

"Online Distance Education Experiences of Saudi International Students in New Zealand: A cultural perspective"

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Abstract

This article reports on a phenomenological research study that was undertaken to provide cultural understanding about the nature of online distance education experiences of Saudi International graduate students pursuing degree programs in New Zealand. As a theoretical framework, Hofstede's international difference dimensions and Hall's concept of low and high context cultures were used. Six participants were interviewed from Saudi Arabia. Analysis of these interviews revealed cultural aspects related to student background. Description of participant experiences are explained in the following themes: mandatory nature of the experience, persistence of social shame feelings online, language difficulties, less participation, and avoidance of confrontation and aggravation of feelings. This study concludes with a few recommendations for future research.

Keywords: Saudi International students; culture; online distance education; anxiety; online; gender

1. Introduction

International students are essentially 'transient visitors' to new and different academic communities and form a typical part of the social, cultural and academic contexts in new countries (Montgomery, 2010). Many researchers have conducted studies in which international students are subjects and their experiences have attracted researchers, teachers, university administrators and policy makers in both their home and host countries (e.g Galloway & Jenkins, 2009; Andrade, 2006). International students have been attending educational institutions in New Zealand for decades, formally through the Commonwealth Colombo Plan in the 1950s to the present day with over 120,000 international students studying at education institutions in New Zealand (Ministry of education in New Zealand, 2011). Sixty-two per cent of the students said that New Zealand was their first choice as a study destination. The most important factors in selecting New Zealand were the English-speaking environment, safety, the international recognition of New Zealand qualifications, the quality of education and cost. Moderately important were factors relating to the "Kiwi experience," i.e., natural beauty and scenery, New Zealand lifestyle and culture, travel and adventure (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an increasingly important source country for New Zealand private providers and universities. Enrolment levels have risen rapidly since 2006. Most Saudi students are enrolled with private providers, followed by the universities. Saudi Arabia was the 5th largest source country of students for New Zealand providers in 2010. Overall enrolments increased by 202% from 2006 to 2018. Because of the educational needs of Saudi Arabia this trend is likely to continue for some years.

With the expansion of online distance education (ODE) through the Internet, the World Wide Web, and interactive software, the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures is promising (Hanna, 2000). Several authors including Gibson, Mason, and Gunawardena et. al. in the Handbook of Distance Education (Moore & Anderson, 2003) refer to the lack of research studies focusing on the cultural aspect of distance education (ODE). They foresee opportunity to undertake such studies to provide practical guidelines for global courses and to bring more understanding on cross-cultural differences influencing online students.

To contribute to the line of research examining the role of culture in distance education environments, this article reports on a qualitative research study aimed to answer the following questions:

How do the Saudi International graduate students describe their experiences of taking online distance education courses during their study in NZ universities?

How do they explain the role of their culture in their online distance education experiences?

2. Research Background

2.1 Cultural Differences

For the purpose of this study, culture is defined as in the Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology (Winthrop, 1991): "The distinctive pattern of thought, action and value that characterize the members of a society or social group" (p. 50). Being specific to a group, culture is a collectively learned phenomenon. Therefore, it should be distinguished from human nature, which is inherited and universal, and from an individual's personality, which can be inherited or learned and is mainly specific to individuals instead of groups (Hofstede, 1991). To view cultural differences among individuals in distance education, Hofstede's international cultural dimensions and Hall's high- and low-context culture are useful frameworks (Chute and Shatzer, 1995; Wilson, Gunawardena, and Nolla, 2000). Hofstede proposed the following four

international cultural dimensions after conducting an empirical study of an international corporation in 50 countries around the world:

- **Small/ large power distance.** This reflects the range of responses of various countries to social equality and class differences.
- **High/ low uncertainty avoidance.** This explains the degree to which a society can deal with ambiguity and tolerance for deviation from the norm.
- **Individualism vs. Collectivism.** Individualism pertains to societies, in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. On the other hand, collectivism pertains to societies such the Arab society, in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups. A lifetime of protection is exchanged for unquestionable reality.
- **Masculinity vs. Femininity.** These are relative terms, meaning a man can behave in a 'feminine' way and a woman can behave in a 'masculine' way. While feminine cultures favour interdependence and service, masculine cultures reflect more materialism, and self-centeredness. In feminine societies, excellence is something one keeps to oneself privileging more modesty and sympathy, whereas masculine cultures appreciate assertive behavior and attempts at excelling (Hofstede, 1991; Chute and Ahatzer, 1995). Another lens to view cultural differences especially in distance education is Hall's (1976) concept of high - context culture (HC) and low -context culture (LC). Because of the high dependence on written communication and lack of verbal cues, distance education represents low-context interaction. Hall (1976) looks at high- and low-context messages as being placed on a continuum, each making one end of the continuum. He states: "Although no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale, some are high while others are low" (p. 75). So, while in LC cultures the explicit verbal utterance provides most of the meaning, in HC cultures meaning is integrated within the environmental context and is dependent on non-verbal cues.

2.2 Cultural Differences and Learning

Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) explain that there is a connection between cultural background, learning styles, and cognitive processing. They compare Western and non-Western world views and their effects on learning. Western world views include competition, individuality, timing and scheduling, dualistic thinking, nuclear family, superiority of their world view, separation of religion from culture, and task orientation. In comparison, non-Western world views include cooperation, collectivity, relativity of time, holistic thinking, extended family, religion as a part of culture, acceptance of other cultures, and social orientation. Western learning style is characterized by field-independent and analytical thinking compared with non-Western leaning style. The authors note these non-Western world views may also be shared by many Euro-American females and minority groups in Western countries.

Some believe ODE corresponds better with the tendencies of some cultures more than others (Venter, 2003 and Anakwe et al., 1999). For example, Anakwe and colleagues (1999) in their study of 424 students from northwestern U.S. universities found that individualistic cultural orientation is more consistent with ODE compared with collectivistic cultural orientation. They explained that "distance education as a technology can evoke different meanings and reactions among individuals with different cultural orientations" (p. 238). This is due to different cultural orientations towards independence and self-reliance. A similar conclusion was reached in Venter's (2001) study of European and Asia Pacific students enrolled in a master program in the United Kingdom Open University. Students from Asia Pacific countries were more concerned with isolation from the instructor, who they referred to as "a figure of authority, the person with 'the answers'" (p. 277) whereas European students expressed isolated from other students and missing out on opportunities for discussion and debates. In addition, Asian students struggled more with uncertainty and self-discipline than European students.

2.3 Cultural Differences and Instructional Design

It is unusual for people of different backgrounds and languages to necessarily share precise meanings and concepts, or to construct them in the same ways. However, Henderson (1996) points out, instructional design approaches reflect "values, ideologies and images that act in interest of particular cultural, class and gendered groups" (p. 87). Ignoring cultural implications when designing online distance education courses for students from different cultures could result in the lack of shared meanings. Thus, communication difficulties occur as various cultures respond differently to layout of graphical

interface, images, symbols, colours, and sounds (Chen et al., 1999). To design culturally appropriate materials for Indigenous Australians, McLoughlin (1999) emphasizes three factors: "cultural awareness of the target group, instructional design decisions, and the provision of educational flexibility in an online environment" (p. 234).

In addition, the literature refers to Henderson's argument for a multiple cultural model of interactive multimedia instructional design (Collis, 1999; Wild, 1997; McLoughlin, 1999). This model is based on "incorporating multiple cultural perspectives into an eclectic paradigm, so that multiple cultures maintain their identities and can have their respective cultures accommodated" (Collis, 1999, p. 205). Cultures constantly negotiate the unpredictable social consequences of technology on moral, political, cultural and religious values. Accordingly, they either restrict or advance the use of technology. More discussion is needed to determine how such negotiation is done successfully, especially in Muslim cultures (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2000).

2.4 Online distance Education in the Arab World

ODE has a short history in the Arab world. For many, it has not been visible, even as a back door to higher education. This is quickly changing however, with the escalating need for national higher education. The history of ODE in the Arab World as described in Alsunbul (2002) can be placed in the following categories (Moore and Kearsley, 2003):

- **First generation of distance education** using correspondence studies through Arab University of Beirut (during the 1960s). This is still a popular venue to higher education.
- **Second generation distance education** using a total system approach by establishing open universities. This began a decade later (during the 1980s) compared with the international development of open universities in the 1970s. The Arab Open University (AOU) of Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz Al-Soud is one such recent endeavour in the region. AOU is affiliated with the United Kingdom Open University for purposes of licensing of materials, consultancies, accreditation, and validation of its programs. In addition, some Arab countries such as Sudan, Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia use radio and television broadcasting.
- **Third generation distance education** that use electronic media is being slowly adopted by the previous open universities as well as traditional universities, which until now mainly use such technologies to supplement face-to-face courses. Examples of such universities are Arab Gulf public universities such as Ziad University, United Arab Emirates; Sultan Qaboos University, Oman; and University of Bahrain, Bahrain.

2.5 Women and online distance education

It is not possible to consider the Saudi students learning experience without reference to gender. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, distance learning opens up doors to women that have long been closed. Al- Harthi (2005) noted that there are gender differences in the nature of ODE experience between Arab men and women. Norris and Inglehar (2002) report from empirical data that the greatest cultural gap between Western and Islamic societies is not in democratic values as some suggest. Instead, it is in gender equality and sexual liberalization. They explain "as younger generations in the West have gradually become more liberal on these issues, this has generated a growing cultural gap, with Islamic nations remaining the most traditional societies in the world" (p. 3). The overall benefits of online distance learning are numerous when implications regarding culture and student-centred methodologies are fully considered (Aljabre, 2012). Because of societal boundaries such as segregated educational systems and gender segregation within work environments, in their home cultures, Saudi women have more personal privacy than women in Western societies. For Muslim women in a non-Muslim country, looking different is more visible, especially if they wear Hijab, a headscarf used to cover a woman's hair. For this reason the absence of physical appearance online, may mean that women are more comfortable to participate (Aljabre, 2012).

2. Significance and implications of the research

There is some evidence that a number of Saudi students withdraw from ODE courses opting for a traditional classroom setting (Ibrahim, et al., 2007). There are a variety of reasons given for this but a definitive underlying explanation for this trend is still lacking. However, it has been suggested that the cultural background of the Saudi students has a high effect on the students' willingness and ability to participate in online distance learning courses (Aljabre, 2012; Shaw, 2009). Online distance learning does have some drawbacks depending on where it is used and by whom and these drawbacks are said to

be ever present in Arab nations. However, if ODE courses are designed in a way that suits the specific culture in which it is used, there is less of a chance of ambiguity and more opportunity for shared meaning and understanding by the professors and students (Al-Harhi, 2005). The overall benefits of online distance learning are numerous when implications regarding culture and student-centred methodologies are fully considered (Aljabre, 2012), e.g. as increasing numbers of Saudi international learners take online distance courses that are designed by educators far from their native countries, Saudi international students need more support than local students in online environments. However, It is important to identify areas that pose challenges to Saudi students and identify strategies that contribute to successful academic work and the achievement of academic goals, especially now because there are more Saudi students in the New Zealand than ever before. Moreover, Saudi student in NZ are not allowed to enrol in online education courses until they get permission from the culture mission in such case as the educational institution offer a required course only at a distance (Ministry of Higher education, 2011). It is important to understand their issues and problems, and it behoves universities to do everything possible to help them succeed. Thus, the fundamental problems that this study seeks to address are the absence of Saudi students' voices in the literature about the experiences of Saudi international students of ODE in New Zealand from a cultural perspective.

3. Research questions:

To contribute to the line of research examining the role of culture in distance education environments, this study will examine the experiences of Saudi international students who are taking ODE courses during their study in NZ universities, and how they explain the role of their culture in their distance education experiences, what are the gender differences in the nature of distance education experience between Arab men and women. In addition, what are the biggest challenges that the Saudi international students have to face in the online learning environment will be examined. As well as the policy of the cultural mission will be examined in the light of the research findings.

To the best of my knowledge, this will be the first study to explore and investigate these issues. It is hoped that by gaining more information about the variety of online learning experiences of Saudi students in New Zealand higher education environments, this study will provide New Zealand educators with greater insight into the needs of Saudi students engaged in online learning and assist decision makers in Saudi Arabia prepare Saudi students for distance education abroad.

4. Research Design

This study used a phenomenological research design to investigate Saudi International students' experiences in ODE, and how those experiences relate to their cultures. The data of phenomenological studies are "the conscious experience of phenomena, which would include both the acts such as thinking, believing, perceiving – and the things to which these acts are related such as ideas or material objects" (Merriam and Simpson, 1995, p. 91). The reason for collecting data about a lived experience is that it makes us more "experienced" ourselves through being more informed, shaped, or enriched by this experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62). Phenomenology can be descriptive presenting a thick description or what a certain experience was like for an individual. It can also be interpretive or hermeneutic giving an interpretation of meaning from a written text. Van Manen uses both to refer to phenomenology, which is the approach followed in this study.

5.1 Data collection Methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data. In designing these phenomenological interviews, the researcher followed Seidman's (1991) three-interview series. The first interview lays the context of participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct their experience within the context in which it occurs. The third encourages individual participants to reflect on the meaning the experience holds for him/her. Seidman indicates that it is not necessary to do the three interviews separately, especially if the researcher is constrained by time and availability of participants. Therefore, the researcher conducted only one telephone interview with each participant employing the basic concept of the three-interview series.

5.2 Research Participants

The main research criterion is that participants have taken at least one online course or a major component of their face-to-face courses was online. Three approaches were used to identify potential participants. First, cultural attachés of Saudi Arabia in NZ were contacted to send a recruitment message to their graduate students about volunteering in this study. Only two participants met the research criterion. The second approach was to identify a number of leading NZ universities using ODE and conduct an electronic directory search for famous Arabic male and female names. A total of 82 potential participants were contacted through this approach and only two participants met the research criterion. Finally, snowball

sampling was used by asking each person interviewed in the research to suggest names of additional people (Mertens, 1997). Two more participants were identified. As a result only six participants took an online course or had a major online component in their face to face courses. Of these, two were females. Three were studying Information Technology and had engaged in approximately three totally online courses. The other three were graduate students majoring in education and only had an online component to complement their regular face-to-face classes. After one to two weeks of initial contact, one semi-structured telephone interview was conducted with each participant concentrating on 1) participants experiences; 2) context of their experience; and 3) personal meaning of experiences (Seidman, 1991).

5.3 Limitation and Assumptions

Since the researcher is the main instrument in qualitative research, qualitative research carries with it a lot of the researcher's perspective (Merriam and Simpson, 1995). Therefore, the researcher finds it important to address several assumptions here. The researcher assumes that research participants knew their home culture well, which is not always the case, given their young age and potential lack of involvement in their society due to living abroad for a long time.

Data for this study was collected in 2018. Since then, some aspects related to technology may have changed. In addition, the awareness of educational systems in Saudi Arabia of the importance of teaching technology skills has dramatically increased. All participants in this study did not gain technology skills during their years of schooling. Today, technology skills are becoming a core subject in school curriculum of Saudi Arabia. This is important to highlight given participants' technological difficulties, initial resistance, and lack of awareness of online courses.

5. Results and Discussion

Interviews were transcribed and analysed. The following themes describe some cultural aspects of participants' experiences:

6.1 Nature of the Experience: Pushed into online distance education

With no exception, ODE was not a first choice for all participants in this study. In fact, one participant was specifically trying to avoid taking ODE courses because of her fear that her cultural attaché would not approve of her taking ODE courses. Research participants referred to their distance courses as either a "must" or a "requirement." Either their educational institution offered a required course only at a distance or an individual instructor included a distance education component to his/ her face-to-face course. These students are not remarkably motivated distance learners. On the contrary, they saw online distance education as a difficulty, about which they had no choice but to overcome in order to fulfil a degree-requirement. They had many fears, concerns, and reservations regarding their mandatory ODE experiences. Those who did not know about the ODE component of their courses were "surprised" and "shocked." One participant thought of dropping the course, but he was advised not to do so because this may delay his graduation.

Anxiety and resistance to take ODE courses by participants in this study could be explained through Hofstede's (1991) uncertainty avoidance dimension. His uncertainty avoidance index shows that Saudi Arabian education system have stronger uncertainty avoidance (score = 68) than the New Zealand (score = 46). This, by definition, means that members of the Arab culture feel more threatened by uncertain or unknown situations than do members of the New Zealand culture. This feeling, as Hofstede explains, is expressed through nervous stress, and a need for predictability and need for written or unwritten rules. Many research participants did not know what to expect as they were faced with an unknown situation, in which anything can happen. Their initial reaction was avoiding it. Many were anxious about it. Their uncertainty was the source for such anxiety. It should be noted that these fears and worries about distance education are not unique to students from the Arab culture. In fact, they might be common among students from other cultures when taking ODE for the first time; however, the tolerance of uncertainty will depend on one's culture. This finding might be helpful in explaining the lack of available participants in this research. Only six out of 191 students contacted by the researcher, took ODE courses, and none of those six took it out of choice.

Many participants stated that they had heard about distance education before but had only a vague idea of what it would be like to study at a distance. Their lack of knowledge about ODE made them anxious about their experiences. Their anxiety level depended on their personal expectations of ODE. For example, one participant was very anxious and even "scared" regarding her ODE at the beginning because she thought distance education meant total dependence on yourself with complete absence of help from the instructor. Another participant, on the other hand, was more relaxed because he thought distance education would be "very easy."

Lack of technical skills was another reason for Saudi students to explained as a source of their anxiety. After a certain period, participants reached a comfort zone of learning in the new online learning environment. As they became familiar with the new environment, their initial resistance to use new technology and learn in a new environment was slowly reduced with time. Gibson (1998) refers to "adult's perceptions of his or her ability to succeed in the educational environment" (p. 66) as learner's academic self-concept. For learners in this study, their anxiety reduced their academic self-concept, which made them question their abilities to be successful in their ODE experiences. After completing ODE courses, however, participants reached a greater appreciation and awareness of distance education options. With the exception of one, all said they will take another online class in the future.

6.2 Determination of Shame Culture Online

Although learners in this study were not anonymous to their peers because real names and, in most cases, an introduction about each person was posted, the lack of physical appearance gave an impression of anonymity. This made both male and female participants feel freer to speak their minds and more able to participate online. In addition, it reduced assumptions associated with race and gender biases. This was particularly relieving for those who do not represent the status quo, such as the participants in this case. Three participants associated this lack of social presence in online courses with a reduced sense of social embarrassment. They felt the courses became "un-scary," and in some respects more comfortable and relaxing than face-to-face courses. It played a role in "face saving," a concept common in collective cultures, which was also reported by Chan (2002) and Tu (2001). One research participant, explains:

"... sometimes when you have nothing to say. You have nothing to say or you can't participate that much, it's kind of embarrassing. You cannot hide yourself. . . Whereas online you feel more comfortable like if you don't have nothing or ah, you just wait to see what others' saying."

Consequently, this feeling impacted their learning process negatively as they tended to become lazy, postpone assignments, or even not participate at all. For them, the social pressure of electronic interaction was far less than face-to-face interaction as reflected in the following comment:

"It [online class] doesn't scare me . . . I myself tend to get lazy if the thing is not in front of me . . . It makes me more relaxed. I don't see myself studying well before the distance education class . . . But, when I go to the [face-to-face] class, I want to understand what he's [instructor] saying. After I get out of the class, I go immediately to the lab to practice".

For Muslim women in a non-Muslim country, looking different is more visible, especially if they wear Hejab, a headscarf used to cover a woman's hair. In their home cultures, women exercise more privacy because of some societal boundaries such as segregated educational systems and gender segregation within work environments. One female participant felt her appearance affected her participation in face-to-face classes. In addition, she feared that what she said was judged by Americans through their "limited" knowledge of her culture and their stereotype of Arabs, which is often portrayed in the some media as 'terrorists.' Because of the absence of physical appearance online, she felt more comfortable to participate. Even male participants agree that ODE would make it easier for Muslim women to participate in educational settings. They see it as preserving the original idea of gender segregation in Muslim societies.

Beyond this naïve suggestion of using ODE to increase women participation in education, there are deeper cultural issues to be considered. One issue related to the Arab culture is a woman's constant concern of society's perception of her family or family name and honour. Soffan (1980) explains, in Arab society "the woman is the repository of moral deeds in her family; thus she can destroy the honour of the family. She carries her family honour with her even after marriage and she continues to represent her family through modesty" (p. 18). Therefore, she is always restricted by what she can and cannot do, especially in her interaction with men who know her and her family and can therefore affect society's perception of her family.

Alternatively, family honour can be viewed through Hofstede's (1991) concept of 'shame.' Feeling 'ashamed' comes from infringing upon rules of society. Hofstede characterizes collective cultures as "shame cultures." Guilt would be the counterpart characteristic of shame in individualistic cultures. Hofstede states "shame is social; guilt is individual" (p. 60). In the Arab culture, there are social restrictions in the relationship between genders originating not only from religion, but from cultural traditions as well. Therefore, in some Arab societies more than others, Arab women monitor social boundaries in their relationship with fellow colleagues in educational or non-educational settings. A female research participant explains how difficult it was for her to have a man who knew her family in her distance course. She logs off a

chat with an instructor and other 'New Zealander' colleagues when he logs in. Her concern of his perceptions of her, and subsequently her family, was greater than her belief in her noble motive of learning. Similarly, another male participant mentioned feelings of "shame" when "inappropriate" words, from his cultural perspective, were mentioned in class. However, he felt the situation was not as embarrassing with New Zealanders as it would have been with Arabs. Shame is a collective concept. It results from expected social sanctions when cultural norms are broken. Shame persisted in the online environment for those students; however, it was only felt with those who shared the same culture. In the absence of a shared culture, the two participants privileged assumptions and values of Western culture underlying the design and facilitation of material. This reminds us once more that what is taken for granted as an "accepted" view about social structure, political structure, gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, nation, or profession, may not be considered in the range of acceptable beliefs or customs for a person from a different background (Dorter, 1997).

This persistence of 'shame culture' online is consistent with the empirical evidence from Inglehart and Baker (2000), who analysed the third wave of the World Value Surveys conducted in 1995-1998. These surveys covered 65 societies representing 75 percent of the world population. The researchers conclude that although values can and do change, "belief systems exhibit remarkable durability and resilience." Changes brought by economic development and modernization continue to reflect society's cultural heritage be it Protestantism or Confucianism or Islam (p. 49).

6.3 Language Difficulties

For participants in this study, English was a second language and not all participants were at the same level of English proficiency. Participants with low language proficiency had an added difficulty online with the rigorous amount of reading and writing required. One reason was the lack of physical gestures and the total dependence on the written word. Collective cultures depend more on high context messages, while individualistic cultures depend more on low context messages (Hofstede, 1991). This made it "doubly" hard on Arab students who come from a collective culture to participate online in low context messages (Hall, 1976). Lewis (2003) characterizes the communication style of Arabs as multi-active depending heavily on face-to-face communication. One participant felt she lost the "other tools" to explain with. This made online participation more time consuming. In addition, ODE courses move participation from speaking to writing, which is a harder language-productive task than speaking, especially for individuals coming from oral cultures.

On the positive side, online participation had the advantage of providing more structure and rules, which reduced the uncertainty felt by some participants. A research participant with low English proficiency, having the chance to use of what he referred to as "academic language" over colloquial speech made it easier to understand others online compared with face-to-face. For more advanced English learners, time gained in online courses was a major advantage.

6.4 Less Participation: Don't appear too eager

In feminine cultures, students do not want to appear too eager. By contrast, in masculine cultures students try to make themselves visible and compete openly in class. With Arab countries scoring more on the femininity index, Saudi students might show such eagerness to participate in class less than New Zealander students (Hofstede, 1991). At the beginning of her study in the NZ, a female participant could not explain New Zealander eagerness to participate in the classroom. She felt they were "showing off" or trying to appear "smart." She felt that if she wants to talk in class, she must have something important to add. This shows the epistemological difference between individualistic societies, where the focus is more on learning process compared with collective society where the focus is more on the product.

Participation also relates to the type of power distance between a teacher and student. In small power distance educational environments such as NZ, students make uninvited interventions and ask clarification questions about the material, whereas in large power distance cultures such as Saudi Arabia, teachers initiate all communication (Hofstede, 1991). Students speak only when called upon. Current trends in the educational systems of Saudi Arabia encourage student participation in the classroom, while maintaining a level of power distance between students and teachers. In addition, a number of participants preferred communicating at an individual level with the instructors for inquiries instead of posting online for a class forum. This felt easier and more comfortable to do.

6.5 Meeting the academic needs of international students

There are several academic weaknesses of international students (Butcher & McGrath, 2004). These include relevant study skills, their proficiency in English and their ability to understand textbooks and their lecturers, but also:

- Their difficulty in responding to the Socratic mode of teaching, particularly if they have been educated in rote-learning and taught not to question authority (such as the lecturer or author); and,
- Their lack of understanding of non-verbal communication, references to New Zealand historical events, use of humour, and so on;
- Their cultural reluctance to participate in class discussions and tutorials.

It has been suggested that since the people of Saudi Arabia have a heritage of oral communication rather than written communication, they do not know or will not accept instructions that place the responsibility on themselves rather than being able to sit in a classroom and have the instructor teach and answer their questions (Albalawi, 2012). Even though past research has highlighted various negative aspects associated with increases in international students, research to date demonstrates that educators have made few changes to either the process or content of classroom activities (Ward, 2001; Li, Baker and Marshall, 2000).

Shank, Walker and Hayes (1996) find that university teachers lack a clear understanding of cultural-based differences in learning styles and are therefore not equipped to meet student needs. This lack of understanding is attributed to the reliance on anecdotal or stereotypical descriptions (Ramburuth, 2001) or the possession of differing expectations by students and teachers of the roles of each other (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997). Educators frequently adopt negative and stereotypical views of international students and misunderstand students who are not from the dominant cultural group (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991).

It is possible that on line learning may provide a less culturally confronting environment for Saudi International students but some of the other issues that Saudi International students face include: "technology phobia, user training, technology support, right technology selection, and technology integration" (Al-Rjoub, cited Quraishi, 2012p.2). Lim, Eberstein and Waint (2002) suggested that research related to the readiness of learners to adapt to online distance learning environment has not kept pace with the changes in the field of ODE. Rogers (2003) points out that every system, whether it is an organization, culture, country or individual has its own norms that effect how an innovation is spread in its system. Therefore, when it comes to the development of online learning, it is important to consider the cultural context of Saudi learners: "There is a strong link between culture and learning that is reflected in how people prefer to learn and how they tend to process information" (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009, p. 338). It is possible that Arab learners bring to their online learning experience a different set of expectations than Western learners and may have different perceptions of online distance learning than their Western counterparts.

With online and distance learning and education emerging as a fast growing field in Saudi Arabia it is important to discover what Saudi students need to improve online educational outcomes. One way to do this is to learn more about the experience Saudi students have of ODE in countries other than Saudi Arabia.

It is recognised that as international students, Saudi students may face more challenges or frustrations than their domestic peers because of factors such as language barriers (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez, & Mason, 2001), feelings of isolation (Uzuner, 2009; Shattuck, 2005), unfamiliarity with the disciplinary culture of the institution offering the course, and a lack of knowledge of specific cultural references (Thompson & Ku, 2005). It is also possible that influenced by their home culture, Saudi students may not participate in the online learning environment as actively as domestic students (Al-Harthi, 2005; Hannon, J., & D'Neto, 2007). However, their experiences of online distance learning in New Zealand could provide valuable information for the development of online learning in Saudi Arabia. For instance, the Saudi students' lack of knowledge about distance education as well as Lack of technical skills made them anxious about their experiences (Aljabri, 2010). By taking control over the anxiety level which depended on their personal expectations of ODE (Albalawi, 2012) and constructing a culturally inclusive online learning environment (Hannon, & D'Netto, 2007) it may be possible to improve the quality of learning for all Saudi students in NZ or SA, especially as the researchers predict that the Saudi population will grow by one-third every eight years and as such Saudi Arabia cannot accommodate the rapid growth of the college student population. The number of students admitted to universities has increased by 62 per cent in only 3 years: from 68,000 in 2003 to 110,000 in 2006 (Albalawi, 2012). Furthermore, to assist the other Saudi scholarship students who are coming to study in NZ in the future.

6. Future Research

Anthropologists believe that various aspects of culture are interrelated. Therefore, if we touch culture in one place, everything else will be affected (Hall, 1976). Studying in New Zealand, participants in this study certainly had more understanding of NZ culture and educational system than individuals who have not had the chance of studying abroad. If they were not successful to do so, they would have either reduced their participation in NZ community or be forced to leave the community (Lauzon, 1999). Therefore, it would be interesting to replicate this study with individuals from Saudi Arabia taking distance education courses in their home countries within their culturally relevant environment. In this case, cultural issues might be more evident as individuals interact with their cultural reality on a daily basis. This raises questions about potential Western cultural hegemony of ODE. For example, in discussing the effect of communication technology in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jones (1996) argues that “in the UAE, the introduction of communication technology has been a more effective means of intellectual colonization than has been achieved under many years of colonial rule” (p. 53). In her opinion, this contact with the West through communication technology made Arabs lose touch with their relevant and more direct social, cultural, and political issues. The question becomes would ODE result in such intellectual colonization and/or acculturation? Or would it provide a richer perspective to view local issues?

It is evident from this study that there are gender differences in the nature of ODE experience between Saudi men and women. Norris and Inglehar (2002) report from empirical data that the greatest cultural gap between Western and Islamic societies is not in democratic values as some suggest. Instead, it is in gender equality and sexual liberalization. They explain “as younger generations in the West have gradually become more liberal on these issues, this has generated a growing cultural gap, with Islamic nations remaining the most traditional societies in the world” (p. 3). Although ODE will greatly benefit from general research about gender differences in Muslim societies, more specific research is needed to investigate the implications of gender differences in course design and delivery in order to facilitate the distance education experience for students from these cultures.

7. Conclusion

As this study shows, Saudi International students were hardly interested in ODE opportunities available for them in New Zealand. One reason for individuals' resistance was the vague policy towards it at the governmental level. If Saudi International students were to benefit from ODE, they should deal with the resistance at two levels: individual level and governmental level. At the individual level, it is important to promote ODE to Saudi students by providing a clearer and a more detailed picture of ODE. At the governmental level, if Saudi Arabia do not want to find themselves overwhelmed with global distance Western providers, a more proactive approach is required to articulate policies addressing critical issues, such as the ones suggested by Farrell (1999), including equity of access, curriculum relevance to labour market needs, accreditation, consumer protection, and cultural sensitivity.

In conclusion, this study does not aim to make any generalizations about the experience of Saudi Students in NZ distance education; however, it attempts to bring attention to the importance of cultural issues in understanding their experiences. Cultural differences can make inter-cultural communication time consuming, difficult, and sometimes impossible (Lewis, 2003). Therefore, a major requirement for successful expansion of global distance education is to understand cultural ‘distance,’ “the extents to which different cultures are different or similar” (Shenkar, 2001, p.215) so that such cultural multiplicity can be incorporated in the processes of online distance education design and delivery.

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ملخص البحث

"تجارب التعليم عن بعد عبر الإنترنت للطلاب السعوديين الدوليين في نيوزيلندا: منظور ثقافي"

تتناول هذه المقالة دراسة بحثية في الظواهر تم إجراؤها لتوفير فهم ثقافي لطبيعة تجارب التعليم عن بعد عبر الإنترنت لطلاب الدراسات العليا السعوديين الدوليين الذين يتابعون برامج للحصول على درجات علمية في نيوزيلندا. كإطار نظري ، تم استخدام أبعاد الاختلاف الدولي لهوفستيد ومفهوم هول لثقافات السياق المنخفضة والعالية. تم مقابلة ستة مشاركين من المملكة العربية السعودية. كشف تحليل هذه المقابلات عن الجوانب الثقافية المتعلقة بخلفية الطالب. يتم شرح وصف تجارب المشاركين في المواضيع التالية: الطبيعة الإلزامية للتجربة ، واستمرار مشاعر العار الاجتماعي عبر الإنترنت ، والصعوبات اللغوية ، وقلة المشاركة ، وتجنب المواجهة وتقاوم المشاعر. تختتم هذه الدراسة ببعض التوصيات للبحث في المستقبل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم عن بعد، الانترنت.