

## Why Do Saudi International Students Choose to Study in Australia?

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the analysis of a narrative discussion group facilitated by the author as a part of a larger study. The participants of this study are six male Saudi Arabian international students who are enrolled at universities in Victoria in Australia. This study aims to answer this question: Why do male Saudi international students choose to study in Australia? Participants announced some reasons why they chose to study in Australia. These reasons include a good environment for Arabs and Muslims, recommendations from friends, good weather, cost of living, agreement between some Victorian universities and Saudi universities and simple and easy admission procedures.

**Key words:** international education, international students, Saudi Arabia, Australia

### 1. Introduction

The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia established the King Abdullah Scholarship program (KASP) in 2005 to improve the development of higher education in Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education. (2014). Subsequently, thousands of Saudi Arabian students travelled to the Western world to undertake either undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. The number of Saudi international students who were sponsored by King Abdullah scholarship program (KASP) was approximately 9000 in 2006 and in six years this number increased to 140,000 students by 2012 (Zeigler, 2012). The most recent statistics in 2014 indicate that 185,000 Saudis, including undergraduate and postgraduate students, are studying abroad in 23 countries (Ministry of Finance, 2014). The rapid rise in the number of Saudi international students is expected due to attractions in this program. As Hilal, Scott, & Maadad (2015) indicated that:

KASP recipients receive full university tuition coverage, monthly salary, allowance for materials and a monthly stipend for living expenses. They also receive complete medical and dental insurance and annual round-trip airfare vouchers for themselves and their families. Students also receive rewards for high grade point averages, for papers published, as well as the publishing of research (p. 256).

The majority of Saudi international students prefer the United States as a destination for their studying as statistics of Ministry of higher education in Saudi Arabia (2014) shows 110,000 Saudi international students are studying in the United States. However, there is a tendency for Saudis to study in Australia. In 2014, more than 8100 students, 77.5% male and 22.5% female, were reported to have enrolled in Australian universities, undertaking higher education courses (SACM, 2014). Hence, this study aims to explore the experiences of male Saudi international students who are studying in Victorian universities in Australia. It seeks to develop a better

understanding of why male Saudi international students choose to study in Australia?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 International Education in Australia**

International education is the third-largest export industry in Australia and is worth almost A\$20 billion. There has been large growth in both offshore and onshore enrolments of international students in Australian universities in the last 10 years (Shah & Nair, 2011). Australian universities have become a big player in international education.

One indicator of Australia's interest in international education was the Colombo Plan, which appeared in the first half of the 1950s. The purpose of this plan was to aid commonwealth countries in South and Southeast Asia with different aspects of economic infrastructures and education, for example, providing scholarships for students from South and Southeast Asia to study in Australian universities. Although the goal of this plan was aiding countries in South and Southeast Asia, there were also political and economic dimensions. Australia played a prominent role in the Cold War to protect the people of South and Southeast Asia from communism and promote capitalism. Indeed, the Colombo Plan was a turning point in Australian foreign policy, and one of its results was an increased interest in the Asian region and internationalization (Burn, 1988).

Additionally, one of the significant turning points in Australian policies for international education was the Jackson Report, which views education as a key element in a development-oriented approach to aid. The report recommends that the share of aid flowing to education and associated areas should be increased. Moreover, the report predicts a strong demand for higher education in Asia for the next 20 years. The report also focuses on scholarship programs that target educational aid. Finally, the report considers research as the gate for the development of countries (Pike, 2002).

The current shift in Australian educational policy is toward internationalization. The reasons for the development of international education programs in Australia are due to two facts: first, a change in government policies toward skilled migration to encourage the enrolment of international students and, second, audits of external quality that affect the offshore and onshore international operations of universities (Shah & Nair, 2011).

According to Pike (2002), "there are many objectives of the international education programs, such as to generate export income; provide fiscal relief for the government by providing an alternative source of revenue for public universities; and to increase and broaden our engagement with the region and more broadly the international community" (p. 344). One success story is the increase in international education programs in the last 10 years. After the United States of America and the United Kingdom, Australia has the third largest number of enrolments in the English-speaking world, and it is one of the leading providers of international education in the world. Since Australia has become a big player in international education, there is a dearth in the literature regarding international students in Australia; particularly, there is a dearth regarding the experiences of Saudi international students of why do they choose to study in Australia? Hence, this gap in the literature will be filled by conducting this study.

### **2.2 Choosing the Destination to Study Abroad**

Choosing to study abroad is not an easy decision. Studies indicate that there are many factors that influence international students in selecting their study destination, such as quality of education, recommendations of friends or relatives, cultural factors, local environments, program costs and living costs.

### 2.2.1 Quality of Education

The most important factor affecting the choice of study destination is the image of an institute, in terms of quality of education and good reputation (Maringe, 2006; Soo & Elliot, 2008). Moreover, the majority of international students believe that an overseas education is better than a local education in terms of quality. In a study conducted by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) that examined the factors motivating international students' choice of a host country, the results of this multi-country study in Indonesia, Taiwan, China and India show that the majority of international students saw an overseas course of study as better than a local one. Moreover, in a study conducted by Michael, Armstrong and King (2003) about the reasons for studying in Australia and Victoria, the sample was 600 international students in a higher education institution in Melbourne, Australia. The results showed that quality of education was the most important reason for choosing to study in Australia (36.5%) followed by recommendations from friends and relatives (29.7%).

### 2.2.2 Recommendations from Friends or Relatives

Previous students who studied in a host country or current students who study in a host country are playing a crucial role in attracting potential international students into a host country. Although the final decision of choosing a host country is mainly decided by students themselves, their friends influence them significantly by providing information and recommendations. Mazzarol and Soutars (2002) suggested that personal recommendations or word-of-mouth referrals of former alumni are main influences. Therefore, there is a link between addressing students' needs and attractiveness. In fact, students' satisfaction can build a good reputation for an institution when they graduate and act of ambassadors through attracting and recommending students to study at the same destination (Engelke, 2008).

### 2.2.3 Cultural Factors

Cultural factors include language and religion, and a Western culture can influence the decision of an international student's destination. Students may choose to go to a country because they want to learn a particular language, especially English. Thus, English-speaking countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, are the top destinations of international students, with almost five million in 2013 (*Arab News*, 12 February 2013). Moreover, students may choose to go to a country because of religious factors, like the ability to study a particular religion or easily practice their religion. According to the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, there are many international students that travel to study the Islamic religion at Umm AlQura University in Mecca and Islamic University in Medina (2010). Furthermore, students may choose to go to a country because they understand Western culture; Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) showed that the second-most important reason to choose to study abroad was the idea of gaining a better understanding of Western culture through an international education. Similarly, Chen and Zimitat (2006) concluded that the main reasons why Taiwanese students choose to study in Australia are to improve their English proficiency and enhance their understanding of Western culture.

### 2.2.4 Local Environment

The local environment, including climate, weather and lifestyle, are important in choosing a destination to study abroad. Many students prefer to study in an environment that is similar to their homeland. According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), many students from Southeast Asia prefer to study in Australia over the UK or Canada because the weather is warmer and similar to the weather in their countries. By contrast, discussions with Japanese and American students showed that Australia was viewed as "beaches and fun but not somewhere to undertake serious education" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 89).

### 2.2.5 Program Cost

Value for cost is a critical issue for students when choosing their destination to study abroad. Students are usually on a tight budget, so the price of a program is crucial. If a program is expensive, students are less likely to want to study abroad there. In a study conducted to discover the most important reasons international students study in Australia and Victoria, the results showed that 24.2% of participants chose to study in Australia and Victoria because of the affordability of an education (Michael, Armstrong & King, 2003). The costs of choosing to study abroad are the most important when several universities offer similar courses (Price et al., 2003) but sponsored students see a different situation. For example, through my experience as a Saudi international student sponsored by the government of Saudi Arabia, that government encourages students to study at the best university, regardless of cost.

### 2.2.6 Cost of Living

The cost of living at a study-abroad destination may affect a student's choice of his or her final destination. Students usually prefer not to study in high cost-of-living countries. Maringe (2006) emphasizes costs of living, including living expenses and the possibility of students' working part-time jobs. He asserts that the availability of a part-time job is one of the factors that attract students to choose their study destination. In a study conducted on international students from four countries, including Indonesia, China, Taiwan and India, to investigate their reasons for studying in Australia, the results showed that international students from Indonesia, China and India stated the importance of a part-time job in Australia to help them with living expenses and education-related fees. By contrast, many Taiwanese students do not need part-time work to support them (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Hence, through the literature I reviewed, I did not find any study investigated male Saudi international students in terms of their reasons to choose to study in Victoria, Australia. Moreover, all the aforementioned studies are quantitative (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Michael, Armstrong & King, 2003; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Maringe, 2006). Thus, the importance of this study is obvious: It is qualitative and investigates in-depth why male Saudi international students choose to study in Victoria. At the end of this study, it will be clear why Saudi international students choose to study in Victoria and if their reasons are similar to or different from the reasons of previous international students.

## 3. Methodology

This study is based on the constructivist paradigm, as it relies on the experiences of Saudi international students learning in Victoria and seeks to examine their visions about learning in Australia as international students. This study will explore the reasons of Saudi international students for choosing Australia as their destination to study abroad. This qualitative research is an interpretation and examination of observed phenomena and open-ended interviews with Saudi international students to highlight meanings as well as examine patterns that emerge from the study (Babbie, 2007). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), "qualitative research locates the observer of the world, and consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 3).

The participants of this study are six male Saudi Arabian international students who are enrolled at universities in Victoria. A small number of participants was chosen because, according to Denzin, Miles and Huberman (1994) "Qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth — unlike quantitative researchers who aim for larger number of context-stripped cases and seek statistical significance" (p. 27). The participants are studying different fields, including business, information

technology, emergency care and nursing and educational technology. One participant is still in the English language stage. The participants range in age from 20 to 38 years old and have lived in Victoria from 1 to 4 years. Five of the participants are married, while one self-identified as single. The participants are only male, not female, due to cultural limitations between Saudi males and females, it is difficult to find Saudi females who will agree to be interviewed by a Saudi male. Participants are from different universities in Victoria, including: Monash, Swinburne, RMIT, Deakin and Monash College. Moreover, the participants are from different regions of Saudi Arabia, including Riyadh, Abha, Jazan, Taif and Medina.

In this study, the data were collected by using a focus group interview with semi-structured questions, as that was the most relevant approach for unveiling the experiences of male Saudi international students at Victorian universities.

All participants were invited to participate in a focus group interview at a day and time negotiated by them. The place where the discussion was conducted was a room in Matheson Library at Monash University-Clayton campus; I booked the room. This focus group interview had this main question:

(1) What are you studying, and why did you choose to study in Victoria?

The focus group interview was conducted in Arabic because English is not the mother tongue of the interviewees. Moreover, it is believed that conducting focus group interviews in Arabic will enable better expression and articulation of ideas perhaps lost in the English language. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, subject to transcription to English by the researcher.

The data analysis was conducted in four phases. In the first, after conducting the focus group interview in the Arabic language, the researcher transcribed it verbatim, word by word, into a document written in Arabic. In the second phase, the researcher translated the Arabic document into English. The third phase incorporated cross-analysis of the data, that is, the interpretation and creation of themes by the researcher. Here, I adopted a thematic content analysis approach. One common method for analyzing qualitative data is to reduce the content of a large body of data to a smaller number of central themes or patterns (Patton, 2002).

## **4. Data and Analysis**

### **4.1 Reasons for Choosing to Study in Victoria**

The question in the interview was: what are you studying, and why did you choose to study in Victoria? Actually, this question has two parts, the major of the participants and why participants chose to study in Victoria. Participants answered the first part as Fadi, a PhD in business; Qasem, a master's of business; Jaber, the only undergraduate participant, a bachelor's in information technology (IT); Thabit, a PhD in emergency and nursing; and Nader, a PhD in educational technology. Hasan is currently in the English language stage and does not meet the requirements of his university yet.

In section 2, I reviewed some literatures about choosing the destination to study abroad. I found that studies indicate that there are many factors that influence international students in selecting their study destination, such as quality of education, recommendations of friends or relatives, cultural factors, local environments, program costs and living costs (see 2.2).

In response to the second part of the question about why participants chose to study in Victoria, some participants stated that their government prefers the US as a primary destination for all their sponsored students. Thabit said that he signed a contract to do his advanced studies in the US:

I began my job as a teaching assistant in one of the Saudi universities. I signed a contract that I have to go and study my master's and PhD in the US — no was Australia, no Britain — so all the teaching assistants went to the US.

Nader corroborated Thabit's assertion that the government allowed Saudi students to go to any university in the US. Conversely, the government limited the number of acceptable universities in other countries.

The vice president of graduate studies pre-determined certain universities in some countries were acceptable for students to go and study. For example, there was a huge number of American universities, and there were 15 or 18 universities in the UK, and the group of eight universities in Australia.

However, some Saudi international students do not prefer to study in the US for many reasons regarding their religion and culture, as one of the respondents said:

Thabit: I did not prefer to go to America for political reasons.

Me: Political reasons?

Thabit: Political reasons, or it might be discrimination against Arabs and Muslims and the previous experiences of some Saudi international students. They said there are tough procedures in airports, as well as Hijab may cause some problems. You can't practise your religion freely.

However, some respondents stated that they preferred to go to the UK because it is closer to Saudi Arabia:

Thabit: *I was thinking Britain before Australia, and I was not thinking Australia before Britain. In fact, distance and proximity played a role in that.*

Me: *You mean because Britain is closer to Saudi Arabia than Australia?*

Thabit: *Yes, Britain is closer. That's why some Saudis prefer to go to Britain more than Australia.*

Then the decision was made that no more Saudi-sponsored students could go to the UK, as Hasan said:

One of the most important reasons was because sending Saudi international students to Britain was prohibited by the Ministry of Higher Education. And then we came here.

Hasan explained the reasons why Saudi students prefer to learn in a country close to their country:

In fact, I preferred Britain because it is closer than Australia. At any time, if something bad happened to my family in Saudi Arabia, you could go back fast, but when they closed Britain, we directly chose Australia.

Following are some of the reasons why male Saudi international students chose to learn in Victoria. I will present and discuss the reasons regarding the following sub-themes:

### 4.1.1 Good Environment for Arabs and Muslims

Male Saudi international students have Arab ethnicity, and they believe in Islam as a religion. They considered Victoria in particular and Australia in general as a good environment for them to study. In contrast, according to Caldwell (2013), Saudi international students experience discrimination while studying in the United States. Fadi decided to study in Australia because Victoria is a good environment for Arabs and Muslims:

The environment here, as I listed before, is less stringent toward Arabs and Muslims than some other countries, such as the UK and the US, so as a father of four girls, I prefer to study in such an environment that is less stringent toward Arabs and Muslims. That was the main reason.

Moreover, Qasam supported Fadi's statement that a good environment is one of the factors that impelled him to study in Victoria; he said:

According to what I heard from previous colleagues and from one of my relatives who studied at one of the universities here in Victoria, racism is less, or there might be no racism. Because of that, I chose to study in Victoria.

Furthermore, Thabit agreed that a good environment for Arabs and Muslims was one of the reasons he chose to study in Victoria, Australia. He especially emphasized tough procedures in US airports against Arabs and Muslims as well as some problems regarding religion like wearing Hijab for women. But in Australia, none of these problems occurs:

Thabit: I did not prefer to go to America for political reasons.

Me: Political reasons?

Thabit: Political reasons, or it might be discrimination against Arabs and Muslims and the previous experiences of some Saudi international students. They said there are tough procedures in airports, as well as Hijab may cause some problems. You can't practice your religion freely. In fact, Australia in general is better than America.

#### 4.1.2 Recommendation from Friends

It seems that relatives or friends recommended Victoria, Australia, to the majority of the participants in this study. Fadi said that his friends recommended he study in Victoria:

As there were some of my friends who studied here, and they recommended I study in this place.

Me: They recommended you study in Victoria?

Fadi: Yes.

Qasem was also referred to Australia by one of his relatives:

I contacted one of my relatives in Victoria, and he said the place is good and excellent in terms of living and studying.

Sometimes, friends recommend studying at a particular university, as in Hasan's situation:

Hasan: I was recommended to study in Victoria by one of my friends who studied in Monash here — same major. He asserted that Monash is suitable, that if we compare this university and some universities in the US at its level, it's not like Monash doesn't have a good ranking.

Even though Jaber was not sponsored by the government, he told an interesting story about the impact of his cousins in his decision to study in Victoria, Australia:

Jaber: I have chosen Victoria to study because ... I studied six months in Malaysia in 2011, and then I went to back to Saudi Arabia for six months without doing anything, no studying, no work. And then I said to my parents, I would like to go to the US to study, and suddenly, they said, no America. After that, I spent another two months doing nothing. Then my cousin, Abo Salem, called me and said, come to Australia, something like that. I said, OK, good idea.

This finding is similar to what I reviewed previously (see 2.2). Mazzarol and Soutars (2002) suggested that personal recommendations or word-of-mouth referrals of former alumni are important influences.

#### 4.1.3 Good Weather

Some of the participants consider whether one of the reasons to choose Victoria. However, others argue that weather is not one of the reasons to choose Victoria, as Thabit said:

I would like to agree to disagree with my colleagues here. I had no problem with the weather.

But Qasem is suffering from some health problems, so he chose to study in Victoria because the weather is similar to the weather at his home in Saudi Arabia:

Qasem: I was suffering from some health problems, so the weather of Victoria, I heard, is similar to our weather in the southern region of Saudi Arabia, where I am from. My relative mentioned to me that the weather here is similar to the southern region of Saudi Arabia, so in regards to my health problems, I chose Victoria.

Sometimes, some international students choose to study in a country that has similar weather to their home country because, for them, it is difficult to adapt to different weather. That's Hasan's situation:

Hasan: For me, one of the most important reasons to choose to study in Victoria is the weather. ... I think the weather here is similar to our weather; there is summer and winter but it is not too hot or too cold, sometimes like the cold weather in the US.

Me: Regarding the weather, what did you mean, suitable in terms of hot or cold?

Hasan: Yes, I think the weather is suitable here in Victoria, because as Saudis or — let me talk about myself — I cannot adapt to the too-cold weather. But I think their cold weather here is similar to our cold weather in Saudi Arabia.

This finding is similar to why some students from Southeast Asia prefer to study in Australia more than Britain or Canada. According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), many students from Southeast Asia prefer to study in Australia more than the United Kingdom or Canada because the weather is warmer and similar to the weather in their countries (see 2.2.4).

#### 4.1.4 Cost of Living

The cost of living in a host country is considered an important influence for the majority of international students as well as the availability of a part-time job. As mentioned in the literature review (see 2.2.6), the study of Maringe (2006) emphasized this point. Saudi-sponsored students see a different situation, perhaps because the government provides their educational fees, a monthly salary, medical health insurance and annual tickets to go home and come back. Therefore, they do not need to work a part-time job.

Only one participant briefly mentioned cost of living as a reason for choosing to study in Victoria:

Qasem: I chose Australia and Victoria in particular, because in terms of cost of living, it might be better than the UK and the US.

Qasem compared the cost of living between Australia, the US, and the UK, and he chose not to study in the US and the UK because they are more expensive. Hasan supported him:

Hasan: Our colleagues recommended we not come to Britain because it is expensive.

#### 4.1.5 Agreements between Some Victorian Universities and Saudi Universities

Thabit provided one reason why he chose Victoria that was not found in previous studies in the literature. This reason is the agreement between the universities of the host country and some Saudi universities. As he said:



There was a new agreement between the Faculty of Medicine and Health at Taif University and Monash University; it was fresh, in the same week when I applied to study abroad. They said the university is good, and its rank in Medicine is 26 globally, and we want some teaching assistants to go to Monash. I thought about it, and it was a good choice.

This agreement is between Monash University and some Saudi universities such as Taif University, Islamic University, Ha'il University and King Abdul Aziz University. According to the website of Monash University, the agreement includes the provision of study-abroad programmes, support for assessment and academic units, exchanges of scholars and resources, research collaboration, professional development workshops for health professionals and staff development and research training for medical, biomedical science and science students.

#### 4.1.6 Simple and Easy Admission Procedures

Although none of the literature in section 2 of this thesis mentions simple and easy admission procedures as one of the reasons that attracts international students to study abroad, I found that one of participants asserted that one of the reasons why he chose to study in Victoria is the simple and easy admission procedures:

Nader: I applied for some universities, and Monash is the first university that approved my application, so I think the simple and easy procedures of admission allowed me to study at Monash.

Nader applied for many universities, but he chose to study at Monash University because of the easy and simple admission procedures.

## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of Saudi international students at Victorian universities. This study delved into the experiences of six male Saudi international students who are studying at Victorian universities as international students. A qualitative narrative inquiry methodology was used to elicit participants' descriptions of their experiences, and the data explicated were derived from a semi-structured interview in a focus group discussion.

This study aimed to answer this question: Why do male Saudi international students choose to study in Australia? Participants announced some reasons why they chose to study in Australia. These reasons include a good environment for Arabs and Muslims, recommendations from friends, good weather, cost of living, agreement between some Victorian universities and Saudi universities and simple and easy admission procedures.

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