instantly.

There are a range of potential reasons why this occurred, and it is not possible to pinpoint them with certainty. However, I believe one of the reasons could be the fact that all online communications are strictly monitored by the Saudi government. Thus, whilst potential participants were comfortable inviting me to their homes for private discussions, particularly in the case of females, they were not so willing to communicate at a distance, via a monitored medium. Other potential reasons included Saudi's strong cultural tradition of gender segregation and the controversy that could arise from a male and a female engaging in a long telephone conversation without others present. The female voice is also another matter for potential controversy, as in Saudi Arabia a woman's voice is regarded as part of her modesty and it is practically unheard of for a woman to elevate her voice in the presence of unrelated males. The first time I realised this, was when I called out to my children in a Saudi supermarket and everybody stopped to stare at me. Further, as mentioned, criticising government initiatives, institutions or Saudi culture can have potentially serious repercussions. Many of the participants made sure to ask me about my intentions for conducting the research from

the very outset of the interviews and were relieved to hear that my intention

was to help improve Saudi higher education.

To search for potential participants, other than those I had already contacted,

I went to the faculty pages on the websites of most of the public universities in

Saudi Arabia at that time, checked the credentials of the academics listed

online and emailed an invitation to dozens of academics who met the criteria

for this study. The response rate was extremely low, with only two female

academics accepting my invitation to participate. In total, one female and

three male participants were recommended by mutual contacts, two females

were recruited by email invitation (see Appendix D for the invitation email),

and three participants, one female and two male, were recruited via snowball

sampling.

4.7 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The primary data collection tool used in this study was an in-depth, semi-

structured interview (see Appendix C for the interview questions and

protocol). According to Boyce and Neale (2006), "in-depth interviewing is a

qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual

interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives

on a particular idea, program, or situation" (p. 3). In-depth interviews provided

me the flexibility as the researcher, to adjust the interview questions where needed, to add questions that arose from the interviewees' responses and to discard questions that were found to be unhelpful after conducting the initial interviews. Further, this technique allowed me to paraphrase participants' responses and directly check with participants whether I had an accurate understanding of what they had said. Thus, participants also had the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their responses, if their intended meaning was unclear to me. This member checking technique enhances the credibility of the data and its interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the open-ended questions enabled participants to freely add information or experiences that they viewed as relevant to the discussions.

To illustrate participants' ability to direct the discussion and add additional information, one female participant expressed that she strongly felt that Saudi academics studying abroad had better learning outcomes when they were accompanied by a spouse, compared with those who were unmarried and/or travelled alone. Additionally, she felt that a lack of policies at Saudi universities made it difficult for academics to implement new ideas and make positive changes. Thus, the open-ended design of the interview questions

and a flexible approach to questioning and answering was highly suited to the purposes of this study.

As noted above, the construction of the semi-structured, in-depth interview questions was based on an adaptation of Biggs' (1993) model of learning. Thus, the interview questions tapped into returnees' motivations and experiences before, during and after study abroad to provide a holistic understanding of the benefits and challenges for academics when they return from postgraduate study abroad. Previous studies focused wholly on returnees' post-study abroad experiences, leading to a fragmentary understanding of the phenomenon.

Along with benefits, the in-depth interview method also has some limitations. Namely, the authenticity of the data collected from participants is dependent on their honesty and their memory. In relation to honesty, there was a great amount of consistency in the responses provided by the participants, regardless of age, gender, discipline, rank or location. However, at times I sensed that certain responses were cautious rather than candid. Issues regarding freedom of expression and the tendency for participants to provide socially desirable responses in Saudi Arabia have already been discussed above. Nevertheless, participants understood that the purpose of this study

was to facilitate the growth and development of Saudi higher education and as such, they were generally very open and generous in sharing their views and experiences with respect to the issues raised.

In relation to memory, many of participants had returned from abroad a relatively short time before the interviews were conducted. Furthermore, the significant overlap in individuals' responses also enhanced their trustworthiness. The extraction of identical or similar information from greater than two data sources is known as data triangulation. Hussein (2009) noted that "according to (Denzin, 1978), there are three types of data triangulation; including time, space and person" (p. 3). In the present study, in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of more than twelve months with nine participants, most of whom were not known to each another. Thus, through member checking and data triangulation, the data collected in this study can be considered trustworthy and credible according to qualitative standards (Golafshani, 2003).

4.8 DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the data for this study began at the time the data were being collected (Rabiee, 2004). The data were collected via in-depth interviews by means of a Skype call with seven of the participants, by email with one

participant and via an in-person interview using a proxy interviewer based in Saudi Arabia with one participant. As mentioned previously, the proxy interviewer was one of the female participants in this study, who was so supportive of the present research that she recruited one of her colleagues to participate and interviewed her on my behalf, as the colleague was not comfortable with doing a Skype interview. For the written interview, the data analysis began at the time of reading the participant's written responses. As I read through the responses, I pondered the meaning of those responses and made notes about what I understood the responses to mean. I followed-up with the participant by emailing some questions to clarify the meaning of responses that were ambiguous, as well as to check that I had understood the participant's other responses as she had intended. For the proxy interview, the analysis of the data began at the time of listening to the recorded interview. I noted the participant's comments, reactions, and tone, as well as relevant clarifications that were obtained by the proxy interviewer.

I personally interviewed the remaining seven participants (six online via Skype and one in-person in Saudi Arabia). Each interview was audio-recorded for transcription purposes and I made notes on an interview sheet for each of the participants while the interviews were being conducted. In the notes, I recorded my immediate thoughts and reflections about the

participants' responses, allowing for verification and further investigation at a later stage. I also made notes about participants' attitudes, tones and anything else that could assist in capturing and describing their perspectives and feelings (including, where relevant, their hesitancy or caution in responding to certain questions). The duration of these interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 2.5 hours, with an average duration of 1.25 hours.

Once the interviews had been conducted, I set about transcribing them. The transcription process allowed a "detailed to-and-fro reading in the analysis of the qualitative data" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 142). As the interviews were being transcribed, notes were made on the transcript to keep a record of important gestures, tones, chuckles, expressions, emphases and any other information that would help preserve the context, nuances and intended meanings of participants' statements. As some of the interviews were very lengthy (transcripts in excess of 30 pages), it became necessary to pay for transcription services to transcribe three of the interviews in the interests of saving time. With the paid transcriptions, it was still necessary for me to listen to the audio recordings several times to check and correct the transcripts, as these were found to contain a number of errors – possibly due to the participants' accents or the quality of the recordings.

Once all the transcripts had been completed, a manual coding process was undertaken to organise and make sense of the data. A three-columned table was constructed with the headings 'raw data', 'preliminary codes', and 'major code' in each column respectively (Saldana, 2009). Key segments of the transcript text were copied and pasted into individual cells in the first column of the table. In the second column, a few words or a short phrase was assigned to the text segment that captured or represented the primary content or essence of the data. One or two words were then placed in the third column of the table to allocate the data to a specified category; after further analysis, these categories were then refined. This process was undertaken with all nine transcripts. Comparisons were made among the individual cases to extract the common and unique themes that emerged (Saldana, 2009). Once the major themes had been determined, some of these were further deconstructed into sub-themes.

4.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is the responsibility of every researcher to ensure that their research is conducted in an ethical manner. Ethical standards and requirements are designed to ensure that firstly "the aims of research are upheld, including knowledge, truth and avoidance of error" (Resnik, 2015, para 7) and secondly to promote "values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust,

accountability, mutual respect, and fairness" (Resnik, 2015, para 8). In carrying out this research, I adhered to the guidelines set out in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) (NS). The first step was to obtain a permit from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Murdoch University. The application for this permit required information about the recruitment of participants, data collection methods, data analysis and data storage.

In relation to the recruitment of participants, three main methods of recruitment were used. Participants were recruited through personal contact (i.e. people known personally to me such as former colleagues or those introduced to me by others); by emailing academics whose contact information was available on the various Saudi university websites; and, by snowball sampling whereby participants recommended other potential participants.

There were no dependency relationships between the researcher and participants. At the time of the application I was an English language instructor at a university in Saudi Arabia and I did not hold a position of authority at my workplace. Saudi academics who participated in this study worked within various departments and at various universities throughout the

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Kingdom, some participants were equal in rank to the researcher and others were in superior positions. None of the participants worked in the female branch of the English Language Centre at my university.

In relation to data storage and analysis, audio recordings were made of the interviews for transcription purposes only and with the participants' consent. During the interviews, participants were not asked to state their name or provide any other identifying information. The recordings were deleted once the transcription and analysis were complete. Pseudonyms were used for all transcripts, interview notes and coding sheets.

Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet about the study (see Appendix A for the Information Sheet) and a consent form (see Appendix B for the Consent Form). The project and the rights of participants were explained either in person, via Skype, or by email. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study that they wished. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Approval to carry out the research was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Murdoch University on 2nd June 2011 and permit number 2011/128 was issued.

4.10 Limitations

As with all research, there are some important limitations of this study. Whilst several of the findings of this study may apply to many Saudi academic returnees, the nature of qualitative research and the small-scale of this study mean that the findings are not claimed to be generalisable to the population of Saudi academic returnees. This may be seen as a limitation, however, the aim of the study was to gather detailed descriptions of Saudi academics' study abroad and return experiences, as there was scant prior research on this topic. These detailed descriptions provide valuable insights, regardless of whether the experiences are unique to one participant or are common to all participants. Participants' experiences are influenced by such factors as their age, gender, academic discipline, job position, host country, length of professional experience before and after study abroad, amount of time spent abroad, and location in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the participants were purposefully selected to explore the impact of these various backgrounds on their experiences and thereby to deepen our understanding of the research topic. The findings that emerged from the present study, however, provide valuable bases for further investigations that seek to produce generalisable conclusions.

Secondly, the interviews for this study were conducted entirely in the English language. This means that it was more likely for Saudi academic returnees who were confident in their English language skills to accept the invitation to participate in the interviews. Subsequently, this factor could have inhibited further insight into a key issue, which is the struggle of Saudis to learn English at home and abroad. Fortunately, there is already a plethora of research available on this issue, as was discussed in Chapter 2.

In addition, the English language medium of the interviews could have increased the possibility of miscommunication or misunderstanding between the researcher and the participants. Most participants in the present study had a good command of oral English however, and had spent three or more years abroad, both of which facilitated communication. The one participant who struggled with oral communication, expressed to me that he fully understood our conversation and I also used paraphrasing and clarifying questions to ensure that I indeed correctly understood his point of view. I have several years of experience teaching Saudi students, as well as a basic understanding of the Arabic language, which aided our communication and safeguarded against misunderstandings.

Thirdly, the difficulties and restrictions faced by some female academics in accessing study abroad scholarships due to guardianship rules and other issues, often means that mainly privileged, affluent and partnered women obtain these scholarships. Subsequently, some of the experiences of the female participants in this study may not reflect those of the typical female Saudi academic working in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, Saudis are generally very cautious about publicly engaging in any sort of critique of the establishment, even if the intent is improvement and reform. There were indications that some participants were not completely open in their responses to interview questions that required critical reflection on the Saudi higher education context and the scholarships program. Clearly some participants were more open than others, and on occasion, certain participants contradicted themselves in the responses they provided to delicate questions. Thus, the apparently cautious approach of certain participants was compensated by the apparent willingness of others to share their thoughts openly.

4.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter described in detail the research approach adopted in this study. The choice of a qualitative case study research approach was justified by the

need to understand in depth the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad, considering academics' diversity in terms of gender, age, rank, academic discipline and location in Saudi Arabia. The present study took a unique investigative approach by examining factors that influence learning, before, during and after study abroad, whilst most similar studies have focused solely on the overseas learning experience or the challenges graduates face on their return. This study is further enhanced by the combination of etic and emic perspectives, which facilitated a broader and deeper exploration and analysis of the present phenomenon than what would have been possible using a single perspective.

The next chapter discusses the findings of this study in relation to the presage and process factors that influenced participants' learning before and during postgraduate study abroad respectively.

Chapter 5: The Presage and Process Factors

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the presage factors for participants before and during postgraduate study abroad, and the participants' approaches to learning during postgraduate study abroad. Guided by the theoretical framework, the interview questions were designed to explore the academics' experiences at all stages of their postgraduate study abroad journey (before, during and after). As discussed previously, the rationale for this approach was based on a modified version of the theoretical model of Biggs (1993) that conceptualises the learning process as consisting of four interconnected phases – presage, process, product and product in practice. Hence, the key themes that emerged from the data in this study have been grouped according to the stages of the modified Biggs' model and will be discussed over two chapters: Chapter 5 covers the presage and process phases and Chapter 6 covers the learning product and the product in practice phases. However, it is important to note that the four phases of the modified Biggs' model are not entirely discrete categories, rather they are closely interconnected. Thus, discussions within one category will at times flow into other categories, particularly when it is necessary to highlight the impact of

certain factors within one category (e.g. presage or process) on the outcomes in another (e.g. product).

5.2 THE PRESAGE FACTORS

This section examines the findings in relation to the presage factors for Saudi academic returnees. According to Biggs (1993), the presage and process factors directly affect the outcomes of the learning process. Thus, knowledge of these factors is vital to achieving a more holistic view of the learning outcomes, including a deeper understanding of how participants' learning outcomes were achieved, greater insight into the quality of those learning outcomes, as well as an understanding of the potential gains that may have been lost as a result of the presage and process factors. Four key themes emerged from the data in relation to the presage factors. These include: language issues; the overseas teaching context; Saudi academics' motivations for studying abroad; and academics' beliefs about the scholarship goals.

5.2.1 Language Issues

Within the category of language issues there are two sub-themes: 1.) English language proficiency before study abroad, and 2.) Academics' attitudes toward learning English.

5.2.1.1 English Language Proficiency before Study Abroad

In this section I discuss the findings with respect to the English language proficiency of the participants before postgraduate study abroad and how this impacted their study abroad experiences. The literature shows that a lack of proficiency in the English language at the commencement of study abroad can negatively impact students' academic transition and progress, and it can also affect their social adjustment and hinder opportunities for cross-cultural interaction (Aina, Ogundele, & Olanipekun, 2013; Andrade, 2009; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Vinke & Jochems, 1993). The literature also indicates that many sponsored Saudi students have low levels of English language proficiency at the commencement of their studies abroad (Al-Khairy, 2013; Almaeena, 2014; Andrade, 2009; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014), but that they usually successfully complete their intensive English language courses and subsequent studies (Alhazmi, 2010; Midgley, 2009a; Shaw, 2009).

The concept of 'language proficiency' is one that has no single agreed upon definition among linguists and language educators (Heng, 2012). Within the context of the in-depth interviews, the working definition of 'English language proficiency' for the purposes of this discussion is as it has been understood and self-reported by the participants themselves and according to how they describe their English language abilities at the commencement of study

abroad. The interview questions used terms such as 'weak' and 'strong' and asked participants about the core language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia requires tertiary level courses to be conducted in the English language, except for courses such as Islamic Studies and Arabic language (Al-Kahtany, Faruk, & Al Zumor, 2016). However, since Arabic is the native language of most university lecturers in Saudi Arabia, as well as being the native language of the students, it is common for some lecturers to conduct their lessons in Arabic rather than English. When I taught at universities in Saudi Arabia, I found that the use of Arabic as the language of instruction was more common at universities located in the less developed regions of the Kingdom, as well as depending on the subject being taught. Further, Saudi students in remote parts of the Kingdom often have less exposure to the English language due to factors such as a monocultural local population, few Western faculty employed at universities in these regions and less exposure to English in their day-to-day lives. Thus, many Saudi students are taught at university level almost entirely in the Arabic language and subsequently have a weak command of the English language at the completion of their tertiary studies. The participants'

self-reported presage levels of English language ability are discussed

individually below:

Ebtisam (female) – "Zero" English

> Interviewer: *When you first went to Australia, how was your English at that time?*
>
> Ebtisam: *Zero.*
>
> Interviewer: *Okay so, English language 'zero' before leaving Saudi?*
>
> Ebtisam: *Yes. I studied all in Arabic.*

As is typical for many Saudi students, Ebtisam studied her undergraduate

degree in Saudi Arabia completely in the Arabic language and had absolutely

no English upon its completion. However, this lack of exposure to the English

language ultimately did not prove to be an obstacle for Ebtisam, as she

managed to successfully complete her intensive English language course

abroad in a relatively short period of time (7 months). Ebtisam was

accompanied by her husband who could speak English, and this made the

transition to an English-speaking country and learning environment less

daunting for her. In the beginning, Ebtisam depended heavily on her husband

for assistance inside the classroom. They sat next to one another and

Ebtisam relied on her husband to translate things such as the teacher's

instructions, reading materials and so on, from English into Arabic. Ebtisam's

teachers noticed her dependence on her husband and so they separated her

and her husband in the classroom. The teachers then realised that seating

Ebtisam and her husband separately was not enough to break the

dependence, so Ebtisam and her husband were put in different classes. She

said:

> *Yeah, I went with my husband because he knows English, so it was easy for me.*
>
> *They put me in level two academic, but I don't know how come* [chuckle]. *Ah, anyway, then my husband he was with me in the same level. But then they separated us, because I was just depending on him. Whenever I want to say something, I just ask him: 'What they call this? What they call that?*
> *In the beginning my teachers they start like separating us in the class, and then after that she said 'no, he should go in a different class', not even in our class. After that I start, like, learning more.*

After Ebtisam and her husband were put in separate classes she became an

independent learner and progressed much better in her language

development. She said:

> *What I used to do, every day when I come home, because I don't have kids at that time, so it's only my time. Eh, so, whatever I'm doing, when it's 6 o'clock, I turn on the TV and listen to the news. I don't understand like three quarters of it, what they are saying, but what was like, uh getting me to do that, because they speak very clearly…*
>
> *So, whenever I'm in the bus, going to the Institute, coming, I just keep reading, reading and that's when I improved my vocabulary.*
>
> *I finished it in 7 months* [intensive English language course]. *Cause I really, really was pushing myself.*

Once Ebtisam was placed in the appropriate class, she developed effective learning strategies and showed resilience and determination in her approach to learning. This helped Ebtisam to complete the intensive English language course in a relatively short period of time and to acquire a good command of the English language. Ebtisam particularly identifies '*reading*' and '*watching the news*' as being her key learning strategies.

After successfully completing the intensive English language course, Ebtisam expressed that she still faced some difficulty with English at the beginning of her master's studies. Ebtisam felt that the intensive English language course did not fully prepare her for her specialised field of study. She said:

> *In the English institute we are mixed. We all science in the class, but, like, one is chemistry, one is physics, one is maths, one is IT, food science… you know. We are all mixed. So, when we speak about something, we talk about something, every, everyone will look at the thing from his own angle, and okay, I can't get all the vocabularies from everybody and maybe I have different things, so that's why when they talk about something, they talk about general things like water, pollution, things like, general, we can all talk about it. But when it comes to master's, it's very specified. So, it's very hard to like, get the words and vocabularies.*

Ebtisam's experiences with learning the English language provide valuable insight into some pertinent issues. Firstly, they indicate that it is possible for a postgraduate student to arrive in the host country without any English language skills and still successfully complete postgraduate level study.

However, there is a risk that without the appropriate intervention, such students may rely on the help of others in the classroom to cope. If this situation is not picked up by the teacher, a dependency learning relationship could develop and inhibit the student from becoming an independent learner who goes beyond a surface / recall level of learning. Further, Ebtisam's case demonstrates that high motivation levels, self-determination and resilience are key characteristics required for students with low presage levels of English language ability to succeed in their overseas studies. We also learn that the intensive English language courses provided by host institutions may not provide sufficient preparation for sponsored Saudi academics to transition smoothly into their mainstream courses. Again, motivation levels and self-determination seem to play an important role in overcoming these obstacles. Ebtisam participated in the in-depth interview confidently and fluently in the English language, demonstrating that despite her presage level of English language proficiency, she had acquired a good command of the English language by the conclusion of her postgraduate study abroad.

Raeesa (female) – "Good" English

Raeesa initially went abroad to accompany her husband who had received a study abroad scholarship. During the first five years of her stay in America, Raeesa had three children and was a stay-at-home mother. Raeesa then

enrolled to undertake her bachelor's and master's degrees and spent a further four years as a sponsored student. Thereafter, Raeesa travelled with her family to the UK, where she spent a further three years to complete her PhD. Raeesa spent a total of twelve years abroad. Raeesa's exposure to the English language was quite good before she commenced her studies abroad. Raeesa is from one of Saudi Arabia's largest and most developed cities. As mentioned previously, Saudis living in the more developed parts of the Kingdom generally have a greater exposure to the English language due to a variety of factors, such as a more cosmopolitan population, a larger proportion of Western faculty, more established universities, and English is more commonly used in shops, businesses and hotels. Raeesa also had the benefit of living abroad for five years prior to commencing her studies.

When asked about her English language proficiency at the commencement of study abroad, she said: *"It was pretty good, because they didn't ask me for TOEFL* [Test of English as a Foreign Language]*".* Thus, Raeesa's English language proficiency was good enough to allow her direct entry into her bachelor's degree at the commencement of her studies abroad. Raeesa attributes her good grasp of English to her education in Saudi Arabia and to her field of specialisation: *"I think learning at school* [university]*, especially*

that I was in IT Department and all of the textbooks were in English and even in my high school I have been studying English as well".

Raeesa's experience learning English at high school and university in Saudi Arabia appears to be quite different to the experiences of many students in Saudi Arabia. The literature regarding the issue of Saudi Arabia's ineffective English language programs in Saudi public secondary schools and universities is plentiful (Alhammad, 2010; Al-Mohanna, 2010). It was my experience as a university English language instructor in Saudi Arabia, that most students commenced their tertiary study with very weak or no English language skills at all. However, as Raeesa pointed out that young Saudis are now part of the '*digital age'*, which she believes has had a positive impact on their English language exposure and language skills development.

> Interviewer: *Many Saudis complain about not learning enough English in high school, but it must be different I suppose between the smaller and larger cities of Saudi, do you think?*
>
> Raeesa: *Yeah, definitely. Yeah, yeah, I'm sure, I'm sure there is a difference, but it also depends on motivation and the other thing is that probably my generation is different than this generation as well. I think this generation is more digital natives, we're using computers all the time and they are really forced to use English, their computer games, etc. So, I think it helps them more than others to learn English. They have more motivation, I think, because they are seeing how all the world around them is using English, whereas my generation, if I wouldn't go and study abroad, I wouldn't feel, I mean, for me actually, I*

had the motivation even if I wasn't going to study abroad, but probably others wouldn't have it.

Thus, Raeesa identifies personal motivation as a critical factor that helped her to learn English and skip the intensive English language course that most other sponsored Saudis are required to complete. Interestingly, once Raeesa entered her mainstream courses abroad she had a similar experience to Ebtisam in that she found that she did not have an adequate repertoire of specialised English language vocabulary applicable to her academic field. She said:

> *It wasn't struggling, but of course I was learning. Until now, actually, I can say that I am learning, because that depends on the subject that you're reading. Especially when I changed my studying here to computer education, I had to learn more about education vocabularies and it took time for me actually to be engaged more in this field.*

Raeesa's case is quite unique from the other participants, as she lived in America for five years as a stay-at-home mother prior to commencing her studies abroad and she stayed abroad for a lengthy period of twelve years, completing all her post-secondary degrees overseas. Thus, given this long duration, it could be the case that Raeesa does not fully remember her precise level of English language ability when she first left Saudi Arabia to go abroad. Nevertheless, it is known that by the time Raeesa commenced her studies abroad, she had a sound grasp of the English language. Raeesa was

able to competently and fluently take part in the in-depth interview, drawing upon a range of sophisticated vocabulary in order to convey her ideas and experiences, which demonstrates that both her before and after levels of English language proficiency were very good.

<u>Huma (female) – "Very Good" English</u>

Huma was invited to participate in this study by her colleague and fellow participant Raeesa. Although Huma agreed to participate, she did not want to be interviewed using Skype and she was highly concerned about having her voice recorded. Hence, Raeesa offered to conduct the interview on my behalf in Saudi Arabia and assured Huma that the voice recording was for transcription purposes only and would be deleted once the transcription was done. Huma agreed to participate under these conditions. Huma's responses were usually brief, and she often had to be prompted to provide further explanation, in contrast to Raeesa and Ebtisam whose responses were usually quite elaborate.

It was apparent from the recorded interview that Huma's spoken English was very good. Like Raeesa, Huma did not need to attend the English language institute, as her English language skills were strong enough for her to enter her master's program:

> *At the beginning when I arrived there, I didn't need to go to the English language institute, which is the intensive language program. I started master's, yeah, direct.*

Huma did not elaborate as to how she acquired such a strong command of English. However, in answering a question about why she did not find it difficult to adjust to a mixed-gender learning environment, Huma mentioned the following: "*Maybe because I get used to travelling abroad, lots of times before I moved to the United States".* This indicates that Huma had a reasonable level of exposure to the English language through travel prior to studying abroad. In addition, Huma was also exposed to the English language by residing in one of Saudi Arabia's major cities and through her field of study - Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) – during her undergraduate degree in Saudi Arabia. During the interview Huma did not mention experiencing any language-related difficulties at the beginning or during her studies abroad.

Fatima (female) – Could speak English 'Very Well'

Fatima is the only participant who refused to participate in a recorded interview. She requested the interview questions in writing and provided her answers in writing as well. This prevented me from observing Fatima's spoken English; however, her written answers allowed me to somewhat

gauge her level of competency through her writing skills. Fatima was perhaps the most conservative of the female participants; at times critical of Western society and defensive of her own Saudi culture. Fatima's answers were also brief, and she did not respond to emails that I sent to clarify some of the answers she had provided. When asked about her English language skills at the beginning of study abroad, her response was: *"I could speak English very well"* and *"I could write essays fairly well"*. These responses were selected from a list of predefined responses.

Fatima's English language ability was clearly adequate for her to have completed her PhD abroad and to publish over twenty research articles (although most were published in local Saudi journals and some were published in Arabic). However, Fatima spent just three years abroad, which is a relatively short period of time in comparison to the other participants and her written responses to a number of the interview questions indicated grammatical errors typical of a person with an intermediate or upper-intermediate level of English language ability. Fatima stated that she had a good grasp of the English language prior to commencing her studies abroad but did not mention whether she had encountered any particular language-related difficulties during her studies abroad.

Abdul Kareem (male) – "Communication and Writing Skills Not Good"

Abdul Kareem is from the same region in Saudi Arabia as participant Ebtisam,

who had commenced her studies abroad with "*zero*" English. Abdul Kareem

felt that his "*scientific language*" or technical English was "*good*" after

completing his bachelor's degree in Saudi Arabia. However, he felt that his

oral communication and academic writing skills were quite weak. The main

instructional language at Abdul Kareem's university was Arabic, although his

professor used English sporadically when teaching, and the course readings

and reference materials were also in English. This facilitated Abdul Kareem's

acquisition of technical English prior to going abroad. He said:

> *Okay, I did my first degree at Tuba University[4] and the main instructional language was Arabic. However, my subject, which was medical physics, was taught in English. So, when we say it was taught in English, that means the textbook that we used, the professor that, the professor writes in English in the blackboard, the questions in English. The instruction when he speaks, sometimes he speaks in Arabic and sometimes in English as well. So, I spent about, I mean, about 2 years, we were taught in English. I feel that my scientific language, the scientific English is, was good. So, I learnt very good in terms of the scientific terms and etcetera. However, the communication was not as good as the scientific language. So, in general I was better than, than any other student in other faculties I believe. The readings that we spent in reading our subject improved our language, so it was, so even when I went to the UK, so I did not find difficulty reading the subject itself.*

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[4] Pseudonym

The type of exposure to the English language that Abdul Kareem articulates above is typical for many Saudi university students. As a teacher at two universities in Saudi Arabia, I observed that many native-Arabic lecturers chose to communicate with their students largely in Arabic, whilst the course materials and assessments were in English. This resulted in students having weak English oral communication skills and academic writing skills, though rote memorisation meant that they could read their subject in English.

Initially Abdul Kareem expressed the view that the one year of intensive English language instruction that Saudi students receive when they go abroad, adequately prepared them for their transition to the foreign academic environment and helped them to "*catch up*" on what they had missed during their secondary and tertiary education in Saudi Arabia. He said:

> *It was only the difficulties in communication and sometimes of course in writing, expressing things. So, it was better, so because I can compare myself with some other friends that were coming from universities that are from areas* [i.e. remote provinces] *that were never actually taught in English, so their English, were very, very far behind us. We all learned English in the UK and we were given a year to study English, so that was very enough and very good to improve our language and catch up what we missed in previous years.*

However, later in the interview Abdul Kareem shifted his position on this point and stated that foreign students from non-English speaking backgrounds were at an academic disadvantage compared with their native

English peers. He also mentioned that he struggled with his academic writing skills well into his postgraduate studies. He said:

> *The English… how much English you learned is not going to be like the home student. When they speak with the tutor and the instructor, you know, you feel 'oh, they can communicate clearly, they can deliver their.., express themselves to the tutor, so they can deliver.., they can clearly communicate with the instructors', so the problems will be minimized. Whereas, like us, sometimes, especially at the first year we started getting involved or getting in the matter. I was the only, there were only two foreigners in the class, the others were English, so you find, oh, okay, when they speak to the instructor, the instructor understand them. Sometimes you feel a little bit shy not to talk to instructor because the whole class is English. That was not really a big problem, but if the instructor were good enough to understand that you are an overseas student, so he can be more patient let's say, with us, and understandable, but we have to wait or make things clearer when he speaks to us, so we can really catch up and understand him.*

Abdul Kareem emphasised the role of the instructor inside the mainstream classroom as being crucial to assisting the learning of foreign students. In Abdul Kareem's experience, instructors in the host country need to consider the pace of their instruction, the clarity of the information they deliver, the level of shyness that some foreign students feel when they are few in the classroom and the difficulty that foreign students might have in expressing themselves clearly. In addition to overcoming the challenges associated with weak communication skills, Abdul Kareem identified his academic writing skills as a major area of weakness. He said:

So, the writing skill, the academic writing skills, we did not…, myself, I did not learn this or become good enough at first year, but with time I think I taught myself better than when I started.

Interestingly, Abdul Kareem stated that "*I taught myself*" the necessary

academic writing skills, although he did not identify the strategies that he used

to do so. A common thread in the experiences of many participants, male and

female, is that the intensive English language courses they undertook at the

beginning of their studies abroad insufficiently developed their academic

writing skills and their knowledge of the technical vocabulary applicable to

their area of specialisation. These skills were only developed by participants

after they were immersed in the mainstream learning environment for some

time. Further, Abdul Kareem pointed out that the academic progress of

students from non-English speaking backgrounds was also affected by their

instructors' levels of experience and skills in teaching these students in

mainstream classes.

…because in my master's program, the instructors, the tutors they came from different backgrounds. Some of them came from industrial backgrounds, industrial institutes or industrial section. So, they had no experience, or they have never taught foreigners or students… they thought that all that were in the class they were actually, all of them are English natives. So, when they start writing quickly and speaking in a normal speed…, with those people, those tutors we felt okay, there are some difficulties. Whereas some others were actually in the same university, …, but actually they used to teach foreigners and non-English students. So, they know, okay, if I have some students in the class, so I have to be carefully, so everyone will understand what I am saying… So they have experience dealing with foreigners, with non-

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English students. So that makes classes different from one class to another.

Abdul Kareem also mentioned that learning experiences differed from country to country:

By the way, I remember when I went to Canada the experience was really different. In Canada, I would say 80% of the students are foreigners, non-Canadian and people speak English very different. I mean, you find people struggling, really struggling in English and some instructors, some professors, actually English is not their first language, so we find difficulties understanding them and not understanding the students. So, I felt two feelings. I felt, oh, I am very much better than others, even compared to some professors who spent time, they are Canadian by the way. And also, the students feel that, okay, my English is not bad, look at others. Whereas in England, people actually speak, English people when they speak and pronunciation because they are, I believe, the reference English. So, I think the experience it differs somehow from one country to another.

Thus, Abdul Kareem highlighted the positive impact of increased cultural diversity within the host higher education environment, which he found to increase self-confidence and ease the academic adjustment of students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Abdul Kareem also mentioned what boosted his confidence to study abroad despite having weakness in his English language skills:

I've seen many, many students before me, friends and they spent time there and get their PhD and their master and they came back, so we are not actually, they are not better than us. So, there's no, of course

there is some challenges, but what we are seeing is telling us that, okay English is not going to be a difficulty that will stop you from studying other subjects abroad.

Thus, for Abdul Kareem, seeing many Saudis go abroad with weak English language skills who succeeded in completing their postgraduate degrees, gave him and his peers the confidence to pursue their higher degrees in an English-speaking country. Abdul Kareem's statement also revealed that sponsored Saudi students go abroad with varying levels of English language ability and that those who come from remote regions in Saudi Arabia are more likely to have weak English language skills.

Mazen (male) – "Very Good" English

Mazen described his English as being "*very good*" before he left Saudi Arabia to study abroad, which is not surprising given that his undergraduate area of specialisation was linguistics. He had achieved the required English language test score to enter his master's degree directly; however, he chose to enrol in a three-month bridging course to help improve his study skills before commencing his master's course. He said:

> *Before going to Australia, I did the TOEFL* [Test of English as a Foreign Language] *exam and I had the mark that allowed me to get directly into my master's program, but I preferred to do the English language bridging course.*

It was really important to me because it gave me the opportunity to develop my study skills, especially at postgraduate level.

Mazen's high level of motivation and determination to succeed in his studies was very evident. He also possessed the insight to realise that language was not the only skill that he needed to succeed academically abroad and thus, he opted to do a bridging course to enhance his study skills. When asked how he had acquired such good English language skills prior to study abroad, Mazen said, "*…it was completely self-learning. It had nothing to do with school or even university".*

Like most of the participants though, Mazen found the initial transition to his postgraduate studies abroad difficult. He said:

> *Actually, I remember that when I first started my master's I found it very difficult, especially at the very beginning. I remember that I had a lot of the unit outlines, those research assignments and final exams and stuff like that. Honestly, I wasn't quite confident that I'll pass and get the high marks required. So, I spent some time with my lecturers, they really helped me a lot and I found when I graduated, thank God, I got a high mark, it was a distinction.*

Once again, the high level of determination and resilience Mazen possessed was evident in his approach to overcoming the difficulties of studying in a foreign language and in a new learning environment. Mazen was not too shy to approach his lecturers for extra help, which was instrumental in his

achievement of a distinction in his master's degree. It is interesting to note that despite Mazen's very good grasp of the English language at the commencement of postgraduate study abroad, he still faced some difficulty adjusting to the new academic environment. Thus, it again becomes apparent that the presage level of English language ability is just one of many factors that affects foreign students' academic adjustment and success abroad.

Numan (male) – "Zero" English

Numan is the only male participant to have left Saudi Arabia for study abroad with "*zero*" English. Numan is from one of Saudi Arabia's major cities; however, his undergraduate tertiary education was completed in a Saudi teachers' college. The teachers' colleges come under the governance of the Ministry of Education, not the Ministry of Higher Education. At the time of interview, most courses provided in the teachers' colleges in Saudi Arabia were delivered in the Arabic language only.

> Interviewer: *When you left Saudi, how would you describe your English before studying abroad?*
>
> Numan: *Zero. Yeah, really* [chuckle]*. When I went to Australia I did the placement test and they just put me in level one.*
>
> Interviewer: *In Saudi, the students study English in middle school and secondary school, but it's not very strong right?*
>
> Numan: *No, really, absolutely nothing.*

Interviewer: *And of course, you were training as a teacher in the area of mathematics, so you didn't really use English that much I suppose?*

Numan: *For the whole four years, I only studied two hours English. All what I learned was just by Arabic and I just took two units* [in English] *for the whole four years.*

Numan: *Actually, because we were related to the Ministry of Education, they just prepare us to be a teacher, so they don't pay any attention to English or another subject. Everything just a little, little, little.*

Numan's lack of English language skills made his transition to university in Australia very difficult. He said, "*actually it was very difficult, especially for the first days, the first weeks, the first months it was very hard*". Unlike Ebtisam, Numan did not have a spouse or a friend who spoke English to accompany him when he went abroad. Thus, it was very daunting for him to study in a foreign learning environment without any foreign language skills.

Nevertheless, Numan was able to overcome this obstacle and successfully complete the intensive English language course abroad, although it took him six months longer than the allotted twelve months. Despite the extra six months, Numan felt that it was still not enough to prepare him for his postgraduate studies.

Interviewer*: You did one and a half years of English. So, when you completed that, how did you feel your English was at that time?*

Numan: *Actually, I thought it's still weak. Even now I'm not really confident with my English.*

During the interview Numan was able to clearly articulate his ideas; however, he often struggled to find the right words to express himself and he sometimes made major grammatical mistakes. Nevertheless, despite Numan's weaknesses in the English language, he was able to successfully complete his master's degree.

Interviewer: *When you were studying your master's, you felt that your English was not very strong, how did you do it? I mean you had to write assignments, exams, a small thesis maybe. How did you manage to get through?*

Numan: *Actually, for me, I spend, I really hard work, I really did hard work. So, I can say that I made the pressure upon myself to do hard, so it was not just only one job, it was two jobs – English language and the master's, the same knowledge. So, it was not only one job, it was two. For example, if I need to read an article, it took maybe half an hour for a native speaker, but I spend maybe three hours to read it. That's why I spend more time in studying my master degree especially. Even, as I said to you, they said your language is not too bad, because even when I did IELTS [International English Language Testing System] or I did bridging course, I get, for example in bridging course, I get a certificate as most improved student, even though I don't feel as a confident. Maybe it's something personal to me, when I talk with my friends who study with me at the same level, we came at the same day, I found myself speak better than him, but still I feel that he more confident than me, even if his language is weaker than me, I don't know why, maybe I am looking for something perfect.*

Shaw's (2009) findings that Saudis who study abroad possess the traits of resilience and determination has been consistently demonstrated and

confirmed by the experiences of the participants in this study. Numan clearly

found it difficult to acquire the English language; however, this did not deter

him from continuing his studies. In fact, he has emphasised how he exerted

greater effort to ensure that he made it through the course. Numan's

achievement of an award for the most improved student in his bridging

course is a testimony to his efforts and progress. However, like other

participants in this study, Numan found studying the mainstream courses

very challenging despite his achievements in the intensive English language

program. He described this as having "*two jobs*" to do during his master's, as

compared with native English-speaking students. He had to simultaneously

learn English and learn his master's subjects at the same time. He said:

> *Yeah, actually, at the beginning I feel that, I felt that I will be behind everybody, I felt they will looking to me as a bad student, something like that. But after spend 1.5 years at the university I used to come, I used, you know, became involved in the environment, so it became good, not too bad, but when I start my master's degree I really, really felt that, I thought that I will be behind everybody and even in the class sometimes I fear to say something wrong or to say the sentence in not correct grammar, so I feel that, but what is surprise me when I sometimes submit my assignment I get mark more higher than, for example, native speaker. It was really surprise me. Then the supervisor or another teacher, they said to me, they said to us as a whole class, we are not assessing your language, we assessing your idea. Of course, when I express my idea, I express it in very simple sentence, not in very complicated. The teacher, they said 'We don't care if it's very simple or in a very complicated...' You know, for example, when I write something I will say 'I go like this', you know, very simple, but native speaker, they can play with words, make it as a professional, you know, that's why I felt, I thought I will be behind, but thank God, I get all of my marks very high.*

Interestingly, Numan was still able to achieve good results in his master's

degree with limited English language skills, as he was assessed according to

his content knowledge, rather than his English language ability.

Although Numan was able to successfully complete his postgraduate study

abroad, he feels that the amount of time that Saudi students are given to

complete the intensive English language course abroad is not long enough:

> Interviewer: *When you were in class listening to the teacher, did you feel that you were getting all the information, or did you sometimes feel unsure?*
>
> Numan: *At the beginning, sometimes I maybe got 20% for the whole lecture, but as time goes, I found myself, I improved actually in understanding more and more. But at the beginning, because I just came from English program, just one and a half year. One and a half year, I don't think it's enough. So at the beginning, especially for the first semester, it was really, really hard.*
>
> Interviewer: *So you feel like they need to do something more to help the students get stronger English language skills before starting their degrees?*
>
> Numan: *Yeah. I would love to spend at least 2 years. Even when I was studying English it was tough and there is a pressure because we have limited time in studying English and if I don't get the conditions to get in the university I will return back. So it was very pressure and just we tried hard. But I don't think one year or one and a half is enough. Maybe we can get the condition* [i.e. meet the conditions]*, but it will affect our study actually.*

The pressure Numan describes, fueled by the fear of being sent back to

Saudi Arabia empty-handed can encourage academic dishonesty, as

discussed in the literature review (Qing, Harney, Stecklow, & Pomfret, 2016). Numan's experience brings to the fore the difficulty that is faced by students who struggle to learn English within the allotted time period. Saudi students who go abroad with little or no English language skills are under significant pressure to acquire the language within a relatively short period of time or risk being sent back to Saudi Arabia empty handed. The official statistics (Saudi King's scholarship program, 2013) show that a small percentage of Saudi students are sent back without completing their degrees, yet there are indications that a large number of Saudis make it through their studies abroad with relatively weak English language skills (Al-Sibai, 2012).

Mateen (male) – "Excellent" English

Like Huma and Mazen, Mateen's specialisation was in the area of English and linguistics and therefore, unsurprisingly, he described his English language ability before postgraduate study abroad as very good. Mateen did not speak in detail about his educational experiences at secondary school and university in Saudi Arabia before studying abroad. However, he did mention two factors that helped him to develop his English language skills prior to going abroad. Firstly, he credits some of his teachers at university in Saudi Arabia for helping him to learn English, and secondly, he identifies his own high level of motivation as another key factor. Mateen stated that he did

not face any difficulties in his studies abroad because of English language issues. In his view, the only difficulties he encountered were the result of a lack of 'prerequisite knowledge' related to the courses he undertook:

> *It was not a language problem. If there were any, at the beginning the twelve credits that I took it was only, I felt like on the same level when it comes to understanding the material, in grasping the information. However, there was some prerequisite information that I had difficulties with, not because of the language element, but because I hadn't read or thought about them before.*

Mateen's experience appears to concur with Taylor and Albasri's (2014) assertion that:

> … the academic difficulties experienced by some Saudi students may have less to do with language and the rigorous educational system of the United States and more to do with Saudi students being ill-prepared for higher education in general, as Saudi school systems are not up to par with American educational systems… (p. 116).

Hence, Mateen commenced his postgraduate studies abroad with a strong grasp of the English language and did not experience any language-related difficulties during his overseas studies.

Ahmed (male) – "Good" English

Ahmed completed his master's and PhD degrees in the field of nanotechnology and spent seven years in the United Kingdom. He went

abroad with *"intermediate level"* English language speaking skills and slightly less developed academic writing skills.

> Interviewer: *Describe your English language before you went overseas.*
>
> Ahmed: *My speaking ability, I was in the Intermediate level when I went to the UK.*
>
> Interviewer: *Okay and then what would you say about writing, like writing essays and assignments and things?*
>
> Ahmed: *I would give myself pre-intermediate for that one.*

Ahmed experienced difficulty in the early stages of his master's degree due to a lack of specialised vocabulary related to his field of study. He said:

> *Well the only difficulty I faced in the first two months in my master's degree was the new terminology, because it was difficult to know everything in the field. So that was the main problem I had in my studies.*

Hence, like many of the participants, Ahmed's difficulty transitioning to his postgraduate studies suggests that sponsored academics could benefit from more specialised English language instruction (ESP), as opposed to just general English prior to the commencement of their postgraduate courses.

Drawing the Data Together

This section discussed the participants' English language proficiency at the commencement of postgraduate study abroad and how this impacted their

study abroad experiences. Analysis of the data revealed that participants'

presage levels of English language ability can impact on their academic

transition abroad, as well as their English language proficiency at the

completion of postgraduate study abroad (to be discussed in Chapter 6).

There were no gender-specific findings in relation to participants' English

language proficiency before postgraduate study abroad. There was a strong

correlation between participants' presage levels of English language ability

and their academic discipline before postgraduate study abroad, as shown in

Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 shows that the participants' levels of English language proficiency

before postgraduate study abroad correspond with Vinke & Jochems (1993)

assertion that "on the whole, the level of foreign language proficiency required

for academic success tends to be lower for technology and natural sciences

than for social sciences or the humanities" (p. 277). Thus, there is a logical

link between the participants' area of specialisation prior to their postgraduate

study and their English language ability at the commencement of

postgraduate study abroad. Participants from a linguistics and English

language teaching background self-reported having very good English

language skills at the commencement of postgraduate study abroad, whereas

those from a science, physics and mathematics background mostly self-

reported having intermediate level or no English language skills.

Table 5.1 – Participants' Self-Reported Presage English Language Proficiency

Participant Name* *Pseudonyms	Gender	Field of Study	Self-Reported Presage English Language Ability
Ebtisam	Female	Food Science	**Zero**
Raeesa	Female	<u>Bachelor</u>: Computer Information Systems (USA) <u>Two Master's Degrees</u>: Master of Computer Science (USA) / Master of Education (UK) <u>PhD</u>: E-Learning /Blended Learning (UK)	**Very Good**
Huma	Female	Curriculum and Instruction - English Language Teaching	**Very Good**
Fatima	Female	Science – Cell Engineering	**Good**
Abdul Kareem	Male	Science - Radiation Physics	**Good**
Mazen	Male	Linguistics	**Very good**
Numan	Male	Mathematics Education	**Zero**
Mateen	Male	Linguistics (Major: English Minor: Educational Psychology)	**Excellent**
Ahmed	Male	Science – Nanotechnology	**Intermediate**

The majority of participants, regardless of their starting levels of English

language proficiency, experienced an initial period of difficulty after they

entered their specialised postgraduate courses. Some participants identified a

gap in their intensive English language courses abroad and the language

requirements of their postgraduate courses, highlighting the potential need for

more specialised English language instruction (ESP) as opposed to just

general English. Further, participant Abdul Kareem pointed out that the

knowledge and skills of host university teachers in teaching students with

weak English language skills in mainstream classes is another factor that

affects their academic adjustment. As other studies have highlighted, the data

in this study confirm that the impact of low levels of presage English language

ability on Saudi students' academic progress abroad can be ameliorated by

their levels of motivation, determination, resilience and effective strategy

development (Kampman, 2011; Shaw, 2009; Taylor & Albasri, 2014)

5.2.1.2 Participants' Attitudes toward Learning English

Saudi Arabia is renowned for its highly conservative culture and sees the

preservation of its culture as a key priority (Hancock, 2017; Saudi Arabian

Cultural Mission, n.d.). Therefore, the Saudi government has aimed to

achieve its national development with the approach of modernisation without

Westernisation (Jardine, 2005; Zain, Kassim, & Ayub, 2016). In other words,

Saudi Arabia welcomes changes in its infrastructure and advancements in scientific knowledge but considers the preservation of its unique cultural identity as paramount. Thus, the spread of the English language throughout the Arab world has at times caused consternation among its people; some fearing the loss of their native language of Arabic (Al Lawati, 2011; Guttenplan, 2012), while others have viewed its spread as a form of neo-imperialism (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

The increasing presence of English as the medium of instruction in schools and universities throughout the Middle East has led to calls for Arab governments to put in place measures to preserve the Arabic language and to improve students' Arabic reading and writing skills that have been slipping as a result (Al Lawati, 2011; Burnett, 2012; Masri, 2012). In 2012, the government of Qatar (Saudi Arabia's neighbour) switched the language of instruction at its largest university, Qatar University, from English back to Arabic ("English vs Arabic," 2012; Guttenplan, 2012). No official mention of switching the language of instruction back to Arabic at universities in Saudi Arabia has been made; however, in 2012, the Gulf News reported that English was no longer allowed to be used to answer telephones in hotels, private companies and government offices in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia bans using Gregorian dates, 2012), signaling a growing concern about the

increasing presence of English and the loss of Arabic. Amid this concern

about the rise of English, I wrote to the Dean of the Preparatory Year

Program and Director of the English Language Centre at a university in Saudi

Arabia to obtain an authoritative view on the likelihood of a switch back to

Arabic as the language of instruction at Saudi Arabia's universities. His

response was as follows:

> *As for my opinion on the issue, certainly not! English is becoming more and more influential in Saudi Higher Education. A clear proof of that is the Ministry tendency towards reinforcing Preparatory Year Programs in which one of the key aims is to upgrade English language proficiency by means of intensive hours of instruction. That has become one of the major requirements to proceed to sophisticated colleges like medical and scientific colleges whose curricula are introduced in English. Being deeply involved in this area, I assure you that shifting to Arabic is not likely to happen soon, bearing in mind that there are efforts to also develop standard Arabic skills for undergraduates.* (E-mail communication, November 2, 2013)

Recent studies indicate that attitudes in Saudi Arabia toward learning English

in secondary schools and universities are generally becoming more positive

over time (Alsamani, 2014; Faruk, 2014). When I taught English at university

in Saudi Arabia during the period 2006-2011, I observed mixed attitudes

among the students toward learning the English language. Students who

required English for their future careers or future study were usually very keen

to learn English, while students who did not require English for their future

careers generally lacked motivation and were sometimes even resentful at

being forced to learn it (Ankawi, 2015). Hence, I found it much easier to teach English to the highly motivated students who were studying English literature, compared to the students who were studying to become teachers, as they were largely disinterested in learning English.

In this study, I sought to understand the participants' views on learning English, given the mixed attitudes among Saudis and the key role that learner motivation plays in influencing learning outcomes (Alkaaby, 2016). The data demonstrate that most participants had a highly positive view towards learning English, regardless of their academic discipline or gender, and they saw it as an essential skill for Saudi academics to possess. Two main sub-themes emerged from the data in relation to the participants' attitudes toward learning English. These include: English is essential for accessing specialised knowledge; and, English is essential for learning Western research philosophies, approaches, and techniques.

English essential for accessing specialised knowledge

The responses of around half the participants indicated that they felt very strongly that English was essential for accessing specialised knowledge in their fields. The reasons provided include: most of the textbooks are in English and these are higher quality than those available in Arabic; most

online information and teaching resources are in English; communication with

experts overseas and keeping abreast with the latest developments in their

field would not be possible without English, and; many Saudi professors

studied in English and use it in their teaching.

Abdul Kareem provided several reasons why he felt that it was essential for

Saudis to undertake their degrees in the English language. He said:

> *I would not reach my current stage, if I study only in Arabic. One of the main reason is, I would say the references, the textbooks, they are not available to students or to the university students to learn the subject. So they are very, very limited and if they are exist, they will not* [be] *as good as English textbooks. The second reason is if you would like to communicate with other scientists, you would not be able to communicate with them and see the state of art of your subject, if you study only in Arabic. I would say the third reason also is your professors, all of them were actually taught in English, so when they're teaching you, they use English terms and they use, English references and English experiences and all these make there is some gaps between you and them, and you feel 'oh, they are in a high status'. So, you feel that, okay, English is very important, very necessary, in order to learn that subject.*

Ebtisam was also confident that if she had studied her food science degree in

the Arabic language she would not have had access to the same level of

subject information that she did by studying it in English. She said:

> *I don't think if I learn it in Arabic I will get the same information, because everything is in English. Now even if I go to the website and I want scientific things, in food science, in Arabic, I will not get any good information.*

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Ahmed's view on learning English echoed the views of fellow participants

Ebtisam and Abdul Kareem, as follows:

> Interviewer: *If somebody was thinking of going overseas to study and they were to ask you what's the difference between here and there, will I benefit more if I study overseas than in a Saudi university, what would you say?*
>
> Ahmed: *Well I think I would advise the people to study the master's and PhD abroad. Not the bachelor degree because everything here is there. But the way we teach I think in my opinion should be changed, because we basically don't have enough references in Arabic. So the way we teach in Arabic is, is not good especially for science. So we need to teach in English or to translate enough references, enough books for students to be as good as people who were doing the same degree abroad.*
>
> Interviewer: *That's interesting. Actually, others I interviewed said a very similar thing to you about the references being in English compared to what's available in Arabic. Are there books that are in Arabic that are not available in English or is it really just catching up with what's available in English?*
>
> Ahmed: *In science, I don't think so, I have to be honest, we don't have. All the books in science are translated from English. In other areas, we have many books that cannot be found in English, but in science, no. The up-to-date science and research cannot be found in Arabic. We have to translate it from English.*

Ahmed's experience as a Saudi academic in the field of science led him to

the same conclusions as fellow participants, that is, there are not enough

references in the field of science available in the Arabic language. Hence,

Ahmed is convinced that Saudis studying in the field of science must be

taught in English, otherwise they will not be on the same level as students

that study this subject abroad.

English essential for acquiring research knowledge and skills

Two participants identified English as being essential for acquiring research

knowledge and skills. Their reasoning is that the plethora of Western

scholarly works in relation to the nature of knowledge and knowledge

production have evolved over centuries and are largely inaccessible in the

Arabic language.

Abdul Kareem has connected the importance of learning English to acquiring

the knowledge and skills essential for conducting research. He said:

> *The … reason that make learning English.. important in my subject, is
> not only the subject is important, is the way that people learn the
> subject, or do research. The research methodology, the research
> thinking, this is done in English and they are really, they reached a
> high status in that area. So, the way they were thinking, the way they
> were conducting experiments and analyzing it, writing it down, these
> are all done in English. So, in all means, English is very important.*

Thus, according to Abdul Kareem, Saudi researchers need to know English in

order to advance their research knowledge and skills.

Ahmed also indicated that despite the growing awareness and support for

research in Saudi Arabia and the increasing number of scholarly works

produced in the Arabic language, as confirmed by other studies (Amer, 2015),

the Arab world is still in need of English to access the latest in research

knowledge and output.

> Interviewer: *Do you think that a lot of research has been going on in recent times in the Arab world?*
>
> Ahmed: *Well yes. I think we have just started to support the research especially in Saudi in the last few years. I think in a couple of years, we will produce more research and more references in Arabic. But now we are not ready to teach in Arabic.*

Therefore, these participants are of the view that the English language is

indispensable for the knowledge and skills acquisition of Saudi academics,

particularly in the field of science.

Learner attitudes are influenced by the motivations for learning English

The previous comments from participants identify their motivations and these

tended to align with the perceived benefits of learning English. Raeesa spoke

at length about how the attitudes of Saudi students toward learning English

are influenced by the perceived benefits, which include the purpose and use

of English beyond the classroom, such as for travel, overseas study or

employment. She also identified globalisation and the heavy dependence on

technology, as two factors that make exposure to the English language

almost unavoidable for the current generation and that have led to increased

motivation for learning English. Raeesa said:

> *They* [the current generation] *have more motivation, I think, because they are seeing how all the world around them is using English, whereas my generation, if I wouldn't go and study abroad, I wouldn't feel, I mean, for me actually, I had the motivation even if I wasn't going to study abroad, but probably others wouldn't have it.*

Raeesa's view that many Saudis would not be motivated to learn English

without a specific need to do so, concurs with my observations mentioned

earlier in this section, as well as studies on Saudi students' attitudes toward

learning English (Bhuiyan, 2016; Holbah, 2015). However, her assertion that

the globalised nature of the world today has virtually forced the current

generation of Saudis to learn English, implying that motivation will not be an

issue for the coming generations, is not so clear cut. Bhuiyan (2016) found

that Saudi students "learn English just to pass in the exam as it is a required

subject. At school, most students study English just to fulfill formalities" (p. 71);

a view also expressed by participant Ebtisam, who said: "*Here* [in Saudi

Arabia], *most of the students, they just care about the exam. Just what we

gonna have in the exam, that's it*." Nevertheless, as mentioned previously,

there is evidence of a growing acceptance and increasing motivation toward

learning English in Saudi Arabia (Alkaabi, 2016; Alsamani, 2014; Faruk,

2014).

<u>Drawing the Data Together</u>

Therefore, most participants held positive views towards learning the English language. The key theme to emerge from the data on Saudi academics' attitudes towards learning English was that it was regarded as an essential tool needed to bridge the information gap that exists in certain fields of study from Arabic to English. It was also noted as an essential tool for acquiring research knowledge and skills. The role of globalisation and the perceived benefits for the learner were identified as strong motivating factors for learning English. Whilst only four participants spoke about their views on learning English, an additional three participants, Huma, Mazen and Mateen, specialised in English language teaching, indicating their positive views toward learning the English language.

5.2.2 Overseas Teaching Context

Sponsored Saudi academics enter higher education systems abroad that are significantly different to the system they are accustomed to in Saudi Arabia. In order for these postgraduate students to reap maximum benefit from their studies abroad, they must make a successful transition to their new academic environment. According to Biggs' (1993) three phase model of learning, teaching context, which includes course structure, curriculum, teaching methods and assessment methods, is a critical component of the learning

process within the presage phase and can have a significant impact on learning outcomes. Thus, participants were asked about the overseas teaching context to better understand the factors that impacted their learning experiences abroad. Two major themes emerged from the data regarding the overseas teaching context, which include approaches to teaching and assessment; and cultural differences. The key difference in teaching and assessment noted by participants was the shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred teaching environment. Three sub-themes emerged from the data on cultural differences, including a mixed-gender learning environment, classroom culture and power-relations, and cultural conceptions of academic integrity.

5.2.2.1 Approaches to teaching and assessment

Knowledge and ideas around approaches to teaching, learning and assessment have evolved significantly over the last twenty years (Ahmed, 2013; Froyd & Simpson, 2010). Traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment reflect the view that the central focus of education is to teach content matter, as opposed to developing critical thinking and independent learning skills. In traditional classrooms the teacher plays a central role as the knowledge provider and the students are the passive recipients of knowledge (Ahmed, 2013). Traditional assessment methods reflect this notion of

education and are designed to test students' abilities to recall the information
that they have been provided by their teacher (Froyd & Simpson, 2010). In
some traditional classrooms it is considered disrespectful to question the
information that the teacher provides, as the teacher is regarded as the expert
and eminently superior to the students (Ahmed, 2013). In the late 1990s, the
information explosion that came with the internet exponentially increased
students' access to the world wide web and forced a radical change in
thinking about the provision of knowledge in formal educational settings
(Allamnakhrah, 2013). It shifted the focus of education from teaching students
content matter, to developing their higher order thinking skills and abilities to
make reasoned judgements about the immense amount of information that
was now available online (Ahmed, 2013; Allamnakhrah, 2013; Froyd &
Simpson, 2010). Assessment methods also shifted in line with this situation,
placing less emphasis on recall-style examinations and increased use of
research-based assignments, open-ended, problem solving and higher-order
thinking questions, as well as a range of other assessment forms (Cristillo,
2010). However, in the Middle East, historical, political and cultural factors
have tended to preserve the traditional approach to teaching and learning,
despite the online information explosion (Cristillo, 2010). Thus, Middle
Eastern education systems continue to rely heavily on rote memorisation,
recall-style examinations and the unquestioned superiority of the teacher's

knowledge (Allamnakhrah, 2013). It is with this background that the participants entered their new teaching context abroad and from this perspective that they shared their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment.

Raeesa reported that in Saudi Arabia she was accustomed to passive learning, which made her transition to the overseas teaching context challenging. However, during her time abroad she was able to gradually develop independent learning skills, which she regards as the pinnacle of what she learned abroad. She said, "*The most important thing that I learnt when I moved to USA was being more self-learner. That I haven't got used to it when I was in Saudi Arabia*".

Raeesa attended a private secondary school in Saudi Arabia and reported that teaching methods were the same in Saudi private schools, as they were in Saudi public schools. She said, "*Yes, yes, it was more teacher-centred than student-centred. And I can say that there wasn't actually a big difference between private or public schools and teaching methods*".

Raeesa completed all levels of her university study overseas and found her PhD to be the most challenging form of study, as this required high-level

independent learning skills and research skills, as compared with her

bachelor's and coursework-master's degrees:

> *… the problem that I faced is at my PhD level, because at the time of the research, even though I studied my master's, but doing my master's it wasn't a research-based studying, it was course work, so it was a bit different about the research. So, when I started my research, actually, it was for me a little bit struggling and a challenge to be more independent. Especially when I am studying in a field that's new for me and not only new, because I had the master's as a course based for the research in education, but when I started my research I felt that I needed more guidance from my supervisor. It's just a feeling that I am not sure if I am taking the right path towards my PhD end or not and just feeling that he knows the answer, but he doesn't give it to me, he's waiting for me to go and look for it. At the beginning I felt that it's, I don't know how to describe it, but it's more frustrating for students. And during the last period of my research I found that really that was a very good way of teaching, because it was helping me to learn more, it was helping me to search for the right materials, because at the end, the supervisor will tell me, okay, this is right or this is wrong, or maybe at the end he would say, what about that idea? Why don't you go and look for it? He would give me the opportunity to search and learn by myself for a while and then at the end he would give me his opinion or his advice.*

Whilst Raeesa spoke of her initial difficulty and frustration with her PhD

supervisor's approach to teaching her, she realised that he had assisted her

to develop her most valued skills from abroad - independent learning skills.

Like Raeesa, Ebtisam also described the teaching approach in Saudi Arabia

as being teacher-centred, whereby students rote-memorised the specific

content that was to be tested in examinations. This is a surface approach to

learning, whereby the learner seeks to maximise their examination

performance without pursuing a deep understanding or internalisation of the content. She said: "*Here* [in Saudi]*, most of the students, they just care about the exam. Just what we gonna have in the exam, that's it. And they just study some information, put it in the exam paper and forget about it."* Subsequently, Ebtisam reported facing difficulty in her transition to the new academic environment abroad, particularly when she needed to complete written assessments. This will be discussed further in the section on academic integrity below.

Likewise, Numan described the teaching approach in Saudi Arabia as teacher-centred and noted his initial difficulty transitioning from a teachers' college in Saudi Arabia to university in Australia. He said:

> *In Saudi, …, when I was in my bachelor degree, I am not really aware, I just come to the class, listening to the teacher, there is no activity, no interaction with the teacher. So we were like a passive learner, we just listening, memorising some facts, answering the exam and that's it. I was not aware that I really, I could call myself as a learner, I just a passive student. When I went to Australia everything change actually. I involved in the class, interaction with others, dialogue with the teacher, with students, I feel that I do something and this increased my conscience about teaching and learning. This is the difference. So, when I went to Australia I thought I will learn in just some textbook, but it wasn't. Eighty percent of the class, it's about the students, the contribution of the teacher only twenty percent I could say. This is what shocked me at the beginning. Now I become believe in it.*

Hence, Numan observed that there was a major difference in the approach to teaching and assessment used at the host university abroad, compared to what he was accustomed to in Saudi Arabia. The learner-centred approach can appear to be quite informal to the unfamiliar traditional learner, as the teacher does not carry the entire responsibility for students' learning and students are given greater agency in the learning process. However, Numan's immersion in the learner-centred environment led him to develop an appreciation for this approach, as he gained an improved understanding of the content as a consequence of his active engagement in the learning process.

> *It's because teacher and students think that their role at the classroom like this. They think, for example, if I ask a teacher* [in Saudi Arabia]*, 'What do you think your role in the classroom?'* [He will say] *'Provide the knowledge to the students.' So they think that, so they not allow the students to engage in their teaching. For example, for me previously, I thought I'm the one who responsible to provide everything to the students, my role in the classroom is essential and important, without me the students learn nothing. So everything I have to prepare, I have to provide to the students, I have to say everything. This is what I believed as a teacher.*

Numan's description of the teacher's role indicates how deeply ingrained the teacher-centred paradigm was in Saudi Arabia at the time of interview. Given these strongly held views and education traditions in Saudi Arabia, it is to be expected that academic returnees will find it difficult to implement the learner-

centred approach when they return to work in Saudi Arabia. Numan and

Raeesa elaborate further on this point in the next chapter.

Therefore, around half of the participants reported that the learner-centered

teaching approach was the key difference in the host and home countries'

higher education learning environments. It was evident that the participants

were able to overcome their initial difficulties, adapting to the new teaching

approach and gaining valuable insights into how this approach is effective in

helping students to learn.

5.2.2.2 Cultural Differences

Given Saudi Arabia's unique traditional and highly conservative culture, an

expected issue for sponsored Saudi academics in the overseas teaching

context is cultural difference. Previous studies have mainly focused on Saudi

students' transition to a mixed-gender learning environment, as well as

touching on the issue of academic integrity (Alhazmi, 2010; Kampman, 2011;

O'Malley, 2016; Redden, 2015; Shaw, 2009; Shepherd & Rane, 2012). In this

study, these same areas have been identified with three sub-themes

emerging with respect to cultural differences. These included: the mixed-

gender learning environment; classroom culture and power-relations; and,

academic integrity.

Mixed-Gender Learning Environment

As mentioned previously, Saudi Arabia adheres to strict gender segregation laws and practices within all public education settings and most public spaces (Dadouch, 2018). Hence, it is unsurprising that almost all participants in this study reported taking time to adjust to the mixed-gender learning environment abroad.

Ebtisam found it very difficult at first to get used to the idea of studying in a mixed-gender environment, to the point where she requested her teachers in the English language institute to put her in female-only groups, to which her teachers obliged. Ebtisam said:

> *From the beginning, from the English Institute, yes, we had these male students with us and then I went to the teacher and I said, 'because of my culture and my background I can't sit with males* [chuckle], *so if we have group work, please, I don't wanna have a male in my group, only my husband'* [chuckle].

> *Step by step… I was like, because we don't talk to males face to face, we just talk on the phone and so it was hard for me. Like I speak very freely with my female friends and then when it comes to males I can't get the words, you know it was a bit… uncomfortable. Even when I went to my PhD, my course supervisor, he was a male, so the first time when we were having our first meeting, he walked in and he wanted to shake my hand and I said, 'Sorry, I can't shake your hand'. And he said, 'Oh, okay, okay, I completely understand'. And I found out he was working in King Faisal Hospital, in Riyadh, for four years. So, he knows the culture.*

By the time Ebtisam reached her master's course, she had successfully

transitioned and was able to work comfortably alongside her male peers.

Ebtisam did, however, maintain the custom of not having physical contact

with non-related males. Interestingly, Ebtisam explained during the interview

that her husband had accepted her interaction with her male peers during her

study abroad without any issues, but once they had returned to Saudi Arabia

he strictly reapplied the custom of no interaction between non-related males

and females. Ebtisam said:

> *Even my husband, he's very open-minded person… and when I was in Australia, he doesn't ever mind if I talk to a male or work with a male in one bench, or anything. But here, even if I talk on the phone with a male, even from the male section here at the university, he says 'why you are talking with him'? My husband, when he come back, he get again into the culture. He get mixed, because he is like, what he's like hearing from around, big stories between all the males here, think very bad about females. So he changed. And even over there in Australia, I was just wearing my hijab* [head scarf]*, like I'm not covering my face, I'm wearing my abaya* [cloak] *and my scarf. Here, I can't even open my cover, even if we are travelling from* [her home city] *to Jeddah, on the way, I can't open my cover!*

Thus, Ebtisam's transition to a mixed-gender learning environment abroad

was a gradual but successful one. Interestingly, it was upon Ebtisam's return

to Saudi Arabia that she faced the challenge of societal attitudes toward

gender-mixing and the fact that her husband was particularly affected by the

stories and fears that existed among Saudi males with respect to the

perceived dangers of gender-mixing.

Numan's experience as a Saudi male studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment was quite similar to Ebtisam's. He said:

> *But when I study English program it was, you know, feeling shy to talk with them, I don't feel comfortable to talk with them, even* [though] *it's suppose to be normal, especially from Islamic perspective, you know, the Prophet has talked to women, nothing, it's okay, but because I didn't used to, so when I went to Australia we looking to this situation as... It's good, not too bad, but it was not comfortable, how to do that or maybe they will understand me wrong. We took it seriously, then later I found, I thought I took it more seriously than I should.*

Like Ebtisam, Numan was able to gradually adjust to studying in a mixed-gender environment and even reached the conclusion that his religion did not prevent honourable interaction between the genders but attributed this custom to his strict Saudi culture.

Huma's experience transitioning to a mixed-gender learning environment was different to Ebtisam's and Numan's. Her previous exposures to mixed-gender environments through overseas travel meant that studying in a mixed-gender environment was not an issue for her. She said:

> *I started master's direct, but then at the end of the master's I had to finish a 6-month practicum where I have no way, no other place to do it, other than the intensive language program over there. When I went there, mostly, like 50% of the students were Saudi and it was really difficult for them to have to have a teacher who was from Saudi Arabia. It was my practical, I was teaching over there, the English language. But it went well, for me, I got used to it, so it wasn't difficult.*

Interestingly, Huma describes the experience of studying in a mixed-gender environment as being difficult for the Saudis who were studying with her. Specifically, she mentions their discomfort when she had to teach them during the practical component of her English language teaching course, with over half the class being Saudi students. This indicates that the mixed-gender learning environment abroad is somewhat of a hurdle for many Saudis studying abroad, confirming the findings of previous research in this area (Alhazmi, 2010; Kampman, 2011; Shaw, 2009).

Classroom Culture and Power Relations

Beliefs, customs and practices around the way people relate to those in positions of authority, such as students and teachers, and those based on race, such as between Saudi citizens and migrant workers, were found to influence the culture of the education environments within the host and home countries. Subsequently, the data revealed that the power relations participants were accustomed to in Saudi society were the source of adjustment issues when they transitioned to the overseas educational environment.

For instance, Ebtisam's experiences in Saudi Arabia meant that she was not aware of the overseas university standards with respect to the expected

conduct in the laboratory. Hence, as a result, Ebtisam had difficulty

transitioning to the new academic environment. She said:

> *… so when I went to Australia, when I started my master's, yes, going to the lab, it was a big issue. All that I was having troubles in the lab, for safety issues. I wasn't wearing my lab coat, I wasn't wearing my safety glasses, like I don't care about it. It's something, like, not necessary, you know? Because that's what is here. They don't care about safety. And like, if a glass were broken down, I don't care about it here* [in Saudi Arabia]. *Someone will come and clean it. Over there* [Australia] *I can't move until I clean it myself. See, so it's different rules. It was like, quite hard for me when at first I get to the lab.*

Ebtisam's experience exemplifies one of the many difficulties that foreign

students can face within the overseas teaching context; yet, it is also

culturally laden. Specifically, it stems from attitudes towards migrant workers

and the beliefs around what tasks are considered too menial to be carried out

by Saudi citizens in Saudi Arabia (Rashad & Paul, 2016). Ebtisam was

accustomed to a situation where no emphasis was placed on safety protocols

in the laboratory, because cheaply paid servants were readily available to

clean up hazards such as broken glass. Nevertheless, Ebtisam was able to

adapt to the new system and developed an appreciation for the overseas

laboratory protocols, which provided her some important transferrable

knowledge and skills.

Huma identified several cultural differences between the home and host

educational environments. For instance, she spoke about the etiquettes within

US university classrooms, including the consumption of food, punctuality

expectations, and the relationship between teachers and students. She said:

> *Well, when I moved to the United States and I was coping with the classroom and I get started with my classes, I noticed that there were some rules, which has been strict in Saudi Arabia, doesn't seem that strict in the United States. For example, students are allowed to drink in the classroom, eat in the classroom, while it's forbidden here, even in the university level. I noticed that the relationship between the students and the instructor is more friendly. There is of course boundaries of respect and so on, but mostly the relationship was so friendly. Another thing I noticed is that they have been always on time. You know, I know this, but this is one of my difficult things to apply in my own life, being on time often. And I think the environment affects the people. If you are in an environment that respects the time, then you will respect time.*

Huma's observation that the overseas educational setting was less formal

than that in Saudi Arabia in terms of the behaviours allowed inside the

classroom and the minimal power-distance between teachers and students,

reflect ideas around authority and power-distance within the host and home

cultures. A number of participants noted these same differences.

Numan also noted the minimal power-distance between teachers and

students abroad. He said:

> *There is some kind of different culture in academic, not about teaching or learning, the culture of the classroom. Even the relationship*

between the students and the teacher. At the beginning we called them, everyone, we said Dr. Peter, Dr... He said, "Don't say doctor, say David, Peter, Barry", like this, and I really don't know why they don't want to be called as a doctor, he is a doctor. But it's different, he became like our friend, not as a teacher. And another thing, when we had morning tea, for example, the director of our centre, when he came, I just stand up, directly. No-one give him any attention, except me. Absolutely, except me. I looking for everybody, they just talk with each other, they eat, no-one gave him any attention, except me, I just stand up, then nothing, then I return sit down. This situation in Australia is different, you know, you cannot separate, make a difference between teacher and students when they come together in one building, they talk with each other, talk friendly and this is good to encourage students to speak about their issues, their understanding, about anything. It's different when the teacher comes to the class, everyone has to be silent.

Numan describes the lofty status given to teachers in Saudi Arabia, including the use of formal titles and students rising to their feet when the teacher enters the room. When I commenced working at a university in a remote part of Saudi Arabia, I was taken aback when I entered the classroom on the first day and the students jumped to their feet. They were equally shocked when I requested them to sit down and informed them that there was no need for them to stand up again in future. Numan demonstrated a shift in his views on the culture of unquestioned respect for the teacher, describing it as "*dangerous*". He said:

… no-one believe that a teacher be wrong. Teacher be wrong? No, you must be crazy, teacher always right. Even sometimes, for example, in mathematics classroom, we dealing with numbers and sometimes we do some mistake, rather than write 5, write 6, even no-one will speak. Even we ask them 'Everything is okay?' 'Is this wrong?', 'Yes',

'Why you didn't say wrong?'. They [the students] *may change their mind to adopt the wrong thing. This is very dangerous.*

Numan adjusted to this cultural difference quite quickly and came to understand the benefits of the more equal relations between teachers and students abroad. He pointed out that the cordial relationship between teachers and students overseas can be advantageous to students' learning, as students will feel free to ask questions and actively participate in the learning process.

Mazen echoed similar sentiments to Numan and firmly expressed his views on the position of Saudi university professors within the Saudi higher education system. He said:

> *Look, yes there is a really huge difference between the education system in Australia and in Saudi Arabia. One of the biggest issues is how you deal with your professors. University professors in Saudi are just like a king, the student can't say anything, even if you got your exam paper mark and you really want to discuss something. I found this during my bachelor degree, it really was completely difficult to raise your voice and say 'I really don't accept this', things like that. But in Australia, you've got your student union. I was amazed when I saw those ads on the university campus saying that 'if you are not happy with your results, just give us a call.'*

Therefore, several participants reported that the different power relations within the overseas teaching context were the source of adjustment difficulties. These participants demonstrated that they were able to adapt quickly and

successfully to the new learning environment. In addition, their responses

indicated that they had developed an appreciation for the benefits of reduced

power-distance in the educational-setting, which placed greater responsibility

and agency in the hands of the learner.

Academic Integrity

Analysis of the data with respect to the overseas teaching context revealed

that several participants experienced significant academic adjustment issues

as a result of the cultural conceptions of cheating and plagiarism prevalent in

the Saudi higher education context, which differ greatly to those within the

overseas education setting. Participants spoke of their academic experiences

in Saudi Arabia and their adjustment to the overseas education context, which

shed light on this issue.

Cheating:

Mazen reported a high incidence of cheating within Saudi universities. He

said:

> *Yeah, it is very serious. When this kind of student graduates from university, do you know what happens in Saudi when they finish their BA, what they usually have to do? They maybe go and teach in public schools. Take it from me, this problem applies to all universities. By the way, one of the issues that we got to know in the past few months, that there was a student who was doing his bachelor's degree in medicine and his GPA is 5 out of 5, and he did, do you know the national exam*

in Saudi, it is for assessment? It's run by the National Center for Assessment. The thing is, that he did that exam and he failed. 5 out of 5 from university and then did the national exam and he failed. You would know what is really happening at a developing university. The grades are fake, very frankly, they are not true. If you have an excellent student with a GPA 5 out of 5, it is not true, not always true. This [National Center for Assessment] *is a national project I really respect, because it really gives you a true image of higher education graduates and there are a lot of controversial issues about this by the way. My opinion is that it is very important to keep such assessment centres to get the image of what is actually happening.*

Thus, in Mazen's view, cheating is a phenomenon that affects all Saudi Arabia's universities. Interestingly, Mazen stated that many of the students who cheat their way through university end up in the public sector as school teachers. Further, Mazen's comment that the National Center for Assessment has attracted much controversy in Saudi Arabia reflects a prevalent idea that cheating is not morally wrong, but rather it is a means of survival, and overlooking it is a form of charity. This has been reported within the literature (Kampman, 2011; O'Malley, 2016; Redden, 2015) and by Numan in the excerpts below.

Numan and Mazen are based in two different provinces in Saudi Arabia, and Numan has reported the same phenomenon as his compatriot. He said:

Before I went to Australia, in the teachers' college, many people came to me and asked me to talk to other teachers to increase his mark. So, it's really, the situation is really difficult and even if I said 'no, this is what you deserve', they don't know, the awareness, they don't know

why I said that… They look at me as a very bad person, he doesn't help anyone. So, they thought that I don't help them, even [though] *this is not help.*

… even sometimes if I talk to someone who has a high qualification and describe to him 'This is not good and this is cheating', he says 'Oh man, no-one will know, come on, do you think this guy will, what he will do?' We call it 'maashee-ha', it means 'Okay, let him go, it's okay, don't worry', we take it like this. It's actually common, some people like this take it easy. 'Let him go, it's okay, what is your benefit if he doesn't pass? Okay, let him go, he will pray for you later.'

Numan's response provides a sense of the prevalence of cheating in Saudi educational institutions, particularly in the form of marks inflation. It also sheds light on the type of thinking around the concept of cheating in Saudi Arabia. According to Numan, an unwillingness to facilitate cheating is seen as a negative quality and such a person is considered to be lacking empathy for others. Such thinking is directly opposed to the accepted norms around cheating that exist within Western educational institutions (Chapman, Lupton, & Weiss, 2000; Marshall & Gary, 2006).

None of the participants in this study indicated that they had encountered any academic adjustment issues in relation to cheating within their host universities. However, several participants did face problems when it came to producing original work and acknowledging the work of others in accordance with Western standards of academic integrity.

<u>Plagiarism</u>:

The lens of culture impacts the way that academic integrity is viewed by the beholder (Chapman, Lupton, & Weiss, 2000; Marshall & Gary, 2006). Alternative views on cheating within Saudi universities were discussed in the section above. Even more prevalent, however, is the act of plagiarism within Saudi universities; despite a growing awareness among educated Saudi citizens that its prevalence threatens the integrity of Saudi higher education (Al-Sibai, 2014; Elahi, 2010). When I taught at two different universities in Saudi Arabia during the period 2006-2011, I found that there were no policies regarding plagiarism, and students freely copied and pasted information from the internet for their assignments without acknowledging the source. The data in this study revealed that some of the participants ran into significant difficulties when it came to the issue of plagiarism abroad.

Raeesa spoke at length about the issue of plagiarism within Saudi universities. She identified the absence of policies and the dominant culture of the education environment in Saudi Arabia as the major factors deterring academic returnees from implementing rules with respect to plagiarism within Saudi universities. She said:

> *This is really a very crucial issue that needs to be considered, because there is no detailed policy about plagiarism. People who were studying abroad have this concept, understand it, but when they come back*

they don't apply it correctly on their students, because, again, people are using their manners [cultural norms], *but not using the policies.*

I asked Raeesa whether this culture of plagiarism within the Saudi university teaching context affected Saudi academics who study abroad. She said, "… *because some them have faced some troubles when they moved there because they weren't aware of plagiarism"*. Raeesa's statement indicates her view that for many sponsored Saudis, plagiarism is not a deliberate act of dishonesty but stems from a lack of awareness and academic preparation prior to study abroad.

Huma spoke of her own personal experience with plagiarism abroad. Her comments reinforce the idea that sponsored students require better preparation and training in this area prior to their departure. She said:

> *Yes, in fact, I have been in trouble for plagiarism lots of times before I have been given an idea of what is, how to keep the copyright of the person and how to, which parts you can borrow from the internet and how you quote these things and so on. So, by training I got used to it, but at the beginning, yes.*

Thus, despite the difficulty she faced, Huma was eventually able to adapt to the new academic system.

Similarly, Ebtisam left Saudi Arabia not knowing how to paraphrase or to cite the work of others, and this caused her great difficulty when she first began her master's degree abroad.

> *… here* [in Saudi]*, we used to do assignments like we just copy from the books and from the internet, at that time internet wasn't very available so we just copied from any book you find, copy it, write it down, write your name and submit it, and you get the grade. But then, over there* [in Australia]*, the first thing you do your assignment is, um, originality statement. Yes, and paraphrasing, you sign that you paraphrase everything and whenever you get something, you quote it, you put your reference there. So it was really hard to paraphrase. Especially first semester, it was really hard for me, I just read and how am I gonna paraphrase? So I remember my first assignment, it was like,* [chuckle]*, all quotation marks, that's it. 'According to such and such…'*

Ebtisam was also able to adapt to the academic system abroad. She developed the required knowledge and skills with the guidance and support of her research supervisor. However, like Huma, Ebtisam would have benefitted from prior preparation to ensure she had the knowledge and skills needed to avoid plagiarism.

Drawing the Data Together

Therefore, the data with respect to the overseas teaching context revealed two key areas of difference, including approaches to teaching and assessment, and cultural differences. Several participants discussed the shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred teaching environment. Three sub-

themes emerged from the data concerning cultural differences, including the mixed-gender educational environment; classroom culture and power-relations; and, academic integrity. As a result of the cultural differences, participants initially experienced some adjustment difficulties, but quickly adapted and developed an appreciation for the differences. Further, their exposure to the different teaching context abroad meant that they subsequently acquired knowledge and skills, which have the potential to be transferred to their home country higher education context.

5.2.3 Motivations for Study Abroad

Another key presage factor that can influence the learning of sponsored students abroad is the motivation or intention behind their decision to undertake overseas study. The literature identifies various reasons why sponsored academics choose to study abroad. These include, financial gain, improved social status, a prestigious degree, career advancement, and improved technical knowledge and skills (Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Grove, 2016; Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015; Wang, 2014). As discussed in Chapter 3, Takeuchi (2008) stated that "the question of whether the students also regard themselves as media for transferring knowledge and skills from study abroad to their home countries has not been well researched" (p. 20). This question provides the rationale for the first research question in the present study,

which asks about sponsored Saudi academics' motivations for studying

abroad with a view to checking their alignment with the scholarship goals.

Tagg's (2014) study involving Malaysian academic returnees found that there

was "significant evidence to suggest that the pre-departure training

programs… failed in their objective to foster patriotism and encourage

Malaysians to serve the nation upon graduation" (p. 58). Analysis of the data

in this study with respect to the participants' motivations for studying abroad

revealed that the principal goal for most participants was self-advancement.

Further, the participants' motivations were poorly aligned with the goals of the

scholarships program. A few participants, however, reported undergoing a

change in their outlook during their studies abroad, and subsequently sought

to acquire knowledge, skills and ideas for use in their university jobs back

home.

To Advance their Career

Ebtisam '*dreamed*' of going abroad to study, as she knew that, as a woman,

she would be treated differently studying outside of Saudi Arabia. She also

knew that she could better advance her career in science with overseas

qualifications. She said:

I get engaged to my husband, which he was studying already at the US. So that was like, my hope, okay, I'm going to US, I'm gonna finish my master's and PhD.

After I finished my bachelor, I was just dreaming of going abroad in any developed country. I know when I just read about those scientists who, like, found something, '[I would think] *oh when I'm gonna read my name in a magazine* [chuckle]*, as a scientist?'*

Interviewer: *So why did you think you could do that, you could become, for example, a successful scientist if you studied abroad; compared to if you studied here* [in Saudi]*?*

Because … here, the first issue is that you are a female. Okay, maybe in some universities they will say we have it [equipment]*, but it's in the male section. So going there and working, and with the Saudi background* [culture] *here, that when they see a female working in a male section, they say 'Oh, why she's here?'*

So, that was like, my main issue. I can go there [Australia]*, I can get into a different culture, because I know that people who are working in the lab, they know that everyone here is doing their job. Everyone here is coming, came here to do… to improve their-selves, to get educated, to get the benefit from the place, not just hanging around and things like that. The idea here* [in Saudi] *is different.*

Thus, Ebtisam's main motivation for studying abroad was the opportunity to study in a different cultural environment that was less restrictive towards women and where she had equal access to resources and equipment. Further, Ebtisam's comments suggest that she is very aware of the gender divide in terms of scientific expertise and status as it is understood and actioned in Saudi Arabia. Whilst Ebtisam's goal for self-improvement incorporates the enhancement of her technical knowledge and skills, she

does not mention any explicit intention to contribute to change in higher education in her country.

Raeesa initially went abroad as the dependent spouse of her husband who had a study abroad scholarship. After she had her children, she decided to take advantage of the opportunity and enroll in her bachelor's degree in the United States. She also chose to do her PhD abroad because the field of e-learning, that she was interested in, was not available in Saudi Arabia, and at that stage Saudi universities were strongly encouraging their Saudi faculty to obtain their postgraduate degrees from abroad. She said:

> *… for my first degree and master's… because I was with my husband, my husband was studying abroad, and I was with him and I just decided to continue my studying. But for my PhD, there wasn't actually a degree for e-learning, or let's say in this specific field that I was looking for and also the university was encouraging the lecturers to study abroad, but they weren't forcing us to study abroad like now, because I studied in late 2006, early 2007.*

Thus, Raeesa aspired to complete her PhD abroad before the rule came into effect that compelled Saudi academics to obtain their postgraduate qualifications from overseas, indicating her intrinsic motivation to do so. Yakaboski, Perez-Velez, and Almutairi (2017) found that many Saudi academics complete their postgraduate studies abroad because they are pressured by their universities to do so. Raeesa's comments also show that she desired to acquire knowledge in a field that had not yet been established

in Saudi Arabia. However, there was no explicit mention within her statement

whether the advancement of this underdeveloped field of knowledge in her

country formed part of her motivation to study abroad.

> *And the other thing is that I found also, not only feeling, but it was advice from people around me, that studying abroad will be much easier for you than studying in Saudi Arabia. I didn't have experience actually to study, graduate or to be enrolled in graduate studies in Saudi Arabia, but all the people who were around me who had the chance, they were warning me, 'It will be really very frustrating for you if you study your PhD in Saudi Arabia, while you had your master's and bachelor's from abroad'.*

I interrogated this issue further by asking Raeesa, "*So what kind of things do*

you think they were warning you about?" And Raeesa said:

> *They believe that the advisors or maybe the people who will guide them, not only advisors, but also professors who will teach them courses are not flexible enough and don't have the professionality as people abroad. Some of them had a bad experience with some of the professors who were trying to make things complicated.*
>
> *I chose UK because it was closer physically to Saudi Arabia. It was easier for me to travel back and forth.*

Raeesa's elaboration that some of her friends had bad experiences with

Saudi-based professors '*who were trying to make things complicated*', reflects

the culture of bureaucracy, rigidity and formality often found in developing

universities, as mentioned in the literature review (Alandejani, 2013; Chen,

2015; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Rathore, 2017). Further, as evidenced in the

previous section, the data related to the overseas teaching context showed

that there is a large power-distance between teachers and students at

universities in Saudi Arabia, to the extent that students feel they cannot

question their own exam mark. Hence, there was logic in the advice of

Raeesa's friends, who felt that she would have had difficulty adapting to the

Saudi higher education system after having spent a significant amount of time

abroad. Lastly, Raeesa made the pragmatic choice of completing her PhD in

the UK, as its proximity to Saudi Arabia made her travels back and forth with

her young children easier.

Huma provided a straightforward response, identifying her desire to fulfill her

personal interest in obtaining postgraduate qualifications from abroad. She

said:

> *Well, actually at that time I wasn't working in the university, but I was working in the Ministry of Higher Education and my reason stems from my own interest to get a higher degree and to..., um, I was thinking of getting a higher degree somewhere out of Saudi Arabia. So that's why I was thinking of going to the United States and getting a PhD over there.*

The King Abdullah Scholarships Program is open to Saudi citizens who have

completed at least their secondary education, regardless of their field or

profession. Thus, Huma was not employed by a university at the time she

chose to study abroad; she began working for a public Saudi university once

she completed her postgraduate study abroad. Huma did not elaborate further about the reasons why she chose to complete her postgraduate studies outside of Saudi Arabia, but her statement implies that her primary motivation was self-advancement.

Abdul Kareem's primary motivation for studying abroad was to fulfil the requirement of his employer, which he believes is the reason that most Saudi students study abroad.

> *… well the first reason was, as part of my job you have to get a master and PhD from abroad. So, this is the main goal, is to study and learn your subject, get your master's, get your PhD. So that's the main goal I believe for most of the students. Of course, learning English was also a goal for me, to learn English and communicate.*

Thus, Abdul Kareem also identified the personal gain of improving his English language communication skills as a subsidiary motivation for studying abroad.

Mazen's main motivation for studying abroad was to improve his self-confidence and independence, as well as his technical knowledge. He said:

> *When it comes to the personal reasons or personal justifications why I decided to study abroad, it varies actually, but mainly it was to be self-confident and be more independent and I got to know more about my field in English language teaching, you could say it's mainly for professional development.*

Again, Mazen's motivations are largely connected to his own personal

advancement and there is no explicit mention of an intention to contribute to

the advancement of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Numan spoke frankly about his intention to improve his employment and

financial position. However, he also explained that the knowledge and

experience he gained during his postgraduate study abroad impacted his

outlook and resulted in a shift in his motivations for studying abroad. He said:

> *Actually, to be honest with you, I decided to continue my study to get a higher job, a high position, honestly. Maybe I have now changed my mind after I grow up, but at the beginning, I just to get a high job. When I went to Australia, actually I was still young, when I went to Australia. My age was 24, you know, what do you think about this age coming outside to really increase his knowledge or not? Absolutely not. It was not really to increase my knowledge, but now, after I engage in this learning, I felt that this really important, it's not just* [about] *a job. A job, it's easy to get.*

Numan identified age and maturity levels as having a significant impact on the

outlook of scholarship recipients. This point was also raised by other

participants and will be discussed further in the recommendations' section of

Chapter 7. Further, Numan's positive experience and intellectual growth

during his studies abroad led him to change his ideas about the purpose and

value of study abroad. Concerning his choice of study destination, Numan

said:

> *At that time, 2006, the relationship between Saudi and America was not that good. So everyone was afraid of going to US, so I applied for Australia and Canada and for Australia I get the response quickly, so I just came here.*

Mateen described a type of inner development similar to that of Numan, whereby his views about postgraduate study abroad evolved from a largely materialistic outlook to a deep appreciation and desire to avail the many benefits of study abroad beyond getting a job promotion. He said:

> *To tell you the truth, the expectations at the beginning were, you'll go there, get the degree and come back. While looking back, it was different. What we gained, I'm not talking about myself, but any person who go there, … initially I was there to finish my degree and come back, right. Immediately after touching down and understanding the system and appreciating the life, you are more immersed in the cultural aspect of the experience. Academically, I could have gained the same information if I went any other place, but when we talk about the life experience, I wouldn't think that it would have been accomplished anywhere else.*

Even though Mateen did not go abroad with the explicit motivation of bringing back transferrable knowledge and skills to advance his home country higher education system, he discovered during study abroad that it had deeply enriched his cultural knowledge, which he felt was much needed in his home country.

<u>To Improve their Knowledge and Skills</u>

Only one participant explicitly mentioned contributing to the home country higher education sector as a primary motivation for studying abroad and one other participant similarly spoke about their primary motivation to carry out research.

Fatima, whose interview was conducted via email, selected from a pre-defined list of reasons why she chose to complete her PhD abroad. Her selections included: to obtain a job promotion; because of the prestige of a foreign degree; to improve her knowledge and skills; to have access to more advanced equipment than what was available in Saudi Arabia; and, because her area of specialisation was not available in Saudi Arabia. Fatima also wrote that her goal was to *"change myself and improve my knowledge and change the level of science in my country"*.

Fatima was the only participant to provide a response that went beyond the goal of career advancement.

Ahmed described his primary motivation for undertaking postgraduate study abroad as: *"Well the main goal was to do more research because we don't have the facilities here."* Ebtisam had also mentioned that part of her

motivation for studying abroad was due to the lack of access to research

equipment she had as a female academic, but this was part of her aspiration

to further her career with a foreign degree. Ahmed's response is interesting

because he does not mention anything about the material gains of study

abroad, such as career advancement and a higher salary, he was primarily

concerned about the greater capacity to do research abroad, which suggests

that Ahmed aspired to push forward the frontiers of knowledge in his field.

Drawing the Data Together

Therefore, participants' primary motivations for completing postgraduate

study abroad included a range of personal and professional benefits, such as

a freer study environment, to fulfil a personal interest, to improve confidence

and independence, for financial reward and higher position, and to fulfil

employer requirements. Only one participant, Fatima, included as one of her

primary goals for studying abroad, the advancement of knowledge in her

country, although Ahmed's response implied a similar intention. Two

participants, Numan and Mateen, experienced a shift in their motivations once

they were immersed in the overseas education environment and they realised

the value of study abroad for their personal and professional development, as

well as for the benefit of higher education in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, none

of the participants mentioned the opportunity to learn about the foreign host

culture as a key motivating factor for studying abroad, even though this is one

of the key goals of the King Abdullah Scholarships Program (Al-Mousa, 2009).

5.2.4 Academics' Beliefs about the Scholarship Goals

Whilst sponsored Saudi academics know that their studies are being funded

by their government, little is known about their knowledge and understandings

of the goals of the scholarships program or whether they carry a sense of

responsibility to contribute to higher education in their home country on their

return. Sponsored academics' knowledge and understandings of the

scholarship goals are an important presage factor that can influence the way

academics approach their studies abroad, as well as the way they use their

new knowledge, skills and ideas when they return.

The goals of the scholarships program as articulated by Al-Mousa (2009) can

be summarised as follows:

- To provide Saudi citizens with the highest possible quality of education available;
- To raise academic and professional standards;
- To exchange scientific, educational and cultural expertise with other countries;
- To build qualified, professional cadres;
- To raise their levels of professionalism.
  (Al-Mousa, 2009, p. 717).

Analysis of the data in relation to participants' understandings of the scholarships' goals indicated very strongly that they had no formal exposure or introduction to these goals prior to their departure or upon their return from study abroad. The participants' uncertainty about what the government's objectives were for sending them abroad was evidenced by their responses, which predominantly contained phrases, such as, *"I think…"*. The participants' responses were diverse, superficial and speculative, with the majority deducing that the government's main goal was to assist with the Saudisation of jobs in Saudi Arabia.

To Fulfill the Saudisation Policy

Three participants surmised that the main purpose of the scholarships was to fulfill the government's Saudisation plan, which seeks to replace expatriate workers with qualified Saudi citizens (Al-Sulami, 2017).

Abdul Kareem's response reflected a very simplistic view of the scholarships' goals, which he believed were primarily to facilitate Saudi academics' acquisition of postgraduate level degrees and to ensure that Saudi citizens were qualified to take over academic positions within the Saudi higher education public sector. He said:

Since I belong to a university, which belongs to the Ministry of Higher Education, their employees have to have a higher degree, at least a PhD or a Master's and PhD, so their goal is to fulfil or to equip..., so I believe these universities or the system in our universities is encouraging all teaching assistants to get their degrees because no-one is allowed to teach at the university unless he has a PhD. That's one reason. The second is, they call it 'Saudisation', which means getting the citizens to take over the teaching and many universities have just started and lots of faculties actually come from abroad, so we have work and plan to gradually replace that or at least mix staff from different countries, as well as from the citizens.

Interestingly, Abdul Kareem considered the scholarships goals from a purely economic perspective, whereby he saw their main purpose as being a means for the government to increase the employability of Saudi citizens and reduce Saudi dependence on foreign workers. He did not indicate any familiarity with the specific goals of the scholarships program and as such did not mention that scientific, educational and cultural gains were expected.

Like Abdul Kareem, Ahmed was of the view that the goal of the scholarships program was to facilitate the Saudisation process, whereby Saudi citizens are sponsored to acquire overseas qualifications and return to fill academic positions that are being occupied by non-Saudi citizens. He said:

I think the main goal for them is to occupy the academic positions by Saudis. We've got ninety percent in my Department are from abroad. The academic staff are from abroad, ninety percent of them. We are only three out of maybe thirty.

At the time of interview, Ahmed worked within a department that had only a handful of qualified Saudi academics. It is apparent that this experience gave Ahmed an acute awareness of the shortage of qualified Saudi faculty and the important role that the scholarships program played in helping to train Saudi citizens for academic positions. However, the focus was again directed toward the credentials that the study abroad program provides, rather than the specific types of knowledge and skills that the government intended academics to bring from abroad.

Ebtisam vaguely outlined the scholarship goals, using phrases like "*get all the advantages*" and "*improve the system*". However, like Ahmed, she did not identify any specific types of knowledge, skills or attributes that sponsored academics were expected to acquire. She said:

> *Yeah, they want me to go over there to get all the advantages, bring it here, improve the system here. Yeah, improve the study here, because I think their plan is like after ten years, we want to be like a country we don't have to send our residents to study abroad. We have all the things, like what I was thinking, the lab, the system… it's here, it's easy.*

Like Abdul Kareem and Ahmed, Ebtisam felt that the government's aim was to continue sending Saudi academics abroad so that eventually Saudi Arabia would no longer need to rely on foreign labour or assistance. It was apparent that her ideas about the scholarships goals were based on her experiences

during her studies abroad and not through any official pre-departure training or government advice. This was evidenced by the fact that she provided the example of laboratory safety protocols as one of the expected changes, which she had been exposed to during her postgraduate studies abroad.

Difficulty Understanding the Question

Two participants were confused by the question about what they believed were the government's goals for sponsoring academics to study abroad. This is quite concerning, as it suggests that not only are scholarship' recipients not being informed about the government's higher education reform strategy by means of a pre or post-program orientation, but some have absolutely no idea why they are being sent abroad.

Mazen's response suggested that he had not fully understood the question, as he tended to focus on what he thought the greatest priority for sponsored academics should be, rather than discussing his understanding of the actual scholarship goals.

> Interviewer: *What do you believe is the goal of the Ministry of Higher Education for sponsoring you to study abroad?*
>
> Ahmed: *Every single person has a different experience abroad, so when it comes to that, I think that the first thing they really have to contribute for is the research contribution in their academic department. You can review any professor's profile at any Saudi university and you*

will find it shameless for most of them that they are spending many, many years in their positions and they didn't even publish one single article. So, if I can actually clearly see it from my colleagues that while they are still doing their PhDs, they're actually publishing some articles and they have the potential to continue this after they finished their PhD.

Thus, Mazen believes that the key goal of the scholarships program should be to increase the research capacity of Saudi Arabia's universities. However, his response omits any reference to goals such as the acquisition of scientific or cultural knowledge, higher academic standards, or greater professionalism and indicates a lack of knowledge as to the official goals of the scholarships program.

Like Mazen, Numan did not seem to understand the question regarding the goals of the scholarships program. He said:

I think they just follow the system, because the system in Saudi Arabia said anyone who apply to a job in university, they have to continue their study, if not, they will return to public school [teaching]*. So everyone in university has at least to get master's, he has only two years looking for an institution to study, if he didn't, he must go to the public school. So that's why for me, at the beginning, I just want to continue my study, without any goal.*

I rephrased the question as follows:

Interviewer: *A lot of money is being spent on sending students abroad, so there must be some specific goals, don't you think?*

Numan then responded:

Actually, you know, it's not really clear. I don't know why they send it, but it seems that to, if I want to look for a positive perspective, I can make a very good sentence, 'So you can learn and get more knowledge and when you return back to our country you contribute the country, to improve the country', but I'm not really sure why I said that because the Ministry of Higher Education they send some people that don't even get an offer from the Saudi university, why you sending them outside? So, that's why I said, if I want to put in positive perspective. Actually, what make me sad, when I heard King Abdullah Scholarship, this is a very powerful program, but the Ministry of Higher Education try to send as much students as they can, so they can come to the King again and they tell him that we send thousands students under your program, without any serious conditions.

Thus, once I rephrased the question, Numan was very upfront in admitting that he did not know why the government was sending students to study abroad. He offered what he thought might be the government's official overarching aim in theory, which was to provide Saudis with the knowledge needed to improve their country. However, he expressed great skepticism about whether there were truly any concrete goals behind the program in reality, other than the Ministry being able to provide the King with some pleasing statistics on the number of citizens who had been sent abroad. Numan felt that the Ministry of Higher Education were not very judicious in their selection of scholarship recipients.

To Raise the Quality of Teaching

One participant speculated that the goal of the scholarships program for academics was to achieve excellence in teaching. Like all participants, Raeesa did not have any formal knowledge of the goals of the scholarships program. She based her answer on what she had heard within her university and from the Ministry of Higher Education about Saudi academics needing to have broader experiences, and not just remaining within the same institution that they graduate from in Saudi Arabia. She said:

> *Every time they say, not only the university but the Ministry of Higher Education, that they are trying to raise the quality of teaching. They said that we don't want people who graduate from same university to teach students, in order to get more experience from different places. We need to have excellency in our teaching and learning sectors, so I think this is their goal.*

Thus, Raeesa saw the study abroad scholarships program as a means to broaden the experiences of university graduates beyond what they have been exposed to within their home country institutions. Like her fellow participants, Raeesa's response omits any reference to goals such as the acquisition of scientific or cultural knowledge, higher academic standards, or greater professionalism, demonstrating her unfamiliarity with the official goals of the scholarships program.

<u>Drawing the Data Together</u>:

None of the participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the scholarships program goals and all were particularly silent with respect to the goals of cross-cultural exchange and improved levels of professionalism. Three participants felt that the main aim of the scholarships program was to facilitate the Saudisation process. Overall, there was little consistency in the participants' responses in terms of the perceived goals, which included, to achieve excellence in teaching, to contribute to the country, and to fill academic positions with qualified Saudi citizens. Hence, there was an evident gap between participants' understandings of the scholarships goals and the goals stated by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education. This lack of understanding of the scholarship goals also helps to explain why participants' motivations for studying abroad, as discussed in the previous section, did not align strongly with the broader aims of the scholarships program. Given the crucial role that scholarship recipients are to play in advancing their higher education system when they return to Saudi Arabia, it was surprising to find that participants had not been informed of the purpose of the scholarships program.

5.2.5 Sponsorship and Employment

Most Saudi academics are employed by public universities in Saudi Arabia at the time they apply for a scholarship to study abroad. Saudi faculty who do not hold a PhD are referred to as teaching assistants or TAs for short. Since around 2007, many Saudi public universities have made it a requirement for their TAs to obtain their postgraduate qualifications from abroad (Yakaboski, Perez-Velez, & Almutairi, 2017). Thus, being employed is a presage factor for most sponsored Saudi academics that has the potential to influence their attitudes towards their learning during their studies abroad. A study conducted by Gauntlett (2006) found that sponsorship had negatively affected the way Arab Omani students approached their overseas studies, whereby a sense of privilege and the absence of out-of-pocket expenses led to a lax attitude and approach. Saudi academics enjoy one of the most generous scholarship packages in the world (ICEF Monitor, 2015), in addition to highly secure jobs, which prompted me to explore the impact of this presage factor on Saudi academics. The data revealed a range of views among participants on the perceived impact of employment and sponsorship on Saudi academics' learning abroad, with the majority stating that there was no correlation between them.

Students can relax

One participant felt that sponsorship and employment could cause sponsored Saudi academics to become slack in their studies. Ebtisam did not provide any personal or specific examples of this, but she felt that there was some correlation. She said:

> *But the thing that makes you motivated, yes, I have my job, okay, then okay, I can relax because my job is there. I feel more secure, because part of my salary is, like, getting in my account in Saudi, part of it in Australia, so I'm very secure.*

It is important to bear in mind that Ebtisam's husband initially went abroad as a self-funded student and she speaks from the perspective of someone who knows what it is like to not have the security of a government scholarship. Ebtisam felt that the security of having a job back in Saudi Arabia could cause sponsored students to take a more relaxed approach towards their studies.

No impact on studies

Several participants felt that sponsorship and employment back home had no impact on sponsored academics' learning. Numan put it simply, that if one does not put in the effort abroad, they will not pass their courses. He said:

> *Actually, to make it simple to you, within Saudi people, I don't think I can make a judgement, because everything, it seems personal. People is different in Saudi Arabia, people is completely different. Some of them, you are right, they said 'Okay, I have a job and I'll do it as it goes.' But actually, to be honest with you, I didn't found it in Australia, with my colleagues and peers in Australia, all of them they doing* [trying]

hard. Even if they don't [usually], *but because in Australia in university you have to do hard, if you don't do hard you will not pass, so they have only one choice actually.*

Numan's own personal experience, as well as that of his peers, showed him that hard work was needed to pass his postgraduate courses abroad. In Numan's view there is no other way to successfully complete overseas study, and thus, sponsorship and employment play no role in this process.

Mateen also expressed the view that without sufficient effort in their studies abroad, scholarship recipients will simply not pass.

> *I've been around with so many students from different Gulf States and for that matter from other places that are sponsored and there is no correlation, actually…. at the end of the day it's not whether you are sponsored or not that you will excel and do your best in your studies, because those who grade you at an American, Australian or a UK university don't care less. All what they care about is that you pass your degree, you pass your exams, and there is no influence on who supports you on that. If you fail, you will not get a job. Period. If you don't get your degree, you don't get an Assistant Professor job.*

Mateen's sentiment that overseas universities "*don't care less*", is not entirely supported by the literature that indicates a number of foreign universities rely heavily on Saudi government scholarship funding and some have gone to great lengths to ensure that their sponsored Saudi students passed (Al-Sibai, 2012; O'Malley, 2016; Redden, 2015). However, Mateen's own personal experiences and observations as a sponsored academic abroad provide a

valid point about conscientious effort and academic success, which is supported by the views of the majority of participants.

Whilst Raeesa also felt that sponsorship and employment did not negatively impact sponsored academics' learning, she did feel that it could encourage academics to prolong their studies in order to take more advantage of the benefits available in the foreign country, such as education for dependent children. She said:

> *I wouldn't think that they would be careless about their study, but they will try to get as much benefit as they can from being abroad,* [such as] *teaching their kids, staying as long as they can, maybe allowing their wife to study also, trying to make their studying longer in order for their kids to finish their high school or their primary school, whatever, allowing their wives to get babies there. All these could be something that really, could be a reason that makes them stay longer.*

This view concurs with the findings of Hilal, Scott and Maadad (2015) who interviewed 484 King Abdullah Scholarships recipients and found that 79 per cent would extend their stay abroad after completing their degree, mainly "to seek better opportunities for their children" (p.262). Thus, whilst sponsorship may not result in academics taking a slackened approach towards their studies, it could encourage scholarship recipients to take advantage of the financial security that the scholarships provide, by extending their stay beyond the time that is genuinely required to complete their degrees. This phenomenon would cause a delay in when Saudi Arabia could avail the

benefits of its enhanced human capital, as well as pushing up the cost of the scholarships program itself.

Age and Maturity

Along with the view that sponsorship and employment do not impact sponsored Saudi academics' attitudes towards their learning, several participants identified recipients' age and maturity as factors that do. Abdul Kareem believes that this is a critical factor affecting sponsored Saudi's approaches to their studies abroad, whilst he does not see sponsorship as having any impact on the recipients' approaches to learning. He said:

> *In my experience I would say the behaviours mainly depend on how much this person is educated in Saudi and also the age of the student. I believe students who are sponsored by the government, by the Ministry of Higher Education, who actually just graduated from secondary school and got a scholarship, their behaviour and their feel of responsibility is much lower than those who are actually older than them and have experienced the life and have been in some occupations, they have graduated from university, so they are taking their study more seriously, are more responsible than those who are actually teenage or from the age of 18 to 22. It's not really related if they are sponsored or not.*

This view was echoed by Numan, who spoke about his own experience of going abroad at the age of 24, where he said: "*My age was 24, you know, what do you think about this age coming outside to really increase his*

knowledge or not? Absolutely not." Raeesa also expressed similar sentiments

about recipients' ages and maturity levels. She said:

> *My suggestion is that I wouldn't send students for bachelors abroad for many reasons. One is that usually teenagers, if we can call them teenagers because they are about 18 years old, are very affected by the culture and I think that, as I have heard, we can see that there were some students who met some difficulties and I wouldn't send also students who are not married.*

The difficulties that Raeesa refers to are not only related to recipients taking

their studies seriously but are also related to the widely reported issue of

young Saudis having difficulty adapting to the foreign cultural environment

(Heyn, 2013; Midgley, 2009a, 2009b; Shabeeb, 1996).

Employment encourages high achievement

One participant, Ahmed, expressed the view that employment actually

encourages sponsored academics to put their best efforts into their studies

abroad. He said:

> *No, I think it's the opposite. If the people who are selected to be employed in the university, they should have, they must have the distinction, so they did very good in their bachelor's degree and they are very, I mean very demanding to do bachelor's in their higher education, do the master's and PhD later on. And so, people who join in the King Abdullah Program, they are not selected for their scores but for some reasons, I don't know why, because I met many people there. In the UK, especially in the UK, they are careless, they are lazy. Not all of them. Especially people who are sent to the Bachelor's degree there, they are very careless.*

However, Ahmed has also conveyed similar concerns to previous participants about the King Abdullah Scholarships Program's general selection criteria, stating that recipients (excluding academics) are being accepted for these scholarships regardless of their academic performance. Further, he mentioned that those who are sponsored to do their bachelors' degrees, are particularly "*careless*" with their studies abroad. Thus, Ahmed also agrees with previous participants that the factors of age and maturity have a bigger impact on sponsored students' learning approaches than employment and sponsorship. He makes a valid point that sponsored academics have already demonstrated their academic abilities, since they had already completed their bachelor's degrees and were required to achieve a distinction in order to be employed by their universities.

<u>Drawing the Data Together</u>

There were highly consistent views among the participants with respect to the impact of sponsorship and employment on academics' attitudes towards their overseas studies. Ebtisam was the only participant who felt that sponsorship and employment could cause sponsored academics to "*relax*" in their studies. Based on their personal experiences and observations, Raeesa, Abdul Kareem, Numan, Mateen and Ahmed all believed that sponsorship and employment did not affect academics' attitudes toward their learning abroad.

Several participants, however, did express the view that age and maturity levels impacted on sponsored Saudi students' approaches to learning, signaling a possible need to review the scholarships selection criteria.

5.3 THE PROCESS FACTORS

The second phase of the modified Biggs' model of learning is the process phase. According to Biggs (1993), this phase is directly influenced by the factors present within the presage phase and concerns the strategies students employ to go about their learning. The previous section discussed a number of presage factors applicable to sponsored Saudi academics, including academics' English language proficiency before study abroad; their attitudes toward learning English; the overseas teaching context; sponsored academics' motivations for studying abroad; their beliefs about the scholarship goals; and, sponsorship and employment. These factors can influence the approach that sponsored academics take towards their learning. Biggs identifies three key approaches to learning: "the deep approach, which aims to understand meaning and utilise information; the surface approach, which involves the memorisation of facts and recall of information; and the achieving approach, which is focused on obtaining the highest possible grades" (McCormick & Ramburuth, 2001, p. 335).

I defined these approaches for the participants in the current study and then posed a direct question that asked them about their approach to learning while abroad. Although the participants come from an education system that encourages the surface, rote memorisation approach to learning, all the participants stated that they took a deep approach to learning during their studies abroad. The findings in the section above with respect to participants' motivations for studying abroad indicated that their primary aim was mainly for career advancement, as opposed to contributing to the progress of higher education in Saudi Arabia. However, the participants' assertion that they took a deep approach to learning is in evidence in the next chapter, which provides their reflections on their learning outcomes, along with tangible examples of the new knowledge, skills and ideas they acquired as a result of postgraduate study abroad.

5.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the data relating to the presage and process factors for sponsored male and female Saudi academics who completed their postgraduate studies abroad. The presage factors were found to play an important role in influencing learning outcomes. Certain presage factors led to transition difficulties for participants, such as inadequate academic preparation, including the knowledge and skills needed to avoid plagiarism.

Other presage factors, such as high levels of intrinsic motivation, the ability to develop effective learning strategies, exposure to new teaching and assessment methods, and integration within the host culture were found to have a positive impact on learning outcomes and resulted in the acquisition of highly transferrable knowledge and skills.

Further, the sponsorship and employment of Saudi academics did not appear to have any negative impact on their attitudes to learning during their overseas studies. This might be due to the fact that the academics selected for the scholarships program already have an excellent academic track record prior to postgraduate study abroad, as well as their ages and maturity levels that supported a more responsible study approach. All participants self-reported taking a deep approach to learning, indicating that their aim was to develop transferrable knowledge, skills and abilities, rather than to simply pass their courses.

The next chapter provides a detailed look at the learning outcomes as perceived and experienced by Saudi academic returnees, as well as the personal and professional challenges they faced when they returned.

Chapter 6: The Product and the Product in Practice

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter examined the presage factors for participants prior to the commencement of their postgraduate studies abroad, as well as participants' approaches to learning during their postgraduate studies abroad. This chapter subsequently examines the personal and professional gains of postgraduate study abroad for sponsored Saudi academics, as well as the personal and professional challenges that returnee academics face within the contexts of Saudi society and Saudi public higher education. It also examines the follow-up by Saudi universities and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) after the participants return from postgraduate study abroad, as well as the participants' advice for Saudi universities and the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education on how to better capitalise on what academics learn overseas.

6.2 THE PRODUCT

This section examines the findings in relation to the participants' learning outcomes. These findings are based on the participants' perceptions of the personal and professional gains that they acquired because of completing

their postgraduate studies abroad. The personal and professional gains of postgraduate study abroad will be dealt with separately, although it is important to note that these are not discrete categories. The personal and professional realms overlap and often impact one another.

6.2.1 The Personal Benefits of Postgraduate Study Abroad

Personal benefits for the purposes of this study are the positive attributes, knowledge, skills and other gains acquired by Saudi academics through postgraduate study abroad, which largely benefit the individual returnee, more so than their university or the Saudi higher education sector. In examining the data for personal benefits, three key themes emerged that include: independence and confidence; cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competence; and higher salaries and rapid job promotions.

6.2.1.1 Independence and Confidence

Increased levels of independence and self-confidence are known benefits of study abroad (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Takeuchi, 2008). However, within the literature, this issue is not mentioned as a key benefit or even as a motive for Saudis studying abroad. Hilal, Scott and Maadad (2015) have identified five main motives for Saudis choosing to study abroad. These include, to acquire a quality education, to learn a different language, to expand worldview, to

obtain a higher salary and because of the prestige of a foreign degree.

However, given the strong patriarchal structure of Saudi society and the many

restrictions that Saudi women face, sponsored female Saudi academics

experience many freedoms and responsibilities abroad that they do not have

in Saudi Arabia. When analysing the data for the personal benefits of

postgraduate study abroad, the theme of increased independence and

confidence among sponsored female Saudi academics emerged, with a focus

on the increased responsibilities that Saudi women encounter abroad. Whilst

this issue was discussed by just two out of the four female participants in this

study, their experiences exemplify the markedly different role the women

played abroad, as compared to the typical lifestyle of women in Saudi Arabia.

The two female participants who provided no comment on the issue of

independence or confidence did not participate in face-to-face interviews,

which contributed to the brevity of their interview responses. Fatima chose to

provide short written responses to the interview questions only and Huma

chose not to be interviewed via Skype but engaged in a brief audio-recorded

in-person interview with a female Saudi proxy interviewer. Huma was very

guarded during the interview and was reluctant to elaborate on her responses,

even when prompted by the interviewer.

The data were analysed with the consideration that Saudi Arabia is a collectivist society (Jian, Garris, & Aldamer, 2017); the family unit being regarded as the most important foundation of this society (Metz, 1992). Families are very close-knit in Saudi Arabia and are responsible for ensuring that their members are supported physically, emotionally and economically. For example, Ebtisam said:

> *… traveling to a different country, then when I go there, I was like responsible of everything, by myself, so that give me more strength. Here, I was like, maybe I go with my brother, my sisters. Okay, if I want to write a letter, I can ask my sister, she can do it for me, someone will do it. Over there I do everything myself, even taking care of my kids, giving birth, I was alone by myself, nobody come and supported me, so I get more stronger. And now when I come here and see the students at the university, the girls in my family, what a lazy…, really, really lazy. They don't wanna do anything, they don't want to even talk, they just want to sit in front of the computer ...*

Thus, Ebtisam found that the absence of family support led her to become "*stronger*" and more independent. She was forced to do things herself abroad that she would normally have had family support to help her with in Saudi Arabia, such as taking care of her children. She was also responsible for many things that would not have been expected of her as a woman in Saudi Arabia, such as filling out paperwork, applying for her children's birth certificates and tending to errands outside the home. While living in Saudi Arabia, I observed that most Saudi families employ domestic workers to perform tasks such as cooking, cleaning, looking after children and running

errands outside the home. The Saudi female academic returnees in Alandejani's (2013) study also showed a shift in the way they saw the typical female Saudi lifestyle after they returned from postgraduate study abroad, and like Ebtisam, they described it as "lazy" (p.73). This shows that there is a significant difference in the responsibilities typically expected of Saudi females in Saudi Arabia, compared to what these women encounter when they are abroad.

Raeesa's experience mirrored Ebtisam's, as follows: "… *and the other thing is to be more independent, not only in studying, but in different things, being abroad from my family and my close friends really made me independent".* Again, this affirms the shift in the expectations for Saudi women when they are in the host country abroad, compared to when they are in Saudi Arabia. It is the newly found 'strength' that Ebtisam describes and the greater 'independence' that Raeesa describes, that can lead to many of the frustrations that returnee female Saudi academics face when readjusting to their lives in Saudi Arabia after postgraduate study abroad. These readjustment issues will be discussed later in this study.

Finally, Mazen was the only male participant who mentioned the attributes of confidence and independence. He simply stated that his main goal for

studying abroad "*was to be self-confident and be more independent*". No

other male participants mentioned this attribute as a notable gain of study

abroad or as a motivation for studying abroad. Given the significant

differences in the traditional roles of men and women in Saudi society, and

the greater responsibilities outside the home that are expected of Saudi men,

it is therefore not surprising that the responses of male participants did not

signal any notable difference in their levels of independence and confidence.

6.2.1.2 Cross-Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is one of the aims of the King Abdullah Scholarships

Program (Al-Mousa, 2009). The importance of intercultural competence

became apparent after fifteen of the nineteen plane hijackers on September

11, 2001 were identified as Saudi citizens (Elyas & Picard, 2013). The

literature shows that sponsored academics from a range of cultural

backgrounds have acquired cultural knowledge and skills as a result of their

postgraduate studies abroad (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chen, 2015; Kitsantas

& Meyers, 2001; Malczewska-Webb, 2014; Namgung, 2008; Rumbley, 2014;

Shepherd & Rane, 2012; Tagg, 2014). However, scant attention has been

given to the different types of cultural knowledge and skills that sponsored

academics gain from abroad, and the ways in which these are used to benefit

the returnees and their home universities. The majority of studies tend to

focus on sponsored academics' acquisition of the English language, which constitutes only a small fraction of the knowledge and skills that lead to intercultural competence (Barrett, 2011).

Malczewska-Webb (2014) found that the international experience gained by studying abroad does not guarantee "the attainment of the ultimate goal of international education, [which is] the development of intercultural competence" (p. 225). Intercultural competence has been defined in various ways within the literature (Barrett, 2011) and is sometimes considered synonymous with cross-cultural awareness (Odag, Wallan, & Kedzior, 2016). Cross-cultural awareness means that one can compare and contrast their own culture with another culture (González, 2011), but generally not to the extent that one is able to appreciate alternative viewpoints. In other words, with cross-cultural awareness, the individual continues to assess the world according to the standards of their own cultural group (Zylkiewicz-Plonska & Acienė, 2014).

Intercultural competence refers to the development of "targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions" (Deardorff, 2006, as cited in McKinnon, n.d.). Barrett (2011) identifies the types of knowledge,

skills and attitudes that constitute intercultural competence. These include

cultural self-awareness; communicative awareness; the ability to listen and

interact with people from other cultures; linguistic skills; respect for other

cultures; valuing cultural diversity; and skills in critically evaluating cultural

perspectives, practices and products, including those of one's own culture.

Zylkiewicz-Plonska and Acienė (2014) explain that intercultural competence is

evident when one leaves the position of being in the centre and adopts new

points of view. It also involves "knowing how to relativise oneself and value

the attitudes and beliefs of others" (Corbett, 2010, as cited in Malczewska-

Webb, 2014, p. 227).

The theme of intercultural competence and cross-cultural awareness

emerged from the data related to the personal benefits of postgraduate study

abroad. This theme could have also been listed under the professional

benefits of postgraduate study abroad; however, the participants in this study

focused mainly on the personal impact of their newly acquired cultural

knowledge and skills, and hence it has been included in this section. Analysis

of the data revealed that there was a gender-based difference in the extent to

which participants immersed themselves in the host culture while abroad.

Male participants were generally found to integrate more deeply in the host

culture compared to their female counterparts. However, interestingly, despite

the different levels of cultural integration, the majority of participants demonstrated a variety of the characteristics of intercultural competence.

With over two decades of lived experience as a Muslim woman, and three years of living in Saudi Arabia, I can offer some insight from an emic perspective into the possible reasons for the female participants' lower levels of integration into the host culture, compared with their male counterparts. Firstly, women in Saudi Arabia generally do not play a significant role in matters outside the home, and when they do, these are almost always single-gender, female only events, such as dinner parties and wedding parties. Saudi males and paid helpers generally take care of matters such as grocery shopping, paying bills and lodging paperwork. However, when sponsored Saudi women enter Western host cultures, they are automatically forced to play a greater role in matters outside the home, such as communicating with males on campus, particularly with their teachers and supervisors; submitting their own paperwork; applying for their student identification cards; using public transport; and so on. Nevertheless, for many sponsored Saudi women, taking on such responsibilities abroad is likely to be limited to what is considered necessary, with her male guardian taking care of the rest. Secondly, in Saudi culture there is a very strong social taboo that discourages women from interacting with unrelated men. Thus, it is likely that most Saudi

women would show some reservation towards such interactions when they are abroad.

Further, most Saudi women who study abroad maintain a visible Islamic identity with their attire, and many continue to cover their faces, as they do in Saudi Arabia. Female participant Raeesa stated that she continued to cover her face while she was abroad, whereas Ebtisam said that she wore the headscarf without covering her face, and Huma and Fatima did not comment on what they wore. There has been a lot of controversy in Western countries regarding the face veil in recent years and much ignorance and confusion surrounds this garment. Thus, Muslim women's attire generally can make it more difficult for them to be able to integrate in mainstream society; sometimes this is due to ignorance and bigotry and sometimes it is due to the women's own conservatism, fears or shyness.

For example, Raeesa is a participant who held strongly to her cultural traditions whilst abroad, such as wearing the face veil and consciously choosing to keep herself and her family apart from the host culture. When asked about whether she experienced culture shock abroad, she said, "*No, no, actually, because we have a very nice community there in USA and we were very tied to them, Muslim actually, and so I didn't feel abroad, because*

people around me were like my relatives, so yeah, it was very lovely actually.

I learned a lot."

Despite the conscious distance that Raeesa kept, she commented that:

> *… being introduced to a different culture was really very helpful for me, it just gave me an experience that I wouldn't have if I studied in my country. A culture not only from the countries that I studied in, but from the people that were around me in the society.*

Whilst Raeesa did not directly elaborate on what she had learnt about other cultures or how this knowledge had helped in her personal and/or professional life, she referred to learning about many cultures, particularly the cultures among 'the people that were around her', such as within the local Muslim communities with whom she associated. This indicates Raeesa's openness to cultural diversity, albeit with a protectiveness with regard to her religious beliefs and practices.

Raeesa also made some statements that indicated an increased level of cultural self-awareness and the ability to critically evaluate some of the norms and practices within her own culture. Firstly, when asked about the reasons she chose to study abroad, she mentioned that the professors in Saudi Arabia were not flexible and did not have the same level of "*professionality*" as people abroad. Secondly, when asked for her views on the reform of Saudi

higher education, Raeesa commented that, "*it's not a matter of people who are studying abroad, I think it's the culture of the education environment*", and, "*We don't have a strong, firm rules, policies, that are followed*" and further, "*abroad they're working based on the policies and rules, not their manners [cultural norms]*". Hence, Raeesa was able to critique aspects of her own culture that she perceived were negatively affecting the operation of universities in Saudi Arabia, such as the absence of policies and the precedence given to cultural norms. Moreover, she was also able to appreciate certain attributes and practices of the universities in the host culture, which she believes has made them more efficient and effective than her own.

Like Raeesa, Ebtisam also displayed a protectiveness over certain aspects of her own culture, particularly in the early stages of her study abroad. She said, "… *I went to the teacher and I said, 'because of my culture and my background I can't sit with males, so if we have group work, please, I don't wanna have a male in my group, only my husband'.*" Further, she said:

> *Even when I went to my PhD, my course supervisor, he was a male, so the first time when we were having our first meeting, he walked in and he wanted to shake my hand and I said, 'Sorry, I can't shake your hand'. And he said, 'Oh, okay, okay, I completely understand'.*

However, over time, Ebtisam and her husband gradually became more comfortable with the idea of her studying alongside men. She said:

> *Even my husband, he's very open-minded person… and when I was in Australia, he doesn't ever mind if I talk to a male or work with a male in one bench, or anything. But here, even if I talk on the phone with a male, ah, even from the male section here at the university, he says 'why you are talking with him? My husband, when he come back, he get again into the culture.*

The above excerpts demonstrate the change that Ebtisam and her husband underwent as a result of postgraduate study abroad. During the early stages they displayed a basic level of cross-cultural awareness in relation to mixed-gender interactions but sought to maintain their own cultural norms. Whereas, later in their study abroad journey they had developed an appreciation and acceptance of the mixed-gender study environment and were able to work comfortably in that environment. Interestingly, Ebtisam's husband's views shifted again when he was re-immersed in his home culture, indicating that some of the changes brought by study abroad can potentially be lost or diluted when academics return to their home culture.

Ebtisam's overseas experience also caused a shift in her view on the role of women. As discussed above, her immersion in the host culture forced her to take a more active role in her own affairs and allowed her to see that Saudi women can play a much more productive role within their families and society

than they do at present. After Ebtisam's overseas experience, she viewed the women in her family, as well as her female students as "*really, really lazy*", whereas previously she viewed the typical female Saudi lifestyle as the norm. Further, Ebtisam also described her colleagues as *"… still having this Arabian mind…"*, when discussing their manner of handling student issues. Ebtisam's critique of her colleagues' attitudes and practices shows her ability to critically evaluate the cultural perspectives and practices within her own culture and adopt a new point of view.

Another participant who demonstrated intercultural knowledge and skills is Huma. Huma learnt how to drive, even though this practice was considered taboo for women in her own culture. Saudi Arabia is the only Muslim-majority country in the world that has prevented women from driving, although a recent royal decree overturned this edict as at June 2018 (Kalin & Bayoumy, 2017). Nevertheless, despite this long-held Saudi tradition, when Huma was asked if there were any other personal benefits that she got from studying abroad, she said, *"knowing how to drive".* In addition, Huma also spoke about her views on teaching mixed-gender classes during her studies abroad. She said, "*It wasn't difficult for me, it was difficult for the people who were studying with me".* This is another cultural issue where Huma demonstrates her ability to work effectively within the host culture, despite the strong Saudi cultural

norm. When asked why she did not find gender-mixing difficult, she responded: "*Maybe that I finished my master's degree and I get used to mixed with American people at the university before moving to teaching at the English language institute*". Huma's comments indicate that the time she spent abroad helped her to develop characteristics of intercultural competence.

When Fatima was asked about the transition to a mixed-gender study environment, she gave an unexpected response, stating that it *"wasn't difficult, because I worked in my country with males".* As at the time of the interview, Saudi Arabia's strict gender-segregation laws prevented men and women from working in the same workplace. When Fatima was asked if study abroad had helped her to appreciate the host culture, she said: "*No, I saw very sad society".* Fatima did not respond to my email seeking clarification on this comment. However, Fatima's sweeping conclusion that the host country was a "*very sad society*", indicates that she had acquired only a very surface level of knowledge about the host culture, which she assessed according to her own cultural standards. Further, when asked if study abroad had helped her to understand her own culture better, she said: "*No, but it makes me love my own Saudi culture better".* Again, Fatima's comments suggest that during her relatively short stay of three years abroad, she did not appear to acquire deep

knowledge about the host culture. It may be that she consciously chose to live

apart from the host society like Raeesa and many other Saudis. Fatima's

overall responses gave little indication that her overseas experience had

significantly broadened her worldview. However, she did make brief

references to two pertinent issues. Firstly, she mentioned that after

postgraduate study abroad she found that her superiors wanted only

themselves to receive credit for any advancements at her university, and

secondly, she mentioned that there was a lack of research freedom. This

shows that Fatima was able to critique some aspects of the culture within her

own institution that she perceived were affecting the quality of higher

education.

Another example is the case of Abdul Kareem. Abdul Kareem demonstrated

various characteristics of intercultural competence after postgraduate study

abroad. Firstly, Abdul Kareem stated that he held a lot of misconceptions

about Westerners prior to going abroad. I found this interesting, because in

my experience living in Saudi Arabia, Westerners were the most highly

respected expat workers in the country. Westerners enjoy very high salaries

and excellent working conditions. Further, Saudi Arabia is very proud of its

long-held alliance with America and the United Kingdom (Chughtai, 2017). On

the other hand, Saudi Arabia is also an extremely closed society, where

tourism is almost non-existent and Western expats are usually housed on luxurious and secure housing compounds that cater for most of their shopping and leisure needs (Bunting, 2015). Thus, the average Saudi citizen has almost no exposure to foreign cultures in the course of their everyday lives. Their main exposure to Western culture is through Hollywood movies, which are accessed by their television satellites and through the internet, as well as the online news. As a fellow Muslim, my Saudi colleagues and Saudi students treated me as an insider in our conversations and discussions. Thus, I became familiar with their sentiments about foreigners from an emic-perspective. Many Saudis perceive Western culture as a very loose culture, relative to their own. This is due to the highly sexualised nature of Western movies and entertainment, and the fact that there is a perception that Western society is not religious. Nevertheless, the majority of my Saudi colleagues and students were very intrigued by the West and perceived it as being highly advanced in science and technology and were keen to travel and study abroad.

Abdul Kareem said:

> *… before I travelled abroad, myself and many, many other Saudis, we hear about Western people, English, Americans, whether in the media and from stories. You know, when you hear about them, you know, you will maybe make some feelings and maybe make your own attitude about it. Whereas, when you travel and mix with them, interact with*

them, making friends and see them live, you know, your attitude will be different. You are establishing a very strong link. You see that most people are actually like you. There is some negative picture for those who did not travel abroad. Maybe have a negative picture about Western, maybe they are not... you know, like, sorry about, if I say this wrongly, I mean, drunk, making adultery, you can touch a girl any time you like. Also, the security, the issue that you lock your door, criminals, etc., when you go there you find things really very, very different. This is an important benefit that you are establishing, an understanding between different societies, different cultures. How to live a better life. When you travel abroad you did not feel... now I can travel to any country, not because that I can speak English, no, it's because I know those people are different than the propaganda that we had and the negative pictures that some people have in their mind.

Abdul Kareem found that going abroad dramatically increased his knowledge and understanding of Westerners and subsequently changed his mindset. Abdul Kareem's description of 'mixing', 'interacting', 'making friends' and 'seeing how they live', and realising that the people abroad were "*actually like you*", indicates the depth of his integration in the host culture, as well as his shift in mindset. It is likely that Abdul Kareem's false perception about the host country being unsafe also came from his limited and distorted exposure to Western culture through the mainstream news media, which tends to focus primarily on crime, sensationalism, and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Secondly, Abdul Kareem's experience of learning how to drive abroad had a major impact on the way he views the Saudi cultural norms for driving. He said:

> *You know also, thank God, we learn how to drive* [overseas]. [In Saudi] *the university campus is 30-minutes' drive, I pray to God just to drive safely and arrive safely without any accident. These sort of things you brush off and you try to educate those people around you without being very, very disappointed. Some people say, okay, you'll never ever solve these problems, you have to be like people who live here, drive like them, be like them. I say, okay, I don't care, I will do what I am really convinced about. I will drive this way, I will fasten my belt, I will drive slowly, I will stop here. People say, you know, you are not in Canada, you are not in the States, you are here in Saudi Arabia. These things shocked me. You have been here* [in Saudi Arabia] *and you have been there* [in Australia]*, so you know the situation.*

Abdul Kareem faced enormous resistance from the people around him for trying to implement the road safety procedures that he became accustomed to abroad. Road traffic injuries are one of the main causes of death in Saudi Arabia (Memish et al., 2014) and thus, road safety is an issue that is in desperate need of reform. Abdul Kareem's statement that "*you have been here*" and "*you know the situation*", demonstrates the connection and the level of trust that the participant had for me as a Muslim researcher who had lived in Saudi Arabia. I was able to sympathise with Abdul Kareem's struggle to accept the highly dangerous driving practices that are commonplace in Saudi Arabia and I could share a joke with him about my own experience as a

female passenger during my time there. Abdul Kareem's in-depth description of the changes he underwent as a result of study abroad demonstrates the powerful potential of international education as a vehicle for developing intercultural competence that goes well beyond work and personal interactions.

Mazen's case provides another strong example of how postgraduate study abroad can help to facilitate the development of the knowledge, skills and mindset needed to interact effectively with people from different backgrounds. Mazen said:

> *For me, it definitely changed my mind, my personal life, my personal behaviour, my professional behaviour, even my family behaviour, me and my wife, we got closer to each other when we went to Australia, when we came away from anyone we know, we spent more time together, we both got to hear an expression from people doing their postgraduate in Australia, they say that they really got to know their families better when they left Saudi, they got some time to spend together, this is in terms of the family life.*

Mazen and other sponsored academics found themselves growing closer to their wives as a result of their time spent abroad. Saudi Arabia's strong patriarchal culture often pressures Saudi men to show their dominance and leadership over their families. A man can be ridiculed if it appears that his wife controls the relationship and there are jokes that are passed around in Saudi Arabia about this. Thus, Mazen's description of going "away from anyone we

know" may indicate how societal pressure, opinions and norms can impact

male-female and family relationships and how it was not until the participant

entered a new culture that he and his wife could appreciate one another more

and their relationship could evolve. The growth in these relationships was

also no doubt facilitated by the practical element of living as a student abroad,

rather than as a fulltime employee, which allowed more quality time with loved

ones. Mazen also said:

> *In terms of the personal or professional benefits and behaviour I think it also contributes to the betterment, at least, at least, I mean, we got to know people from everywhere, from diverse backgrounds, so that's actually helped in shaping our minds in how to deal with people who are not sharing you with the same cultural and religious background.*
>
> *Unfortunately, in Saudi we got some complications dealing with people who are not sharing our cultural or religious background. As Muslims I think that we have to be moderate in our behaviour and in everything, so this has really helped us to do that. So, to answer your question precisely, yes, it actually helps in shaping or changing our behaviour.*

Mazen's statement shows a deep critical evaluation of his own culture

whereby he distinguishes between Saudi culture and the religion of Islam,

which are often seen as synonymous. He clarifies that although an attitude of

intolerance exists among some sections of Saudi society, this is not from the

religion of Islam, which teaches moderation and tolerance. Further, Mazen

credits the experience of going abroad for helping him to appreciate the value

of cultural diversity and to interact more effectively with people of other cultures.

Ahmed's case is another example of how postgraduate study abroad can lead to the development of intercultural competence. During our in-depth discussions, Ahmed demonstrated a strong cultural self-awareness, good communication skills, respect for other cultures and the skills to critically evaluate his own culture. Of his time spent abroad Ahmed said, "*I loved it because learning new language and knowing new culture and living with people who are different culture is fun.*" Further, Ahmed had developed an appreciation of the way of life abroad to such an extent that when he returned to Saudi Arabia he struggled to cope with what he now perceived as the negative aspects of his culture. Ahmed said:

> *After coming back, I just see the bad things and the problems and started counting them. So, I start to compare my culture and their culture, and you know, I see only the problems… Just to improve it. Problems with the system and people, how people communicate with others, everywhere, is different and sometimes we have got many problems.*

Mateen was the most forthright in his views on the importance of integrating in the host culture whilst abroad. He said,

> *I chose to live on campus, on university premises with international and American students and families and I was the only Saudi there. Other Saudi students choose to live outside in gated environments,*

where you will find out that in one gated community you will find twelve Saudi families living together. Living in the same community.

It's a choice that you make. Many Saudi university students went there, finished their degrees, came back and they are excellent, excellent academicians, but they suck when it comes to life. They did not experience the way of life. All that they have done is they got a degree.

Mateen indicates that from the very beginning of his study abroad journey he aspired to learn as much as he could about the host culture, as well as other cultures. This brings to the fore the important role that sponsored academics' motivations for studying abroad play in influencing the outcomes of their overseas education. Furthermore, it indicates that a close alignment between sponsored academics' aspirations and the scholarship goals can lead to increased efficacy of the scholarships program. Conversely, Mateen criticises "*other Saudi students*" for choosing to live in "*gated environments*", which he has observed as being all too common. Hence, Mateen's comments imply that many sponsored Saudi academics return to Saudi Arabia without acquiring intercultural competence. Thus, this raises a pertinent question for future research: If large numbers of Saudi scholarship recipients choose to remain segregated from the host society while they are abroad, what impact does this have on the efficacy of the scholarships program in relation to returnees' intercultural competence? As mentioned, the need for intercultural competence among Saudi citizens was highly emphasised after the tragedy

of September 11, 2001 and was the catalyst behind the King Abdullah

Scholarships Program. Its purpose was to strengthen relations between Saudi

and US citizens. Mateen is of the view that intercultural competence is the

most important outcome that can be achieved from study abroad, given that

most degrees can be obtained without the need to travel. Mateen also found

that cultural integration enhanced his ability to engage academically:

> *I believe that having done cultural integration with the host country helps you a lot with your studies and it goes hand in hand. Those who have experienced culture, more than often have gained more academic information and more insight into their professional field.*

The data clearly show that sponsored academics study abroad for a range of

reasons and possess unique goals and attitudes. The literature indicates that

for some sponsored academics the main aim of study abroad is to obtain a

prestigious degree in order to increase their salary and advance their career

(Hilal, Schott, & Maadad, 2015), and for others it is to sharpen their technical

knowledge and skills (Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Grove, 2016; Wang, 2014).

Many international students are not concerned about building social

relationships and participating in activities that serve to broaden their

understanding of the host culture (Summers & Volet, 2008; Ward, 2001). The

female participants in this study were much more reserved than their male

counterparts when it came to cultural integration and did not appear to

engage in the 'mixing, interacting, making friends and seeing how others live'

that Abdul Kareem spoke about. The apparent gender-based difference in participants' interactions with the host culture appears to stem from the strongly ingrained cultural norms and expectations for men and women that exist in Saudi society. Nevertheless, despite the differing levels of integration, all participants except Fatima, demonstrated an appreciation for various aspects of the host culture, a greater cultural self-awareness, an ability to critically evaluate their own cultural perspectives and practices, and a shift in worldview.

6.2.1.3 Increased Salaries and Rapid Promotions

The theme of increased salaries and rapid job promotions emerged from the data related to the personal benefits of postgraduate study abroad. Saudi academics are some of the highest paid academics in the world (MacGregor, 2008). Mateen alluded to significant salary increases for Saudi academic returnees during a discussion where he stated that the salaries for Saudi university teachers who have not yet completed their postgraduate qualifications, "*pays you nothing compared to what you would have got when you finish your degree*". All participants, regardless of gender, confirmed that there was a salary increase upon their return from study abroad.

According to Mateen, all sponsored Saudi academics assume the rank of Assistant Professor when they return from abroad. However, due to a "*shortage*" of qualified Saudi faculty, as described by participants Abdul Kareem and Ahmed, it is common for new returnees to also be promoted to leading administrative positions. Ahmed described the shortage of qualified Saudi faculty as follows, "… *ninety percent in my department are from abroad. The academic staff are from abroad, ninety percent of them. We are only three out of maybe thirty".* Three out of the nine participants were rapidly promoted upon their return from abroad. For example, Raeesa became the Vice Chair of her department without having any work experience and she was not even required to attend an interview. She said, "*Interestingly, for me, because I didn't spend more than 3 years for my PhD, they didn't make interview with me, they directly gave me the higher position".* Abdul Kareem was also given a promotion to the position of Vice Dean of Admission and Administration and Mateen was promoted to the position of Dean of University Development.

The implication of rapid job promotions for Saudi academic returnees is that some senior university positions are being filled by individuals with relatively little or no administrative or academic experience. In addition, these returnees are given heavy administrative responsibilities that take time away from

teaching and research; two of the key areas that returnees are sponsored to gain expertise in. For example, Abdul Kareem was the only qualified radiation physicist at his university at the time of interview and stated that "*eighty-percent*" of his time was taken by administrative duties, preventing him from performing tasks related to his field of expertise. Abdul Kareem was very concerned about the impact of returnees being given administrative responsibilities: "*Spending time in administration will take you away from your subject and from your speciality and you will not find the time to read and spend time doing research and you will not also focus on the quality of your research and your teaching.*"

This finding shows that the Saudisation of senior administrative positions has forced universities to draw on a limited pool of qualified Saudi academics, which has led to the rapid promotion of newly qualified and inexperienced Saudi academic returnees. Whilst the higher position and commensurate salary might be a personal benefit for the returnee, this phenomenon has the potential to seriously undermine the goals of the scholarships program. If Saudi public universities need to rely on Saudi academic returnees to fill administrative positions, this might negatively impact the universities' teaching and research capacities and inhibit the transfer of specialised knowledge and skills.

Drawing the Data Together

This section discussed the personal benefits of postgraduate study abroad for returnee Saudi academics. Three major themes emerged from the data in this study related to this area. These are: increased independence and self-confidence, cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competence, and higher salaries and rapid promotions.

My emic-positioning as a Muslim convert to Islam who taught at universities in Saudi Arabia for three years enabled me to ask insightful questions and engage in open and frank discussions with the participants, who spoke at length about their experiences abroad and back home in Saudi Arabia. These in-depth discussions brought to light some new issues such as gender-based differences in sponsored academics' levels of cultural integration and the phenomenon of rapid job promotions. In addition, greater depth was added to some issues that were raised by previous studies, such as the increase in independence and confidence of Saudi female academics as a result of postgraduate study abroad.

Unlike the presage and process factors discussed in the previous chapter that showed no detectable gender-related differences, the data on the personal benefits showed how gender can impact the outcomes of postgraduate study

abroad for sponsored Saudi academics. For instance, two out of four female participants spoke in detail about the growth in their independence and confidence as a result of postgraduate study abroad, whereas this issue was not discussed by any male participants. On the other hand, most of the male participants spoke in detail about their intercultural integration and subsequent deepened understanding and appreciation of the host culture, whereas the female participants did not appear to integrate deeply in the host culture. These findings add a new dimension to the existing literature, since such comparisons were not possible in previous studies involving Saudi academics, as they were mainly conducted by Saudi researchers and involved participants of a single-gender.

The data also indicate that all Saudi academic returnees enjoy a higher salary and position upon their return from postgraduate study abroad. However, the phenomenon of rapid promotions to senior positions due to the Saudisation policy and the shortage of experienced qualified Saudi faculty to take up these roles, could undermine some of the key goals of the scholarships program by taking returnees' time away from teaching and research.

6.2.2 The Professional Benefits of Postgraduate Study Abroad

Professional benefits for the purposes of this study are the positive attributes, knowledge and skills gained by Saudi academics through postgraduate study abroad that can be utilised in their professional roles within the Saudi public higher education sector. Three key types of professional benefits for Saudi academic returnees emerged from the data in this study. These are: improved English language ability; improved pedagogical awareness and practice; and improved research knowledge, skills and practices.

6.2.2.1 English Language Ability

All participants were entitled to a minimum of twelve months to complete an intensive English language course abroad before commencing their postgraduate studies. However, this entitlement has now been reduced to six months for current scholarship holders, due to Saudi government budget cuts (ICEF Monitor, 2016). Whilst there have been reports of large numbers of Saudi students returning from abroad with weak English language skills (Al-Sibai, 2012), the data in this study indicates that postgraduate study abroad has had a positive impact on the participants' levels of English language proficiency, as already touched upon in Chapter 5. The literature confirms that academic returnees regardless of nationality, acquire improved English language and communication skills as a result of postgraduate study abroad.

However, the literature often provides no more than a brief statement referring to returnees' improved English language skills (Chen, 2015; Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015; Iyengar, 2012; Namgung, 2008; Takeuchi, 2008; Xu, 2009). The data in this study differs somewhat from the data in other similar studies in that participants were asked to evaluate and discuss their pre and post-study abroad English language skills. The participants' self-reports taken together with my observations of the returnee academics' spoken English during the in-depth interviews and transcript analysis provide a deeper understanding of the impact of postgraduate study abroad on the English language proficiency of sponsored academics.

Improved language ability has been classified as a professional benefit because most university courses in Saudi Arabia, except for Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, are meant to be taught in English. Thus, academic returnees with improved English language skills are at an advantage over their locally trained colleagues because they can communicate with their students in English, access and produce teaching materials in English, and publish their research in international journals. There were no detectable gender-based differences in participants' English language abilities after postgraduate study abroad. However, those participants who specialised in

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the area of linguistics or English language teaching had a clear advantage in their before and after levels of English language ability.

Self-Reports of English Language Proficiency:

Huma:

Huma commenced her studies abroad with very strong English language skills and was not required to do the twelve months intensive English language program that most Saudi students do. She provided a brief, to-the-point response of "*yes*", when asked whether postgraduate study had improved her language skills. It was evident from Huma's recorded interview that her command of spoken English was very strong. Huma's strong English language skills are of significant benefit to her academic discipline of teaching English as a foreign language.

Mazen:

Mazen commenced his studies abroad with very good English language skills due to his high level of intrinsic motivation and effective learning strategies. He felt that his postgraduate studies abroad helped him to '*master English'.* This is evidenced by the fact that he did not report any language-related difficulties during his study abroad; his challenge was adapting to the different requirements of the new academic system. He said:

Actually, I remember that when I first started my master's I found it very difficult, especially at the very beginning. I remember that I had a lot of the unit outlines, those research assignments and final exams and stuff like that.

During the in-depth interview Mazen spoke confidently and fluently, and did not make any grammatical errors, which demonstrates his progression to an excellent level of English language ability. Mazen's mastering of English gives him a capacity to contribute significantly to his academic field of linguistics and English language teaching.

Mateen:

Mateen reported a strong grasp of the English language at the commencement of his postgraduate studies abroad and did not face any language difficulties during his studies. He said:

It was not a language problem. If there were any, at the beginning the twelve credits that I took it was only, I felt like on the same level when it comes to understanding the material, in grasping the information. However, there was some prerequisite information that I had difficulties with, not because of the language element, but because I hadn't read or thought about them before.

Like Huma and Mazen, Mateen's strong command of the English language is unsurprising given that his area of specialisation was linguistics and his intrinsic-motivation levels were very high. Hence, as Mateen had begun his postgraduate studies with an "*excellent*" command of English, he also

completed his postgraduate studies abroad with an excellent command of English, which was evident in the spoken interview.

Ebtisam:

During the face-to-face interview with Ebtisam, it was evident that she had a good grasp of the English language after postgraduate study abroad. Ebtisam mentioned how she was now able to quickly understand research articles written in English and could assist her colleagues who had difficulty understanding what they were reading. She said:

> *So sometimes I just, or someone of the, um, colleagues, they print out one of their researches and ah let's have a look at this. Um, I feel like I can read the article in like 10 minutes or, yeah, 10 minutes I can finish the article and I can summarise it. It will take them like an hour until they get it and sometimes I tell them some information…*

Ebtisam spoke confidently and fluently during the in-depth interview with some minor grammatical errors, which demonstrates that postgraduate study abroad was highly effective in improving Ebtisam's English language skills.

Raeesa:

Raeesa commenced her studies abroad with a good grasp of the English language that was aided by her significant exposures to the language before commencing her bachelor's degree in the United States. During our lengthy Skype interview, Raeesa demonstrated very strong spoken English language

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skills and spoke about how her study abroad experience had helped her to develop her professional vocabulary and academic writing skills. Raeesa was able to competently and fluently take part in the in-depth interview, albeit with some minor grammatical errors. She drew upon a range of sophisticated vocabulary in order to convey her ideas and experiences. This suggests that her post-study level of English language proficiency was overall very good.

Fatima:

Fatima felt that she could speak English "*very well*" prior to commencing her studies abroad and stated that postgraduate study abroad had helped to improve her English language skills. Fatima provided written responses to the interview questions, which indicated that there was still some weakness in her command of the English language, particularly with grammatical structures and vocabulary use. However, Fatima's English language ability was good enough for her to have completed her PhD abroad and to publish over twenty research articles (although most were published in local Saudi journals and some were published in Arabic), indicating a sound acquisition of the English language as a result of her overseas study.

Abdul Kareem:

In Chapter 5, Abdul Kareem reported having weakness in his oral communication and academic writing skills at the commencement of postgraduate study abroad. He stated that he had taught himself how to write much better during his time abroad and his oral communication skills were evidently very good during the in-depth interview. He said: "*So, the writing skill, the academic writing skills, we did not…, myself, I did not learn this or become good enough at first year, but with time I think I taught myself better than when I started.*" Abdul Kareem also provided examples of how his oral communication skills had improved during his postgraduate study abroad. For instance, he said: *"My English improved very dramatically* [chuckles], *you know. People, when you look at people's face and they understand you and they can understand what you're saying, okay, so my English is not bad…".* Hence, postgraduate study abroad has led to a significant improvement in Abdul Kareem's English language skills.

Numan:

Numan is the only male participant who went abroad with "*zero*" English language skills. During postgraduate study abroad, he acquired the skills to communicate reasonably well and write well enough to successfully complete his studies. Numan still had some weakness in his English language skills at

the time of the interview, he often struggled to find the right words to express

himself and he sometimes made major grammatical mistakes.

> Interviewer*: You did one and a half years of English. So, when you completed that, how did you feel your English was at that time?*
>
> Numan: *Actually, I thought it's still weak. Even now I'm not really confident with my English.*

However, despite Numan's intermediate level of English language skills, our

in-depth discussions relating to teaching and learning, as well as Numan's

sound academic performance indicated that his English language skills were

sufficient for him to be able to greatly improve his knowledge and skills in the

area of mathematics education.

Ahmed:

Ahmed's presage English language skills were at an "*intermediate level*" at

the start of his postgraduate studies abroad and he had no difficulties in

completing his intensive English language course before embarking on his

master's degree.

> *Well the only difficulty I faced in the first two months in my master's degree was the new terminology, because it was difficult to know everything in the field. So that was the main problem I had in my studies.*

Ahmed spoke very confidently and fluently during the in-depth interview,

demonstrating his progression well beyond intermediate level.

Therefore, as shown in Table 6.1 below, the participants' academic discipline prior to engaging in postgraduate study abroad correlated very strongly with their starting levels of English language proficiency. Those in the field of linguistics and English language teaching had the strongest English language skills before and after postgraduate study abroad. However, regardless of the different starting levels of English language proficiency, most participants acquired a good grasp of the English language by the completion of their postgraduate studies abroad.

In Chapter 4 it was mentioned that because this research was conducted in English, this study tended to attract participants who were quite confident in English and thus, these results cannot be used to make generalisations about the impact of postgraduate study abroad on returnee academics' levels of English language proficiency. The phenomenon of scholarship recipients returning from abroad with weak English language skills has been reported in the literature (Al-Sibai, 2012) and is something that I observed when I taught at university in Saudi Arabia. For example, when I was still based in Saudi Arabia, I met a female academic returnee who had completed her master's degree at an Australian university and who had agreed to participate in this study. However, her lack of English language skills meant that I could not interview her without the help of a translator. Once I relocated to Australia, the

participant no longer remained in contact. I was puzzled by how this returnee

could complete a master's degree with so little English.

Table 6.1 – Participants' Self-Reported Before and After Levels of English Language Proficiency

Participant Name* *Pseudonyms	Gender	No. of Years Spent Abroad	Field of Study	Self-Reported Presage Level of English Language Ability	English Language Ability after Postgraduate Study Abroad
Ebtisam	Female	2 years	Food Science	Zero	Good
Raeesa	Female	12 years	Bachelor: Computer Information Systems (USA) Two Master's Degrees: Master of Computer Science (USA) / Master of Education (UK) PhD: E-Learning /Blended Learning (UK)	Good	Very Good
Huma	Female	6 years	Curriculum and Instruction of ESL	Very Good	Excellent
Fatima	Female	3 years	Science – Cell Engineering	Good	Good
Abdul Kareem	Male	7 years	Radiation Physics	Good	Very Good
Mazen	Male	4 years	Linguistics	Very good	Excellent
Numan	Male	4 years	Mathematics Education	Zero	Intermediate
Mateen	Male	7 years	Linguistics (Major: English Minor: Educational Psychology)	Excellent	Excellent
Ahmed	Male	7 years	Science /Nanotechnology	Intermediate	Very Good

There were no detectable gender-related differences in participants' levels of English language proficiency. When taken together, the discussion of the participants' English language learning experiences before and after postgraduate study abroad suggest that their proficiency was influenced by their intrinsic motivation levels, determination and use of effective learning strategies.

6.2.2.2 Pedagogical Awareness and Practice

One of the aims of the King Abdullah Scholarships Program is to improve Saudi academics' teaching knowledge and skills (Al-Mousa, 2009). Traditionally there has been a teacher-centred, rote memorisation and recall approach to teaching and assessment in Saudi Arabia (Grami, 2012; Gulnaz, Alfaqih, & Mashhour, 2015), although this is slowly changing (Hamdan, 2015; Idris, 2016). The data in this study confirm that approaches to teaching and assessment are undergoing change in Saudi Arabia, they also show that postgraduate study abroad has had a positive impact on the participants' pedagogical awareness and practice. This manifested itself in three main ways - an increased appreciation for student-centred pedagogy; changes in teaching practice; and increased awareness of the role of teacher-student relationships in students' learning.

Appreciation of Student-Centred Pedagogy

An important sub-theme that emerged from the data in relation to academic returnees' pedagogical awareness and practice was participants' increased awareness of and appreciation for student-centred pedagogy. This is significant, given that teachers and students in Saudi Arabia traditionally give disproportionate focus to examinations and often overlook the principal purpose of education, which is for students to acquire knowledge, skills and values that are useful beyond the learning experience (Al-Essa, 2009; Al-Nasser, 2015; Matson, 2015). As a university teacher in Saudi Arabia I was able to observe from an emic perspective that teachers and students were often unconcerned about the 'learning' aspect of education or whether students were internalising new knowledge and skills. Thus, I contemplated how these students would be able to productively contribute to their society once they graduated. An increased awareness of and appreciation for student-centred pedagogy for academic returnees was largely demonstrated through the changes that several participants had made to their teaching practice, as well as being evident through participants' changed perceptions about the role of the teacher.

Two participants spoke explicitly about their increased appreciation for student-centred pedagogy as a result of their postgraduate studies abroad.

For instance, Numan mentioned that when he went to Australia to study his

master's degree in mathematics education, he thought that he would simply

be taught different teaching techniques, as his job role in Saudi Arabia was to

teach pre-service mathematics teachers. However, he was surprised to find

that he gained an in-depth knowledge about the ways in which students learn:

> *… what I learn in Australia I found it's more useful, it's increase our conscience, it increase my conscience, developed my conscience* [awareness] *of how to teach or how to learn...*

Numan's increased awareness of how students learn caused a shift in his

understanding of the role of the teacher in the classroom. Numan said,

> *… for me previously, I thought I'm the one who responsible in provide everything to the students, my role in the classroom is essential and important, without me the students learn nothing. So, everything I have to prepare, I have to provide to the students, I have to say everything. This is what I believed as a teacher.*

Numan realised that he was not the primary or sole source of knowledge for

his students and that students also share responsibility for their learning and

are capable of learning independently.

Secondly, Raeesa reported that the student-centred teaching approach was

the main difference that she found with higher education abroad compared

with Saudi Arabia. However, she also mentioned that this situation is rapidly

changing in Saudi Arabia, particularly at her university:

The main thing that I noticed in the first and probably the second year of teaching was that the people who studied in Saudi Arabia [have a] *more teacher-centred style of teaching – this is the most important difference. But to let you know that, especially in my university, there is a very rapid improvement in different aspects of teaching and learning.*

When asked why academics who studied abroad tended to favour the student-centred approach more than those who did not, Raeesa said:

… it's a matter of practicing this as students or as teachers. So, people who are studying abroad, they are practicing these skills as students. So, they are feeling how their students feel when they are practicing these skills. I think this is the big difference.

Further, Raeesa identifies "*practicing this as students*" as the main catalyst for sponsored Saudi academics changing their mindset and seeing the learner-centred approach as more effective, due to being able to experience the benefits of this approach firsthand as students abroad. The changes in participants' teaching practice and the shift in their perceptions of the teacher-student relationship are dealt with in the subsequent sub-sections.

Changes in Teaching Practice

As mentioned above, another important finding that emerged from the data analysis was that a number of participants made tangible changes to their teaching practice as a result of postgraduate study abroad. This sub-theme manifested itself in three main ways, including - the use of more diverse

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methods of presenting information in the classroom and less focus on the textbook; the use of new teaching techniques; increased integration of technology into teaching practice; and new approaches to course organisation, structure and delivery.

For example, Ebtisam, who teaches in the field of food science, described some of the ways that she has changed her professional practice as a result of her postgraduate study abroad experience:

> *…before we just use a book and, or notes, or things and just give it to the students and we are not allowed to ask them to get any researches, no. Now there is a kind or research or there is an assignment we give to the students. And the other thing, the good thing that I'm trying to teach the students how, because I saw, I attended many seminars, I saw how they prepared their seminars, their slides. I'm trying to get them* [to be] *more professional in preparing slides instead of putting all these pictures and movie things and a lot of words inside. No, you need to be more professional, like, make it simple and easy for you and for the audience, so you will not lose them. I'm using the same thing, in, like, teaching, when I'm using my slides. Posters, they never hear about posters, making posters. How, how we can make it ourself, we don't have to take it to someone. That's what I'm like, trying to teach the students…*

Ebtisam mentions the typical approach to teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia, which focuses on the use of a textbook for students to memorise. However, the recent introduction of independent student research projects as a component of students' assessment within Ebtisam's department indicates the gradual shift that is occurring in the approach to teaching and assessment

in Saudi Arabia, as previously expressed by Raeesa and highlighted in the literature (Hamdan, 2015; Idris, 2016). Ebtisam also reported an improvement in her technology skills and her ability to produce an effective presentation, which she has been working to share with her students, as well as modelling this in her teaching practice.

Similarly, Huma, whose academic field is teaching English as a foreign language, spoke about her acquisition of new pedagogical knowledge and skills from abroad:

> *Well, I got my master's degree and PhD in the field of TESOL or teaching English to speakers of other languages and from there I know new approaches, new trends of teaching English to speakers of other languages. I knew some new ways of assessing students, rather than just giving them tests and grades and written tests and so on, using projects. We have been assigned just recently in our university the use of rubrics in evaluation and so on and so forth, you know. So, you get more skills.*

Huma affirms that her postgraduate studies abroad taught her new teaching approaches in her field, as well as new assessment methods. When Huma was asked about the differences between education in Saudi Arabia and abroad, she was keen to say that there was no difference at all, stating that "*there's nothing that I can say that is very much different than what we are using here in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, presentations, using*

PowerPoint, …". However, when she was asked about her own acquisition of professional knowledge and skills abroad, she identified a number of key areas where her knowledge and skills had been advanced. Huma also made mention of the fact that "*rubrics*" were recently introduced at her university as a tool to help evaluate students' work. This demonstrates an evident gap in higher education at her university compared with universities abroad (Cooper & Gargan, 2009). At the same time, it also confirms the gradual changes that are taking place in teaching and assessment in the Kingdom, as previously discussed.

Below is a practical example of where Huma has used her newly acquired knowledge and skills to implement a new assessment practice:

> *… one of the methods that I have been exposed to where I was studying in the United States is what we call 'teacher self-assessment' and I am teaching students to be teachers. I am teaching students who are already teachers also and they are getting a higher degree. So, one of the things that we used to do over there was to video tape the students while she's presenting or giving a lesson and then we can sit altogether in a group and watch the video and comment positively and you know, be honest with her and give her honest feedback.*

However, in this case Huma found that her students were not keen on this technique as they felt that it conflicted with their cultural values. This issue will be discussed further in the section on professional challenges encountered by returnees.

Like Huma, Mazen, who also specialised in English language teaching, reported that postgraduate study abroad provided him with "*new ideas and philosophies in English language teaching*", enhancing his specialised pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Another example is that of Ahmed, a scientist, who spoke about various changes in his teaching approach:

> *We're using, for example, the projector to show the students the, I mean the information more clearly and we can, we can show them movies, we can now, as one of the improvements that I've added as a teacher, is to do some experiments during the lecture. So that would help students to understand the subject more.*

Ahmed's statement that this "*would help students to understand the subject more*" demonstrates his increased awareness of how the variety of teaching tools and using visual teaching aids serve to improve students' understanding of the content that is being taught. He also mentioned introducing a hands-on element to his teaching via the use of experiments, indicating how postgraduate study abroad has enhanced his repertoire of teaching techniques and increased his awareness of how students learn.

Further, Abdul Kareem provided insight into how his exposure to an online teaching program abroad enabled him to source and use this software in his

own teaching practice and significantly change the way that he delivered

courses to his female students, as follows:

> *One thing that I learnt in Canada is, since Canada is a huge land, they use online learning quite often, use virtual classrooms, software for online learning. It was used very heavily in some universities in Canada. I thought, okay, this is a good software, this program, why not take it, so I learned about this, I subscribed for it and now I am teaching girls through that software. You know the way that we teach* [female] *students, I should go from the male campus, change campuses, go to another campus* [external to the female campus] *and give my lecture. Now I established this system, so I can give lectures from my office and the cost is very minimal; it is totally cheaper than the current system. I have some problems with the internet and with the connection, but these things can be solved. You know in Canada, I mean, we have students taking the course from the UK, from Australia, from Africa. We* [males and females] *are in almost the same location, so why not, there is a shortage of female professors, so the males can give some lectures from his office. They just need a laptop and some mic and speaker and that's it and a board to write on. So, there are many things we learn and should have learned.*

In the example above, Abdul Kareem has mentioned the system of teaching

female university students in Saudi Arabia when there is a shortage of

qualified female staff. As discussed in Chapter 2, Saudi Arabia implements

strict gender segregation rules for almost all public spaces, including schools,

universities and banks (Matthews, 2012). Thus, when there is a shortage of

qualified female staff to teach the various university courses on offer, a male

lecturer is required to teach the female students without entering the grounds

of the female campus. A small room or building located close to the female

university campus is set up for the male lecturer to deliver his lesson via a video link system where he cannot see the female students, but they can see him on a screen and hear him through speakers located in a classroom on-campus. Abdul Kareem's new knowledge about the online teaching software enabled him to teach the female students without needing to travel to the external video link room in order to deliver the lectures and it also enabled the students to participate in the course from any location by accessing a computer, saving them the need to travel to the university. As a teacher of female university students in Saudi Arabia, I observed that the students who took these courses via video link were often distracted by the noise of other students in the lecture room who preferred to socialise, rather than to look at the screen and listen to the lecture. Thus, Abdul Kareem was able to potentially improve the quality of his students' learning experiences by introducing this newly acquired teaching technique, as well as make his job easier as a teacher.

Postgraduate study abroad not only enables sponsored academics to observe and learn new approaches to teaching and assessment, as demonstrated through the multiple examples provided above. It also enables sponsored academics to observe and experience the ways that overseas university courses are organised, structured and delivered, which returnees

can adopt into their teaching practice back home. For example, Abdul

Kareem said:

> *One thing that benefitted me abroad was, let's say, the teaching style, is different than universities in Saudi Arabia, especially in Canada. For their university courses, looking at the details, how it is structured and delivered, how the system works. I found studying abroad and even, not only studying or getting the knowledge, also the experience of how your tutor or instructor is giving the course, how the department is constructing the system or the program. Those things were very interesting to me and I find it useful and helpful and I brought this back with me. I find, okay, we are not doing these things, although it's really important. For example, I remember that every course that students were taking in Canada, for example, were given before the course, maybe a week before the course, a course description, a outline and it was given to them through Web CT or Blackboard, so the student can see the details of this course before the term starts, and when I say the details, I mean it. The details of the course, the course outline, the assessment method, everything the students need, references, papers, etc., etc. I found okay, well, that's really very helpful. I would love it if I was a student and my teacher gave me this course outline at the beginning. It helped me very, very, very much. The course style, the teaching styles, [is] something really, I like it and I hope that we implement it and make it compulsory here in my university.*

Abdul Kareem's experience shows how he was able to transfer this

knowledge to his home university context by using it in his own teaching

practice. However, his last sentence that, "*I hope that we implement it and

make it compulsory here in my university"*, indicates that this idea has not yet

gone beyond Abdul Kareem's own classes. Only time will tell if these ideas

will gain wider acceptance at his university and beyond.

<u>Teacher-Student Relationships</u>

In the previous chapter, the differences between the overseas teaching

context and the Saudi teaching context were discussed, including the

differences in the teacher's role and the power-distance between teachers

and students in both contexts. For instance, Numan described the teacher's

status as the "*teacher always right*" and mentioned how in Saudi Arabia

students rise to their feet as the teacher enters the classroom. Mazen said

that university professors are "*like a king*", and could not be questioned, even

if it was just to clarify exam results. Analysis of the data also indicates that

postgraduate study abroad can lead to greater awareness among sponsored

academics about the role that power-distance between teachers and students

can play in students' learning outcomes.

For example, Ebtisam's views on the relationship between teachers and

students shifted as a result of postgraduate study abroad and she

subsequently became more responsive to her students' learning needs, as

follows:

> *Solving problems with the students and things. Even I, because they* [other teachers] *still having this Arabian mind of like 'Maybe the girl is lying, they are not telling the truth and things'. Okay, don't judge me from my cover, please talk to me. Sometimes I just get the girls and just talk to them, like, just next to the door. 'So just tell me what's the truth, nobody will know about it. If you want me to support you in your case, just tell me the truth.' And some, like let's say in the exam, some*

girls they come like half an hour late. They are under stress, they are afraid, they want to get into the exam. [Other teachers say] *'Why are you get late? Okay, come and write, sign this paper and …'. Come on people, she is under stress, she want to get to the exam. Let us relax her a bit, give her water or something, take her to the class and then sit down, this is the questions, look at it, take a breathe, don't think about what's gonna happen because you are late, just start writing. Then I can bring my paper, okay, sign this, that you're not gonna be late again. Not the first thing I'm gonna say to her 'why are you late?', I delay her more and more. Yep, so like small things make you more professional in dealing with people.*

My experience of teaching female university students in Saudi Arabia and my emic positioning in this regard, allows me to elaborate on the context of the example that Ebtisam has provided above. Ebtisam has described the different approach that she takes to her colleagues in dealing with students who are late for an exam. Although it would ordinarily not be acceptable for a student to arrive late to an exam, the context of women in Saudi Arabia needs to be considered. At the time of data collection, women had no control over their transport, due to being denied the right to drive and the fact that there is no public transport system in Saudi Arabia. Thus, female students depend on a male family member or the availability of a male driver to take them to university, which is not necessarily easy, given that male family members often work or study and a driver may not be available. Even though there are demonstrable reasons why a female student might not make it to her exams on time, Ebtisam describes a situation where the traditional authoritarian

approach in Saudi Arabia tends to punish the student regardless of her situation. Ebtisam's new approach involves gaining students' trust and showing the students compassion and understanding in the way that she deals with them. In addition, Ebtisam said that she also endeavours *"to let them know what's their rights and how they can get. Some girls, they don't know what's their rights at the university".* This statement reflects the large power-distance between teachers and students in Saudi Arabia, whereby students are made to feel that they have no rights.

Numan also articulated some of the benefits of having less power distance between teachers and students, as follows:

> *The situation in Australia is different, you know, you cannot separate, make a difference between teacher and students when they come together in one building, they talk with each other, talk friendly and this is good to encourage students to speak about their issues, their understanding, about anything.*

Thus, Numan observed that less power distance enabled students in Australia to feel that they could discuss their learning issues openly with their teachers. Interestingly though, Numan's discussion with a Saudi pre-service teacher during his postgraduate research revealed that Saudi students may actually have less respect for teachers who are less authoritarian. Numan relayed that the pre-service teacher had said:

Even if the teacher very active, we don't care about him, even if he ask us to engage in discussion, we don't talk, we don't care about it, we actually look at him as a noisy. We just want to finish and pass the exam and find a job and that's it.

This situation was also encountered by a female Saudi academic returnee, as reported in Alandejani's study (2013), who said that the students showed her disrespect when she told them not to refer to her as "doctor".

Hence, while around half the participants commented on the low power-distance between teachers and students abroad, only two participants demonstrated an evident appreciation for how improved teacher-student relations can potentially enhance students' learning experiences. However, in the context of Saudi Arabia, where students are accustomed to viewing their teachers with an elevated level of authority, the data also suggest that in this context the less formal approach could be misinterpreted by students and result in a loss of respect for such teachers.

6.2.2.3 Research Knowledge, Skills and Practices

The literature shows that research output among academic returnees is often greater than that of their locally trained counterparts, particularly when it comes to publishing in international journals (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Namgung, 2008; Xu, 2009). In addition to confirming the findings from previous studies with respect to research output, data from this study show

that several participants improved in their research knowledge, skills, and practices as a result of postgraduate study abroad. The rich reports from the participants provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which postgraduate study abroad can benefit Saudi public universities in the area of research. There was a tendency for gains in this area to be reported by participants with a scientific background, with only one report from a participant with a non-scientific background. This is likely to be because of the practical nature of scientific research and the large gap between scientific research practices in Saudi Arabia and abroad, as discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Research knowledge and awareness

Abdul Kareem reported that the research knowledge and skills he acquired overseas was very good. His research knowledge and motivation to conduct research was partially demonstrated by the measures he took to establish the necessary resources and equipment within his home university so that he could conduct research in his field. He also tactfully improvised and overcame difficulties that he faced as a result of limited resources and equipment. He said:

> *When we came back I had to establish my lab and to establish a research group, a room that we can work together, I cannot do research by myself unless I do something theoretical. I had to establish*

some links with good universities in the Kingdom in order to use their facilities and see what kind of problems we are facing in the Kingdom.

In addition, Abdul Kareem's statement shows that, as a returnee, he saw it as his responsibility to use his newly acquired research knowledge and skills to contribute to the body of scientific knowledge relevant to the needs of Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, Ahmed, who studied in the field of nanotechnology, also set up a laboratory to conduct research in his field. He said:

If you ask me this question before, well seven years ago, I wouldn't think about, about setting up a lab or doing experiments. When I saw people, their interest of doing the research there, it's very important to, especially for developing universities like my university. So, it's one of the main things that we should do to improve or to yeah, to improve the university.

Thus, this example demonstrates the changes Ahmed made as a result of his postgraduate studies abroad, including the establishment of a lab, the procurement of the necessary equipment and the prioritising of research. It also shows how postgraduate study abroad caused a shift in Ahmed's thinking about the importance of research and the role it plays in the advancement of newly established universities.

Applying academic conventions

Huma stated that overseas study had helped her to hone her research writing skills. She observed that the method of writing up research in the West was different to the way it was done in Saudi Arabia. She said:

> *I noticed that the way of writing research in English is much more easier than doing it in Arabic. Here we have been adapting our way of writing an Arabic research from one of the Arab countries, Egypt, you know, and a research has to be not less than 40 papers* [pages] *with all the details and so on. So, going there, I know that the way you have to form your research is different, you have to go to the main points in your research and that's it, you don't need to go into too much detail. Very simple, very easy, to the point.*

Thus, as a result of postgraduate study abroad Huma is now aware of internationally recognised conventions for academic writing.

Laboratory protocols and safety

Ebtisam spoke at length about her experience of conducting experiments during her postgraduate study in Australia and the significant contrast between the lab protocols and practices used in Australia compared to those used in Saudi Arabia. Further, when I asked Ebtisam what changes she thought would potentially be made as result of postgraduate study abroad, her response was, "*at least safety is in the lab…*". She also mentioned the cutting down of paperwork and bureaucracy; which are among the factors known to inhibit quality research in Saudi Arabia (Alandejani, 2013; Rathore,

2017). Thus, Ebtisam's responses indicate that she developed an appreciation for the lab safety procedures and professional protocols that she learnt in Australia and that she was keen to implement them when conducting research in Saudi Arabia. The more formalised and systematic approach to conducting research that Ebtisam spoke about is also likely to contribute to higher quality research being produced. Ebtisam had only returned to Saudi Arabia less than 1 year at the time of interview and could not report widely on her practical research experiences after postgraduate study abroad.

Research output

At the time of interview, Huma had published six journal articles since returning from abroad, which was a period of three years. This means that she produced an average of two papers per year since her return. Whilst there is insufficient information to comment on the quality of the research Huma had produced since her return, she reported that she now follows internationally recognised conventions for academic writing.

Fatima also reported that postgraduate study abroad helped her to improve her research skills. This was partially evidenced by the fact that she had authored and co-authored a total of twenty-six published journal articles, as well as an additional four articles that were in-press at the time of interview,

which was four years after she returned from abroad. These articles were published in a variety of Arabic and English-based journals.

Drawing the Data Together

This section discussed the professional benefits of postgraduate study abroad for returnee Saudi academics. Three major themes emerged from the data in this study related to this area. These are: improved English language proficiency; improved pedagogical awareness and practice; and improved research knowledge, skills, and practices.

Whilst the literature shows that academic returnees acquire improved technical knowledge and skills as a result of postgraduate study abroad (Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Grove, 2016; Wang, 2014), the range and depth of the knowledge and skills gained by sponsored academics have not been deeply investigated. The detailed descriptions provided by the participants in this study led to a more in-depth and expanded understanding of the professional benefits acquired by Saudi academics, such as providing pre and post-study abroad descriptions of their English language ability, identifying the specific changes in their approaches to teaching and assessment and teacher-student relations, and stating the specific ways that

their research knowledge and skills have been enhanced and utilised within their home country higher education sector.

Whilst there were no detectable gender-based differences in the professional benefits acquired by participants, there were some possible discipline-based differences. For instance, participants with the strongest pre and post study abroad acquisition of the English language were those who specialised in the area of linguistics and English language teaching. Further, in terms of the research knowledge and skills that academics acquired, those who specialised in scientific subjects focused heavily on the use of practical experiments and laboratory protocols, whereas the participant from a non-scientific background mentioned the conventions of writing up research.

Finally, four participants, Raeesa, Fatima, Abdul Kareem, and Ahmed, studied in fields abroad that were not yet available in Saudi Arabia, including e-learning, cell engineering, radiation physics and nanotechnology respectively, which also indicates the potential significance of postgraduate study abroad for enhancing the knowledge capacities of Saudi public universities. However, the professional benefits of postgraduate study abroad can be offset or undermined by the challenges and obstacles faced by Saudi academic returnees. This topic will be dealt with in the next section.

6.3 THE PRODUCT IN PRACTICE

As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a paucity of literature on the adjustment issues and challenges encountered by returnee academics. Further, most previous studies have been conducted from an emic perspective, where participants can feel obliged to provide socially desirable responses and there is a propensity for researcher bias (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Holmes, 2014). In addition, the literature pays scant attention to the impact of gender on returnee academics' experiences. As previously discussed, my unique etic-emic positioning allowed me to build a strong rapport and trust with most of the participants in this study, whilst at the same time ensuring that I was sufficiently distanced to make critical outsider observations and to ask critical questions. Three key challenges emerged from the data in this study, including reverse culture shock, obstacles to quality research and resistance to change.

6.3.1 The Personal and Professional Challenges

6.3.1.1 Reverse Culture Shock

There is evidence within the literature that reverse culture shock, experienced when people return to their home culture after an extended stay abroad, is often more severe than the culture shock that is experienced when people

enter a foreign culture (Milhouse, Asante & Nwosu, 2001). Research also

shows that factors such as age and the extent of difference between the host

and home cultures can influence the level of reverse culture shock

(Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes,1984; Al-Musaiteer, 2015; Gama & Pederson,

1977; Zahrani, 1986). Studies by Gama & Pederson (1977) and Alandejani

(2013) suggest that women from traditional or conservative cultural contexts

may find the reentry experience more difficult than their male counterparts.

Whereas, in more liberal cultures such as Japan, the reentry experience of

female academic returnees was found to be easier than that of their male

counterparts (Takeuchi, 2008). The data in this study indicate that male and

female Saudi academics are both susceptible to reverse culture shock, albeit

in differing ways and to different degrees. Interestingly, male participants

tended to experience more severe reverse culture shock than their female

counterparts, particularly those who had immersed themselves deeply in the

host culture abroad.

In this study, Ebtisam was the only female participant who reported

experiencing reverse culture shock. During the in-depth interview, she spoke

at length about the differences between the host and home countries. Whilst

Ebtisam did not have much to say about the people within the host country,

she did have a lot to say about the systems in place overseas, as well as the

negative impact of prevailing attitudes towards women in her home country.

> *Yeah, so, it was easy for me to adapt* [to the host country]*, NOW it's a*
> *trouble, I have culture shock* [returning to Saudi Arabia] [chuckle].

Ebtisam explained that in the host country she did not have to wear the face

veil that she wears in Saudi Arabia, she was able to work alongside men to

conduct her research and that she was able to do many things more easily in

Australia than in Saudi Arabia. For instance, she spoke about being able to

apply for her children's birth certificates online in Australia, whereas she

laments the heavily bureaucratic system in Saudi Arabia that is particularly

burdensome on women. She said:

> *And life is easier over there* [in Australia]*. You can just finish your*
> *paperwork maximum in one week. Here, because you are female, until*
> *you raise your issues to male section and it goooes around and*
> *someone forget it under the desk, or under the carpet, I don't know, sit*
> *on it… And then, like, even you forget about it. Then they will say 'Oh,*
> *okay, we will think about it'. It will take a year until you finish your*
> *paperwork. It's just routine, routine, routine, here…*

Ebtisam was also the only female participant to openly criticise the treatment

of women in Saudi Arabia and to express dissatisfaction over the way the

system operates in favour of men.

On the other hand, Raeesa was quite conservative and chose to live separate

to the host culture while she was abroad and did not appear to experience

any reverse culture shock. The key issue that Raeesa pointed out in relation to university culture in Saudi Arabia was the absence of policies that define the rights and responsibilities of female university leadership in relation to their male superiors. Huma and Fatima's interviews were conducted by proxy and by email respectively, and I was unable to build the same kind of rapport as I had done with the previous two female participants. Huma was very guarded during her interview and cautious about expressing any criticism of Saudi culture. As such, she did not mention whether she had experienced any reverse culture shock. Fatima expressed great pride in her Saudi culture and emphasised its superiority over the host culture, also with no mention of reverse culture shock.

Conversely, male participant Abdul Kareem described the cultural readjustment that he and his family experienced getting back into life in Saudi Arabia, as follows:

> *I think yes, we did, but sometimes I tell myself, okay Abdul Kareem, you know, this is your country and you have to adapt yourself, you have to give this country back what you have learned. Some people say, okay, well I cannot do that just myself, so he start to complain and blame other people and* [achieves] *nothing at the end.*

Abdul Kareem also mentioned his children's readjustment difficulties:

> *We take him to the school, you know, the school is different, people are different, you know, and you hear my kids saying things, okay Dad,*

my teacher saying this and that bad words, she doesn't smile at all, things like that, which is very minor things, but it's not minor in education.

Abdul Kareem emphasised that he has always tried to remain positive in the face of reentry challenges. In the above excerpt he speaks about his children's transition back into Saudi schools, where they found the teachers to be stern and use harsh language. As discussed previously, teachers are authority figures in the Saudi education context and there is a commonly held belief that if they are too friendly with students, the students will lose respect for them (Alandejani, 2013). In this discussion, Abdul Kareem also spoke about his shock at Saudi attitudes towards road safety issues, such as fastening seatbelts and keeping to speed-limits. He said that he continues to apply the road safety rules that he learnt abroad, regardless of what people do around him. Abdul Kareem believes that remaining positive is the only way to ultimately achieve change. He said, *"we have to always be very positive"*.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Mateen demonstrated the greatest degree of cultural integration while abroad. Subsequently, he and his family have found the readjustment process difficult and were still coming to grips with their return several years later:

> *When I went to the States, it was less than a month to get immersed in the culture and blend in. When I came back, it took at least three to four years to blend in* [readjust]*. We came back August 2005, last time*

we talked about how difficult it is to blend in was last night. He always asks, Daddy why are we staying until now here, when are we moving back [to the USA]. *It's his home.*

This study and others (Alandejani, 2013) have shown that the readjustment process not only affects the sponsored academic but impacts their spouses and children as well. As mentioned earlier, age is a critical factor that affects the readjustment process. Gama & Pederson (1977) found that younger sojourners "experience a more intense and traumatic reentry crisis" (p. 47).

During the in-depth interview, Ahmed spoke at length about experiencing reverse culture shock after returning from postgraduate abroad:

> *After coming back, I, I, I just see the bad things and the problems and started counting them. So, I start to compare my culture and their culture, and you know, I see only the problems* [pause]. *Just to improve it. Problems with the system and people, how people communicate with others, everywhere is different and sometimes we have got many problems.*

When he returned from abroad, Ahmed became overwhelmed with a sense of needing to fix all the problems that he saw. Whereas, Mateen had taken a more pragmatic approach, he said:

> *I believe in one simple thing, don't force change, be a model for change. I never force anything to anybody. I just do it my own way and they will see whether it's better than the way that they're doing or worse than the way that they're doing. Because, frankly, not everything that is American is good. Sometimes our way of doing things is better than their way of doing things.*

In the absence of such an outlook, Ahmed found himself struggling to cope with the reverse culture shock and sought support from his friends:

> *Yeah when I was talking to my friend from Jeddah and he told me, he has got a friend and when I explained this problem to him, he said you are in the safe side, because you haven't visited the psychologist. After coming back, he didn't, he couldn't start with what these people are doing, that he are seeing the psychologist every month.*

These examples demonstrate that reverse culture shock impacted the participants differently, with more severe accounts provided by the male participants. Ebtisam's experiences show her acute awareness and dissatisfaction with the gender divide in Saudi Arabia, though this issue was not raised by the other three female participants. This could be because Ebtisam was the only participant that I was able to interview face-to-face while I was in Saudi Arabia and she felt safe to discuss such issues in that setting. It could also be because, in Saudi Arabia, women's opinions are divided on issues relating to women's rights. Some Saudi women fully support Saudi cultural norms and seek to preserve its traditions, while others desire change and challenge the status quo (Kinninmont, 2017). Age was also found to be a critical factor affecting readjustment, with two participants mentioning the difficulties experienced by their children. Finally, participants' outlook appeared to have a significant impact on their ability to cope with the reverse culture shock; Abdul Kareem and Mateen maintained a very positive and

pragmatic approach, whereas Ahmed felt overwhelmed and found it difficult to see past the problems.

6.3.1.2 Obstacles to Quality Research

The literature shows that academic returnees from developing countries commonly face obstacles to producing quality research. These obstacles include a lack of equipment and an unfavourable research environment within home institutions (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Altbach, 2014; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Namgung, 2008). Analysis of the data in this study revealed that returnee Saudi academics can face several obstacles to producing quality research. Three sub-themes emerged from the data in relation to this issue, including: a lack of research equipment, insufficient time to conduct research, and an unfavourable research environment. Interestingly, only the participants of a scientific-background reported facing obstacles to producing quality research, with an equal number of two males and two females respectively. One participant mentioned that female academics have less access to the latest research equipment than their male counterparts, though this could not be expanded upon with the available data.

Lack of equipment

A lack of research equipment is a common obstacle faced by returnee academics in the developing world (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Altbach, 2014; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Namgung, 2008). This sub-theme emerged from the data as the most-reported obstacle to producing quality research, raised by about half the participants. Fatima who studied abroad in a scientific field that had not yet been established in Saudi Arabia returned to find that "*…some techniques I am not able to do because the shortage of equipments and manpower."* She also stated that, *"… equipments of cell engineering are lack in my university"*. Further, Fatima mentioned that there is a need for greater research freedom, though this was raised in her recommendations to the Ministry of Higher Education and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Ebtisam, who studied food science, was the only female participant who pointed out that male university campuses in Saudi Arabia were more equipped to conduct research than female campuses. I subsequently asked Ebtisam whether male academics might then prefer to complete their postgraduate studies in Saudi Arabia. She said:

> *No. They* [Saudi men] *feel it's harder here, because most of the universities, they are not fully equipped with the newest equipment in*

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science. So, any machine, it's been like ten years they've been working in, ah, England, ten years ago they worked on it…

Thus, Ebtisam's statement confirms that both male and female academics are faced with a lack of necessary equipment or a lower standard of equipment than they were accustomed to abroad. Such a situation makes it difficult for returnee academics to utilise the research knowledge and skills that they have acquired overseas. According to Ebtisam, the latest equipment can only be found at a select few universities in Saudi Arabia. She said:

… we are still behind. Some like, places, like Madinatul-Malik-Abdul-Aziz [King Abdul-Aziz City for Science and Technology] *in Riyadh, they have the new equipment, but it's all for males.*

As mentioned, Ebtisam has raised the issue that male academics have better access to research equipment than their female counterparts. Since no other participants have raised this matter and it does not appear to have been discussed in the literature, it is not possible to elaborate on the nature and extent of this phenomenon in the Kingdom.

On the other hand, Huma answered a swift "*no*" when asked whether there was a lack of research equipment and resources at her university. Huma's location in one of Saudi Arabia's major cities might explain the difference between her experience and Ebtisam's. As mentioned, some of Saudi

Arabia's universities are better resourced than others. It might also be

because, as pointed out by Abdul Kareem, academics in non-scientific fields

tend require less specialised equipment to conduct their research. He said,

"… we have people, their subject is humanities or arts, so they don't actually

need, they can do their research by their own, they don't need any lab or

equipment…".

Abdul Kareem also identified a lack of equipment as being an obstacle. He

said: *"… my subject requires complicated and expensive equipment. Yes, the*

resources, we have very limited resources."

Finally, Ahmed made a comparison between the equipment available at

Saudi universities and universities overseas. He said:

> *Well if you want to compare their research, we have to compare the*
> *labs they did their research in. If you compare the labs in the UK to*
> *some over here in Saudi, there's a big difference. So, the outcome of*
> *people doing research in the UK should be different from the outcome,*
> *from people here in Saudi. So, it depends on the labs where they did*
> *their research in.*

Hence, four participants reported a lack of research equipment at their home

universities and all were of a scientific-background. Gender was raised by

one participant as a factor that influenced academics' access to research

equipment; however, an equal number of males and females reported

experiencing this problem. The data indicates that participants' academic

discipline and the location of their university in Saudi Arabia are two factors

that can influence their need and access to research equipment respectively.

Unfavourable research environment

Research culture relates to the acceptance and recognition of research

practice and output as a valued and worthwhile activity within an

organisational setting (Evans, 2007) and is vital to the production of quality

research. The absence of a positive research environment or research culture

has been identified in the literature as a common obstacle encountered by

academic returnees from a range of cultures (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes,

1984; Altbach, 2014; Gama & Pederson, 1977; Namgung, 2008). This

unfavourable environment often entails bureaucratic funding procedures,

university leadership that gives a low priority to research, and a lack of

understanding by superiors of the support that academics require to produce

quality research. Two participants in this study discussed various aspects of

the research environment at their universities and how these factors can

impact the production of quality research.

Abdul Kareem described the arduous process involved in acquiring the

resources needed to conduct research at his university and pointed out how

barriers can be encountered at every level of the decision-making chain from

the Dean to the Rector. He said:

> *Sometimes it's very difficult, maybe okay, you talk to your Dean, the Dean talks to the Vice Rector of the university, the Rector talks to the Ministry of Higher Education and you are very convinced about yourself, about your needs, but maybe the Dean is not very convinced and he has many subjects to talk to the Rector, so maybe, if the Rector is very convinced and the committee and the university counsel are really keen to make it real, they can state the budget and convince the Ministry of Higher Education to establish something very easily.*

Abdul Kareem's statement provides a sense of the nature of Saudi

bureaucracy and the way that universities are managed, whereby decisions

depend heavily on the personalities of decision-makers, rather than on

policies (this issue was raised by Raeesa and will be discussed in the next

sub-section). In other words, agreement between the relevant parties to a

funding decision can result in speedy and favourable results, whereas the

presence of apathy at any stage in the decision-making chain can prevent a

project from reaching fruition.

Ahmed also identified university bureaucracy and decision-maker knowledge

as factors affecting the research environment. He said:

> *… the way they give funds to fund the research is very complicated. If they are not, if they don't understand the research area, they don't give any funds, especially if the equipments are expensive…*

Ahmed also touched on financial-constraints. He said:

> *I asked for an equipment which was very expensive, but they said it's not possible to get something like this. Even if it's the most important equipment for my research. Well, it will help people in Biology, Chemistry, Physics. It's not, it's not just for my own research. It's going to be used in many, many areas, but, because it's expensive they don't accept my project.*

Thus, Ahmed has identified three significant factors that can affect the research environment. These include, a convoluted process for accessing research funds, a lack of specialised knowledge by those responsible for approving research funds that is needed to understand the importance and utility of the equipment being requested, and budgetary constraints.

Therefore, the research environment that academic returnees find themselves in has a major impact on their ability to conduct quality research. A positive research culture entails university leadership that understands the importance of research, allocates a suitable research budget, implements simplified funding application procedures, and possesses the knowledge to make sound funding decisions. Hence, the absence of a research culture could undermine the scholarship goal of building the research capacity of Saudi Arabia's public universities.

Insufficient time to conduct research

This sub-theme is closely linked with the issue of research culture discussed

above, as the time allocated for academic returnees to conduct research is in

part a reflection of the importance given to research by university leadership.

However, Saudi Arabia's rapid expansion of its public higher education sector

coupled with the implementation of the Saudisation policy that requires

university administrative positions to be filled by qualified Saudi citizens, has

resulted in many Saudi academic returnees being placed in administrative

roles with less time for teaching and research. Abdul Kareem spoke at length

about the issue of being overloaded with administrative work and having

insufficient time to conduct research:

> *… the thing that I believe, as a Saudi faculty in a Saudi university,
> which has not been achieved, which is part of the scholarship* [goals]*,
> is to be able to do the same type of work or the same quality of
> research that you used to do while you were abroad. I do not believe
> that has been achieved, strongly achieved. … The main job that,
> especially because I am from a relatively new university, the main job
> that we were actually being responsible for is doing, I would say 80%,
> is administration work, which is not part of our main job, and 20% is
> divided between research and teaching.*

Abdul Kareem has pointed out that fresh Saudi academic returnees from new

universities are particularly susceptible to being placed in administrative roles.

This is because there is a shortage of qualified Saudi academics to take up

these positions and the Saudisation policy will not allow expatriates to fill

these roles, even if they are appropriately qualified. Further, he said:

> *You know, the university, because Saudisation is compulsory, you have to, there is no option, there is no alternative. We need someone to take or be responsible for the department, or for the faculty. Taking this responsibility will not allow you to do some other main jobs that you need to do. Spending time in administration will take you away from your subject and from your specialty and you will not find the time to read and spend time doing research and you will not also focus on the quality of your research and your teaching.*

In addition, Abdul Kareem made an important connection between the

placement of fresh Saudi academic returnees in administrative roles and its

impact on the efficacy of the scholarships program. He said:

> *… the universities need to consider that they spent a lot of money and we spent a big amount of time abroad, not to come back and do some jobs that maybe other people can do, who are not specialised. I mean, in my subject, nuclear radiation science, I feel that the university is wasting their money and wasting their time by appointing some other faculty... They would say, okay, no problem, I am the right person, I can handle it, I am good at it, but you know, what about my subject, no-one can take over my specialty. No-one can do research and teaching, that's my job and the job that I was taking.*

Abdul Kareem also mentioned that the shortage of qualified Saudi faculty can

lead to the over-burdening of newly qualified Saudi academic returnees:

> *… we have shortage of Saudi faculty. So, some colleagues, they were responsible for two sections of the university, like chairman of the department, as well as the Dean of the Faculty, they are also members of several committees in the university. In our university, sometimes they have a saying that 'The university were born, but were not born as a child, were born as a man'. So just suddenly, the university just*

appeared and did not actually grow gradually and with some intention, no, it's like an explosion, so the university had to hand in all these things and we were the victims and we had to take these responsibilities and get the work done.

Thus, Abdul Kareem identified the Saudisation of university administrative jobs and the shortage of qualified Saudi faculty to fill these positions, as the main reason why many new academic returnees are placed in administrative roles. Subsequently, in Abdul Kareem's experience, heavy administrative responsibilities are a key factor in reducing the time that academics have for conducting research.

Therefore, the data indicate that participants can face multiple obstacles to producing quality research. These include a lack of necessary equipment, a lack time resulting from excessive administrative responsibilities, and a non-supportive research environment. Only participants from scientific backgrounds expressed facing obstacles to producing quality research, with an equal number of two males and two females respectively. The obstacles that were raised by the participants in this study confirm what has been reported in the literature. However, the participants' rich, in-depth responses have also indicated that there are potentially several obstacles to producing quality research that are specifically relevant to the Saudi context. These include, gender inequality in academics' access to equipment, bureaucracy,

the Saudisation of university administrative positions and the shortage of qualified Saudi faculty, and restrictions on academic freedom. Further research is required to determine the complete nature and extent of these phenomena and their impact on research output and quality at Saudi public universities.

6.3.1.3 Resistance to Change

The data in this study revealed that academic returnees can face resistance to change at many levels, including university leadership, colleagues, students and wider society. The Saudi education system has been tightly controlled by the Saudi government since it was established in the 1950s, and until recently, it was heavily influenced by the religious elite (Alharbi, 2014; Boucek 2010; Teitelbaum, Karsh, & Har-Zvi 2010). Many generations of Saudi citizens have become accustomed to an education system that primarily aims to produce loyal citizens with a strongly ingrained national identity, an a priori respect for authority, a passive acceptance of information, and the ability to memorise and recall information (Prokop, 2003). Thus, the nature of the Saudi education system makes it a difficult environment in which to introduce change.

<u>Leadership</u>

The data analysis revealed that resistance at the leadership level was the most significant type of resistance faced by the participants. Female participant Huma was very uncomfortable with being asked about the attitudes of her superiors and colleagues towards change and she requested the proxy interviewer to skip the question. As follows:

> Interviewer: *Have you gained new knowledge and skills overseas, but have been unable to use some or all of it at your university in Saudi because of the beliefs or attitudes of your superiors or those below you in your department at your university?*

> Huma: *Let's skip this question, you know, let's go to the next one.*

Given that she did not answer 'no' to the question, she may have encountered resistance from her superiors or colleagues but did not feel safe to discuss the issue.

On the other hand, Ebtisam expressed frustration over the resistance that she had encountered from superiors after study abroad:

> *Yeah, whenever you gonna just walk one step, they will push you ten steps behind. So, I don't, that's the thing that bothers me here, it's like how we gonna change the minds of… One, one thing, change the people who are working. They've been in this chair for many years, and they're having all this old system in their minds, they don't wanna change. The same thing when I told you about the, ah, childcare support, when they said 'no, it's not in the system. If they are school*

age, we can cover them, under school age, no'. Why? Because this system was, like, 30 years ago when not much females studying abroad.

Ebtisam has offered a potential solution to the resistance to change among superiors, by suggesting that those in leadership positions be changed with more reform-minded leaders. However, in Saudi Arabia, university faculty have extremely high job security and many in leadership have held their positions for several years. When such leaders are attached to the "*old system*" and seek to maintain the status quo, this presents a significant barrier to change, as it prevents the university from keeping pace with it current circumstances, as well as global trends.

Further, Ebtisam's concerns were echoed by Fatima who stated, "*…superiors like to be only them in the vision."* Fatima's brief response indicates that she may have encountered resistance from superiors who are reluctant to provide support to burgeoning returnees. This issue was raised in the literature by Chen (2015) who found that superiors at Chinese universities often feared that overseas graduates were more knowledgeable and capable than them and hence worked to marginalise the returnees' influence. Such leaders tend to only give importance to those projects that will result in their own recognition and personal advancement.

Ahmed also spoke about an incidence of resistance from his university leadership, when he requested to teach his subject in the English language, and it was refused even though scientific subjects are meant to be taught in English at Saudi universities:

> *… when they asked me to teach this semester, I was surprised that they are still teaching in Arabic. So, I asked them if I could teach in English, but they didn't agree to do that.*

When I was a teacher at university in Saudi Arabia I observed resistance from amongst the student-body towards learning in English in certain courses. This caused upward pressure on leadership to support the use of Arabic as the language of instruction and subsequently resulted in resistance from university leadership as well. This creates a multi-levelled culture of resistance that can make it very difficult for academic returnees to introduce change.

In addition, Ahmed mentioned resistance to change that stems from the Ministry of Higher Education:

> *These are, these are the rules from the Ministry and they cannot change it. These academic, these academic staff cannot change anything, and they have to obey what they are saying, the Ministry. So, if they, if you fail say forty students out of sixty, definitely* [you] *will be questioned. So, I'm sure these people don't want to deal with these problems and they pass all the students.*

Specifically, Ahmed has provided the example of teachers facing pressure

from the Ministry to pass students regardless of their performance, which is a

phenomenon confirmed by the literature (Ahmed, 2016; Chang, 2015).

Ahmed's statement about the pressure from the Ministry on academic staff

prompted me to ask why a department that had invested billions of dollars in

sending academics to study abroad would maintain policies that served to

counteract the efficacy of its own program. He said:

> *Well there are a number of people in the Ministry who did not go*
> *abroad, they completed their studies here in Saudi. They're doing or*
> *they are doing the same thing. They are, they have been chosen here*
> *in Saudi.*

Ahmed's response echoes the sentiments of Ebtisam about the presence of

old-school thinkers in decision-making positions who are holding the

education system behind. Ahmed believes that there is a connection between

the number of returnees and their ability to counter resistance to change, as

follows:

> *They tried to improve things, especially in the university, but they*
> *couldn't do it outside in the street, because you know, one to one*
> *hundred thousand. So, you face one hundred thousand people against*
> *you, so you cannot do anything. But now the more people coming with*
> *different cultures, they will definitely do something to improve it.*

Ahmed's idea that a critical mass of reform-minded Saudis is required for

change to take place in Saudi higher education is espoused by many in Saudi

Arabia according to Hilal, Scott, & Maadad (2015).

<u>Colleagues</u>

Raeesa worked at a university in one of Saudi Arabia's major cities, so I asked her about the ratio of Western faculty to Saudi faculty at her university, as follows:

> Interviewer: *At your university, what's the background of the professors there? I mean, let's say in smaller regions you tend to have not more than a handful of Western teachers. In your city is it different?*
>
> Raeesa: *I can say that the majority are Saudis and there are a large number of them who were studying abroad.*
>
> Inerviewer: *It's interesting that so many people have been abroad, and they have seen the way things are happening in other parts of the world, but a lot of people tend to, would you say, come back and just do things the same old way?*
>
> Raeesa: *Yeah, yeah, it was really from things that I used to think about it, 'Why they're using the same way?' I don't know. This is an interesting question.*

Prompted by Raeesa's observation that most Saudi academic returnees just blended back into the higher education system upon return, without making any drastic changes, I asked her whether she felt that the aims of the scholarships program had been achieved. She said:

> [Chuckle] *I was going to answer this before you asked me. I don't think..., because we do have now professors who were studying abroad…, probably you can reach them and ask them why they are not teaching the same way that they have studied? So, it's not a matter of people who are studying abroad, I think it's the culture of the education environment. It is something that they need to get used to it. …. If I am*

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a Minister, I would bring high quality professors to my country to teach my students, not send students abroad.

The phenomenon of Saudi academic returnees reverting to the old system could be because of the dominance of Saudi culture that participant Numan described as being "*hegemonic*". Ebtisam had also mentioned previously that her husband was strongly influenced by the culture once he returned from abroad, and Ahmed stated that many returnees have found it difficult to counter large numbers of non-returnees, describing it as "*one to one hundred thousand*".

In addition to the pervasiveness of Saudi culture, another compelling reason why many academic returnees do not push for change is the very high job security enjoyed by Saudi academics employed in the public sector. For example, Numan stated that Saudi teachers keep their jobs until they "*retire or die*". He also said, *"… it seems that we think about ourself, not about the students. So as long as I got the money, as long as I got salary, I do as minimum level."*

Further, Abdul Kareem said:

> *There is something else that makes the faculty, to not actually reach their full capacity to do research… they are very relaxed and they are happy with their salaries. The university, they don't really have a*

system where they can really kick you out. They don't have a system that will reduce your salary or give you a warning, so your job is this job until you resign or retire. So, there is nothing pushing the faculty to do this, unless he wants to do this.

This high job security described by Abdul Kareem is further reinforced by the shortage of qualified Saudi faculty and the Saudisation policy that guarantees teaching and leadership positions for Saudi citizens. This presents a concern for the Saudi higher education sector, because accountability and job security are key factors that influence the extrinsic motivation of employees to improve in their professional practice. Thus, there may be little incentive for Saudi faculty, including returnees, to exert their best efforts in teaching and research.

Students

Raeesa shared her thoughts on resistance to change among Saudi university students:

> *In general, I think the students like it* [change]*, but, I'm sure that there are some students who refuse this change, because they don't want new process to come up, especially for senior students, but let's say that like, um, students who are in the preparatory year, they are new to the university, so they are now coming with the change.*

Thus, Raeesa identifies two categories of students: those who recently entered university from secondary school, whom she sees as more willing to accept a new system of education; and those older students who have been in the higher education system for some time and are already accustomed to

the traditional style of higher education in Saudi Arabia, whom she sees as more likely to be resistant.

On the other hand, Huma gave a detailed example of resistance to change among students at the same university as Raeesa:

> Interviewer: *Have you gained any new knowledge and skills overseas, but have been unable to use it because of the attitudes or expectations of students at your university?*
>
> Huma: *… So, one of the things that we used to do over there was to videotape the students while she's presenting or giving a lesson and then we can sit altogether in a group and watch the video and comment positively and you know, be honest with her and give her honest feedback. Now, I didn't feel that this idea was really welcomed here in Saudi Arabia, even though I suggested to the students that we can video tape you using your own mobile, the students' own mobile…*

In the above example, Huma's students felt that her assessment technique was culturally inappropriate. Saudi women are generally uncomfortable with being videotaped or photographed in public, and there are very strong social taboos about the distribution of images of females in Saudi Arabia. Hence, even though Huma tried to minimise her students' concerns about the use of video recording as a tool for self-improvement, by allowing them to use their own phones, and by assuring them that their recordings were for their own personal use, the resistance to using this technique was still very strong.

My emic-positioning as a Muslim woman who lived in Saudi Arabia for three years enabled me to understand the students' mentality regarding the use of video recording. Until quite recently, it was completely unacceptable for women's images to be printed in local newspapers or for women to appear as news readers on television. In many Saudi grocery stores, you will often find that imported products containing images of women have the image coloured in with a permanent marker. This stems from the Qur'anic injunction that asks women to draw their veils over their beauty so that they may be known and not abused (Qur'an 24:31), as well as the injunction that asks men to lower their gaze (Qur'an 24:30). Thus, it is believed to be sinful for a man to look at an unveiled woman whom he is not related to by blood or by marriage, and hence you do not find women on billboards or in advertising in Saudi Arabia.

Numan also mentioned resistance to change among students, describing the mentality in Saudi Arabia as being "*hegemonic*". He feels that change in Saudi Arabia is an extremely difficult feat. He relayed an insightful discussion that he had with a Saudi pre-service teacher during his research:

> *You know, their thinking is like, you know, it's hegemonic, or dominant, so it's not really easy to deconstruct this dominant thinking. So that's why it's not easy for them to accept it* [change]. *Even with the students, you know, during my PhD, I travelled to Saudi Arabia to do interview with pre-service teachers and I asked them, like, about this question, 'What do you think about teaching and learning, what is your role, how*

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do you describe your experience in the college?' I found someone just said to me, 'Even if the teacher very active, we don't care about him, even if he ask us to engage in discussion, we don't talk, we don't care about it, we actually look at him as a noisy. We just want to finish and pass the exam and find a job and that's it.

The response of the Saudi pre-service teacher encapsulates the typical attitude towards education in Saudi Arabia. Again, through my emic-experience as a university teacher in Saudi Arabia, it was evident that for many Saudi students, education was not about their personal development, it was simply to prepare them for examinations so that they could graduate and get a job. In fact, the pre-service teacher's comment that "*we look at him as a noisy*", indicates that some Saudi students have less respect for teachers who try to make their lessons interactive and enjoyable.

Drawing the Data Together

This section discussed the personal and professional challenges after postgraduate study abroad for returnee Saudi academics. Three key challenges emerged from the data in this study - reverse culture shock; obstacles to quality research; and resistance to change. The data in this study showed that the type and extent of reverse culture shock experienced by returnees is influenced by factors such as the age of the returnee, their gender and their level of intercultural engagement abroad. This study concurs

with the finding that younger sojourners often find their transition back to the home country more difficult (Gama & Pederson, 1977). Previous studies have given scant attention to the impact of gender on returnee academics' personal and professional experiences, whereas this study gathered and analysed the detailed experiences of male and female academic returnees, uniquely highlighting gender-related differences. Further, it was found that sponsored academics who remained separate from the host culture abroad, experienced less difficulty reintegrating into their home culture. These challenges serve to hinder the transfer of knowledge, skills and ideas that academics bring from abroad and ultimately undermine the goals of the study abroad scholarships program.

6.3.2 Post-Scholarship Follow-Up and Support

The government of Saudi Arabia has invested significantly in the upskilling of its academics through postgraduate study abroad. Thus, it is in the interests of the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education together with Saudi public-sector universities who employ the academic returnees to evaluate the efficacy of the scholarships program. Returnee academics' feedback can help to ensure that their knowledge and skills are put to best use, and that suitable supports are put in place to ease their re-entry and to facilitate the transfer of new knowledge and skills. The British Council conducted a comprehensive study

on the rationale for sponsoring students to undertake international study (Engberg, 2014), which examined the scholarships programs of eleven countries, including Saudi Arabia. The study found that these countries did not prioritise re-entry support for returnees and that returnees were "rarely consulted or involved for use in the ongoing operations or improvement of the scholarship programmes from which they have benefited" (Engberg, p. vi, 2014). These findings were confirmed by the data in this study, which demonstrated that there was no follow-up of participants by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education or their receiving universities after postgraduate study abroad. None of the participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on what they had learned overseas or to discuss the challenges that they had encountered when trying to implement their new knowledge and skills.

Raeesa reported that there is generally no follow-up with those who return from study abroad, except when the returnee applies for a higher position. Although this was not the case with Raeesa's promotion to Vice Chair of her department. She said:

> *… if they are going to be assigned a higher position they would make a meeting with them, a kind of interview. A committee usually is responsible about this issue, where they ask that person some questions to know how they studied, how they achieved their goals. Interestingly, for me, because I didn't spend more than three years for*

my PhD, they didn't make interview with me, they directly gave me the higher position.

Thus, according to Raeesa's response, it appears that some university decision-makers are of the view that finishing a degree within the minimum timeframe is a reflection or confirmation of the graduate's ability, which can remove the interview requirement for higher positions as well. Interestingly, at the time of her promotion, Raeesa had spent twelve years abroad, with five years as a stay-at-home mother and seven years as a student, she had little exposure to the Saudi tertiary system prior to going abroad and she had minimal professional experience, yet her employer saw no need for her to sit an interview to assess her suitability for a leadership role. This could be seen as a lack of diligence on the part of the university but given the chronic shortage of qualified Saudi faculty raised by the participants throughout this study, it is more likely to be because of the Saudisation policy that requires university leadership positions to be filled by Saudi citizens.

When Huma was asked whether her employer had communicated with her to discuss the potential contributions she could make and any difficulties she had experienced, she simply replied, "*No".* Similarly, Fatima also reported that there was no follow-up from her university or the Ministry of Higher Education after she returned from postgraduate study abroad.

Likewise, Abdul Kareem reported that there was no follow-up after postgraduate study abroad and shared his thoughts on why this was not a priority at his university. He said:

> *Unfortunately not. I was really shocked, you know, we came back, and you know, a proud graduate, achieved a PhD from a decent university and the time you have given to education and you have contact with some international scholars. You think maybe people would ask me to give at least a seminar or asking you what you have done. No-one has actually asked me even a question, so it's something that really disappointed me. Sometimes you can understand it, maybe because I am in ABC[5] University, it's a small city and the types of people are different, you are the first person who is coming from abroad in the physics department. But, you know, the faculty can do much better than this. Maybe the Dean, the Vice Dean can make something like introduction, but since the university has just started, so there is no big intention towards such, they consider it minor.* [They think] *Okay, we are talking about something really very much advanced, let's leave it for some time later. Maybe if I was working at other universities in the Kingdom, the situation could have been different...*

Abdul Kareem's response confirms that there was absolutely no follow-up after his return from postgraduate study abroad. It also shows how returnees can find themselves being reabsorbed into the system without any acknowledgement of the changes they have undergone or what they have to offer. Further, Abdul Kareem felt that his knowledge and skills were undervalued by his superiors and there was a lack of interest in capitalising

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[5] Pseudonym

on what he had learned abroad. Interestingly, Abdul Kareem partially

attributes this experience to his location in Saudi Arabia, as he describes the

people of his city as being "*different*". I spent three years living amongst the

locals and travelled extensively in Saudi Arabia and observed that city folk

generally had higher education levels and greater exposure to other cultures

than those from remote regions, which resulted in '*different*' ways of thinking

and behaving among Saudis from different regions. Thus, I can confirm that

Abdul Kareem's assertion that the apathy of his superiors towards his new

knowledge and skills was partially due to this 'small-town' insular mentality is

plausible.

In addition, Mazen was very disappointed by the apparent lack of interest in

what he had learned during his four years abroad. He said:

> *Not really. No, nothing like that, nothing from your imagination that there would be something to evaluate my experience. You spent four years in Australia, so what happened to you? Nothing like that at all.*

Mateen also reported that there was no follow-up after postgraduate study

abroad, but contrary to Abdul Kareem and Mazen, he felt that this was to be

expected. He said:

> *No, in an academic setting like a university nobody will come and ask you what do you know, but they will put you to test and it depends on what you provide, they will give you more tasks to complete. If you*

> *excel in those, then you will continue, otherwise you would be just*
> *teaching in classrooms.*

However, teaching is one of the key mediums for transferring the specialised knowledge and skills that academics bring from abroad. Given that many academics are sent abroad to study in fields that are not well-established in Saudi Arabia, teaching should be one of the primary responsibilities of academic returnees. Interestingly, Mateen's statement tends to suggest that teaching duties are for those who are less competent.

Finally, Ahmed also confirmed that there had been no follow-up after his return from abroad. He said: "*No, I haven't been asked to give any ideas or to explain what I was doing during my studies."* Ahmed's use of the word "*ideas*" is very telling. It shows that despite spending several years in study abroad, he was unable to make the simplest contribution of sharing his ideas. This gives a sense of the challenge that returnees are faced with when they attempt to contribute at the level of decision-making or implementing tangible changes.

Drawing the Data Together

None of the participants in this study were involved in a follow-up process. Plausible reasons for this, as suggested by participants, varied considerably.

There was no consensus. Reasons proffered ranged from timely PhD completion through to quality of work on return being the test. What was in evidence, however, was the level of disappointment experienced by many participants who wanted to share their knowledge, capabilities and insights. What also came to light was an apparent disconnect between the Ministry of Higher Education who sends academics abroad and Saudi public universities that receive returnees. It appears that the Ministry's responsibility ends when returnees complete their overseas studies and the universities' responsibility is limited to assigning sponsored academics a suitable position on their return, with no mechanisms in place to harness returnees' feedback and provide suitable re-entry support.

6.3.3 Returnee Academics' Advice for the MoHE and Saudi Universities

The participants in this study have an emic view of higher education in the Kingdom and of international postgraduate education abroad. This insider perspective puts these academics in an ideal position to be able to share valuable insights and offer advice that could help to improve the overall efficacy of the scholarships program. Thus, as a final question during the in-depth interviews, the participants were provided the opportunity to offer advice to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and their universities to

assist in further capitalising on what academics learned overseas. The

participants provided the following six key pieces of advice:

1. <u>Systematically Gather Feedback from Returnees</u>

The absence of follow-up with academic returnees by the Ministry of Higher

Education or the home university was one of the findings of this study. The

need for follow-up to gather feedback from returnees and to assist with their

re-entry was intimated by a number of participants. For instance, Abdul

Kareem stated:

> *I was really shocked, you know, we came back, and you know, a proud graduate, achieved a PhD from a decent university and the time you have given to education and you have contact with some international scholars. You think maybe people would ask me to give at least a seminar or asking you what you have done. No-one has actually asked me even a question, so it's something that really disappointed me.*

Mazen said: "*No… nothing from your imagination that there would be

something to evaluate my experience. You spent four years in Australia, so

what happened to you?*"

Finally, Raeesa provided the following recommendation: "*I would recommend

that there is a committee that meets people who come from abroad, discuss

with them any kinds of suggestions for the development of the education

system, whether in the university or in higher education in general.*"

2. <u>Develop and Enforce Higher Education Policies</u>

The need for various higher education policies to be developed and enforced within Saudi higher education came through the experiences and feedback of several participants. For instance, Abdul Kareem explained how he had learnt the value of providing course outlines to students while he was a sponsored student abroad. In terms of whether this practice would be adopted by his university as a general protocol he said:

> *I would love it if I was a student and my teacher gave me this course outline at the beginning. It helped me very, very, very much. The course style, the teaching styles,* [is] *something really, I like it and I hope that we implement it and make it compulsory here in my university.*

Huma spoke about her troubles with plagiarism abroad, which occurred because of the absence of policies on plagiarism in Saudi higher education and a subsequent lack of awareness. She said:

> *… I have been in trouble for plagiarism lots of times before I have been given an idea of what is, how to keep the copyright of the person and how to, which parts you can borrow from the internet and how you quote these things and so on.*

Similarly, Ebtisam mentioned:

> *… here* [in Saudi]*, we used to do assignments like we just copy from the books and from the internet, at that time internet wasn't very available so we just copied from any book you find, copy it, write it down, write your name and submit it, and you get the grade.*

Finally, Raeesa advised:

> *I think to build clear policies for higher education; that would really help the system to be improved. Policies for every part of higher education. I will give one example about ethical consideration in education and this you can find also in my PhD research about plagiarism. This is really a very crucial issue that needs to be considered, because there is no detailed policy about plagiarism. People who were studying abroad have this concept, understand it, but when they come back they don't apply it correctly on their students, because, again, people are using their manners, but not using the policies.*

The absence of policies is known to be a significant barrier for academic returnees seeking to implement change. Returnees are often overwhelmed by the culture of the higher education system that operates, as Raeesa said, according to personalities and social norms, rather than set rules and procedures. Alandejani's (2013) study involving five female Saudi academic returnees, also found that: *"… when they come back, they don't find a clear policy and regulations. This frustrates them… in general, when the youth come back…and don't find regulations, it depresses them…"* (p.87).

3. <u>More Stringent Scholarship Selection Criteria</u>

The advice to tighten the scholarship selection criteria was mentioned by several participants and confirmed by previous studies related to Saudi returnees (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehwes; 1984).

Numan commented on his own experience going abroad to study in his early twenties. He said: "*When I went to Australia, actually I was still young, when I went to Australia. My age was 24, you know, what do you think about this age coming outside to really increase his knowledge or not? Absolutely not*".

Abdul Kareem echoed a similar sentiment to Numan. He said:

> *I believe students who are sponsored by the government, by the Ministry of Higher Education, who actually just graduated from secondary school and got a scholarship, their behaviour and their feel of responsibility is much lower than those who are actually older than them and have experienced the life and have been in some occupations, they have graduated from university, so they are taking their study more seriously, are more responsible than those who are actually teenage or from the age of 18 to 22.*

Further, Mateen critiqued the government's policy of sending massive numbers of Saudi students' abroad, particularly those who do not seek to integrate with the host culture, noting its countereffect on the acquisition of intercultural competence. He said:

> *Recently, we are sending thousands and thousands of students. We created a mini Riyadh, a mini Jeddah and a mini Medina in every country on this globe. So the chance to experience the culture were not a necessity anymore.*

Interestingly, Ahmed stated:

> *… people who join in the King Abdullah* [Scholarship] *Program, they are not selected for their scores but for some reasons, I don't know why because I met many people there. In the UK, especially in the UK,*

they are careless, they are lazy. Not all of them. Especially people who are sent to the bachelor's degree there, they are very careless.

Finally, Raeesa said:

My suggestion is that I wouldn't send students for bachelors abroad for many reasons. One is that usually teenagers, if we can call them teenagers because they are about 18 years old, are very affected by the culture and I think that, as I have heard, we can see that there were some students who met some difficulties and I wouldn't send also students who are not married. So first, not to send people who are for bachelor, second not to send people who are not married, third is to continue the orientation that has been provided to the students who are sent abroad. Although I don't know exactly what this includes, but probably this needs to be reviewed and understand exactly what the students require before they travel.

Whilst the present study focuses on postgraduate level study only, the King Abdullah Scholarships Program is open to Saudi citizens for all levels of tertiary study abroad. Raeesa's recommendation regarding the age, marital status and level of study of scholarship recipients reflects her concerns about the preservation of Saudi culture, whereas the other participants' advice relates to improving the efficacy of the scholarships through stricter selection criteria.

4. <u>Research Equipment and Research Freedom</u>

Several participants, particularly those with a scientific background, spoke of a lack of suitable and up-to-date research equipment within Saudi public

universities. For instance, Ebtisam said: "*… we are still behind. Some like, places, like Madinatul-Malik-Abdul-Aziz* [King Abdul-Aziz City for Science and Technology] *in Riyadh, they have the new equipment, but it's all for males"*. Thus, Ebtisam also identified unequal access to research equipment for female Saudi academics.

Abdul Kareem mentioned a lack of equipment as being an obstacle. He said: "*… my subject requires complicated and expensive equipment. Yes, the resources, we have very limited resources."*

Finally, Fatima offered the following advice: "*… make incubators for their projects and allow research freedom"*. Here Fatima identified the lack of research equipment as a key concern, particularly for scientists like herself. Without vital pieces of equipment, Fatima is unable to conduct important research in her field of cell engineering. Further, Fatima requested greater academic freedom. Unfortunately, Fatima did not respond to my emails seeking further elaboration and clarification on her written responses and I could not ascertain what type of restrictions on research freedom she faced. However, it is conceivable that in her field of cell engineering that Fatima could face several obstacles where certain investigations might appear at odds with religious teachings.

5. <u>Focus on Quality Not Quantity</u>

Mazen advised that the Ministry of Higher Education change its overall

approach to higher education reform. He said:

> *If there is one thing that I really would like to raise as the last thing,*
> *what I see now in Saudi is that they are copying themselves. Years*
> *ago we had just 7 to 8 universities, now we got 27 universities in Saudi.*
> *If you look at the structural planning or the structural thing that is*
> *happening when opening new universities, what you find that they are*
> *copying themselves – they are all similar to one another. You've got*
> *the feeling that they are all the same, there is nothing specific. I mean,*
> *I know that Curtin University is famous for its Curtin Business School,*
> *while UWA is famous for its Law School, you know what I mean, each*
> *university is famous for one specific thing, it's working on other majors.*
> *In Saudi, I mean, I got the feeling that all universities are the same. So,*
> *you've got a lot of money to spend, that's really great, you are building*
> *new buildings, that's really great, but at the same time just focus on the*
> *education quality. Now they are having the quantity, there are quite a*
> *good number of universities and as far as I understand they are*
> *pursuing this, they've got the initiative to build new universities, but*
> *what is the purpose? Are you going to build a new university for*
> *something unique or something similar to what other universities have?*

At the time of interview, the Ministry of Higher Education was in the midst of

building and establishing several new universities in Saudi Arabia (Alamri,

2011). Mazen's sentiments are also echoed by Davidson (2018) who said:

> The problem is that Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, have
>
> periodically lavished money on higher education but rarely got bang for
>
> their buck. This can happen when you have the physical infrastructure
>
> -- impressive buildings, libraries, laboratories -- and so on, but don't

have the higher education culture in place (Cited in McKie, 2018, para 8).

Thus, Mazen has expressed a relevant frustration about the MoHE's expansionist approach to higher education reform. He questions the value of having a large number of universities in Saudi Arabia when they are all the same. Considering the challenges that Saudi academic returnees face, it should be a priority for the MOHE to ensure that effective programs and policies are established within the existing universities, rather than replicating institutions characterised by such problems and deficiencies. Several of these problems and challenges are highlighted within the present study. Hence, Mazen's advice to "*just focus on the education quality*", seems sensible and timely. For instance, it is evident from the present study that more funds need to be channeled into areas such as scientific research, further training and professional development for teachers and administrators, and follow-up and research with returned scholarship recipients to improve the quality of higher education within Saudi's existing universities.

6. <u>Capitalise on New Academic Returnees</u>

Mateen provided some comprehensive advice on how to get the best out of

academic returnees. He addressed all stages of the study abroad experience.

He said: "*We can do it pre, during and post*".

> *<u>Before</u>: You can educate them a little bit, give them the basic tools that they need to use over there.*
>
> *<u>During</u>: Encourage them to get immersed in the culture. Encourage them to learn more than what they get inside the classrooms.*
>
> *<u>After</u>: Show them that you are interested in both the knowledge that they have gained and the professional skills that they have acquired and enable them to be part of the change that you want to see. So many talented people are not into positions which they can enforce or show the change they want to see. My recommendation is capitalise on those people or you will be stuck on the old school while you have fresh, ready to sacrifice everything graduates and taking them back to the classroom only, put them in jobs where, let them be able to make a change if you want the system to evolve.*
>
> *I'll elaborate on two points. The preparation prior to going there is essential and shouldn't be only language and academic, but also the way of life to be expected. You cannot teach the culture by lecturing to them, but just let them be prepared and let them be … and that should not be done for those who go to scholarships only, but it should be done from the beginning of elementary school. Tell them to be tolerant, tell them to be understanding of others. That's the two things that were missing, but nowadays has been a little bit changed in the new curriculum and that tolerance has been included and is being taught. Whether it's practiced or not that's something else. Understanding other cultures is also included now in the workbooks and textbooks, but whether it's practiced or not that's something else."*

Mateen's advice encompasses the initial orientation of scholarship recipients,

which should inform students of the scholarships goals and prepare them for

study abroad in order to maximise their acquisition of both formal and informal knowledge, particularly informal knowledge that leads to intercultural competence. Given that the data for the present study indicated that there were mixed outcomes among participants with respect to their levels of cultural integration abroad and none of the participants had a comprehensive knowledge of the scholarships goals, Mateen's advice is very pertinent. Further, Mateen places the onus of responsibility on the MoHE and Saudi public universities to provide post-program follow-up and support to returnees and recommends placing returnees into key decision-making roles. His statement reflects an acute awareness of the problem of resistance to change among Saudi public university leadership; an issue also raised by fellow participants Ebtisam and Ahmed.

6.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the findings in relation to the personal and professional benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad. It also revealed that there was no post-scholarship follow-up or support provided to returnees by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education or the receiving universities. It was also apparent through the findings that my etic-emic positioning had enabled me to ask insightful questions and engage in open and frank discussions with the majority of

participants. These in-depth discussions brought to light a range of new issues, such as gender-based differences in sponsored Saudi academics' levels of cultural integration abroad and their experiences of reverse culture shock on return. This unique perspective also meant that greater depth was added to issues raised by previous studies, such as the increase in independence and confidence of Saudi female academics as a result of postgraduate study abroad.

Previous research on academic returnees has largely been conducted from an emic perspective where participants have been found to provide socially desirable responses and avoid potentially contentious issues (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984). In addition, previous studies involving Saudi returnees were conducted with participants of a single gender because of Saudi Arabia's strict gender segregation laws and customs. However, this study gathered and analysed the detailed experiences of male and female Saudi academic returnees, enabling comparison of gender-related differences. Finally, this chapter provided a platform for Saudi academic returnees to offer valuable advice to the Saudi MoHE and Saudi public universities based on their experiences abroad and upon return, on how academics' new knowledge, skills and ideas can be further capitalised on.

The next chapter presents the conclusions of the study, including reflections on the research questions, the contributions of the study, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications of this Research

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, my intention is to achieve three things. First, I provide a brief reminder about the major outcomes of the study by revisiting each of the research questions originally posed. Second, I describe the contributions made by the current study to the research literature, as well as aspects of the study that could benefit from further research. Lastly, I provide some final reflections and comments pertinent to the study.

This study is the product of an eight-and-a-half-year journey that has led to an in-depth understanding of the benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad, and the implications of these for higher education reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 2009, when the idea for this study was conceived, I felt that the study abroad scholarships program for academics was not helping to improve higher education in Saudi Arabia. This was because, as a university teacher in Saudi Arabia at the time, I saw Saudi academics who had studied abroad continue to be subsumed by the same old system. At the time, however, I was largely unaware of the various factors and challenges that can inhibit the transfer of knowledge, skills

and ideas from abroad. I found perplexing, for example, the relatively small changes in the standards of higher education in Saudi Arabia over the past 30 years, given the government's substantial investment in scholarships for academics and the large numbers of Saudi academic returnees present within the Saudi higher education system (Baki, 2004; Hamdan, 2005; Laessing & Alsharif, 2011). The present study has provided me a vehicle for improving my understanding of systemic changes in Saudi higher education. In particular, its findings provide for a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad, and the implications of these for the ongoing project of higher education reform in the Kingdom.

In 1984, Saudi researcher Al-Mehawes, introduced his study on the re-entry and readjustment experiences of Saudi Arabian graduate returnees with the statement: "There is an acute shortage of university educated personnel with technical knowledge, scientific spirit and personal initiative" (p. 1). In the thirty-four years since Al-Mehawes' study (1984), there has been a major shift in the knowledge, skills and aspirations of Saudi academics, reflected in the introductory statement of the present study: "… Saudi academic returnees possess the aspirations and capabilities to raise the standard of public higher education in the Kingdom" (p. 1). This study demonstrates that postgraduate

study abroad results in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and ideas for Saudi academics, and many are eager to implement what they have learned. At the same time, however, Saudi academic returnees can face a university environment that is not conducive to change and that lacks an adequate support structure to facilitate their successful readjustment.

The Saudi Arabian government is to be commended for recognising the value of postgraduate study abroad for the development of Saudi academics' technical knowledge and skills, as well as for enhancing their personal and professional attributes. The detailed contextual and historical information provided in Chapter 2 of this study shows the complexity and difficulty involved in rapidly modernising the Saudi higher education system. The Saudi Arabian government is committed to ensuring that higher education keeps pace with the economic requirements of the nation, whilst at the same time ensuring that these changes are in harmony with the historical, cultural and religious identity and expectations of its people. Given the deeply traditional and conservative context of Saudi Arabia, this is an enormously complex task.

7.2 REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There were two broad aims of the present study. Firstly, this study aimed to understand the personal and professional benefits and challenges

experienced by Saudi academics after returning from postgraduate study

abroad. Secondly, it sought to understand the implications of these benefits

and challenges for the project of higher education reform in Saudi Arabia. The

findings in relation to the following four research questions have helped to

inform these two key aims.

7.2.1 Research Question One

**Research question one: What are the motivations of Saudi academics
for undertaking postgraduate study overseas?**

The purpose of this research question was to gauge the alignment between

participants' motivations for undertaking postgraduate study abroad and the

official goals of the scholarships program. The present study found that most

participants primarily sought to advance their own careers through

postgraduate study abroad, as with participants in other similar studies

(Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015; Takeuchi,

2008). Further, none of the participants in the present study could articulate

the official goals of the scholarships program and were therefore unaware of

their intended role.

The issue that sponsored academics may not be aware of their intended role

as agents for transferring knowledge, skills and ideas back to higher

education in their home countries has been raised in the relevant literature

(Takeuchi, 2008). It is possible that, if sponsored academics know from the

outset the types of knowledge and skills they are expected to bring from

abroad, these can become embedded in their aspirations, which may

enhance the outcomes of study abroad and improve the efficacy of

scholarships programs. Thus, there is potential here for closer alignment that

would be mutually beneficial for the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi

public universities and scholarship recipients.

7.2.2 Research Question Two

<u>Research question two</u>: What personal and professional benefits do Saudi academics perceive that they have gained as a result of completing postgraduate study abroad?

Previous studies tended to give only casual attention to the benefits of

postgraduate study abroad, and thus, limited information is available on the

nature of these benefits and how they are being used to improve higher

education in returnees' home countries (Alandejani, 2013; Chen, 2015;

Namgung, 2008; Takeuchi, 2008; Xu, 2009; Zahrani, 1986).

The present study took a unique approach to examining the personal and

professional benefits of postgraduate study abroad, in order to facilitate a

deeper understanding of the nature and extent of these benefits. The presage and process factors that impacted participants' learning were first considered, and subsequently the learning outcomes and the learning outcomes put into practice were examined. Three key types of personal benefits for participants were identified, including increased independence and confidence; cross-cultural awareness and intercultural competence; and, higher salaries and rapid promotions. There were also three key types of professional benefits, including improved English language proficiency; improved pedagogical awareness and practice; and improved research knowledge, skills and practices.

The findings indicated that the benefit of increased confidence and independence was largely applicable to female participants. The strong patriarchal structure of Saudi society, the dominant role of men in Saudi public life, and the restrictions Saudi women face at home compared to abroad, meant that study abroad provided Saudi female academics the opportunity to further develop their independence and confidence.

Conversely, male participants were generally found to immerse themselves more deeply into the host culture abroad compared to their female counterparts. This led to an apparent difference in the levels of intercultural

competence between male and female participants. This outcome may also stem from the cultural norms and expectations for men and women that exist within Saudi society and the more dominant role males typically play in the social sphere.

The Saudisation of jobs policy coupled with the shortage of experienced qualified Saudi faculty to take up senior roles in universities is also a key factor in the phenomenon of rapid promotion for returnees. One concern with rapid promotions, however, is their potential to undermine some of the key goals of the scholarships program by allocating substantial administrative duties to new returnees and thereby reducing their availability to teach and conduct research.

Whilst the participants experienced overall improvements in their English language abilities, the extent of improvement varied and may be influenced by factors such as, varying motivation levels, determination, the use of effective learning strategies and academic discipline. The acquired English language skills are being used by returnees in various ways, including in their teaching practice and lesson preparation, as well as in accessing and conducting research. It is important to note, however, that resistance may still exist toward the use of English as the medium of instruction at some Saudi

universities or by certain university leaders. Further, although the participants were confident in their use of English and hence agreed to participate in this study, questions remain with respect to the post-study abroad English language skills of the broader cohort.

Overall, postgraduate study abroad had a positive impact on participants' pedagogical awareness and practice, which manifested itself in three main ways - an increased appreciation for student-centred pedagogy; more varied teaching methods, including the introduction of practical experiments and student research projects; and increased awareness of the role of teacher-student relationships in students' learning.

Finally, participants reported improved research knowledge, skills, and practices as a result of postgraduate study abroad, as was found in similar studies (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Namgung, 2008; Xu, 2009). Interestingly, in the context of the present study, there was a tendency for gains in this area to be reported more frequently by academics from a scientific background.

7.2.3 Research Question Three

Research question three: What personal and professional challenges have Saudi academics experienced since returning from postgraduate study abroad?

Only one qualitative study has previously been conducted on the returnee experiences of Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad (Alandejani, 2013). However, the said study involved female Saudi academics only. The present study included both male and female academics and was therefore able to illuminate some of the gender-based differences in the challenges that Saudi academics face. Overall, three key challenges for returnee Saudi academics were identified in this study: reverse culture shock, obstacles to quality research and resistance to change.

The present study found that male and female Saudi academics are both susceptible to reverse culture shock, albeit in differing ways and to different degrees. Interestingly, male participants tended to experience more severe reverse culture shock than their female counterparts, particularly those who had immersed themselves deeply in the host culture abroad.

The participants also faced several obstacles to producing quality research, including: a lack of research equipment; insufficient time to conduct research;

and, an inhibitive research environment that involved cumbersome research

approval and funding procedures. Only participants within a scientific-

discipline, however, reported facing obstacles to producing quality research.

There was also an indication that female academics may have less access to

the latest scientific equipment than their male counterparts, and that

restrictions on academic freedom can also inhibit quality research.

The challenge of resistance to change was reported by these participants at

many levels, including from university leadership, among colleagues, and

from students. All forms of resistance served as barriers to the transfer of new

knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad. However, resistance at the

leadership level was found to be the most detrimental type of resistance faced

by participants.

7.2.4 Research Question Four

<u>**Research question four**</u> **- What recommendations would Saudi academics make to their university and the MoHE that would assist them to further capitalise on the things that academics learned during their overseas study?**

The final question during the in-depth interviews gave participants the

opportunity to offer advice to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and their

universities that could potentially help to further capitalise on what academics

have learned overseas. Six key recommendations were provided by the participants, including: to systematically gather feedback from returnees; to develop and implement higher education policies; to introduce more stringent scholarship selection criteria; to provide relevant research equipment and greater research freedom; to focus on higher education quality not quantity; and to capitalise on new academic returnees.

The first recommendation recognises that Saudi academic returnees comprise a valuable resource that can be tapped into by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and Saudi universities to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the scholarships program and to improve its efficacy. This concurs with the findings of previous related studies that have also identified the value in systematically gathering feedback from returnees to improve the return in investment from the scholarships program (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Engberg, 2014; Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015; Zahrani, 1986).

Secondly, the participants identified several key areas within Saudi public higher education that could benefit from policy development and/or implementation. For instance, Saudi universities might benefit from policies that govern the rights and responsibilities of female university leaders in relation to their male counterparts; policies around course structures, course

requirements, delivery modes and methods, and assessment - could serve to increase higher education quality and consistency across Saudi public universities; policies that support academic integrity - could raise the credibility of Saudi higher education; policies that serve to strengthen research culture and simplify research funding procedures - could increase research quality and output; and, a review of recruitment and promotions policies - could help to ensure that academics are best placed on their return. A lack of policies or policy enforcement puts universities at risk of operating according to sociocultural norms and the whims of individual decision-makers, thus potentially limiting opportunities for modernisation and reform.

Participants recommended a tightening of the scholarship selection criteria, based on the perceived impact of scholarship recipients' ages, maturity levels and sense of responsibility on the quality of learning outcomes and how this could affect the efficacy of the scholarships program. Previous studies related to Saudi graduate returnees likewise called for a review of the scholarship selection criteria (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Zahrani, 1986).

Participants recommended the provision of relevant and up-to-date research equipment for their home universities and greater academic freedom.

Participants are proud of the new research knowledge and expertise they have acquired abroad and are keen to put this into practice for the benefit of Saudi Arabia. However, without the necessary equipment or the freedom and opportunity to conduct research, these valuable skills will not be used to maximum effect.

It was recommended that the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education focus on improving the quality of its universities, rather than the quantity. Nolan (2011) described Saudi Arabia's higher education reform efforts as largely window dressing, without much substance. The present study, however, has identified multiple benefits of postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics and Saudi universities. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's public higher education system does require real change.

Finally, it was recommended that the Ministry of Higher Education and Saudi public universities better capitalise on the knowledge, skills and ideas of academic returnees through a series of before, during and after study abroad initiatives. For instance, pre-departure programs can be implemented to provide scholarship recipients with a proper understanding of the scholarships goals, as well as to clarify their roles in transferring the targeted knowledge, skills and expertise from abroad. During postgraduate study abroad, suitable

support can be provided to remind sponsored academics of their purpose and

to assist them in order to facilitate the acquisition of the desired knowledge,

skills and expertise. Most critically, after postgraduate study abroad,

returnees' feedback can be systematically collected, and academics

empowered to implement what they have learned abroad. Previous studies

related to Saudi graduate returnees also identified the need for pre-departure

preparation and post-program follow-up to assist with re-entry and to facilitate

the adaptation of new knowledge, skills and ideas within Saudi higher

education (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Lindsey, 2011).

7.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to the body of knowledge with respect to the benefits

and challenges after postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics and the

potential contributions of postgraduate study abroad to higher education

reform in returnees' home countries. The holistic analysis of this study added

to existing research by identifying the key presage and process factors that

impacted sponsored academics' learning abroad, as well as the perceived

personal and professional benefits and challenges they experienced after

their return. To holistically analyse the before, during, and after stages of the

overseas learning experience in a single study has not been done before.

The present study confirmed results of previous studies that identified the benefits and challenges for sponsored academics after postgraduate study abroad (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Chen, 2015; Engberg, 2014; Namgung, 2008; Tagg, 2014; Takeuchi, 2008; Xu, 2009; Zahrani, 1986). However, whilst the general findings were similar, the knowledge in the present study is more nuanced because of the depth and richness that was achieved by this qualitative study. The modified Biggs' model facilitated this greater depth of understanding of the benefits of postgraduate study abroad, as participants' knowledge and skills before and after postgraduate study abroad were discussed and analysed, rather than focusing only on the latter. Further, a more in-depth understanding of the challenges for Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad was also facilitated by my deep knowledge of Saudi Arabian history, culture and religion, as well as my firsthand experience as a teacher in Saudi Arabia.

The present study also identified new findings, including apparent gender-based differences in the benefits and challenges Saudi academics experienced after postgraduate study abroad. My access to experiences of both men and women, within the same study, enabled a more expansive discussion of Saudi returnee experiences than has been available previously.

Moreover, existing research has mostly been conducted from an emic perspective, in which participants arguably may be more prone to providing socially desirable responses and to exercising caution when discussing potentially contentious issues (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984). In the current study, a qualitative case study approach coupled with a unique etic-emic positioning enabled me to elicit deep, personal, expansive and open responses that give readers access to the experiences and reflections of the participants. Further, the study is grounded in, and expressed through a detailed understanding of Saudi Arabian history, culture and current context both from an academic and personal/experiential perspective.

Collectively, these factors enabled me to build a strong study that models how the use of the modified Biggs framework can facilitate a detailed examination of multiple phases of academics' learning journey: before, during, and after postgraduate study abroad. The additional phase, product in practice, enabled the identification of key situational and personal factors that influenced the extent to which the learning product was put into practice. Through the use of this framework, the present study identified a range of key factors that can influence the adaptation of knowledge, skills and ideas from abroad. These factors include, sponsored academics' motivations for studying abroad, the alignment of academics' aspirations with the goals of the

scholarships program, the conduciveness of the home academic environment to change and the availability of an appropriate support structure to facilitate academics' successful re-entry into the home university environment.

7.4 OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Whilst the present study has made significant contributions to current understandings of the benefits and challenges after postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics, and the potential contributions of postgraduate study abroad to higher education reform in Saudi Arabia, some aspects of the study would benefit from further investigation.

The present study confirmed that various demographic characteristics such as age, gender, location in Saudi Arabia, and academic discipline can impact on participants' study abroad and return experiences (Alandejani, 2013; Al-Mehawes, 1984). However, the small-scale in-depth nature of the study, which aimed to explore the benefits and challenges experienced by Saudi academic returnees, meant that the impact of these factors on sponsored academics' experiences could not be conclusively determined. Thus, the influence of these factors on Saudi academics' study abroad and return experiences is an area suitable for further research.

Gender-based differences were in evidence in a number of areas in this study, such as, apparent differences in intercultural competence, confidence and independence, and possible differences in academics' access to research equipment. Hence, a more detailed examination of these gender issues would be a fruitful area for additional research.

This research has dealt with academic returnees who were successful in their postgraduate studies abroad and who had largely acquired the knowledge, skills and attributes that were intended by the scholarships program. However, the results of the present study may have been markedly different if I had access to a broader range of interviewees, including those academics who struggled to complete their postgraduate studies abroad or who had achieved poor learning outcomes. Hence, this would be a useful area to explore through research. However, such a study would require an Arabic-speaking researcher, or a researcher assisted by an Arabic-speaker to access academic returnees who are not confident English language speakers.

The aim of the present study was not to evaluate the scholarship program. It was to investigate, in-depth, the experiences of a number of Saudi academic returnees. The results of this study, and others (Engberg, 2014; Rumbley,

2014) indicate, however, that there would be merit in a detailed formal evaluation of the efficacy of scholarships programs for academics.

7.5 FINAL COMMENTS

I set out on this research journey to better understand the impact of sending Saudi academics to complete their postgraduate studies abroad on higher education reform in Saudi Arabia. I quickly realised that the scholarships program itself was not a failure, nor were Saudi academic returnees responsible for the pace of reform. Certainly, postgraduate study abroad is a culturally and intellectually enriching experience for many Saudi academics. However, the value of the transformation of a nation's human capital can be offset when the knowledge, skills and ideas acquired abroad are diluted within a system that is not ready to accept such change.

At this juncture, I must acknowledge that the benefits and challenges for Saudi academics after postgraduate study abroad could not have been known without Saudi academics' voices and emic perspectives. I have mentioned several times throughout this study, the advantages of my etic-emic perspective and how this allowed me to ask risky questions, present delicate findings, cross cultural boundaries and conduct insightful analyses. However, it is also my view that the most qualified to articulate a problem and

to develop appropriate solutions are those who are on the inside. Hence, I endeavoured to ensure that participants' voices remained dominant throughout this study, especially in the recommendations it offers.

Further, I must also acknowledge that my perspective on what "good" higher education could look like, has been shaped and coloured by my experiences growing up in Australia and studying at Australian universities. Thus, it is likely that there is an unintentional tinge of cultural arrogance in the way this study has been presented, making it appear as though the challenges and tensions identified in Saudi higher education do not exist within the West (Altbach et al. 2009; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). It must be said that the Western higher education model should not be considered the benchmark for successful higher education reform. Saudi Arabian higher education reform and improvement will be achieved on its own terms and in accordance with the needs and expectations of its people.

Therefore, it is my hope that this study, which encapsulates the voices of female and male Saudi academic returnees, will reach key decision-makers in Saudi Arabia's public higher education sector. Saudi academics' knowledge, experiences and recommendations are a valuable resource that can be tapped into by the Ministry of Higher Education and Saudi public universities

to ease the transition of returnees and to further capitalise on the knowledge,

skills and ideas they have acquired abroad.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Information Sheet for Participants

Title of Research Project: The Personal and Professional Benefits and Challenges for Returned Saudi Academics after Postgraduate Study Abroad and the Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Please read this form carefully.

1. Purpose of the study: I understand that I am invited to take part in this research study. The purpose of this project is to gain a better understanding of the personal and professional benefits and limitations of postgraduate study abroad for Saudi Academics, and to benefit from Saudi academics' insights into how study abroad may be able to help in the development of Saudi's higher education system. The results of this research project will be used for Toni's Doctor of Education studies and help her to complete her degree.

2. The purpose of this form: I understand that this form is to give me the information I need to decide if I wish to participate in this research. I may ask any questions I have about the research, what will happen during it, what Toni's part will be, what my part will be, or anything else that is not clear. When all my questions are answered and I feel that I fully understand, I can decide if I want to be in this research study or not.

3. Why you are invited to be in this study: I understand that I am invited to be in this study because I am a Saudi Arabian academic (lecturer or above) employed in a public Saudi university and I have completed my postgraduate degree (master's or doctor's) at a university outside of Saudi Arabia.

4. What will happen during this study and how long it will take: I understand that during this study, I will be interviewed alone by Toni for approximately 1.5 hours (possibly more or less). Interviews will be conducted via Skype.

Interviews will take place at a time and date suitable to both parties, which will be arranged via email communication. I understand that interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes only. Once the interviews have been transcribed in writing, the audio recording will be deleted immediately. I agree to the interviews being recorded and deleted after they are transcribed.

5. Risks: I understand that there are no foreseen risks in this study. I understand that I can refuse to take part in this research project.

6. Benefits: I understand that the benefit of being part of this study is the opportunity to contribute to understandings of the personal and professional benefits and limitations of postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics, which may assist Saudi universities, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education, and overseas universities and policy makers to make future decisions that better support the personal and professional growth and needs of Saudi academics who study abroad. I understand that I will not be paid for participating in this research project.

7. Confidentiality: I understand that my identity will remain unknown and my name will not be used in any written reports, publications, or presentations the researchers may give. Any reference to me will be by a letter of the alphabet, and I understand that any information I give during this study will be confidential. All interview notes and write ups will be kept in a locked drawer at Murdoch University and destroyed after five years. All audio recordings will be deleted after the interview has been transcribed.

8. Voluntary nature of this research project: I understand that I take part in this research because I wish to, and my participation is voluntary. I understand that I can refuse to answer any questions, and that I may stop being part of this research project at any time.

9. Questions: If I have any questions, I understand that I can contact Dr. Andrew McConney at +618 9360 6995 (*a.mcconney@murdoch.edu.au*) or Dr. Caroline Mansfield at +618 9360 2467 (*caroline.mansfield@murdoch.edu.au*) or Toni Pikos-Sallie at +61 466 914 008 (Australian mobile) (*pikost@hotmail.com*).

I understand that my signature indicates that this research study has been explained to me, that my questions have been answered, and that I agree to take part in this study.

Participant

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Investigator

I have fully explained to _____ the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures to be employed, and the possible risks involved. I have provided the participant with a copy of this Information Sheet.

_____   _____
            Signature of Investigator   Date

_____   _____
                Print Name   Position

This study has been approved by Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2011/128). If you have any reservations or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University's Research Ethics Office (Tel. +618 9360 6677 or e-mail ethics@murdoch.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Appendix B: Consent Form for Interview

Title of Research Project: The Personal and Professional Benefits and Limitations of Postgraduate Study Abroad for Saudi Academics, and the Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Participant

I have read the participant information sheet, which explains the nature of the research and the possible risks. The information has been explained to me and all my questions have been satisfactorily answered. I have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep.

I am happy to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio recorded as part of this research. However, the audio recording is for transcription purposes only, and will be deleted once the interview has been transcribed in writing. I understand that I do not have to answer particular questions if I do not want to and that I can withdraw at any time without consequences to myself.

I agree that research data gathered from the results of the study may be published provided my name or any identifying data is <u>not used</u>. I have also been informed that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study.

I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

Investigator

I have fully explained to _____ the nature and purpose of the research, the procedures to be employed, and the possible risks involved. I have provided the participant with a copy of the Information Sheet.

_____   _____

Signature of Investigator   Date

_____   _____

Print Name   Position

This study has been approved by Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2011/128). If you have any reservations or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University's Research Ethics Office (Tel. +618 9360 6677 or e-mail ethics@murdoch.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Title of Research Project: *The Personal and Professional Benefits and Limitations of Postgraduate Study Abroad for Saudi Academics and the Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.*

Date of Interview: _____ **Time of Interview: _____** **Pseudonym: _____** **Name: _____** **Skype Interview or in-person: _____** **Location: _____**

Part 1 – Collection of Relevant Demographic Information:

Circle all applicable answers:

1. Gender: male / female

2. Age range: 22-25 / 26-30 / 31-35 / 36-40 / 40+

3. Degree obtained from abroad: bachelor's / master's / doctor's -- all degrees / all postgraduate degrees

4. Degree Specializations / Majors: Bach. _____ Master's _____ PhD _____

5. Last academic rank held BEFORE study abroad: a.) teaching assistant / lecturer / assistant professor / associate professor / professor. Role: b.) Teaching assistant / lecturer / program chair / program director / head of department. c.) Administrative role only / Teaching role only / Both

6. Number of years the above rank and position were held BEFORE study abroad: _____

7. Academic rank held AFTER returning from study abroad: a.) teaching assistant / lecturer / assistant professor / associate professor / professor. Role: b.) Teaching assistant / lecturer / program chair / program director / head of department. c.) Administrative role only / Teaching role only / Both

8. Length of time spent abroad for postgraduate study: a. _____ b. Time abroad for other study: _____

9. Did you engage in any (paid or unpaid) work experience in your academic field while abroad? Yes / No ; Paid / Unpaid; For how long? _____ ; Briefly describe what this experience involved:
_____
_____

10. When did you return from study abroad and resume work at your university?
_____

11. Did you receive any promotions after returning from study abroad? How long after your return did you receive this promotion? Briefly describe this promotion?
_____
_____

Part 2 – <u>Pre-Study Abroad (Presage) Related Questions</u>:

a. <u>Personal Factors</u>:

*In this first part of the discussion I will ask you to describe any personal characteristics and/or circumstances that existed <u>before</u> your study abroad that might have had an effect on your study abroad experience. I will suggest some 'possible' factors, but I would like you to mention any factors that 'you' feel are important to this part of the discussion.

- 'English Language Proficiency' - How would you describe your English language proficiency at the start of your study abroad? (Were you required to take an English language course first? Did you feel your English skills were strong enough to achieve the best possible results your degree?). - Do you think that studying in a foreign language (English) affected how much you were able to learn, understand or benefit from study abroad?)

Notes:

- 'Academic background' – Did you complete your secondary schooling and bachelor's degree in KSA? (Yes/No). Did this education give you the knowledge and skills you needed to study at a foreign university, or do you feel that more knowledge and skills were needed before going abroad? Explain.

Notes:

- 'Goals' - What were your main goals or reasons for studying abroad?
- 'Beliefs' - What did you expect to gain from studying abroad (personally and professionally)?
- 'Choice' - Did you choose your country and/or course of study, or was it selected for you as part of the scholarship rules/conditions?

Notes:

- 'Sponsorship and employment' – Do you think that students who have a scholarship and/or a job after their study abroad is complete are different in their approach to studying (e.g. less motivated or less careful) than students who pay for their study and/or don't yet have a job? (Issue raised in Gauntlett 2006). Discuss.

Notes:

- 'Understanding of Employer's Expectations' - What do you believe were the reasons your employer (i.e. your university and the MoHE) wanted you to study abroad? In your view, what did 'they' expect to gain?

Notes:

- Do you think these aims are being achieved? Explain.

- Is there any follow-up by the MoHE or university after a Saudi academic returns from abroad to gather academics' ideas or recommendations (either for the study abroad program or for Saudi universities)?

Notes:

- 'Culture' - When you arrived in the host country, did you experience any culture shock, and/or were there any cultural factors that you felt affected your learning? (For instance, the absence of family support, dietary issues (meal timings, food types), sleeping patterns, the mixed-gender environment, etc.).

- 'Personality' - Could you adapt easily to your new surroundings or did you find it difficult to adjust? How long did it take you to adjust to the new <u>cultural</u> and new <u>academic</u> environments?

Notes:

-Are there any other factors that existed before your study abroad that you feel affected your study abroad experience? (E.g. financial situation, married/single, children, etc.)

Notes:

b. <u>Situational Factors</u>:

*Please talk about any factors existing within the overseas learning environment that you feel affected your study while abroad. For instance, learning in a mixed-gender environment (peers/teachers), different teaching styles and methods, different classroom and on-campus rules (e.g. voluntary attendance of lectures), course structure, assessment types (e.g. more written assignments), course content (types of information/topics covered, course objectives, outcomes, etc.),

Notes:

Part 3 – <u>During-Study Abroad (Process) Related Questions</u>:

- What statement <u>best describes</u> your approach to learning:

> (a) The main focus of your learning was on being able to understand and use the information that you learned (the deep approach);
>
> (b) The main focus of your learning was on memorising facts and reproducing the information you learned for tests and assignments (the surface approach);
>
> (c) The main focus of your learning was on getting the highest possible grades (the achieving approach).

Part 4 - <u>Learning Outcomes Related Questions</u>:

- How do you feel that study abroad has benefitted you <u>personally</u>? (This includes personal changes like intercultural competence, improved language skills, as well as job promotions, better income, etc.). Provide examples, if possible.

> Notes:

- How has study abroad benefitted you <u>professionally</u>? (This includes professional changes such as improved knowledge and skills related to teaching, or improved technical knowledge and skills related to your field, improved research or management skills, or any other knowledge, skills or values that you feel have enhanced your professional performance, characteristics or outlook). Provide examples, if possible. [<u>Specific prompts</u>: Have you conducted any research since your return from abroad? Do you feel that study abroad has helped you to conduct research? Do you feel that your teaching skills have improved since returning from study abroad?]

> Notes:

- Has study abroad <u>not</u> met your expectations in any way? In other words, were you expecting some benefits that did not come about? Are there any aspects of study abroad that you feel could be changed to better suit the needs of Saudi students? (Limitations)

Notes:

- Do you have any suggestions that may improve the study abroad experience (for example, improved pre-departure preparation for students, more language or cultural support either at home in Saudi or on campus in the host country, or changes to the curriculum, course structure, course content, etc.).

Notes:

- Have you experienced any <u>personal</u> challenges since returning from abroad? (For example, reverse culture shock, difficulty settling back into your native culture/society, linguistic challenges (challenges related to using the native or foreign language, etc.).

Notes:

- Have you experienced any <u>professional</u> challenges since returning from abroad? (For example, structural challenges (related to university policies or the university setting), challenges related to the educational environment (such as student and community beliefs, attitudes and expectations, beliefs, attitudes and practices among superiors and/or subordinates, availability of resources, challenges in applying new approaches in teaching or assessment or management, etc.). Provide specific examples, if possible.

Notes:

- What advice or recommendations would you give to key decision-makers at your institution or the MoHE about how they can get the most benefit from the knowledge and skills Saudi academics bring back from overseas?

- What changes, if any, would you like to see happen in higher education in Saudi Arabia?

-Do you know any other Saudi academics who might like to participate in this research?

- Are there any further comments or suggestions you would like to add to this discussion?

END OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Appendix D: E-mail Invitation for Potential Participants

As-Salaamu Alaykum
Greetings to you!

I am currently conducting research with **Saudi Arabian academics** and this email is an invitation to invite you to participate in this project. Before I explain more about my project, I will introduce myself by providing a brief bio.

Brief Biography - About me:

Personal Background

I am 35 years old, female, married and have four children. My children are 6, 10, 12 and 14 years of age.

Educational Background

I have a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Economics and History from the University of Western Australia; a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults, issued by the University of Cambridge, UK; a Graduate Diploma in Education (secondary) from the University of Western Australia; a Master of Education degree from Murdoch University, Australia; and currently I am completing a Doctor of Education with Murdoch University.

Professional Experience Abroad

I have been a teacher and teacher trainer in the Middle East region for over five (5) years, with three (3) years spent teaching at public universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I have worked for the Dubai Ministry of Education, UAE, the University of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia and Taif University, Saudi Arabia.

At Taif University I was inspired by my Saudi colleagues and students to focus my doctoral research on the topic of "The Personal and Professional Benefits and Limitations of Postgraduate Study Abroad for Saudi Academics and the Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". As a teacher who cares about the advancement of Saudi higher education, it is my hope that this research project will contribute to this endeavour.

Thus as part of my Doctor of Education (Ed.D) studies at Murdoch University in Western Australia, I am conducting in-depth interviews / discussions with Saudi Arabian academics that are employed in public universities in Saudi Arabia, and who have completed their postgraduate study (master's and/or doctor's degrees) abroad. The purpose of my research project is to gain a better understanding of the personal and professional benefits and limitations of postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics and what role postgraduate study abroad might have in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia.

I would like it very much if you could be a part of my research project. If you agree, you will take part in at least one in-depth interview, at a time and date that is convenient to you. As I am currently located in Australia, interviews will be conducted via Skype. To get a free Skype account, simply go to: http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/get-skype/ (then click on "Get Skype for Windows" to download Skype onto your computer). Once you download Skype and choose a Skype name, you will be able to make and receive 'free' calls and video calls from around the world using your computer. My Skype name is: **toni.sallie**

You are receiving this email because you fit the criteria of being a Saudi academic who has completed their postgraduate study abroad. Please understand that you can choose not to be part of my research project. Whether you choose to participate or not in this project, I would ask that you inform me by replying to this email as soon as possible. Furthermore, I would also ask that if you know of any other Saudi academics who have completed their postgraduate study abroad that you kindly forward them this email, or pass on my contact details.

The benefit of being part of this study is the opportunity to share your experiences and recommendations about study abroad and contribute to a better understanding of the personal and professional benefits and limitations of postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics. This may assist Saudi universities, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education, and overseas universities and policy makers to make future decisions that better support the personal and professional growth and needs of Saudi academics who study abroad.

I look forward to your soonest possible reply.

Kind Regards,

Toni Pikos-Sallie

Calling on **Saudi Arabian** Postgraduates!

*Participate in this research or help to find the right participants and you will contribute to research that is beneficial to the development of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia!!!

Greetings! If you are a Saudi Arabian overseas postgraduate AND you currently work at a university <u>in Saudi Arabia</u> OR <u>you know</u> a Saudi Arabian overseas postgraduate who works at a university in Saudi Arabia, please read for further information on how you can contribute to this very beneficial project…

What's it all About?

<u>Title of Research Project</u>: *The Personal and Professional Benefits and Limitations of Postgraduate Study Abroad for Saudi Academics and the Implications for Higher Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.*

Your support:

✓ only takes **around 1.5 - 2 hours** to participate;

✓ can be **easily fitted in around your other commitments** - <u>you choose a time that suits you</u>;

✓ is done using Skype (a free internet phone call, very easy to download on your computer); and

✓ **will not require anything difficult or risky** - all participants need to do is take part in at least <u>one</u> in-depth interview, where they will have the opportunity to discuss what they believe are the personal and professional benefits and limitations of postgraduate study abroad for Saudi academics. Through the published research results, participants will be able to ***anonymously*** share their experiences and insights and provide <u>their</u> recommendations to Saudi universities, the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, as well as to overseas universities and organisations, about how Saudi universities can get the most benefit from the knowledge and skills that Saudi academics bring back to Saudi Arabia from overseas!!

If you would like to support this beneficial research project <u>by participating</u> or <u>by helping to find participants</u>, please leave your contact details on the sheet below <u>or please contact me AS Soon As Possible</u>:

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