

## Saudi International Students' Perception about Services Provided by Victorian Universities

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**Abstract:** Due to the rising number of male Saudi Arabian international students who choose to study in Australia, it seems important to understand their experiences as they move to a new culture and new educational system that is completely different from their own culture and educational system. This study aims to examine the experiences of male Saudi international students who are studying in Victorian universities. The study seeks to develop a better understanding of Saudi international students' perceptions about current services available to international students and ways in which these may be improved. This qualitative research study was designed to examine the experiences of a sample of Saudi Arabian international students studying at Victorian universities in Australia. A narrative inquiry method was used to conduct semi-structured questions with the participants in a focus group interview. The main question of this study is: *How can Victorian universities improve their services for international students?* The findings of this study showed that overall Saudi international students are satisfied with current services and facilities that help them with their learning endeavours such as the availability of resources and references, the ability to access campus buildings 24 hours a day, the availability of workshops and study groups to help international students, going between campuses of a university for free and using technology in education. Moreover, they suggested some opinions for new services and facilities for international students such as bringing some native speaking students to help international students in class and giving international students the chance to participate in conference.

**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 Saudi international students' perceptions about current services available to international students and ways in which these may be improved.

## **2. Literature Review**

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

International education is the third-largest export industry in Australia and is worth almost AU20 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 the country (Pike, 2002).

The current shift in Australian educational policy is toward internationalization. The reason for the development of international education programs in Australia is 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 gap regarding the perceptions of Saudi international students about current services available to international students and ways in which these may be improved. Hence, this gap in the literature will be partially filled by conducting this study.

## **2.2 Services and Facilities for International Students**

There is little doubt that international students bring both non-economic and economic benefits to a host country. The non-economic benefits include collaboration between cultures as well as a respect for, tolerance of and appreciation of diversity (Woolf, 2002). Conversely, the economic benefits for international students are obvious. For instance, Australian universities have become big players in international education; as a result, international education is the third-largest export industry in Australia and is worth almost \$20,000,000,000. 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).

Because of the potential benefits from international students, competition has emerged between providers of international education in English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK and Australia, especially when the international education market was extended by the entry of new competitors, that is, countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia (Cheung et al., 2010). Consequently, universities provide many facilities and services to attract international students, including academic, social and psychological services.

I will give some examples from my experiences as an international student studying at Monash University.

### **2.2.1 Academic Services: Learning Support**

Academic services are provided to international students to maximize their learning achievements. It is obvious that many international students learn in a new language, culture and educational system. Therefore, international students need more support and services than domestic students. To attract international students, universities have announced many academic services and facilities for those students such as learning support.

Monash University affords international students learning support, which is divided into three types. The first type is general learning support, which is provided by a librarian to those who want to improve their academic learning skills — including the quality of their academic English. Assistance is offered in such areas as oral communication and presentation, reading, studying and exam preparation, effective listening and note-taking in lectures and seminars, analysis, problem-solving and critical thinking, academic essay writing, and report and thesis writing. I remember when I was studying in bridging course at Monash College, I have got lots of benefit from librarian of Matheson library in Clayton campus such as taking notes, making referencing and citations and critical writing and reading. The second type is faculty-based learning support, which is more specific than the previous type. Faculty-based learning support staff run a range of programmes for postgraduate students at various times of the year, particularly in the subject of academic writing. Assistance can be provided to a postgraduate via email and/or telephone.

From my experience as an international student in the Faculty of Education, leaning support can be

categorized into three types: face-to-face support, online resources and booklets. Face-to-face support, such as academic writing and reading workshops, is provided by Dr Raqib Chowdhury and Dr Anna Podorova. These workshops are offered free to all international students enrolled in the Faculty of Education. Workshops are two-hour, practical, interactive sessions focusing on academic language and writing skills. The topics of these workshops are interesting and include reading critically and effectively for assignments and task responses, the Australian education system and learning at the university, planning and structuring academic writing, developing your minor thesis, formatting, referencing and citations, as well as refining your aims and research questions and constructing your literature review. I attended many of these workshops. In fact, it is beneficial especially when I was in first semester, I was not knew the procedures of lectures and evaluating students but by attending workshops it returned me to right truck.

Another example of face-to-face support for international students in the Faculty of Education is focused study group support, which is one-hour study sessions available free to all international students and local students who are enrolled in the Faculty of Education. Although attendance at these study groups is not mandatory, it is beneficial because it offers advice and help with unit readings, assessment questions, planning and writing assignments, and group and individual assessment tasks. I have achieved many benefits from attending these study groups, like working with the study group teacher and other students; asking questions about readings, assignments and referencing; analyzing assessment questions; learning about assignment writing; talking about unit readings and developing confidence for class discussions.

“GET HELP” is yet another support programme for international students. It is a series of skills-based modules on English language development, targeted specifically toward students enrolled in a master programme for teaching (i.e., early childhood, primary and secondary — and a graduate diploma for English, primary and secondary). Students from other courses are welcome to attend. Furthermore, academic language and literacy advisors in the Faculty of Education offer academic language advice and support to all education students (including international students). Students can contact either Dr Raqib or Dr Anna to make an appointment, Even this thesis was revised by Dr. Raqib he checked overall structure and gave me suggestions for improvement. He also checked the technicalities of my writing such as referencing (Monash University, 2014).

#### 2.2.2 Social Support

Many international students experience loneliness, due to the lack of sociability in a new environment. That may harm international students in their journey as they study abroad. Khawaja and Dempsey's (2008) study comparing international and domestic tertiary students in Australia recommended providing high-quality supportive, orientation programs to international students to improve their social support. Universities that wish to attract international students must make programs to fill the gap regarding international students' social lives. Monash University has some social support services for international students such as students' clubs and social activities.

##### (1) Students' Clubs

One of the many services offered by Monash University is to enable an international student to make friends with other students — either international or local, to avoid isolation. The university's website clearly shows many student-run clubs. These clubs have diverse subjects, including academic, cultural and spiritual or religious. Moreover, these clubs are found at all campuses of the university (Monash University, 2014).

##### (2) Social Activities Support

The Faculty of Education organizes a number of social events for the international students enrolled at the

school. The objective of such social events is to make international students feel welcome and provide them with networking opportunities. In fact, I have got many friends from different nationalities by attending some social activities running in Monash. Each semester, the Faculty of Education features the following events.

- Afternoon teas offer light refreshments, free of charge, and provide an opportunity for students to mix and also meet staff members each month.
- A day trip provides the opportunity for students to enjoy a day away from their studies and to mix and meet other international students while seeing and learning about parts of Victoria. The trip is by bus and is accompanied by experienced staff.
- Finally, the faculty provides a presentation farewell lunch free of charge. This is an opportunity for students to say goodbye to and take photos of their classmates and friends as they leave the faculty at the completion of their studies (Monash University, 2014).

### 2.2.3 Psychological Services: Counselling Support

International students experience some problems related to stress or homesickness. Some universities provide services for international students to solve any potential psychological problems such as counselling support which provided for international students by Monash University.

Monash University provides counselling and mental health support for both local and international students. Counsellors can help international students with study or course problems, coping with university life, stress, anxiety and depression, loneliness, substance abuse and addictions, negative feelings and suicidal thoughts, and relationships or family issues. Students can easily get an appointment with any counsellor either by phone or e-mail.

Although some international students announced some problems regarding the dearth of services and facilities for international students (Novera, 2004; Hofer, 2009), it has been argued that sometimes universities provide services and facilities for international students but are, unfortunately, unaware of the full range of services offered to international students (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Hence, it is the responsibility of universities to publicize services and facilities for international students — and it is the responsibility of international students to ask about and search for the services and facilities provided by universities.

During my research, I found that there is the need to listen to the voice of international students regarding the services and facilities provided by host universities to strengthen positives aspects and avoid negative ones. This article will partially fill the gap in the literature about perceptions of international students regarding the services and facilities of host universities in general and the literature about Saudi international students studying at Victorian universities in particular.

## 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. The study seeks to develop a better understanding of Saudi international students' perceptions about current services available to international students and ways in which these may be improved. 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) How can Victorian universities improve their services for international students?

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. In the second phase, the researcher transcribed it verbatim, word by word, into a document written in Arabic. In the third phase, the researcher translated the Arabic document into English. The fourth 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 Current Services and Facilities that Help Saudi International Students with Their Learning Endeavours**

In section II, I talked about some services and facilities that help international students with their learning endeavours such as academic services, social support and psychological services. Academic services such as learning support which include face-to-face support, online resources and booklets. Face-to-face support, such as academic writing and reading workshops. Social support services for international students such as students' clubs and social activities. Psychological services such as counselling supports.

The question in the interview was: To what extent do the current services and facilities of your university

help you with your educational and learning endeavours? In response to this question, participants overall were satisfied with the current services and facilities provided by Victorian universities, which they described as excellent:

Fadi: In fact, the current services and facilities are excellent; there are many things that are affordable, more than what I was expecting.

Qasem also supported Fadi:

Qasem: In my opinion, the facilities and services are excellent, generally speaking, at Australian universities.

Thabit also agreed with these opinions:

Thabit: Actually, I could not agree more with all of the opinions said by my colleague in this question.

One of the participants hopes he can convey these services to Saudi universities:

Qasem: Frankly, all the services and resources are excellent, and they are not available in my country. I hope that one day we can make it available.

Additionally, participants named some services and facilities that helped them with their education and learning endeavours, such as the availability of many resources and references:

Fadi: The current services and facilities are excellent; many things are more affordable than what I was expecting. Like the possibilities of resources and references. Even something is not available at your campus, only click "request", and it will be delivered to you within a couple of days. It is helpful and useful for me as a researcher.

Hasan supported Fadi's opinion:

Hasan: I think resources at independent learning centre (ILC) — as an institution are more than enough, so for anyone wanting to prepare for international English language testing system (IELTS) — there are many resources about that, also about how to improve your reading and writing and listening.

Another helpful function is the ability to access campus buildings 24 hours a day:

Fadi: I have access to buildings on campus 24 hours, so I can study at anytime I want. Some students prefer to study at night, so you can come at night and vice versa.

Jaber agrees with Fadi:

Jaber: Access is 24 hours in a university.

Moreover, there are funds to support students to attend conferences:

Fadi: There are funds to support students to attend conferences; I think up to \$5,000.

Furthermore, workshops and study groups help international students:

Fadi: Also, workshops and group studies are available as well to help you learn how to write correctly.

Students can travel between campuses for free:

Nader: You can go between university campuses by bus for free.

Moreover, using technology in education is encouraged:

Jaber: One of the beautiful services is the easy and simple registration of subjects and units as well as attending lectures online and reading PowerPoint slides, which are available on a website.

#### **4.2 Opinions for New Services and Facilities for International Students**

During my review of literature regarding opinions of international services for new services and facilities, I did not find any study examined international students' opinions for new services and facilities. Therefore, my study is important because it will fill partially the gap in the literature by providing opinions for new services and facilities for international students.

The last question in the interview was: what changes to these would you like to see? Although participants were satisfied with the current services and facilities provided for international students, they suggested some services and facilities such as bringing native-speaker students to help international students at a language institution:

Hasan: As a student at Monash English Centre, I hope that Monash will bring some native students to help us in practicing English, because no one is native. Sometimes even the teacher is not native, so I hope to bring some native speakers once or twice a week to help students practice English. Also, we need to make more group discussions, because sometimes we pronounce words wrongly. The teacher can't follow our every single word, so native students will help both international students and teachers.

Moreover, international students need a big chance to participate in conferences:

Fadi: I hope the university will give us the chance to participate in conferences. That would help us, as students, benefit from researchers, especially if those researchers are from different universities all over the world.

Thabit best concluded this theme:

Thabit: I am satisfied; everything is brilliant.

### **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: How can Victorian universities improve their services for international students? The findings of this study showed that overall Saudi international students are satisfied with current services and facilities that help them with their learning endeavours such as the availability of resources and references, the ability to access campus buildings 24 hours a day, the availability of workshops and study groups to help international students, going between campuses of a university for free and using technology in education. Moreover, they suggested some opinions for new services and facilities for international students such as bringing some native speaking students to help international students in class and giving international students the chance to participate in conference.

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