The Living and Learning Experiences of Saudi Arabian Undergraduate Students in a Western Canadian University

by

Norah Abdullah G. Alghamdi

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
(Curriculum Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

December 2016

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Abstract

Saudi Arabian student enrollment in undergraduate programs has been increasing over the years in postsecondary institutions worldwide. This has been more so in English speaking countries. Yet, there has been no research investigating Saudi undergraduate students’ living and learning experiences in postsecondary institutions abroad. Hence, the study reported in this thesis explored through a qualitative case study Saudi Arabian undergraduate students’ experiences at a Western Canadian University (WCU). The goal was to understand the nature of Saudi students’ living and learning experiences during their study abroad and in particular at a WCU.

Involvement and sociocultural theoretical frameworks and narrative methodology were employed to interview 10 undergraduate students from Saudi Arabia studying at WCU. Narrative method of interviewing allowed the students to tell stories of their living and learning experiences at WCU. A search for common patterns within each individual story and across the stories revealed two key themes common to their experiences: 1) “Expression of an Understanding of Educational Systems and the Complexities and Challenges of Attending a Canadian University”, manifest in both: a) academic; and b) language encounters; and 2) “Expression of Understanding Social Complexities”, which manifested in encounters involving: 1) new cultures and environments; and 2) different rules and responsibilities. The study’s findings reveal insights into the challenges and successes experienced by Saudi Arabian students studying at a WCU and personal responsibilities they considered to be successful as well as offer suggestions for ways stakeholders can make Saudi student study at WCU a rewarding experience.
Preface

This research study obtained the approval of the University of British Columbia UBC Research Ethics Board. Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia; (UBC BREB Number: H16-00427).
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Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all those who provided me the possibility to complete this thesis. I am extremely thankful to my research supervisor, Dr. Samson Madera Nashon for all his constant support and insistence for excellence throughout this research study. Also, my sincere gratitude is extended to my research committee member, Dr. J. Douglas Adler for all his kind mentorship and help in this study. With a grateful heart, I thank my lovely external examiner Dr. Sandra Scott to be part of this great committee. It is my pleasure and I am very grateful to have these great and experienced people guiding me through the process of my Masters’ degree. This thesis would not be what it is if it was not for these people and their guidance and patience in overcoming numerous obstacles I have been facing through my research. I also want to thank my friends and all the participants in my study for their help and time to get results of better quality.

I would like to extend my grateful thanks to the most important people in my life, my dear Mom and Dad for all your love, encouragement and supports which means the world to me. Also, many thanks to my sisters and brothers who have made me feel special and believed in me when I had difficulty. Special and big thanks to my lovely family my husband (Saleh), my son (Albara) and my daughter (Kenda) who bear with me the studying pressure. Thank you for all your support all the time, which has given me the will to keep working on this until it was finished. Without all of you, none of this would have been worth what it is today.
CHAPTER 1: Introduction to the Study

1.1 Study Background

The foundational elements of the Saudi Arabian education system can be traced back to the early 20th century when the country first established the Directorate of Education (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Prokop, 2003). This Directorate contributed substantially in subsequent years to establishing the basic structure and requirements that would characterize education in the country for a number of decades. The next significant change that occurred in the Saudi Arabian education system occurred in 1953 when the country founded the Ministry of Education (Achoui, 2009). The main motivation for the reforms in the Saudi Arabian education system at this time included the need for human resource development through education and specialized training, as well as the country’s growing need for a comprehensive economic infrastructure. Notably, neither of these initiatives focused on religious values despite the fact that religious values have come to constitute a cornerstone element of the modern Saudi Arabian education system (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2016).

In 1958, the Saudi Arabian government through the Ministry of Education established the basic education structure that students would advance through in the state-sponsored education system (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2016). Today, this structure continues to characterize Saudi Arabian education as the Saudi Arabian education system is divided into a number of different categories that distinguish students based on grade level, similar to structures in Western countries such as Canada and the United States. In this respect, primary education constitutes the first state-sponsored formal stage of education, the elementary school. This stage comprises grades 1 through 6, with the typical age range being 6 to 12 years old. In Canada and the United States these schools are co-educational. Whereas in Saudi
Arabia they are gender-based, as boys and girls receive separate instruction in separate schools. Scholars are divided about the merits and disadvantages of this separation. Some argue that despite the separation, both boys and girls receive equal (same) education. There are those who argue that separation creates disparate outcomes at a young age. Middle years education, Intermediate School, is the next formal stage of state sponsored education. This phase of education covers grades 7 to 9 and includes 12 to 15 year-olds.

High school (Secondary) education is Saudi Arabia’s final three years of state-sponsored education. This phase runs from grade 10 to 12 (16 to 19 year-olds). While in Western countries students typically continue through traditional forms of education during this age, in Saudi Arabia students instead are given the option of continuing this general education route or entering into a specialized education system (Vocational) at a technical school where a wide range of different technical education programs are offered. Following this state-sponsored technical vocation education, students can enter into self-funded vocational or tertiary education programs.

While the Saudi Arabian education system follows a state-sponsored structure that is similar to many other Western nations, much of the content taught in this system is different from content in traditional Western public school systems. The most significant difference that characterizes the Saudi Arabian education system is the strong emphasis on instruction of religion, underscored by the gender segregation, which is emblematic of this religious emphasis in the Saudi education system. This further involves instructing students in ways that deepen their understanding of the Islamic creed and provide them with the values and moral assumptions underlying Islamic teachings.

The Saudi Arabian higher or post-secondary education is similar to education systems in Canada and the United States, although the Saudi system draws upon the valued elements espoused
in Islamic laws and creeds. These core elements of the Saudi education system were established in 1975 when a new section of the Ministry of Education become the Ministry of Higher Education. The new Ministry focused primarily on higher education matters in Saudi Arabia. Today, the Ministry of Education Council is the upper most body responsible for all levels of education, including post-secondary, in the country.

In 2013 there were 13,626 Primary, 7,826 Intermediate, and 4,885 Secondary levels as well as 25 public universities, 9 licensed private universities, 70 technical and vocational training institutes, and 35 colleges of technology in Saudi Arabia (Clark, 2012, 2014). Despite the high number of post secondary school enrollment opportunities, many Saudi Arabians prefer to take advantage of the opportunities the government provides in facilitating study abroad programs.

Similar to many countries, Saudi Arabian or Saudi students have the option to study abroad. In previous years, the Saudi Arabian government was extremely active in providing funds for students to study abroad through scholarships from the King Abdullah Scholarship Fund. This scholarship fund was first implemented in 2005, and the fund placed very few restrictions on countries where Saudi Arabian students could study. However, because of fluctuating crude oil prices, the country has now introduced new restrictions for studying abroad. Previously, most students were eligible for the scholarship to study at any university abroad, but now the new rules require scholarships to be made available only to students who are attending one of the top 100 global universities or to students who are studying in a program that is rated in the top 50 in its field (Kottasova, 2016).

In 2014, there were 14,000 Saudi students in Canadian institutions (International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF), 2016), about 4% of Canada’s total international enrollment. At this stage, it is imperative to give a definition of an international student. An
international student is an individual who temporarily immigrates to another country with the sole aim of taking a course of study in an approved program in either an academic or vocational institute (Clark, 2009).

Challenges faced by Saudi students studying abroad do not end upon returning home to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, perhaps the greatest Catch-22 (Heller, 1961) or snag for those students is the longer they study abroad, the greater challenges they will face when they return home. As Saudi students struggle to acculturate and integrate with the cultural values of the West through Western post-secondary institutions they also face unemployment upon returning home (Albeit, 2014). Despite the struggle Saudi Arabian students studying abroad experience, a review of the relevant literature revealed an absence of empirical studies investigating the experience of Saudi Arabian students studying in Canadian postsecondary institutions.

A study such as this is important. This research recognizes the significant challenges that Saudi Arabian students studying in Canada face. The findings yield important information and provide in depth understanding regarding these students’ experiences living and learning in Canadian Universities.

1.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by following guiding research questions:

1) What might be Saudi Arabian students’ curricular expectations prior to starting to live and learn in their respective undergraduate programs at a Western Canadian University? What assumptions underlie the students’ curricular expectations?

2) How have Saudi students’ experiences of living and learning in their respective undergraduate programs unfolded since joining a Western Canadian
University? How have their modes of learning evolved over the time in their respective undergraduate programs?

3) What do the students see as the critical decisions they have made in terms of living and learning strategies including social and cultural to be successful in their respective undergraduate programs?

1.3 Study Significance

The study’s main objective is to gain comprehensive qualitative insights into the living and learning experiences of Saudi Arabian students enrolled at a Western Canadian University. While the particular modes of intended insights will be discussed at greater length in the methodology chapter, an intent of this investigation is to gain and provide insights to guide future Saudi Arabian students studying abroad in Western universities. Second, the research intends to provide pertinent information to universities to aid students from other countries. Finally, findings will aid in ensuring Saudi Arabia and Canada maintain a strong relationship in terms of the success of students studying abroad.

1.4 Researcher Background

I am a female graduate student from Saudi Arabia, studying at a Western Canadian University. Prior to enrollment at a Western Canadian University, I studied in segregated girls’ schools for approximately 16 years in my home country of Saudi Arabia.

1.5 Thesis Overview

The dissertation contains five chapters. The first chapter is the present introduction chapter. This chapter provided an overview of the Saudi Arabian education system as well as a brief overview of the challenges associated with studying abroad. The second chapter presents
the theoretical framework and the literature review. This chapter includes a comprehensive overview of scholarly research on students’ experiences while studying abroad as well as significant investigations into different educational practices. The third chapter focuses on the study’s methodology and discusses the research design with justification for the case study design approach. Chapter three also includes the assumptions that are contained in the study, as well as the sampling and data collection procedures. The fourth chapter presents the study findings and data analysis and includes the participants’ results in relation to the study’s main research questions. The fifth and last chapter provides the summary by answering the research questions. Recommendations and future research are discussed. The study’s results are examined in regards to broad ranging emergent themes. This chapter also provides reflective statements on the results and considers recommendations established both by the researcher as well as by the participants regarding effective measures to assist future Saudi Arabian students who plan to study abroad in Canadian universities.
CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical frameworks that inform this study. First, I will present and discuss Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984). I will then present and discuss Socio-cultural theory (Lantolf, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). Finally, I will provide a literature review of key studies on different international and Saudi Arabian students’ experiences of studying abroad.

2.1 Student Involvement Theory and Socio-Cultural Theory

This study is informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984); and Socio-cultural theory (Lantolf, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998). In employing Astin’s (1984, 1985, 1999) student involvement theory or theory of student learning, the focus is limited to the essential core of learning by getting involved. By applying this theory, I was interested in what Astin (1999) describes as, “behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development (the how of student development)” (p. 522). Although this statement seems to be aimed at instructors who plan learning experiences where foreign students are involved, my study employs this theory to investigate the students’ prior expectations of programmatic experiences and the unfolding experience in the respective programmatic curricula in terms of the mechanisms for development, socially, culturally and academically, and how students mitigate the associated challenges.

2.1.1 Student Involvement Theory

The theory of student involvement or theory of student learning clarifies how the results of higher institutions are perceived concerning the developments and changes students undergo as a result of participating in co-curricular activities. This theory is based on three aspects (Astin, 1984). The first aspect is the input of the student, which includes previous experiences,
background, and demographics. The environment of the student is the second aspect, which covers any other experiences the student will undergo in the college (Forney et al, 2013). The final aspect is the outcomes which account for the characteristics, attitudes, values, beliefs, and knowledge of a student that continue to exist even after a student completes college.

Furthermore, Astin (1984) developed five main assumptions on the involvement approach. He suggests that involvement requires an investment of physical and psychological energy. The second assumption states that involvement is constant, and the amount of energy that a student invests varies from others. Thirdly, elements of involvement may either be quantitative or qualitative. The fourth assumption states that the development of a student is directly proportion to his/her level of involvement (Forney et al, 2013). The final assumption is that the academic performance is connected to the involvement of the student. The approach has been widely applied in many institutions of higher learning to reinforce the involvement of students in co-curricular activities.

Additional studies confirm the correlation between student involvement and good academic results (Forney et al., 2013). When students take part in activities such as leadership positions, student organization among others the level of retention is boosted, therefore leading to good academic results. Most universities encourage students to participate in co-curricular activities for better academic outcomes.

Research has shown that a student who is greatly involved is highly motivated to learn, leading to academic excellence (Astin, 1984). For instance, a student who participates in student organizations, interacts with fellow students and faculty members, spends most of his or her time on campus is likely to devote energy to studying. On the contrary, students who are uninvolved
spend most of their time away from campus, do not interact with other members of the faculty, avoid extracurricular activities often devote very little energy to their studies.

The theory considers the energy and time of the student as the resources of the institution. Hence, all the practices and policies of an organization (those related to both academic and non-academic issues) can be evaluated by looking at the level of decrease or increase in student involvement. The amount of personal development and student learning linked to an educational program is about the amount and the quality of student participation in the course. The success of an educational practice or policy is proportional to the ability of that system or policy to enhance the involvement of a student (Astin, 1984).

The theory is mainly based on a longitudinal analysis of college dropouts that tried to identify factors within the university environment that significantly influence the persistence of a student in college. It was reported that nearly every factor could be traced back to student involvement. It was also noted that every positive issue would increase student participation while negative ones could reduce the level of involvement. This means that the positive aspects contributed to the student’s completion of college while negative ones led to dropout (Astin, 1984).

2.1.2 Socio-Cultural Theory

I also employed socio-cultural theory (Lantolf, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978) in framing the study as the focus and content of the research questions are investigated in a social and cultural context (Lantolf, 2007). According to Lantolf (2007), socio-cultural theory considers human cognition to be mediated by cultural tools that evolve over time (Wertsch, 1998). Thus, cultural, social, historical, and institutional settings have a strong influence on living and learning processes (Wertsch, 1998). Moreover, living and learning cannot be separated from the influence
of the socio-cultural world where they are experienced.

The socio-cultural theory is concerned with the social aspect of consciousness, which is principle in fact and in time (Wertsch, 1990). The individual element of knowledge is secondary and derivate. From the statement, the individual mental functioning is not just derived from the social interaction instead the particular processes and structures portrayed by someone can be drawn from their interactions with other people.

In his writing, Vygotsky (1978) concentrates on three primary themes that explain the nature of interdependence between the social and an individual in the development and learning process. The first theme states that the personal development and mental functioning originate from social sources. This is illustrated the “genetic law of development” developed by Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1990). The law says that any task of the cultural development of a child is exhibited in two planes or twice on the stage; the social appears first followed by the psychological, initially between individuals as an inter-mental group then in a child as the intra-mental category. From the stated idea, it is clear that as learners take part in various joint works, and then reflect on the impacts of working together, they gain new knowledge and strategies of culture and the world. The tenet has been widely elaborated through analyzing relations between people with different levels of knowledge for instance novices and experts or children and their caretakers.

The second theme states that human acts on the individual and social planes are reconciled by signs and tools referred to as semiotics. They include mnemonic techniques, counting systems, the algebraic symbols, writing, and work of art, maps, diagrams, mechanical drawings and schemes (Lantolf et al, 2007). Other semiotic means are calculators, computers, paint-brushes and much more which significant in representational activities (Lantolf et al,
2007). The semiotic means are the instruments that speed up the knowledge co-construction and the means that are reflected to help in problem-solving activity in the future.

The third and final theme of genetic analysis was proposed by Vygotsky as he argued that the first two themes can be best studied using genetic analysis (Wertsch, 1990). According to Wertsch’s understanding of Vygotsky’s theme, the historical study of a concept includes reviewing it in the process of change as explored in various phases, from birth to death. Through this, the nature of something can be discovered.

In contrary to the perceptions that existed during his time, where learning was considered to be an external process while development was internal, Vygotsky mainly dealt with interdependence and unity of development and learning (Lantolf et al, 2007). For instance, he criticized Piaget’s theory of perceived maturation as a prerequisite of knowledge. He introduced the idea of ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD) as a new methodology to the issue that learning should be equated to the level of child’s development (Wertsch, 1990) and claimed that in order to comprehend the link between development and learning, two stages of development should be identified, that is, the potential and the actual. The actual level refers to the achievements a child can perform alone or independently. The potential level refers to what the child can accomplish when assisted.

In summary, student involvement theory examines the quality and quantity of the psychological and physical energy that students spend during their time as a student including participating in co-curricular activities, being absorbed in academic work and interacting with faculty members and fellow students. The theory states that if the involvement of a student is great, then the amount of personal development will also be great. The most significant
assumption of the approach is that the success of an education practice or policy is proportional to the capacity of that system or policy to increase the level of student involvement.

Socio-cultural theory explains how the mental functioning of an individual is connected to the institutional, historical, and cultural context (Lantolf et al, 2007). The approach focuses on the role played by culturally organized actions and involvement in social interactions in impacting psychological development. The theory introduces two levels of development that is the actual and the potential. The actual are the achievements a child can perform alone or independently. The potential level refers to what the child can accomplish when assisted.

2.2 Literature Review

I will now review and discuss select literature pertinent to the framing of the study. I will organize the review and discussion thematically into two headings. The first heading, *International Undergraduate Students’ Academic Life* contains two subheadings. The first subheading, *New Education Systems and Classroom Environments* examines the challenges for students that travel abroad. The second subheading, *Language Barrier* presents language challenges experienced by international students. The second heading, *International Undergraduate Students’ Social Life* contains two subheadings. The first subheading, *New Cultures and Environments* portrays challenges for international when cultural values are imbedded in new learning environments. The second subheading, *Different Rules and Responsibilities* reviews how learners bring different reactions and responsibilities from various scholars in their new country of study. The literature review will expound on all these phenomenon as will be observed below.
2.2.1 International Undergraduate Students’ Academic Life

In their academic life, International students enrolled in undergraduate programs in Canada can encounter numerous challenges. New education systems and classroom environments may affect the ability of students to prosper and graduate.

When students travel abroad to study, they experience many different challenges including new education systems, instructional methods, language, culture, social norms, living environments, beliefs, psychological problems, and other factors. Tseng and Newton (2002) state:

[T]he key adjustment problems faced by international students include the following four major categories: (1) general living adjustment, such as adjusting to American food, living/housing environment and transportation, adaptation to a new climate (weather), dealing with financial problems and health care concerns; (2) academic adjustment, such as lack of proficiency in the English language, lack of understanding of the American educational system, and lack of effective learning skills for gaining academic success; (3) socio-cultural adjustment, for example, experiencing culture shock, cultural fatigue, or racial discrimination, having difficulties in adjusting to new social/cultural customs, norms and regulations, differences in intercultural contacts/social activities, and encountering conflicts between American host standards (or values, world views, life styles) and those of home country; and (4) personal psychological adjustment, such as experiencing homesickness, loneliness, depression, frustration, or feeling alienation, isolation, the loss of status or identity, and feelings of worthlessness. (p. 591-592)

Tseng and Newton (2002) note in the passage above the experiences that many international
students confront. These comprise some of the realities of studying abroad, far away from families and friends. When international students travel to a host country to begin their academic studies, most of them start to feel and experience some challenges such as “anxiety, confusion, insomnia, physical illness, and depression” (1996, p. 171).

On the positive side, students who study abroad gain a number of advantages through their experiences include growth and life enhancement that occur in the international students' lives, both academic and culture experiences (Brown & Brow, 2009; Cahpdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Davis, 2014; McLachlan & Justice, 2009;).

2.2.1.1 New Education Systems and Classroom Environments

Alrashidi and Phan, (2015) assert that while the changes in the educational system in Saudi Arabia have focused on ensuring the system meets international standards, the educational system continues to rely on gender separation throughout all education and work levels. It is very rare and exceptional to find mixed gender classes or work environments such as in medical classes, hospital fields, and business work. Most Saudi Arabian students studying abroad may experience for the first time mixed gender classes and instructors of the opposite sex.

Different learners have multiple methods of perception and data processing strategies. These define a learner’s normal mode of “perceiving, remembering, thinking, and problem solving” (Sywelem, Al-Harbi, Fathema & Witte, 2012, p. 11). That is to say, people have their own learning styles that they apply to their studies. As Hyland (1993) confirmed in his study, learning style is influenced by gender, and academic and cultural background are parts of the individual differences. Many researchers and scholars in academia define learning styles. For example, here are some of the definitions according to (Sywelem, Al-Harbi, Fathema & Witte, 2012): The modes of perceiving, remembering, thinking, problem-solving, and decision making
reflects the regularities in information processing that result from congenial manners based on personality trends (Messick, 1994, p. 122). According to Kinsella, (1995, p. 171), learners continue to prefer their natural, preferred, and habitual learning ways. They have learned to absorb, process and retain information with less regard to the changes in teaching methods and source of content. These result from the increasing consistency in memory, perceptions, thinking, and judgments of students in response to the stimulus provided (Curry, 2000, p. 239), and the "individual's preferred ways of gathering, organizing, and thinking about information" (Fleming, 2001, p. 1). These preferences affect learning in foreign countries.

According to Wu et al. (2015), many international students find it difficult to cope with the new systems. Some of them observe that the educational system is very different from either what they expected or the systems they were used to back in their native countries.

Faced with challenges including new educational settings and classroom environments, international students may further be affected academically (Pedersen, 1991, p. 38; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Liao, & Wu, 2007, p. 391). Many international students often expect the same high grades obtained in their home country and often feel disappointed and depressed when they receive low marks (Pedersen, 1991, p. 34). According to Wu et al., (2015), the adjustment for international students to new education systems and classroom environments can prove to be challenging.

2.2.1.2 Language

Living in a place and among people who speak a different language to one's mother language can be difficult and stressful (Kedzior, 2016). When most students travel to foreign countries for studies, they need to prepare themselves by learning the language used in that country as, according to Nyland and Hartel (2013), most international students will face
difficulties with the language during their academic and social lives in the host country. The English language is one of the first challenges students will face in English speaking countries (Li, Fox & Almarza, 2007, p. 1-44; Luzio-Lockett, 1998, p. 216; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000, p. 100; Tompson & Tompson, 1996, p. 55). Many international students do well with learning the language but may feel they need to improve and become as fluent as native speakers (Jie, 2016). Moreover, being proficient in a language may differ from person to person as it is based on the individual’s writing, reading, speaking and listening skills (Onur, 2016). Even international students who may be considered to be fluent in the English language find it challenging to be in an English-only context (Li, Fox & Almarza, 2007, p. 1-44).

2.2.2 International Undergraduate Students’ Social Life

The education system of Saudi Arabia has encompassed the application of Sharia laws in the management of students. This affects their social life and the culture in which they live.

2.2.2.1 New Cultures and Environments

Hofstede et al., (1997) found that cultures have some influence on how we learn. When students go abroad to study, they find that not only must they understand new academic environments but they also must understand the culture of the country to which they have temporarily immigrated.

According to a survey conducted by Davis (2014), participants reported some of the major differences between the Saudi and American cultures included the following; "The treatment of women (15 participants), social mores (14 participants), and attitudes toward religion and morality, laws, privacy, time and family closeness (13 participants)” (p. 26). Shabeeb (1996) reported in a study involving 99 males and 4 females Saudi and Arabian Gulf international students about the differences between Saudi and Arabian Gulf culture and the
United States culture that 68% of participants responded on cultural similarity and differences that the Saudi and Arabian Gulf culture was "very far apart from the American culture," and 31% responded that their cultures have some "overlap" with the American culture. Importantly, none of the participants reported any closeness or similarities between their culture and the culture in the U.S (p. 104).

Studying in Canada exposes Saudi students to different cultural constructs. According to Hamad (2012), participants in the scholarship program in Canada elicit common constructs when dealing with their social roles regarding the cultures of the host country and those of the countries of origin. Learning to exist in these different environments with many varied social approaches places a heavy responsibility on Saudi students. Consideration of the cultures of the people of Saudi Arabia with their application of Sharia laws and those of Canada puts a burden on Saudi Arabia students as they participate in social activities. Saudi Arabia is considered a collectivistic society whereas North American’s societies are more individualistic (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 1997).

2.2.2.2 Different Rules and Responsibilities

Along with academic, language and social challenges, many international Saudi students feel pressure from the scholarship administration (Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau), the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education and Immigration and Citizenship Canada. In Saudi Arabia recent changes in eligibility rules for the scholarship program have seen the inclusion of the need for students to maintain a minimum grade point average for continued support by the program. The changes to the rules also included that those applying must be granted admission to a top 50 academic programs and a top 100 universities based on the determination of the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia (Paul, 2016).
Immigration and Citizenship Canada requires the student to have upon entry an introduction letter from the source country visa office, their passport, and other forms of travel documents authorizing their entry. The letter of acceptance issued by the institution where the student will study, a temporary visa for residence, and documents to prove funds (Immigration and Citizenship Canada, (n.d, p.3) are required. While in Canada, students are required to have full-time enrollment during spring and fall times and must refrain from unauthorized employment. Enrollment in online courses is limited to one per semester. A violation of any of these rules may result in the termination of student's scholarship in Canada (Jared, 2016, p. 41).

Finally, along with the government expectations most Saudi students face new domestic requirements. These include paying bills every month (telephone, Internet, insurance, rent, etc.), buying groceries, cooking, doing laundry and housekeeping, and other domestic chores.

2.3 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the challenges students including those from Saudi Arabia experience when studying abroad, especially in Canada. There is evidence that the language barrier is usually the first challenge to affect foreign students. To be academically successful students must adapt to new environments and cultures. Students from Saudi Arabia find it challenging especially as they come from a culture influenced by Sharia Law whereas Canada is a secular society. As Hofstede et al. (1997) states, a student’s learning experience becomes a success when they can easily relate to the social, cultural, and academic environment.

In the next chapter, I will provide more detail about the study’s methodology. I will restate my research questions and discuss with the context of the research design. I will also describe my participants and outline how I went about my data collection and data analysis of my research.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology and Research Design

To investigate the curricular expectations and experiences of Saudi Arabian students prior to and since joining undergraduate programs at a Western Canadian University, I employed a qualitative case study approach, narrative methodology, and I conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative data. I will also discuss in this chapter my recruitment of participants, data collection, and data analysis, I will then present my study’s ethical considerations, validity, and reliability in more detail. I then conclude the chapter with a brief summary.

3.1 Research Questions

This qualitative study is an exploration and description of the living and learning experiences of Saudi Arabian undergraduate students in a Western Canadian University. Hence, the following are the guiding research questions:

1) What might be Saudi Arabian students’ curricular expectations prior to starting to live and learn in their respective undergraduate programs at a Western Canadian University? What assumptions underlie the students’ curricular expectations?

2) How have Saudi students’ experiences of living and learning in their respective undergraduate programs unfolded since attending a Western Canadian University? How have their modes of learning evolved over the time in their respective undergraduate programs?

3) What do the students see as the critical decisions they have made in terms of living and learning strategies including social and cultural to be successful in their respective undergraduate programs?
The above questions guided me in deeper probing of the participants’ experiences and should not be considered as discrete to the extent that each question requires a separate answer. Instead these questions should be seen as assisting me in focusing the data collection process with a view to eliciting richer and thicker data. The purpose of these questions is to make sense of the participants’ experiences while studying abroad through the context of enrollment in undergraduate programs at a Western Canadian University.

3.2 The Research Design

As experiences are often unique and conveyed by different people differently, I considered a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) design to be appropriate for the kind of exploration of Saudi Arabian students’ experience of living and learning in a Western Canadian University. Moreover, I considered narrative methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990) to be appropriate to elicit the students’ experiences as these narratives are better expressed through stories. I interviewed (Appendix C: Interview Questions) 10 undergraduate students from Saudi Arabia and guided by the above questions, I focused on the core of the inquiry, which was enabling all participants to tell their stories of living and learning in the University. I ensured minimum researcher intervention except when I sought clarification of what participants said and when deeper probing was required. As I interacted with the select participants by listening to their stories and reflections and observing their gestures about of their home experiences and how they interacted with their unfolding experience within the university abroad, two main themes characterizing their experiences developed and solidified. These themes were influenced by the literature reviewed and the two theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in this thesis: (1) involvement; and (2) socio cultural theory. These themes formed early on in my initial interaction with participants’ storied
experiences. Hence, I continued to test their validity as I interviewed additional participants. In
drew upon a thematic analysis for making sense of the narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3 Nature of the Study

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Study

Qualitative research study is any “kind of research that produces findings that are not
arrived at using statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990,
p. 17). Therefore, qualitative research does not have any descriptive formulations since the
research paradigm emphasizes the application of inductive and interpretive methods. It is a
subjective type of research that is socially created (Anderson, 1987). It is a research procedure
that produces descriptive data where people write, story, and/or speak words and observable
behaviours. The qualitative researcher often directs settings and the people within the settings.
This kind of research is viewed as part of the whole (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 2) and enables
researchers to establish their thoughts into conceptual boundaries.

3.3.2 Case Study Approach

Case study as defined by Creswell (2012):

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-
life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over
time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information
(e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and
reports a case description and case themes. (p. 97)

Merriam (1998) claims, “a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of
the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in
context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p. 19). Yin’s
two-fold definition of the case study is more encompassing. One, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. Two, case study inquiry copes with technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

3.3.3 Narrative Methodology

I chose narrative as the research methodology for this study. Narrative methodology is defined by Czarniawska (2004) as “… understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). Also, Clandinin and Connolly (2000) claim, “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p. 20). The main purpose of using narrative inquiry in this research is to gather and interpret the participants’ stories about their experiences.

Narrative is both “phenomenon and method” as we can equally say “inquiry into narrative” as “narrative inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Narrative inquiry provides a structured quality of experience which allows the researcher to study the participants in a more organized way. Participants tell stories of their lives and narrative researchers, compile and write narratives about the participants’ experiences.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is rarely acknowledged and poorly demarcated but widely used as a qualitative analytic method (Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001). Thematic analysis is a qualitative
approach that is complex, diverse, and nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003). The thematizing of meanings is a shared generic skill across qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Hence, it is characterized not as a specific method but as a tool to be used across different methods (Boyatzis, 1998). Scholars such as Ryan and Bernard (2000) argue that thematic coding is not a process within the major analytic tradition but rather a specific and unique approach; a method in its own right.

Thematic analysis is an approach used for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within a data set. It is a minimally described and organized data set rich in details. However, it often goes further as it interprets various aspects of the research topics (Boyatzis, 1998).

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis Process

The phases of the thematic analysis are similar to the phases of any other qualitative research. The stages of thematic analysis are not all unique to thematic analysis. The process of thematic analysis begins when a researcher notices and looks for patterns – in the issues and of meaning - in the data especially during the data collection process. It ends with the reporting of the meaning and the content of patterns in the data where the “themes are abstract and constructs the investors to identify before, during, and after the analysis” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780). The analysis should entail the constant moving forward and back between the data set and the data coding that it is being analyzed. Writing is an integral part of the analysis. Hence, it does not take place at the end as it does with statistical analysis. Therefore, the writing should be in the first phase with the jotting down of ideas and potential coding schema and should continue with throughout the entire analysis process.
Furthermore, it is significant to recognize that the qualitative analysis guidelines are not fixed but are dynamic and follow basic precepts. Flexibility is the norm to respond to the data’s direction that aligns with the research questions (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the analysis is not a linear process where it moves from one phase to the next. Rather it is a more recursive process where the researcher moves back and forth as required in all phases of the analysis. The process is developed over time (Ely et al., 1997) and should not be rushed.

### 3.4.2 Advantages of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis offers flexibility in research methodology. The results of thematic analysis can be summarized using key characteristic of a large body of data set. Thematic analysis can highlight the difference and similarities across the data set and can generate unanticipated insights that allows for social and psychological interpretations.

### 3.5 Assumptions

Before the data collection, I anticipated that the participants would show a willingness and eagerness to share their personal experiences including both the description of their academic and personal challenges while they attended the Western Canadian University. I expected the participants would encounter a world that is immensely different from their home country both in culture and language. Based on the work of Gebhard (2010) who found that Saudi students enrolled in educational programs outside of Saudi Arabia do not readily seek personal or educational support services such as counselling, advising, and tutoring I assumed that most Saudi Arabian students would be hesitant to seek support services when they encountered academic and personal challenges.

I also expected the differences in the educational systems of the different countries would pose a challenge to the students, and some students may find difficulty in dealing with and/or
associating with their supervisors due to their cultural view of not challenging supervisors. Also, the lack of familiarity working with people of the opposite gender would also pose a challenge for the Saudi students.

3.6 Study Setting

The study was conducted at a Western Canadian University. English is the language of instruction. The university has a diverse student population and a sizeable international student population which included students from Saudi Arabia.

3.7 Participants

My chosen study participants had to be students from Saudi Arabia currently enrolled at the Western Canadian University. I sought the help of the Saudi Student Association (SSA) and the Saudi Arabian Student Association (SASA) to recruit candidates for the study, and I included contact details for those wishing more information about participating in the study (see Appendix A). All students willing to participate and who met the minimum criteria for participation were included in the study (6 females and 4 males). The participants and the programs they are enrolled in are listed in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>3rd year Business Administration</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly</td>
<td>3rd year Psychology</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma</td>
<td>4th year Sociology Major - Law and Society Minor</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rana</td>
<td>1st year Chemistry</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>1st year Food, Nutrition, and Health</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samar</td>
<td>2nd year International Relations Political Science</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmad</td>
<td>3rd year Political Science</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>3rd year Political Science</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>1st year Engineering</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>3rd year Materials Engineering</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

3.8 Data Collection

3.8.1 Interviews

The purpose of the interview is to use discussion and conversation as well as questioning to provide insight into the student’s insight as well as an investigation of themes. According to Sumner (2012) 10 participants is a suitable number when conducting participant interviews to produce detailed descriptions of the occurrence under study. In my study, each participant was interviewed separately for approximately 45-60 minutes. I ensured the participants’ privacy through the use of pseudonyms in the research documents rather than individual names (Lim, 2013). All interviews were digitally recorded and encrypted.
3.9 Data Analysis

Each interview recording was transcribed in preparation for analysis. Thick descriptions of interview data in form of narratives of student experiences were developed. These data corpus was sifted through and in some cases reconstructed to identify common themes (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to address the study’s overall goal (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2013). This is necessary since the nature of the narrative interview is expected to flow as stories and reconstruction of storied data will be necessary to organize the student experiences. The analysis of the one-on-one narrative interview data sets involved examining and categorizing the respective student interview transcripts in search of answers to goal of the study as guided by the study’s research questions. In other words, I identified domains, themes, patterns, and relationships across and among all the interview transcriptions. This resulted in key themes that cut across the student narrative interview data sets.

The data analysis constituted an extraction of the significant statements from the questions answered by the participants on their experiences while enrolled at a Western Canadian University (WCU). The collected data was then described by meaningful sentences or statements that gave individual voice under each specific theme. The notable quotes, phrases, and statements were then grouped into larger information units that were vital in the development of a textual description of what the participants experienced while enrolled at a Western Canadian University (Friesen, Henriksson & Saevi, 2012). The final textual description contained precise examples that offered more and full illustrations of the experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 2009).
3.10 Ethical Considerations

I obtained approval to conduct this research from the UBC Research Information Services Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB). In accordance with BREB procedures, all participants received “Letter of Informed Consent” outlining the principal investigator(s) and the conditions for participating in and withdrawing from the study (see Appendix B). To ensure anonymity and to maintain privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants. All data was stored on an encrypted password-protected computer, and documents stored in a locked file cabinet. After five years, all data including identities and personal information of the participants will be destroyed.

Participation was entirely voluntary and students had the opportunity to withdraw from participation at any point in the research without any required notice or reason. All students were required to provide personal consent for their participation.

3.11 Study Validity and Reliability

In order to increase the validity and credibility of my study, I triangulated multiple data sources as suggested by Mathison (1988). The initial data in my study came from semi-structured interviews. In order to establish reliability, I employed a dialogic reliability check multiple times throughout the study as described by Åkerlind (2012). This was done by regularly communicating my interpretation of the data with the members of my supervisory committee as a form of member checking and to establish a consensus regarding the interpretation of the data.

Throughout the study, I emphasized my status as a researcher. It was made clear to all the participants in the Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix B) that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.
3.12 Study Limitations

The study’s findings are limited to only those Saudi Arabian undergraduate students were enrolled at a Western Canadian University and who participated in this research study. However, like many other case studies, the findings might be seen to apply to those in similar contexts.

3.13 Chapter Summary

In summary, in this chapter I presented and justified why I employed a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), case study approach (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also, I provided a brief description of the participants in the study and outlined the data collection and data analysis process. In the next chapter, I will present and discuss the study findings and analysis.
CHAPTER 4: Study Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, I report the findings and provide an analysis of the study data in order to address:

1) What might be Saudi Arabian students’ curricular expectations prior to starting to live and learn in their respective undergraduate programs at a Western Canadian University? What assumptions underlie the students’ curricular expectations?

2) How has the Saudi students’ experience of living and learning in their respective undergraduate programs unfolded since attending a Western Canadian University? How have their modes of learning evolved over the time in their respective undergraduate programs?

3) What do the students see as the critical decisions they have made in terms of living and learning strategies including social and cultural to be successful in their respective undergraduate programs?

4.1 Overview

This study’s findings were divided into two major themes: 1) Expression of an understanding of educational systems and the complexities and challenges of attending a Western Canadian University; and 2) Expression of an Understanding of Social Complexities. To highlight specific elements with each theme, sub-categories were created. Patton (2010) indicates that within qualitative fieldwork frequently themes will emerge through the data. The researcher’s responsibility is to divide these themes as a means of gaining greater insights. Throughout this study, themes became apparent at multiple junctures in the results section, with the ultimate division
into two themes. These themes were related to the research questions under study and recurred among a preponderance of the participants.

4.2 Theme 1: Expression of an Understanding of Educational Systems and the Complexities and Challenges of Attending a Western Canadian University.

All interviews were transcribed, analyzed separately, and compared across participants. I searched for common features that were distinctly unique across the data sets and reinforced developing themes from the time I started interviewing the participants. This involved examining, categorizing, testing assertions for reliability, and recombining evidence from the different participant interview transcripts to address the main goal of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). Thus, these two themes were manifest in the students’ stories: 1) academic encounters; and 2) language encounters.

4.2.1 Academic Encounters

A number of the Saudi students believed the education program at a Western Canadian University (WCU) was significantly different than their experiences in the Saudi Arabian education system. In fact, this perception was so prominent that almost all of the participants not only remarked on it but also believed it significantly impacted their academic performance. For instance, Rana remarked:

Our high school achievement is not enough to prepare students to the university because when I came here and saw the students and how they have a good background about most of the topics that we are studying, I knew that I am missing many things that I should have been learned in the high school.
Nadia who studied just one year in a university in the United States, she said that she devoted 60% of her time to studying and 40% to her free and social time, but she said that in Canada her experiences were different:

The difference here is very shocking especially in my first semester! I worked very hard and that made me very shattering and disappointed because of all the hard work that I did and at the end, I got bad marks! It is very disappointed psychologically!

Ahmad commented that he faced some academic difficulties with his courses in his first year, “I went to the Art advisor and told her that it is one of two! Either your university is very very very difficult or I am stupid! And she said neither this nor that.” Such comments reflect literature that indicates that many international students often expect high grades during their university studies in host countries in comparison to their grades back home and feel disappointed and depressed when they receive low marks (Pedersen, 1991, p. 34). Hana further reinforced this view as in Saudi Arabia she was a standout student, but when she came to Canada, she was shocked by her low marks. Failing a class was an event that particularly stood out for her. She stated in an apparent exasperated way that, “Even though I studied hard and did all the assignments I got surprised by failing in a course.” In terms of specific classroom challenges, Hana believed that public speaking was perhaps the most difficult because she did not practice this skill in the Saudi education system. She said, “I found so many difficulties in my presentations and mostly during my first and second year because I did not use to stand in front of people to present.” She did not know how to prepare for a presentation, how to organize it, how to start and end, or what was even expected.

Differences in teaching and learning were remarked upon by the participants in a variety of ways. For instance, many of the students indicated that the Saudi Arabian system emphasized
memorization, while the WCU system placed a greater emphasis on deep-learning of concepts. For instance, Rana stated:

The first term was very hard and difficult especially when I saw and noticed the differences between our curriculums in Saudi and their curriculums here in Canada…our curriculums require memorizations and their curriculums require understanding and here is the problem. Rana provided an example:

In Saudi Arabia, in a lesson in physics, teachers give us definition, terminologies, examples and then scientific equations, scientific law to apply to solve the problem whereas here you never have to memorize definitions! you just know the scientific law and then apply it on a right away.

Other students also discussed the different types of instructional practices that occurred in Saudi Arabia and Canada. For example, Lilly who expected that academic study would be different and hard but not to the extent she encountered stated:

I was used to our system in Saudi and how we study and prepare for the exam just before one or two days from the exam. In Saudi, it is easier because teachers choose and give us what we just have to study for the exam but here in Canada everything in the curriculum is included in the exam. Except some professors who might sometimes eliminate just a few points.

Nadia discussed exams and how the process is different at a Western Canadian University. She believed that students have to understand everything so they can apply what they understand to problems that are similar to what they solved before but different. She stated, “because in the exams we do not get the same problems that we learned about in classes.”
Lilly described the instructional approaches as substantially different, believing that for the most part, these instructional practices held students to a higher standard and were more effective in their approach. As a student at a WCU, she found:

Everything is organized and well arranged. Before a student goes to a lecture, professors upload the lecture online, and this happens for all the classes and lectures so students can see and know what is the upcoming lesson so they can prepare for it before they go to class and if they have questions they can ask during the class.

She also discussed how professors are using different approaches and technologies during lectures, including “projectors, group discussions, practice questions, videos, and links to scientific and research papers related to the lessons.” Malik also talked about teaching methods at a WCU. He stated:

Most classes are lecture slides and professors upload them online for anyone who needs them … there are PowerPoint … they use i-clickers especially in my first year with the big classes … there are group discussions but not that much … there were a number of simple educational trips and I love them very much especially in a field like mine in Engineering where what I see on paper is difficult to understand and to apply in reality so it is good when I see it and learn about it in reality.

Samar also expressed similar sentiments regarding differences in instructional approaches. As a student back home she stated that:

Teachers were trying to make the class interactive between them and the students by asking questions but mostly they recount all the information…here there is the i-clicker and we can say our opinion but in Saudi we can not…here there are discussions in some classes…in Saudi there is always only one right answer for a question! Here may be there
are 10 right answers…depends…the most important thing is that you have to support your answer by right evidences…in Saudi the answer is only one and we have to memorize it as it is without any change!

Hana discussed having a similar experience in relation to recognizing a greater amount of discussion-based instructional practices. When she was a student in Saudi Arabia, she was used to different teaching methods and because of this, she did not believe there would be group discussion in the classes at a WCU. She stated;

Teachers used to give all the students folders with notes about each topic, so the students did not go back to use the school books whereas here in the Canadian classes, teachers use a lot of discussions and ask many questions.

She also assumed that many of the processes of school would be the same at a WCU as they were in Saudi Arabia as she thought the students would have a single classroom and that each teacher would come in to teach and give lesson one after the other.

Some of the participants seemed to indicate that their challenges were associated with the WCU system. Nadia, who compared the challenges she faced at a WCU with those she faced in the United States, indicating that she did not face any big or hard studying challenges when she was in the U.S. university, whereas at a WCU her most challenging experience was about the difficulty of studying and writing exams. She stated:

The most thing I suffered from studying here at a WCU is frustration of studies and exams. When you feel you study hard as much as you can and you do everything you can do but at the end you got shocked with the results and you find yourself you are getting F from the class average, this is very disappointing!
Ahmad also shared a similar experience and he said that at the beginning it was difficult for him to get used at a WCU education system and atmosphere because, as he stated:

> It is very different than the education system and atmosphere in Saudi! Even though I heard about the difficulty of the WCU education but I did not believe it till I tried by myself especially in my first year of Engineering! It was a nightmare.

Then he stated:

> I became a big believer about the *College Triangle* that you have to choose only two choices among the three choices which are: social life, sleeping, education because the quantity of the homework was too much! We had about 4-5 homework in a week and each homework took about 5-6 hours! So I was wondering how can I get more time to finish everything! So I decided to start learning some skills about the time management and other helpful skills.

Alma was the only one of all the interviewees, who did not find a noticeable difference between the Saudi and the Canadian teaching methods. She remarked, “I do not see a difference in the ways of learning here at a WCU because I am used to it.” She explained:

> When I was in high school in Saudi Arabia we worked in groups to write assignments, do different projects, posters and presentations also we did some research papers but it was very easy because we just copy and paste which is different and prohibited here at the WCU. Here at the WCU, they use almost the same teaching skills such as; group and individual presentations, PowerPoint, group and individual projects, in addition to more new skills such as; group discussions, using I clickers and going to some filed trips.
However, she noted that in her first year of undergraduate studies in Saudi Arabia she found all but one course did not employ any of these teaching strategies, such as using new skills for new ways of thinking.

When considering participants’ responses in relation to both statements regarding the difficulties associated with the Canadian educational system, as well as the challenges regarding different teaching methods, one recognizes a number of reflections in existing literature on the subject. Kinsella (1995, p. 171) argued that learners continue to prefer their natural, preferred and habitual learning ways that they have learned to absorb, process, and retain information with less regard to the changes in teaching methods and source of content. These results from the increasing consistency in the memory, perceptions, thinking and judgments of the students in response to the stimulus provided (Curry, 2000, p. 239). When considered in relation to occurrences involving the above participants’ statements, one recognizes that it makes understanding their underlining processes significantly more challenging and complex. In this way, the Saudi Arabian students report that the Canadian curriculum is substantially more difficult than the curriculum in Saudi Arabia. This finding may be attributable to this curriculum being new as much as the curriculum holds students to a higher standard. Still, while the learners remarked that the WCU curriculum places a greater amount of emphasis on deep-learning than rote memorization, it is possible that the students have expressed findings in which the Canadian curriculum is truly concerned with different forms of epistemological understanding. Ultimately, it is not the auspices of the present research to determine whether or not such differences truly constitute a qualitatively superior form of instruction, it is significant that these findings consistently reflected the students’ lived experiences in engaging with the different instructional approaches.
4.2.2 Language Encounters

English language constituted another of the complexities and challenges for the students while studying at a Western Canadian University. The language challenge that emerged as consistent among the participants is also reflected in the literature. English-language difficulties constitute among the most prominent challenges that foreign students face upon studying abroad (Khan, 2011). Perhaps the most consistent reoccurring belief within the participants was the feeling that they did not expect to face English language challenges. Hana and Rana, indicated that while they believed their English language abilities were strong, they discovered otherwise when they started to take courses at the WCU.

Adam faced difficulties studying a load of five courses and writing the assignments. He stated, “especially with the academic language difficulties which is different than what we had in the English language institute and everyday life!” Malik who expressed the difficulties he faced with language in relation to completing his challenging science coursework noted:

The beginning was the most difficult thing but with time and the years these difficulties scaled down … the language difference was one of the difficulties especially in the scientific courses like mathematics, chemistry and physics, we studied all of them in Arabic in Saudi and this is a very big difference … I remember the first math class I took here in the university (CAL 1), the teacher was explaining and I did not understand anything because I had studied all of this in Arabic! So the difference was big … these difficulties that I faced affected on my study performance very much especially in my first year and I was very disappointed psychologically especially after I failed in one of my courses in my first term and this course had another related part in the second term so the marks are related to each other in both terms!
Many students, such as Alma, indicated they faced substantial challenges related to doing presentations in English. Specifically, she faced difficulties in preparing and “doing presentations and present in front of people with a language which is not my mother language.” She found more difficulties in her English language skills and said, “it is better to be silent than talk and people say this girl does not know how to speak English.” Alma also added she “had some trouble writing exams”, specifically when they were essay questions, “I am very slowly in writing with the different language even in Arabic I am very slowly in writing.” As a result, at the beginning of her studies, she heavily criticized herself because of her English skills. Adam also notably expressed facing a number of language related challenges. He indicated that his language related challenges did not simply negatively impact his academic life; they also had a negative impact on his social life as challenges in the one field had a carry-over impact on the other areas of his life. Adam commented:

I was shocked and faced difficulty in terms of the language and I did not think of this before I started my academic study! I thought it is going to be something simple and I can handle it easily! … I faced a very difficulty in terms of making friendships with the students and this was shocked for me because my personality is not like this! But when I faced with myself, I knew that the pressure of the study was one of the reasons for that because the materials we got are not easy and they required lots of time and effort so I did not have the enough time for my social life and for making friendships due to the studying commitment.

Furthermore, he said:

Even though engineering does not rely on the language that much because most of it are equations and mathematical problems which is opposite to the art specializations which
required more academic language but when I read the curriculum to understand scientifically and linguistically, it took me a lot of time to understand and get the idea so linguistically it was hard for me to understand the subject but scientifically there was a small gap due to what I forgot about some of what I learned in the high school.

The participant’s comments are echoed in the literature that language difficulties constitute among the major challenges students face upon arrival in the country when studying abroad (Li, Fox & Almarza, 2007, p. 1-44; Luzio-Lockett, 1998, p. 216; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000, p. 100; Tompson & Tompson, 1996, p. 55). In their study on international graduate students, Stafford, Marion, and Salter (1980), found that of 53 international undergraduate students and 225 international graduate students, 66% of the students had issues with different factors and using the English skills was one of the top problems (Stafford, Marion, & Salter, 1980, p. 40-45).

Similar to students who expressed experiencing language challenges they did not expect, other students who despite having a significant background in English found themselves struggling with the language at a more elite university. These comments are support by Li, Fox and Almarza (2007, p. 1-44) who argued that even international graduate students who are already fluent in the English language find it challenging to be in an English-only context. For example, when Alma talked about her English language skills and how it affected her study experience, she indicated that in the Eastern Canadian University she attended, she believed she was doing fine when she compared herself with the other international students. She believed that her English skills were better than her peers even though she faced some minor difficulties in explaining her ideas in English. However, when she talked about her English skills in a Western Canadian University, she discovered deficiencies in her English skills and said, “it is better to be silent than talk and people say this girl does not know how to speak English.” Rana also expressed challenges as she
indicated that she studied at three different English language schools in the city where the WCU is situated to prepare her for the university before she started her undergraduate studies. All these schools assessed her English as advanced upon graduation. She also received a 7 out of 9 in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). However, she stated she still found difficulties in the English language “because their expectations [professors at the university] are higher than what I have … we have to read a novel every week, summarize, write essays and in-class essays just in 40 minutes!”

Within the theme of language encounters were the strategies implemented in addressing their language-related difficulties. Some participants, such as Hana, indicated that their language abilities improved as a result of being immersed in the culture. Lilly indicated that her initial approach was to think and do everything in Arabic and then translate to English. However, Lilly noted she eventually found this approach to be more time consuming than just working directly in English. Consequently, she witnessed a substantial improvement in her schoolwork. Alma stated that she encountered writing difficulties through studying and preparing for exams because of “the language difference, and I need to practice the spelling and summarizing.” Rana indicated that when she did experience scientific or language-related difficulties she visited the school’s resource centre.

4.3 Theme 2: Expression of Understanding Social Complexities

All interviews were transcribed, analyzed separately, and compared as I searched for common features that were distinctly unique across the data sets and which reinforced the theme that had began forming from the time I started interviewing the participants. This involved examining, categorizing, testing assertions for reliability, and recombining evidence from the different participant interview transcripts to address the main goal of the study (Miles &
Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). Thus, this theme was manifest in the students’: 1) new cultures and environments; and 2) different rules and responsibilities.

### 4.3.1 New Cultures and Environments

New culture and environment challenges at a Western Canadian University (WCU) was another emergent theme. Among the most frequent responses expressed was the new environment they encountered was starkly different from the environment in Saudi Arabia. For instance, Adam faced some difficulties with the culture shock. He remarked that “culture shock was one of the difficulties that I faced during my academic study in the university and I was surprised because I did not notice this during my English language study!” Also, Alma compared her grades and the difficulty of study between the Eastern and the Western Canadian University and how she was more successful and doing well at the Eastern Canadian University. She was confused about what she was doing wrong at the Western Canadian University. She indicated that, “this took a bit of time to understand the new situation (environment) and to give and do more efforts and give more time for the study because the study here in this Western Canadian University is different and very difficult.” Such setbacks were something that was not just limited to Alma but also expressed by other students. Nadia noted a slight cultural shock not merely between Saudi Arabia and Canada but also between her experience at a post secondary institution in the United States and the Western Canadian University:

> In the U.S. University, I got good marks, and we [her and her sister] were from the honour students, and we got A’s in most of the courses and the lowest mark I got was 70 and this was something good!”

Before she came to study in Canada, she heard about the difficulties in the Canadian universities, but she did not know how hard and difficult it would be. Rana similarly experienced a number of
setbacks in her studies. She partly contributed these difficulties to the challenges she faced in regards to the large class sizes that were notably different from her educational experience in Saudi Arabia. Many participants expressed the feeling of emotional difficulties that seemed to emerge as a result of academic circumstances. For instance, Ibrahim became highly frustrated in his academic studies, and this frustration had a decided impact on his emotional state. He remarked: “I became frustrated psychologically because I tried all the suggested solutions but they were not useful and helpful with me so I underestimated and detracted myself.” In addition to confirming Tseng and Newton’s (2002) understanding of the difficulties that new students face, these findings confirm other researchers’ assumptions that new students will as international students face challenges that include new language, new culture, and a new setting, they may further be affected academically and socially (Pedersen, 1991, p. 38; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Liao, & Wu, 2007, p. 391).

The participants expressed a multitude of challenges in relation to their new environments. Many other students indicated they had positive experiences. For instance, students expressed an increasing appreciation of different study areas on campus, as well as opportunities to engage directly. Hana stated that during these three years of study she enjoyed studying in the various libraries on the University campus as well the open-space study areas the university provided. Further, she appreciated how professors were welcoming and willing to help the students during their office hours. Ibrahim similarly expressed a number of positive experiences with his new academic environment. Particularly, he enjoyed the simplicity and smoothness of his relationship with his professors. He liked the variation of the learning centers in the university and enjoyed the opportunities provided by the university’s libraries to study and finish his work. Moreover, Ahmad gave two points as his most enjoyable experiences of living and learning here in Canada,
saying, “people here are open for debate and listen to other peoples’ opinions with respect and without any problems or hate.” His second enjoyable experience about studying here is the weather, and how it helps him to give more in his study. He said, “the beautiful weather, views and places give me the enthusiasm to study so when I finish my daily work I can go and visit these places and relax.” Malik also talked about his experience with the academic social environment and he said:

I heard from other people’s experiences and from some friends about the treatment and the simplicity of the relationship with the professors here and how they are open for debate and this is opposite to what we have in most universities where they do not accept debate … and there are boundaries I am a professor and you are a student and this is what must happen and whatever I say is right you can not discuses it with me … I thought the situation is going to be easier especially within the academic field!

Also he shared one such experience when he was in his language preparation class in his English language school. He described this, saying that, “I met people from almost everywhere even from Saudi because I am from Jeddah so I met with Saudi students from other cities who have other different cultures than what I have with the people who I live among.”

Of course, students’ social difficulties were substantial in their new environment and resulted in a significant amount of difficulties. Consider Hana who faced many issues of self-doubt, particularly a recurrent feeling that she was not as smart or clever as the Canadian and other international students and that she didn’t have the aptitude to compete with them. Such sentiments would seem to confirm Lewthwaite (1996) who argued that when international students travel to a host country to begin their academic studies, most of them start to feel and
experience some challenges such as “anxiety, confusion, insomnia, physical illness, and depression” (p. 171).

Tseng and Newton’s (2002) understanding of the elements of psychological adjustment were also significant in relation to the participants’ stories. While some of these psychological challenges were addressed above in terms of students’ academic challenges, many other students expressed encountering such difficulties in relation to social circumstances. For instance, after I asked Samar about the counselling services in the university and whether she tried to access them or even consider them, she said:

I have an opinion and I do not know if it is right or wrong but they will not understand me because they will not even understand my background … for example, if I have a problem with my mom and I went to ask for help from the counseling, they will not understand how much I should respect her! and do some specific things for her! no one will understand me!

However, the Samar stated a positive self-changing experience since she came to study in North America as she stated:

I accepted the differences more and I became more flexible where as in Saudi I was not like this at all! for example, I used to be fanatic for my opinions … but when I came here I see how the life is flexible … I became more optimistic, I try to achieve and organize my time much better, I try to develop my skills in different ways, I try to exercise more.

Similarly, personal change was something Malik believed he possibly had undergone, but he thought such change was difficult for him to notice. He said:
I used to see ourselves in Saudi that we are right and all other people are wrong or who are different than us are wrong or who think different than us are wrong so this is may be one point that I noticed the self change”

Not only did participants report experiencing psychological difficulties in regards to adjusting to Canada, but they similarly expressed feeling mental and emotional difficulties when returning home:

The most difficult time when we go back to Saudi! I used to go to Saudi twice a year and every time I go back, I feel depression and sad which is the culture shock that I am back there and the lifestyle is very quite and I do not have anything to do.” says Samar.

Conversely, Ibrahim expressed facing similar situational challenges, “when I go back for a vacation this summer, there will be a real conflict with my family because now I have my own opinion, decision, and independent personality.” Yet, he was very happy from this change and sees it as a positive. He said, “if I did not go in a scholarship, this change will not happen and I aspire to the best.” Moreover, Alma also discussed how much she changed since she came to Canada. She said that:

I became more responsible and more independent and more carful about what I want to say and how to say something because I do not want people to misunderstand me … I became more logical and more mature … my thinking is not shallow anymore.

In this respect, Alma’s experiences as well as those of other participants such as Malik, who indicated having positive associations with his new situation, would seem to extend or even challenge Tseng and Newton’s (2002) framework that largely focused on participants’ negative emotional experiences.
4.3.2 Different Rules and Responsibilities

Reports of having experienced a multitude of different rules and responsibilities and the challenges associated with these new responsibilities constituted another thematic area of consideration for the research. A significant amount of changes related to students’ discussion of new rules and regulations occurred in relation to the challenges students faced on how to navigate the bureaucratic challenges and rules of their new academic environments. Multiple participants indicated that they experienced difficulties related to understanding the rules associated with course registration. Samar stated, “it was something unheard of and difficult for me! I consider the courses registration the most nervous stage in the university at the beginning of each semester in both the U.S. and the Canadian universities.” Adam also indicated facing challenges with course registration. He said he went to ask for help from different staff in the university, but he did not get what he wanted.

Hana expressed similarly difficult sentiments when she encountered Canada’s rules, the university’s rules, her new living situation, and the challenges of navigating the massive university campus. She indicated that encountering these new rules was an intimidating process that caused her to experience emotional fear, particularly as she did not know how to register for courses, or even knowing which courses were appropriate for her in the first year.

Many participants also discussed the challenges they had conforming to academic rules in Canada, with some particularly indicating that conforming to these rules was difficult because they conflicted with rules they had in Saudi Arabia. Lilly’s discussion of the differences related to turning in an assignment in Saudi Arabia compared to submitting an assignment in Canada was particularly illustrative of this effect. Describing these difficulties, she stated:
The differences are completely different! When I was in university in Saudi Arabia, whenever we had an assignment, we had to go and look for it to a particular place where the assignment is. This place was known as ‘almatba’ah,’ [the printing place] and this place was not organized at all, and it was busy and crowded all the time. The waiting time was very long to finish what the student wants. To submit any assignment to the professor, we have to go and look for the professor to give them the assignment! this was different and not as easy as here in Canada where students submit everything by computer and email.

This participant also expressed surprise at the types of responsibilities that students had in relation to completing writing assignments. She indicated that when students back home were asked to do an assignment or a research paper, they did not complete it by themselves. She said, “students go to bookstores outside the university and buy the research papers whereas here they consider it as plagiarism and professors punish those who do it.”

Yet another frequent occurrence that participants noted was the personal responsibilities they increasingly faced in their new environment. Such responsibilities are significant as for many participants they constitute elements that occur in addition to their unique position as a foreign national student. For instance, prior to Lilly beginning of her study at a WCU, she underestimated the challenges she would face balancing schoolwork and a personal life. She found it challenging to manage her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and student. She also believed that these challenges were compounded in emergency circumstances such as sickness, exams, and projects. As her husband is in an even more rigorous Ph.D. university program, it was frequently hard to divide and manage everything between the two of them. She indicated:
It was very hard, and I did not know how to manage between midterms, quizzes, assignments, lectures and home responsibilities. This was even more difficult as it was my first time to be a mom with my newborn baby, wife and student all together in my first year at a new university, new place with new language.

Other participants experienced similar challenges regarding their personal lives, although it was difficult to precisely understand the extent to which these challenges were characteristic of all situations or if these challenges were something compounded by the difficulties faced while studying in Canada. Studying in Canada exposes the Saudi students to different cultural constructs. Learning to abide in these different environments with many varied social approaches places a heavy responsibility on the Saudi students. Ultimately, however, the Saudi students’ challenging experiences related to the new rules and regulations they faced would seem to support existing literature on the subject. According to Hamad (2012), studying in Canada exposes the Saudi students to different cultural constructs. The participants in the scholarship program in Canada elicit common constructs when dealing with their social roles regarding the cultures of the host country and those of the countries of origin.

Of all these new rules and responsibilities, most of the participants if not all of them were happy with the new changes and responsibilities in their lives. Hana stated that much of the personal change would not have happened if she stayed and studied in Saudi Arabia. She particularly highlighted her new independence and self-reliance as a welcomed skill, proudly declaring that she buys all the stuff she needs herself and pays all bills by herself, including food, phone and television service, insurances, and other things that she relied on her parents for when she lived in Saudi Arabia. She said, “I feel I gain more confidence even though feeling some weakness in some ways, but when I see what I did and how much I endured that means I can do
more and that gives me more and more confident.” Lilly also experienced a significant change in personal, social, and academic levels since she came to Canada. She described these changes as being radical yet positive. She said:

I became more strong than before, and I have a stronger personality than before … also I take big, and lots of responsibilities and I became more social … I learned many things other than the academic side such as the way of life, living, and evolution especially when you see people around you and you learn from them.

Also Adam enjoyed living in the student accommodation in the university campus because he said, “I liked the self independence and being more independent and doing all my tasks only by myself.” Furthermore, Malik said, “there is more self independent and managing the self tasks like laundries and cleaning and cooking”.

4.4 Chapter Summary

In conclusion for this study findings chapter, it is important to appreciate that there is rich diversification in the ways different societies view education. The responses obtained through the participants’ interviews clearly indicate that different approaches work for different colleges and universities. In this chapter, I outlined some responses from participants in relation to various topics that cut across their living and learning experiences in a Western Canadian University.

This study illustrates how Saudi Arabian students are coping with the significant differences they experience when comparing the Saudi education system to that of a Canadian university. According to most of the respondents, the Saudi education system is more academically lenient when it comes to dealing with students when compared to the Canadian
experience. All of the students were surprised by the gap that exists between a well-developed education system in Canada and that of Saudi Arabia.

In addition, students must also be willing to blend within the society if they are to achieve success in their undergraduate program. Despite diversity of culture and education, the immediate community is very welcoming and accommodative. All of the students were happy and felt very positive regarding to their living experiences in their Canadian environment. This diversity is imperative to any society that upholds different cultures.

In the next chapter, I will provide a summary of my findings by addressing the research questions that guided my study. I will then discuss some implications of my study and conclude with some potential avenues for further research.
CHAPTER 5: Summary of Findings and Implications

In this final chapter, I summarise the main findings that address the study’s main objective of gaining deeper qualitative insights into the living and learning experiences of Saudi Arabian students enrolled at a Western Canadian University as guided by the three research questions. Noteworthy is that the three research questions were used to provide a systematic process of inquiring into the students’ experiences with the ultimate goal of addressing the main objective of the study. Therefore, in this chapter a summary of the findings is provided in response to goal or objective of the study. This will be followed by implications of the findings for Saudi Arabian students’ future study abroad and further research.

5.1 Summary

Analysis revealed two key themes that manifested in the students’ encounters with their experience at the Western Canadian University. The first theme, “Expression of an Understanding of Educational Systems and the Complexities and Challenges of Attending a Canadian University” was manifest in both: 1) academic encounter; and 2) language encounter. The second theme, “Expression of Understanding Social Complexities” manifested in encounters involving 1) new cultures and environments; and 2) different rules and responsibilities. Moreover, the study revealed that prior to enrolling at a Western Canadian University (WCU), the Saudi students believed they would be successful living and learning at the University. Their conceptions were based on their academic success in Saudi Arabia and a belief in their English language proficiency gained through experiences inside and outside Saudi Arabia. Analysis of their stories has revealed that the actual living and learning experiences at a Western Canadian University turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. As they further experienced a lack of time for socializing as they have to study very hard to improve their grades due to the perception that the
Curricula in the new country were harder than those of their home country (Saudi Arabia). Hence, as revealed, the reality of the experiences forced them to change in their mode of studying.

Further, the study has also revealed that the reality of student life at a WCU compelled them to make critical decisions the ways they lived and learned including making cultural and social adjustments. Prominent among the decisions included dedicating more time to their studies. Outstanding students such as Hana made a conscious decision to increase their study time, believing that such a decision would improve their grades in the seemingly difficult new curricular experiences. Consequently, the students cut short time spent on socializing and instead focused on their studies. As such, the Saudi students had a tough experience when it came to classroom discussion. The practice of not encouraging speaking or discussion with instructors within the Saudi education system added to challenge the students faced in the new context where instructor-student discussion was the norm. Therefore, the Saudi students at a Western Canadian University had to start cultivating a culture of being comfortable with speaking in public. Classroom and group presentations were difficult for them because of their lack of experience in public speaking in their home educational experience. They therefore had to adopt a new culture of public expression.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Implications for Considerations by Future Saudi Students

The implications for considerations by future Saudi Arabian students who wish to study at a WCU and other Canadian universities were manifest the study participants’ multitude of suggestions and recommendations. Among the most consistent recommendations that students made concerned the effectiveness found in relation to seeking school resources provided at the university. In these regards, some participants, Hana in particular, found it most helpful to go to the academic advisors in her undergraduate office to ask for help. She indicated she found success when
she sought the Office’s help on questions of courses she should take, her study plan, and her time of graduation. Lilly similarly expressed the effectiveness she found in taking advantage of the university’s resources. For example, she stated that she attended a time management session and had been to various writing sessions; even in instances when she was unable to attend any of these sessions she was able to find the information from these sessions in the library. Attending the university writing sessions was particularly useful in helping her learn different approaches to structuring her writing, as well as the different citation styles such as MLA, APA, and Chicago. Moreover, she learned strategies that helped her prepare for multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions exams. Rana also found success in such approaches noting that:

Whenever I have a research paper, I go to the library and tell them about my topic, and they help me with the books and the resources that I can use and are helpful for my research…also they help me with citations and how I can do citations especially when they know I am a first year student.

Such insights would seem important as they demonstrate that the resources the university provides are helpful for students. Subsequently, more emphasis could be placed on instructing students in the importance of these institutions and the willingness of these resource centers to help them.

In addition to seeking out the school’s resources, a majority of other students attested to developing strong social support and friendships with people they interact with in their new environments. These forms of social support can be understood along a variety of dimensions. One such dimension related to students who found success in becoming friends with other students in their classes. Such a process was particularly effective for Lilly. She said, “these friends will support and help each other with studying and preparing for exams and writing the assignments”. Malik discussed the importance of working in groups. He stated that in his first year, he worked
alone and it was very difficult because the workload was not for one person. This approach made it very difficult to reach deadlines. He added:

This is one of the things that I regret doing it in my first year because I was working and doing everything only by myself without any help from other classmates but later I found out that it is not going to work like this! working alone for 5 to 6 hours for only one assignment! so I had to find a group to work with them so the accomplishment would be bigger and faster.

Such combined experiences would seem to indicate students increasingly engaging with other students was not something just significant in their social lives but also critical to their academic success. Because of the strong emphasis on academic success and students’ potential not to recognize the importance of such collaborative engagement, it is increasingly important such information be provided to students early on in their educational careers as a means of improving their understanding of the education journey they would eventually face.

The students pointed to the importance of maintaining contact with significant others back home in Saudi Arabia as they can play an import support role. In this regard many participants indicated they frequently remained in contact with their parents and other support groups when they experienced challenging situations in their new country. As such, increased emphasis could be placed on family communication as a pre-requisite of being a part of the study abroad program, as such support for many would seem to be essential in their achieving success in their new environment.

Although not specifically mentioned by students as a consideration for improvement by future students, the high number of students who seemed to have greater levels of success after completing earlier programs attested to the significant amount of success that informal education
procedures might have on improving student outcomes. Lilly echoed the sentiment of many other students in indicating the importance she found in having a chain of people with whom she could discuss her academic challenges. If she could not solve the issue or the issue was academic, she went to a tutor or friends to help her. If these people could not help her she returned to the professor. However, if the problem was something social or with her daily life, she spoke with her sister first and then she discussed it with family and friends. Lilly went to the undergraduate advisors only to choose courses or when she failed in her course.

Alma discussed finding similar success through engaging in such programs. She said that it was very important to live in university housing for some if not all of the time at the WCU because she had better opportunities to establish more friendships. As with most other participants, Alma indicated that participating in the university’s activities and events was another substantial factor that helped in her studies, including participating in a university wide competitive athletic event called Storm the Wall. In these instances, students may be able to use more informal academic settings as a means to gain greater cultural understanding of their surroundings and classmates in a situation where they might not feel otherwise oppressed by the hierarchical organizational setting.

Of course, the Jumpstart orientation program that introduces new students to the university setting is a program which many students noted as significant in aiding their integration into the school environment. However, such a program might only provide students with information to navigate their surrounding scholastic environment. As such, it would seem critical that a greater amount of programs be adopted that offer comprehensive instruction in the areas most frequently recognized as presenting students with the greatest difficulties, including language skills such as reading, writing, and listening and presenting, and Western approaches to teaching and learning.
Ultimately, the current model appears ineffective as it assumes international students will be immediately prepared for academic engagement in traditional programs. While one would not want to undermine the quality of the Canadian education system or compromise the students’ time in remedial classroom instructions, the present approach to directly integrating students into traditional undergraduate classrooms is unsuccessful for the students and may be creating a dysfunctional system that places unfair burdens on this student body. Ultimately, however, through increased preparation programs and attention and encouragement in the identified support areas, Canadian and even Saudi Arabian education systems can create more effective pathways for students studying abroad.

5.2.2 Implications for Improvement by Future Students.

In the same vein as in section 5.2.1, the implications for improvement by future Saudi students who wish to study abroad are manifest in the recommendations for how the students from Saudi Arabia might be helped to improve or cope with the living and learning experience at the Western Canadian University. These include: 1) Graduate Students as Mentors, 2) Offering Prep Workshops by the WCU in Saudi Arabia, 3) Establishing a Foundational Year at the WCU, and 4) Improving Instructional Practices in Saudi Arabia.

5.2.2.1 Graduate Students as Mentors

The absence of reference to any benefit or encounter with assistance from graduate students should be a cause for concern and an important anomaly to rectified or addressed by the WCU. After all, Crisp and Cruz (2009) found that although universities offer effective assistance measures, many students perceive them as too bureaucratic and formal to effectively provide guidance, and others may perceive seeking aid as a sign of weakness. Graduate students,
especially those who have experienced living and learning at the WCU, could act as mentors for undergraduate students.

5.2.2.2 Workshops by the WCU in Saudi Arabia

WCU could offer workshops in Saudi Arabia prior to traveling to study at the WCU. These workshops would focus on the living and learning in at the WCU. Such a workshop would complement existing already established in the Saudi scholarship program but would focus on the demands of living and learning at the WCU.

5.2.2.3 Establish a Foundational Year at the WCU

The WCU could create a foundational year for international students in order to for them understand the teaching and learning systems used in the WCU. In this foundational year, international students would have low of academic course load, use simple written and spoken language to help them, and provide students with more time to understand the culture and environment of the WCU, the city, and country. By having this foundational year, international students could improve their language skills, better know and understand different teaching and learning methods as well as the culture and many of the differences of surrounding environment.

5.2.2.4 Improving Instructional Practices in Saudi Arabia

Research conducted by Al-Hazmi, (2003), Al-Seghayer, (2014) and Alkhatnai, (2011) specifically explored EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in teacher education in relation to instructional practices within Saudi Arabia and indicated that educational practices in Saudi Arabia were ineffective because they were nonsystematic and inadequate. A significant amount of challenges within this spectrum of understanding are attributable to these teachers not receiving specific training in the methods of instruction that are directly related to teaching. Instead, these teachers predominantly receive instruction in fields related to English translating
rather than instruction or other supplementary fields. Hence the findings of this study may provide recommendations for more effective teacher education in Saudi Arabia.

5.3 **Implications for Future Research**

Findings of this study ought to be interpreted carefully as this is a case study involving ten Saudi Arabian students living and learning at only one Western Canadian University. Thus, due to the study’s limitations would mean being cautious about how the findings are applied to other contexts. Hence the need for further research that can shed more light on how implicate the findings to other contexts. Generalizability of the current findings beyond the selected group of international students is quite limited. Hence the need for further research involving a broader sample of Saudi students at the WCU and other Canadian Universities. Nonetheless, the findings have implications on framing research studies that seek to elucidate on students’ day to day lessons learned studying and living at the WCU shape decisions they make in service of academic success and in particular, Saudi students. Certainly, the study’s findings have implications on how to frame studies that inquire effective ways curriculum and instruction for foreign students might delivered.
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Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Higher Education Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission.


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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

Greetings to the Saudi Student Associations,

My name is Norah A. Alghamdi and I am a Masters of Arts student in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia. I am currently studying the learning and living experiences of Saudi Arabian undergraduate students in Canadian universities. The Principal Investigator of this study is Dr. Samson Nashon, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of British Columbia.

The purpose of my study is to investigate the curricular expectations and experiences by Saudi students prior to and since joining undergraduate programs at a western Canadian University. I am looking for Saudi Arabian undergraduate students (both male and female) who are studying in (STEM) science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and Arts specializations. The participants will be interviewed for about 45 minutes about their learning and living experiences during their studies here in Canada. After the individual interviews are concluded, a focus group will be arranged lasting 45 minutes around the same topic. Both interviews will be audio recorded.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating in this study, please email me Norah A. Alghamdi.
Appendix B: Letter of Informed Consent

Research Title: The Living and Learning Experience of Saudi Arabian Undergraduate Students in A Western Canadian University Environment

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Samson Nashon, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of British Columbia

Co-Investigator:
Dr. J. Douglas Adler, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of British Columbia
Norah A. Alghamdi, M.A. Student. Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy
University of British Columbia

Purpose: The purpose is to investigate the curricular expectations and experiences by Saudi students prior to and since joining undergraduate programs at a Western Canadian University. Findings from this study may enhance our sensitivity to and understanding of the difficulties faced by international students in their adjustment to education and culture in the Canadian environment. The findings and data will be used in a graduate thesis, thesis presentation and also for future publication on the Western Canadian University digital repository for research and teaching materials.
You are being invited to take part in this research study if you meet the following requirements: you were born and educated in Saudi Arabia and an undergraduate student in a Canadian university, over the age of 18 years, and in STEM or Arts specialization.

**Study Procedures:** To participate in this study, the co-investigator will interview each participant individually for about 45 minutes. After that, at a different time, a focus group will be leading by the same co-investigator for about 45 minutes. All interviews will be audio-recorded. You are free to ask questions and participate during the interviews as you normally would.

**Confidentiality:** All data of this study will be treated with high confidentiality. We will use pseudonyms to protect your identity. In addition, all computer data, including audio recordings and resulting interview transcripts will be stored on a password protected encrypted computer and kept in a locked filing cabinet.

We encourage all participants to refrain from disclosing the contents of the discussion outside of the interview; however, we cannot control what other participants do with the information discussed.

**Contact for information about the study:** If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact:

Dr. Samson Nashon, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, UBC

Dr. J. Douglas Adler, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, UBC

Norah A. Alghamdi, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy

**Consent:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time. Your signature indicates that you agree to participate in this study and that you have kept a copy of this form for your records.

There are campus supports available to assist international students in their transition to
If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics or if long distance e-mail RSIL.

Please check [✓] the boxes below:

[ ] I give my consent for my participation in this study.

[ ] I understand that conversations and interviews between me and the co-investigator will be recorded.

____________________________________________________
Subject’s Signature                                  Date

____________________________________________________
Printed Name of the Subject Signing Above
Appendix C: Interview Questions

What is your age? ______

What is your year of study?
___ First year
    ___ First semester (Fall)
    ___ Second semester (Winter)

___ Second year
    ___ First semester (Fall)
    ___ Second semester (Winter)

___ Third year
    ___ First semester (Fall)
    ___ Second semester (Winter)

___ Fourth year
    ___ First semester (Fall)
    ___ Second semester (Winter)

___ Fifth year or more

How long have you been studying in Canada?
___ 0-1 year
___ 1-2 years
___ 2-3 years
___ 3-4 years
___ 4-5 years
___ 5+ years
1. What were your expectations of University before you came to study in Canada?
2. How has the experience been like since you arriving and starting your study in Canada?
3. What is/has been your most enjoyable experience of studying in Canada?
4. What do you find to be most challenging experience about studying in Canada?
5. How have your English skills affected your study experience in Canada?
6. What do you do when you have problems, or are experiencing difficulties?
7. How have you changed since coming to Canada? And how would you describe that change?
8. What were your learning/studying strategies before you came to Canada? How have they changed since starting your study in Canada?
9. What teaching methods or approaches did you experience when you were student back home (in Saudi Arabia)? How do these methods compare with your experience at this Western Canadian University?
10. Based on your educational experience in both Saudi Arabia and Canada, how might you describe the similarities and differences?
11. What suggestions might you offer that would enhance reciprocal improvements that would make Saudi students successful in studying at this Western Canadian University?
12. What else can you share about your learning and living experience in Canada?