EDUCATION AND DESIRES IN A TRANSNATIONAL ARENA: SAUDI ARABIAN STUDENTS ON THE KING ABDULLAH SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM IN WESTERN CANADA

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Abstract

This dissertation is about the varying ways Saudi Arabian male students navigate the challenges of education abroad in Western Canada under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). This research builds on a growing literature around international education and student mobilities, more specifically, it looks at how Saudi students navigate cultural, social, and gender differences, as well as expectations that they face during their time abroad and their return home. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic research methods, the findings indicate several main themes: the tensions around the celebration of global citizenship that underlines study abroad experiences and its limitations under the KASP; changing perceptions of gender and identity that intersect with masculine privilege; and geopolitical limitations in the face of evolving Canadian-Saudi antagonisms. This study anticipates that the personal narratives will add insight and understanding for faculty and teachers by shedding light on the various perspectives and meanings associated with student mobility for these Saudi males under the KASP. The difficulties separating the researchers’ own personal experience and knowledge of the subject matter is also addressed.
This thesis examines ways in which Saudi Arabian male students navigate challenges and cultural exchange while studying abroad in Western Canada under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. More specifically, the research draws on qualitative methods, such as interviews and secondary data, to explore the personal narratives and insights of Saudi Arabian male students between 2017-2018. Two related theoretical areas inform the analysis: 1) international students and transnational mobility, and 2) gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world. I argue that this research can help play a role in facilitating greater understanding around Saudi student mobilities and the growing importance of intercultural communication as a skill in higher education.
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Dedication

To my late father. I’ll see you on the dark side of the moon.
Prologue

I am at the border in Osoyoos, British Columbia, as an American citizen. When I originally landed in Toronto a month prior, I was asked by the Canadian Border Services to go see an officer a month later so they could make sure I was following the rules to be in Canada. While their intentions were not entirely clear, they did show some concern when I told them that I was visiting my boyfriend who is from Saudi Arabia. Following their demands, when I reached the border crossing in Osoyoos I am directed towards a cold clinical room where no jokes are made. They ask me to come up to the desk. No please or thank you from this callous man. The questions keep coming off his mouth faster than I can answer. Hours go by. The questions don’t stop. They sit me down and tell me to wait. They question me again, tell me to wait. They bring me to a room where a woman officer asks me the same questions, but with an accusing tone. They look at me like a liar, like a suspect. I sit, clutching purse to my chest, biting my tongue so the tears stay put. I am to leave the country within 24 hours and not come back for one year.

I run to the door, get behind the wheel of the rental car which I have to return before nightfall. Lucky for me I have one day. I scream, slamming my hands on the wheel. I call my boyfriend; tell him I am coming to the old beaten up motel where he has been impatiently waiting. I tell him the truth. He gets in the car. We hug each other as close as we can, knowing that this touch will be no longer in 24 hours. How could this happen? We know. We know there is an underlying reason. I am white and he is brown. I am from the U.S. He is Saudi Arabian. In the eyes of most Saudis, our relationship is deeply frowned upon. Sadly, at this point, we both know the extent of its prohibition. This is not the first time we have had trouble. Whether cultural differences within the relationship or discrimination by police, security and the general public, we have faced adversity as an interracial Saudi-U.S. couple. We know. We are not naïve
anymore. As I am driving, thoughts overwhelm my mind. Is the relationship worth the troubles anymore? I can’t do this. I just can’t. As I’m thinking with silent tears, I feel his hand find mine and squeeze it tight. I look over at his face, solemn with defeat. “We can do this. We can do anything”, he whispers as his tears match mine.

The man I love, whom I will more than likely always love in one way or another, is magnificent. He looks is handsome. His eyes are dark brown and often the pupil is hard to find. But when the sunlight hits just right, the brown iris glistens a mocha brown. His eyebrows are thick and shapely, without any maintenance. When he talks, he uses them, showing animation with his eyes. He lifts his eyebrows up with surprise, pushes them down to show frustration. With each word, Arabic or English, he has passion. He wears his heart on his sleeve through his eyes. He stands while everyone sits. He walks back and forth, scrolling on his phone. The room always feels uneasy with the fact that he is standing and not sitting, but this idiosyncrasy is the way he is. At night, he comes alive. He cannot rest his eyes; everything he does seems to wake him up more. His mind thinks too much. When he smiles and laughs, the room lights up. As I watch him talk, attention turns to him. He can take a room and make it his.

My now-former partner has expressed that he feels as though he is living with two identities. One Saudi Arabian and one Canadian/American. The Saudi Arabian personality stays intact by having a close circle of Saudi friends. When they sit together, they speak in Arabic, eat Saudi cuisine, and play Saudi games. When he prays, discusses his religion, or talks with his family, I can feel the Saudi identity. His first identity. Perhaps his “real” identity. Then there is the man that drinks beers and flirts with his white girlfriend. He says “What’s up brotha,” to Canadian friends and acquaintances. He juggles these identities well and with ease.
Now, as I write these words, he has graduated with his bachelor’s degree in Business Administration and has moved back to Saudi Arabia. This means that our relationship has finally come to an end, but not really. We will always be there for each other. Even though our lives must go on, we will always hold each other in our hearts. I thank him for the experiences we have shared and what I have learned. I would do it all over again in a second.

I have been through my share of hardships as well as learning experiences to make a relationship with a Saudi Arabian man work. There have been so many times that we could have given up and called it quits, but we had made it work and have been patient with each other. This is despite the reality of an expiry date on our relationship and the inevitability that we will have to go our separate paths. I found this journey was worth the experience because of the love we have shared for one another. We have many stories of love and struggle.
Chapter 1: Introduction

My research for my Master’s degree focuses on a small group of male Saudi Arabian international students and how they negotiate cultural differences, gender norms and socio-economic expectations around the King Abdullah Scholarship Program while living in western Canada. More specifically, I carried out research with six Saudi men who were students between the ages of 22 to 30 attending college or university in British Columbia. This chapter provides an overview of the project, including the purpose of study, research questions, theoretical approach, a review of the literature, methods and methodology, findings, positionality and ethical concerns, and a brief overview of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (to be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2).

1.1 Purpose of Study

The goal of this research is to shed light on Saudi Arabian men’s experiences as students in Canada and how they navigate cultural differences, gender norms, and social expectations around their education program. I have also seen academic advisors and professors struggle with understanding the cross-cultural differences of Saudi students. I argue that this research can help play a role in facilitating greater understanding around Saudi student mobilities and the growing importance of intercultural communication as a skill in higher education. I hope my research might help alleviate these struggles by providing knowledge about the everyday lives of a few Saudi men and, specifically, how they navigate transnational pressures and what the King Abdullah Scholarship Program means to them as students in Western Canada.
1.2 Research Questions

Main research question:

1. How do young Saudi men who are international students and thus temporary migrants and transnational mobile subjects negotiate cultural difference and gender norms around the King Abdullah Scholarship Program while living in Western Canada?

Secondary questions:

1. How is social identity affected through transnational ties?
2. What are the cultural constraints and limitations they face as international students at Canadian colleges or universities?
3. What are the motivations, aspirations, and desires that accompany these opportunities with the scholarship abroad program?

I answer these questions through an ethnographic case study of the lives and experiences of several young Saudi Arabian men who were living and studying in Western Canada on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.

1.3 King Abdullah Scholarship Program

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) has become a prominent channel for Saudi Arabian citizens to study abroad. Under the KASP Saudi citizens have the opportunity to study in over 30 countries with all expenses paid. Many men and women have applied and received this scholarship since its beginning in 2005. The Ministry of Education and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission and Bureau heads the program. However, in 2018, geopolitical differences between Canada and Saudi Arabia resulted in a rapid cancelation of the Program, which I will explain further in later chapters. Before this, Canada was a very popular choice for
Saudi students to study abroad and was the third most popular destination, behind the United States and the United Kingdom (Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau). Under the KASP, the students who have been selected are required to return to Saudi Arabia after their education is completed to contribute to the economy as workers and human resources (Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau). Bringing the skills learned abroad back to their home country is an important piece of the scholarship’s mission. Along with education, strengthening English language proficiency and experiencing new cultures are also important components. It is expected that students will return home with higher chances at success in Saudi society than they would have had otherwise. One related study suggests that the program has become so popular since 2005 that almost every family has a student in the program (Taylor and Albasri 2014). I provide a more in-depth study of the KASP in Chapter 2.

1.4 Findings

My detailed findings are separated into two chapters. Each chapter focuses on questions addressing my main theoretical interests: 1) international students and transnational mobility, and 2) gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world. My conclusions derive from the opinions and narratives of the student’s experiences in Western Canada, and how they were able to adapt and navigate the pressures and challenges of studying abroad under the KASP. Of primary interest were the push and pull factors that accompanied their educational experiences and how their masculine subjectivities were shaped by pressures that involve family and societal expectations around work, marriage and dating.

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program provides a unique lens to study student mobilities in a transnational arena because it differs from many other study abroad programs.
One major distinction is the financial stability provided by the Saudi government, creating a certain degree of privilege as transnational mobile subjects that few students experience. According to my research participants, they received a monthly salary of $2,500 CAD from the Saudi Arabian government for living expenses, including accommodation, which they claimed was more than enough to live comfortably. A second distinction is the expectation that Saudi students return back to Saudi Arabia after completing their studies. Students must sign a document to this effect, which ensures Saudi state regulation over its students abroad. A third distinction of the Program is the unique challenge Saudi students face in Canada because of the mixed gender environment in most Canadian universities which differs from the sharp gender segregation back in Saudi Arabia.

I found several significant themes through my research and interviews that I discuss in more depth in the following chapters. These include: the tensions around the celebration of global citizenship that underlines the study abroad experience and its limitations under the KASP program; changing perceptions of gender and identity that intersect with masculine privilege; and geopolitical limitations in the face of evolving Canadian-Saudi antagonisms. As will become evident in my conclusion, the ongoing geopolitical conflicts between Canada and Saudi Arabia directly impacted this study and led to the dramatic termination of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program for many Saudi students in Canada.

1.5 Theoretical Approach

For my literature review and theoretical framework, I draw upon two main bodies of scholarly literature: 1. International students and transnational mobility, and 2. Gender,
migration, and difference in a globalizing world. While there is clearly overlap in these bodies of literature, for the purpose of this research I have divided them into two conceptual categories.

Most of the studies on Saudi Arabian students in North America have focused on the United States and have based their research on academic achievement, such as “Saudi Male Perceptions of Study in the United States: An Analysis of King Abdullah Scholarship Program Participants” (2013) by Terry Ryan Hall, “The Political, Socio-economic and Sociocultural Impacts of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) on Saudi Arabia” (2015) by Kholoud T. Hilal, Saíyyah R. Scott & Nina Maadad, “Bridging Differences: Saudi Arabian Students Reflect on Their Educational Experiences and Share Success Strategies” (2009) by Donna L. Shaw, and others. I focus my research on Saudi students studying in Western Canada for two reasons: 1) my own graduate institution is located at the University of British Columbia-Okanagan, and 2) there is a sizable population of men and women Saudi students attending universities and colleges in the region. Also, this research goes beyond student experience of higher learning and academic achievements to examine how they negotiate cultural differences in their everyday lives and both the familial and state expectations surrounding their study abroad period. Personal and social life can be very influential in shaping academic excellence and my hope is that this research will bring forward stories and experiences of their transnational lives that have not been explored before by researchers. Seeing the kinds of issues and pressures they face and how they manage them could also have broader implications for universities and colleges in terms of how they support and advise Saudi international students here in Canada and elsewhere. My research also fills a gap in this area of research by focusing on Western Canada as well as looking at the entanglements of personal and social life with education. Not only will this research help to fill some of these gaps, it is also a very pertinent subject considering the current
political turmoil that has taken place between Saudi Arabia and Canada involving the
cancellation of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program for students studying in Canada in 2018.
This dramatic turn of events has ramifications for every student currently enrolled in the
program.

**International students and transnational mobility**

The linkages between international higher education and transnational mobilities are an
important part of my theoretical orientation. According to sociologist Floya Anthias (2012,102)
she argues for transnational migration studies to be “framed within a contextual, dynamic and
processual analysis that recognizes the interconnectedness of different identities and hierarchical
structures relating to gender, ethnicity, ‘race’, class and other social divisions at local, nation and
transnational and global levels.” The transnational positioning of Saudi Arabian international
students is a complex process because they must negotiate their identity and social position under
very different circumstances in Canada compared to Saudi Arabia. Another key aspect of
transnational mobilities is how international education is infused with power relations and
geopolitics that affects individuals crossing national borders. For Anthias (2012, 103), “the kind
of transnational lens we use must pay attention to how different nations are hierarchically
positioned and how actors themselves are positioned hierarchically through these global
dimensions of power.” The financial guarantee provided by the King Abdullah Scholarship
Program arguably creates a privileged space for these mobile students because they do not have
to experience financial stress and/or juggle several jobs to pay their monthly bills, which is likely
different in comparison to many other student population groups studying abroad.
There are many books and articles that have helped to inform my main conceptual categories. Turkish author and international educator Kemal Guruz’s book *Higher Education and International Student Mobility in the Global Knowledge Economy* (2011) discusses the internationalization of higher education and the reasons behind the rapid expansion of international learning. According to their findings, there are 2.75 million international students worldwide and more than 17,000 institutions in 184 countries that have opportunities for students to study abroad. The Saudi government certainly contributes to this rapidly growing number of students pursuing higher education abroad. Guruz writes, “knowledge and people with knowledge are the key factors of development, the main drivers of growth, and the major determinants of competitiveness in the global knowledge economy” (Guruz 2011, 7). He concludes that the “Internationalization of higher education in today’s global knowledge economy includes, in addition to increased international content in curricula, movement of students, scholars, programs, and institutions across borders” (20). The mission of the King Abdullah Scholarship Programs aligns with what Guruz says about international education and the desire to build a competitive global knowledge economy in the Saudi Kingdom. One of the main goals of the Program is to create global citizens, but, as I argue, one of the main conditions of the Program is to create global citizens who are expected to return after their studies and remain firmly rooted in the Kingdom itself.

Building on the theme of higher education abroad, *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education* by Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters (2011) focuses on neo-liberalism in the globalization of higher education and how the patterns of student mobility are rapidly changing. Although not coming from an anthropological background, they focus on case studies from students in the UK, Europe, and Asia and how “the relationship
between education, globalization, and neo-liberalism is important in terms of understanding policy imperatives in this area as well as the perspectives and motivations of individual students” (Brooks and Waters 2011, 8-9). The authors claim that mobility “can have a significant impact on identity formation” and that international students see themselves as “neither tourists nor immigrants, but occupying an entirely new cultural space” (8-9). Some theoretical issues that are explored in more depth include “employability” and the relationship between overseas study and labour market advantage; the role of student mobility in reproducing social advantage within families; the construction of “cosmopolitan” identities; and the importance of adopting geographical perspectives in the analysis of educational processes (Brooks and Waters 2011, 11).

From my research into this topic, the concerns around “employability” are central to Saudi Arabian students’ motivation and rationale for undertaking education abroad, but also the opportunity to experiment with their own identity and relationships with other people, without the fear of reprisal from family and state. For example, a student may go abroad to gain new skill sets that will support “employability” upon return, but they also gain a degree of symbolic capital that comes with pursuing higher education in a foreign country.

Muslim mobilities is another key aspect of this research. In the book Managing Muslim Mobilities, Anita Häusermann Fábos and Riina Isotalo (2014) look at Muslim mobilities and the politics of “migration management.” As a result of growing conflict and forced displacement in many parts of the Arab Muslim world, these authors argue that there is a need to explore the varying ways Muslim people reconfigure space and place in the context of growing insecurity for millions of Muslims, and how the discourse of “migration management” is understood and challenged in various parts of the world (Fábos and Isotalo 2014, 1). For example, they discuss how post 9/11 Muslim migration has increasingly been viewed as a “security threat” and a
potential spearhead for “terrorism” in the global north by some Euro-American political groups and community organizations. While the Fabos and Isotalos book does not focus on Muslim international students, the book does shed light on the broader geopolitical context of changing views on Muslims abroad. All of the students I interviewed identify as Muslims, so reading directly about Muslim mobilities was insightful in providing a broader context for my student interlocutors and their concerns. Another recent book that was central to my background literature on Muslim mobilities is Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission (2017) by Michael Farquhar. In this book, the author focuses on Da’wa (the pilgrimage to Mecca by Muslims worldwide) and the significance of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. He writes about how the Saudi institution of the Islamic University of Medina influences migrant views and education that has broader transnational implications for Muslims beyond the Kingdom. In other words, this book is unique within my literature review because it focuses on inward student migration in Saudi Arabia, rather than outward higher education, which is important because not all young Saudi citizens aspire to pursue education abroad.

Of particular interest in shaping my theoretical approach is the scholarship of anthropologist Vered Amit. Her research interests focus on dual nationalities, Canadian students studying abroad, travelling professions, and other topics that bring globalization and transnational mobilities together. Vered Amit has written three articles that have helped to shape my theoretical perspective. In her first article, “Circumscribed Cosmopolitanism: Travel Aspirations and Experiences” (2015), she focuses on travel aspirations and experiences of youth study and work abroad programs and introduces the concept “circumscribed cosmopolitanism.” Amit defines circumscribed cosmopolitanism as “a persistent tendency to interpret cosmopolitanism in terms of openness to other peoples, practices, lifestyles, cultural expressions
and traditions” (551) that is part of the temporary and situational worlds that constitute study abroad programs for many students. However, she notes there is often a disjuncture between the aspirations of mobile students towards a cosmopolitan outlook and how their actual experiences are circumscribed and constrained in practice. The benefits of international education that these articles highlight are many, including new experiences, challenges, knowledge of other cultures, and self-discovery. As will become evident in future chapters, I see these benefits in myself as an international student in Canada and among my Saudi participants. However, there are also additional challenges that speak to the kind of gaps that Amit is referring too, such as the experience of isolationism and barriers making friends with locals. One of the main critiques of study abroad experiences is that they set students up to meet other international students through orientations and housing, but make it difficult to meet resident students from the host country because they are not involved in the same integrative activities upon arrival.

In this article Amit also writes about the desires of young people seeking “global citizenship,” which she defines as the notion that living abroad would “further their careers or sense of citizenship” by providing them a firsthand experience to “learn about other cultures and other places” (Amit 2015, 561). In Chapter 3, I explore this article further in regards to Saudi student responses. Related to this she discusses how employers see prospective workers as more attractive when they have had an experience abroad, showing that they have the willingness to adjust and adapt to new situations. Amit writes, “once you return to Canada you become more attractive to Canadian employers as part of a knowledge based economy because the employer looks at the participant and sees an individual who is open-minded, who has seen other things, who is actually also open to new ways of doing things and is willing to accept changes, which is very important for an employer these days” (2015, 560). This reflects directly on my own
research and the mission of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. As I discuss more in the next chapter, the KASP’s mission is “to prepare and qualify Saudi Arabian human resources in an effective manner to compete on an international level in the labor market and in scientific research” (www.saudibureau.org). In other words, the Saudi Bureau is also looking at education abroad to help build global citizens that will also provide a competitive edge in terms of building human resources and also moving away from an oil dependent national economy. However, global citizenship, as I discuss, does not necessarily entail opportunities presented by globalization because all of the students are required to return home after completing their education.

Another important article by Vered Amit is “Student Mobility and Internationalisation: Rationales, Rhetoric and ‘Institutional Isomorphism’” (2010), where she examines the role of student mobility within broader discourses of internationalisation. One of her main arguments is that universities tend to be designed as neoliberal and entrepreneurial, meaning that they draw on a corporate business model that relies on the recruitment and financial support of international student registration fees. As a result, the internationalization of universities’ mission and curriculum tends to be more administrative than scholarly. She claims that there is a “blurring of the boundaries between business/trade models and notions of global citizenship or international community” (Amit 2010, 9). This article shows how the reconfiguration of public-private universities increasingly draw on discourses of “internationalism” in the global West as both a moral endeavour as well as an economic necessity. This raises the question, do these universities have the best interests of students in mind or are they just looking to make a profit? What is certainly evident is that universities are not outside the current market-driven neoliberal
landscape of the early twenty-first century and are being shaped in various ways by broader political and economic determinants.

David Jefferess at the University of British Columbia speaks to these issues in his article, “Global Citizenship and the Cultural Politics of Benevolence” (2008). Linking global citizenship to broader philosophical views on cosmopolitanism, he writes,

Cosmopolitanism is an ethical philosophy that is concerned with understanding the role of the individual in the work of transforming ideologies and structures that produce and maintain inequality and injustice. While articulations of global citizenship reiterate this ideal of a universal humanity, the discourse of global citizenship seems to elide the positioning of the global citizen as embedded within a material history of global social relations (Jefferess 2008, 28).

This statement is important because he critiques the way global citizenship discourse, especially in North America, is lauded for its benevolence and close alignment with projects of international development and humanitarianism that are designed to help Others (28). He writes, “by focusing on what the global citizen must do to or for the Other, rather than conceiving a global ethics in terms of understanding our relationships with others, the focus of this ethical obligation seems to be the symptoms of global inequality and not the causes” (34). He relates this concept to programs at UBCO, such as Go Global and GROW, showing how they are also embedded in a cultural politics of benevolence that masks the structures of inequality and privilege in the first place. While I do not entirely agree with everything Jefferess’ says on global citizenship, his article is helpful in encouraging us to think more critically about international education program like the KASP and about the politics of student transnational and global mobilities.
Gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world

The second body of literature that I draw on looks at the relationship between gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world. Students who live abroad are often exposed to different cultures, societal norms and experiences that can directly impact their understanding of social identity (Maschia-Lee, 2010). According to Mascia-Lee,

As more and more people move to new places, whether through leisured travel, voluntary immigration, or forced movement, varied constructions of gender come increasingly into contact with one another… As a result of these movements, many individuals now routinely confront complex and contradictory identity constructs and expectations (2010, 10).

Furthermore, she adds,

Individuals and groups of people do not merely accept wholesale “new” cultural conceptualizations of difference. Instead, they react in complex ways to them, sometimes integrating bits and pieces of new conceptualizations in preexisting models of femininity and masculinity. At other times they contest and resist them. The end result is often the creation of new values, social identities, and tensions. In the realm of gender, exposure to others’ constructs has also resulted in the emergence of new and diverse conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity (2010, 10).

Arguably, one of the most significant challenges for Saudi students is their encounter with Canada’s mixed gender society. It is well known that gender norms and expectations differ across cultures. According to Mascia-Lee, “Gender role expectations arise from society’s ideas about the social skills, abilities, and behaviours thought appropriate to individuals depending on whether they are male or female” (2010, 7). Similarly, Floya Anthias (2012, 106) writes, gender also plays an important role “in the reproduction of national and ethnic boundaries,” and is important for understanding the experience and position of migrants. Furthermore, it is crucial that we consider “differences among migrants and indeed among both men and women migrants, not only in terms of geographical origin, but also in terms of the differentiated social positions that they occupy in the receiving countries” (Anthias 2012, 106).
In most studies on Saudi Arabian students abroad, gender is an important and sensitive topic. Whether it is young men coming across women who are in positions of power and authority, or women experiencing co-ed classroom experiences, the prevailing gender norms and their differences between the Kingdom and dominant Canadian society can be significant. A PhD dissertation in Australia by Ahmed Alhazmi (2013) examines the religious aspects of experiencing gender desegregation at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. For Alhazmi (2013, 7), gender desegregation for women can be a “scary” and threatening experience when pursuing higher education in Australia. Similarly, Terry Ryan Hall (2013) shows how gender and sexual identity are challenged and/or threatened for both Saudi men and women when they study abroad in western educational settings. This is of particular interest to my research because of the varying ways young Saudi men negotiate conflicting gender norms and expectations here in Canada. In other words, as they navigate their experience of education the exposure to women in positions of power and influence can affect their learning processes and understandings of femininity and masculinity. However, as I will demonstrate, this does not always entail a lasting critique or challenge to patriarchy that is common in Saudi culture. As sociologist Mirjana Morokvasic (2013, 48) argues, “while for both men and women the crossing of [international] borders can lead to more autonomy and the challenging of established gender norms and intergenerational hierarchies, it can also lead to new dependencies and reinforce existing gender boundaries and hierarchies.”

The emphasis on transnationalism is also important here. As Frances E. Mascia-Lee (2010) shows in her book, *Gender and Difference in a Globalizing World*, transnational mobilities are shaped by many factors, such as gender, power and inequality, and how these in turn shape the world. This book is particularly helpful because it provides a theoretical
framework drawing on gender studies and transnationalism that speak to a number of emergent themes in this research. Another important book is *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams* by Karen Kelsky (2010). In this ethnography Kelsky shows how gender, patriarchy and transitional mobility collide among young Japanese “internationalist” women who are studying or working abroad and have a desire to escape the patriarchal structures of Japanese society. Despite these aspirations to escape the gendered hierarchy of Japan through educational opportunities, as Kelsky shows, sexuality, race and patriarchy are reinscribed as a result of Western (mostly white) men and their fetishization of the demure oriental women. Her insights connect to this research because of the similar ways young “internationalist” Saudi men also exploit new opportunities afforded by international education in Canada but have to rework (albeit temporarily) their understandings of gender and patriarchy if they are to succeed in their education and/or if they are dating western women in Canada or the United States. As well, these men are also subjected to ideas and images of what constitutes Muslim manhood while in Canada, which has a bearing on how they understand their own masculine subjectivity, not only how they perceive femininity and women. As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, most of the participants in this study have dated a western woman, whereas dating is forbidden in Saudi Arabia, and this influences their perceptions of femininity.

Although there is a growing literature on transnational masculinities in migration studies, I am particularly interested in how this is experienced by young Saudi men. In *Bodies that (Don’t) Matter: Desire, Eroticism and Melancholia in Pakistani Labour Migration* (2009) Ali Nobil Ahmad focuses on Pakistani men’s experiences of working abroad in Italy and London and how they re-negotiate their sexuality and masculine desires in a transnational arena. One section of the book is particularly compelling, when the author describes the experience of
Pakistani men and how they perform their masculinity in the bazaar. In Pakistan, as in many parts of South Asia and the Middle East, the bazaar is an important public space and social arena where young men find pleasure in looking and being watched by others. By displaying and showing off their new found material wealth, they are also trying to show that they are powerful, which equates with culturally inscribed views of “manliness.” In my own research, I see Saudi Arabian international students doing this as well. For many of my Saudi participants, it was important to have the best cars, watches and clothes to show how power, wealth and masculinity are mutually reinforced.

However, in his study Ahmad also explains how the process of working abroad can also be seen as desexualizing because for many of them they are bound to grueling contractual labor and are too busy with work to even call their families. In other words, as Ahmad points out, the experience of transnational migration often involved “sexual and emotional deprivation and becomes a source of inward torment, disillusionment, suffering and sadness” (Ahmad 2009, 321). Despite the projection of wealth and symbolic capital at home, labour work abroad changes their understandings of masculinity which is much more performative at home in comparison to emasculating hard work and isolationism abroad. Nor can they show this vulnerability within their families because their families are not present with them. Ahmed ties these two examples together by concluding that “the more acute an individual’s loss of self-esteem through social and sexual marginalisation in Europe, the greater his need for recuperating a sense of self-worth by posturing as wealthy and potent upon return” (Ahmad 2009, 326). This cycle repeats itself, according to Ahmed, in order to regain feelings of masculine potency on return.

Another concept that can be challenging for Saudi students is housework. Because household tasks in their home culture are looked upon as highly feminized and therefore
demeaning to men, adjusting to independence and domestic responsibilities in Canada can be a challenge. In my research, as Saudi Arabian men experienced everyday life without their familial responsibilities, they were required to look after themselves, which included cooking, cleaning and grocery shopping. Giulia Sinatti’s article “Masculinities and Intersectionality in Migration: Transnational Wolof Migrants Negotiating Manhood and Gendered Family Roles” (2014) is helpful because it shows how Wolof migrants from Senegal re-negotiate their notions of manhood in Italy to fit the patriarchal norms expected from men, and how this is reflected in daily practices with family members (Sinatti 2014, 216). Playing the “breadwinning” role is important to the Wolof men, which is why they leave to Italy so that they can continue to uphold this dominant masculine role. To them, migration is equated with manhood. Yet when they go abroad, their own masculinity is challenged because they are experiencing a new culture where they are often marginalized from the dominant culture as a result of prevailing ethnic and class differences, as well as racism.

Another more recent article by R. W. Connell, called *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept* (2005) is helpful in understanding that gender is not fixed and there are different formations of masculinity within each culture yet always in subordination to a hegemonic model, which is often unattainable for most men. First, she explains the concept of hegemonic masculinity defining it as “a pattern of practice that allowed men’s dominance over women [and subordinated men] to continue” (Connell 2005, 832). This concept draws attention to the way men justify their “macho” and powerful behavior over women and other men, and the authority by which they act out their dominance because it is encultured and normalized. Connell claims “[some] men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments” (Connell 2005,
This can be used to explain the varying ways men negotiate their sense of masculinity when they migrate, whether as workers or students. Depending on their audience, ideals of masculinity are enthusiastically adopted and are subject to change. Connell writes that “the evidence on global dynamics in gender is growing, and it is clear that processes such as economic restructuring, long-distance migration, and the turbulence of ‘development’ agendas have the power to reshape local patterns of masculinity and femininity” (Connell 2005, 850). As cultures change, expectations change, which may include what is regarded as “hegemonic,” especially given that hegemonic masculinity is contextual, multiple, and relative. It is important to also note that hegemonic masculinity is an ideal that is rarely attainable by actual men, and often relies on the hierarchies and social distance of other subordinated men to give it force and meaning. For example, while my research participants may claim to reinforce this ideal of hegemonic masculinity in Saudi Arabia, in Canada, they feel subordinate as visible minorities associated with other racialized groups. Although international students do not share the same conditions as these migrant labor workers, and in fact, come from a position of privilege, it is important to look at the varying ways their time abroad can challenge hetero-normative views of masculinity and/or reinforce them. Heteronormativity is the idea that being heterosexual is the preferred sexual orientation.

Another concept by Connell that I find particularly helpful in my ethnographic study of Saudi students is “transnational business masculinity” (849). This concept refers to the ways in which masculinity is idealized through the prestige of successful and powerful businessman, and is often shaped by western definitions. From my interviews I found that Saudi men were motivated to study and travel abroad as a means to leverage opportunities for money and success,
perhaps influenced by an idealized transnational business masculinity that has cultural capital in Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, in Men, Migration and Hegemonic Masculinity (2009) by Mike Donaldson and Richard Howson, these authors also engage with the varying ways men worldwide experience masculinity throughout the migration process, posting that “migrating men do not arrive in their new homeland bereft of notions about their own manliness. To the contrary, they usually bring with them firm beliefs and well-established practices about manhood and gender relations” (2009, 210). In other words, men will often go abroad with strong expectations and beliefs surrounding manliness and worthiness, and can be reinforced rather than challenged in the locale and spaces of migration, as we will see among these Saudi students.

From what I have discovered in reading this literature, masculinity is affected by dominant and pervasive models of hegemonic masculinity, but this does not mean masculinity is not subject to change, especially under conditions of transnationalism, such temporary migration. Whether doing everyday household chores, attending to family relations and duties, or through a reconfiguration of power in various institutional settings, gender is an ever-changing concept that bears on the subjectivity of Saudi students and how they interpret their experience on the KASP. This literature has been helpful in situating my findings in Chapter 4 that look at the varying ways research participants have experienced Canadian culture in terms of gender, migration, and difference. It is also important to point out that while masculinity was central to my initial theoretical interest in this topic, as the research unfolded, I broadened the topic to explore broader themes and tensions between gender, migration, and difference, that includes other related topics such as dating, marriage expectations, identity, and experiences of discrimination.
1.6 Methods

This research is a qualitative research project drawing primarily on ethnographic methods, especially interviews, used by cultural anthropologists and social scientists. Ethnographic methods generally involve immersion within a culture or field site, building rapport, taking field notes, and conducting interviews. I used the following methods for this research.

1. *Interviews.* I interviewed six Saudi Arabian men studying at various universities and colleges in Western Canada. Many of these students were in undergraduate business programs. While I intended to interview closer to ten students several of my prospective interviewees returned home in light of the visa curtailments by the Saudi Kingdom in 2018. Semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix) guided me in each interview, yet the questions were not necessarily addressed in any particular order. The goal was to create a space where my research participants felt comfortable sharing their knowledge and personal experience of their education abroad. With their permission and ensuring confidentiality throughout, I recorded the students interviews and transcribed them using pseudonyms for their names. Each interview lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes, depending on how much detail the participants went into. Each interview question was written with language sensitivities in mind in order to be accessible to students whose first language was not English.

2. *Secondary Data.* Reviewing the data and literature collected by other researchers, government departments, and cultural bureaus helped augment the interviews by providing important details on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program as well as
other background information on Saudi students abroad. All of this secondary data is available online through public reports, academic journal articles and records.

In anthropology and ethnography, immersive fieldwork and participant observation is a common method for collecting data. I decided not to include participant observation as a method in this research because of the potential ethical challenges and “conflicts of interest” that could arise as a result of my Saudi partner and his broader social network. Having said that, it is also important to note that I have had several years of deep socialization with Saudi students in the United States and Canada that informed my research and has shaped my understanding and perspective. For these reasons, I have elected to build my analysis and interpretation of data around the primary interviews to ensure methodological rigor and augment some narratives with reflective comments and observations drawing on personal experience. While I fully realize the limited number of interviews impacts my ability to triangulate data I am also aware that the process of interpretation can only ever be “partial.”

Although this research did not entail in-depth fieldwork, common among cultural anthropologists, as mentioned previously, I had spent over one year building a rapport with a number of Saudi Arabian men when I moved to British Columbia in 2016. Several of these Saudi students expressed an interest in this research and a willingness to be interviewed. I believe they were interested in my research because they face certain challenges and pressures under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program that are often misunderstood by other students, faculty, and staff. These relationships that I had built allowed me to recruit a broader sample of Saudi students across various higher learning institutions. In many ways these prior interactions tacitly inform this project.
The timeline in terms of data collection and analysis was not always linear. As Merriam and Tisdell claim in their book *Qualitative Research* (2015), the process of analyzing and reporting qualitative data are often simultaneous activities. They say, “Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions, and so on” (191). This “iterative-inductive” approach (O’Reilly 2005) allows the researcher to begin with an open mind to new discoveries, while still drawing on theories and concepts to substantiate data. As certain themes emerged through the research process it often changed the direction of the project slightly as new data and insights emerged. As I collected data, I also found myself with many pages of transcribed interviews. Through this process of transcription, I began to see certain themes and patterns emerging. This allowed me to organize and analyze the findings in a more systematic way. At this stage I drew on the “constant comparison method,” which means that each finding that emerges is compared to the already existing findings from the data (Merriam and Tisdell 2015).

I believe that qualitative methodology was a good choice for this research project because I was particularly interested in individual stories and emergent themes from the interviews and personal narratives, which I believe helps to justify the small cohort. This research is not intended to be representative. A limitation of the data is that I draw entirely on this relatively small number of extensive interviews. For future research, comparing and contrasting this data set with another group of students and/or more interviews would be helpful in building greater empirical data to support my conclusions. A next step in the research could be to follow up with the students after graduation or, in this case, after they were sent home from the King Abdullah Scholarship Program after its dramatic ending in Canada. Future research could also explore reactions and experiences of the Program after its cancellation in Canada.
1.7 Positionality

As described in the introduction, I believe that my own story and experiences through dating and friendship with Saudis plays a significant role in my research and should not be ignored. Sharing my story is an important way to show the personal significance of my research and also to highlight my positionality within this project. In the book *Alive in the Writing*, Kirin Narayan (2012) discusses how creative non-fiction can complement more traditional qualitative forms of analysis. I feel my personal experiences and story can play a critical role in embedding this research in a particular social and cultural milieu that has brought me to where I am today. For these reasons, I have incorporated my own personal stories, observations and reflexive narrative at different points in the dissertation in order to position my research as a white, heterosexual Euro-American woman in my twenties who was involved in a long-term relationship with a Saudi national and recipient of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.

Since studying abroad in Ireland during my first year of university, I found a love for travel and cultural diversity. When I returned to my home university in New Hampshire, I discovered that I had a talent for welcoming international students into my own social circle that was embedded within American culture and society. For these reasons, I teamed up with the international office and became involved as an orientation leader, a global ambassador, and finally, I was hired to be the Global Student Coordinator, meaning I was the student leader of the international office on campus. Throughout this time, I began to make friends from all over the world. I loved hearing their stories, learning new languages, experiencing cultural events and trying new food that was unfamiliar to me as a white student born and raised in the United States. I started to realize that this could also be a career option for me.
Throughout this time of learning and maturing, I met my partner. He was an international student from Saudi Arabia. Before meeting him, I knew very little about Saudi Arabia and had never met anyone from the Kingdom. Through getting to know him and other friends, I realized how much I enjoyed their company. Our romantic relationship continued despite several obstacles and limitations that underscore this research project.

When I graduated with my Bachelor of Art’s degree in Psychology with a Minor in Anthropology, I was employed at two different international higher education companies. This further strengthened my aspirations to pursue international education as a career option. All the while, I was dating my Saudi boyfriend, who was still at the University. While trying to renew his study permit in Saudi Arabia in 2016, he was refused re-entry to the United States. The main reason for denying his re-entry was that the border control/immigration agents claimed he did not have enough ties to Saudi. This claim struck me as unfair because he was, after all, a Saudi Arabian citizen and was studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which is a Saudi sponsored program. In order to continue his education, he decided that his only option was to move to Canada, where his entry was accepted right away. That left me with a major decision regarding my own future. I flew to Canada, where he was newly admitted to a college under the business program. I knew I wanted to pursue a master’s degree, but I wasn’t sure exactly in what program of study. I found the perfect program for me in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies (IGS) at the University of British Columbia. The IGS program gave me the option to incorporate anthropology as well as international education into my degree. I was thrilled and applied right away.

I moved to Kelowna, British Columbia in 2016 where I lived with my Saudi Arabian boyfriend until his departure in April 2018. My partner graduated and received his degree in
January. Like all Saudi nationals under the KASP program, when he completed his degree he was required to return to Saudi Arabia where he is now currently employed and working full time. Since our relationship came to a halt, I moved back to the United States, and I still keep in contact with him and other Saudi Arabian students that I have become acquainted with. Over the years I have continued to learn Arabic, aspects of Saudi culture and Islamic religion, and how that influences their everyday lives. I have also come to appreciate that Saudi Arabian culture is very different from the North American culture in which I have grown up with. It is these kinds of cultural differences that involve both educational aspirations and personal connections in a transnational arena that has fueled this research project. In an article entitled “Putting Ourselves Forward” by Kathy Absolon and Cam Willett, they discuss how there is no point in doing research unless you have passion for it, using one’s “self-location” as a reflexive device to explore meaning and truths (2005, 385).

It is also important to note that I am also an international student studying in Canada. Although my immersion into Canadian society was a process in itself, I certainly did not face the same set of cultural challenges and language-barriers that other international students encountered. Nonetheless, as an international student I was able to participate in many shared experiences and notable transitions like my Saudi research informants. For example, I experienced bouts of homesickness and faced some pedagogical challenges at the academic level. It was interesting to find that most Canadians could tell that I was from the United States by how I acted and talked, which I did not expect. Thus, interpreting the data as an international student allowed me to relate with my participants, especially in regards to working with advisors and being far from home.
1.8 Ethical Concerns

In general, this project is considered low-risk and the risks associated with participating in this research project are no greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. Each student interviewed was aware of the purpose of the research and had the right to withdraw at any time. Throughout the research, I have maintained anonymity by ensuring all research participants go by pseudonyms in the interviews and publications. Any extensive quotes or stories that emerge from the interviews that may draw attention to a participant’s identity such as hometown, age, and year in the program were changed to ensure further anonymity.

The majority of research participants were recruited through participant recruitment on campus through the international office and snowball sampling (or chain sampling) which is a common nonprobability sampling technique used in the social sciences where existing study subjects help to recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. Snowball sampling requires the third party to obtain permission from any potential participants before giving the researcher any personal information. Research informants gave potential participants information on the study and my contact information so that if they were interested in being involved in the study they contacted me directly.

The cohort of Saudi students that I interviewed can be considered a relatively homogenous group. All of them are successful KASP applicants and self-identified as coming from the “middle class.” Most of them were also pursuing a degree in business management, which is common among Saudi male students. In terms of differences, all of the participants came from different regions in Saudi Arabia and varied slightly in terms of family background (sibling order and expectations) and sexuality, as we will see.
As a result of my relationship with a Saudi man, I feel that I was able to gain rapport with students and therefore was well suited and prepared for this research. However, it was also important to address my position of power as a researcher and mitigate feelings of potential coercion that may be perceived by certain students as a result of my relationship with a Saudi national. In order to mitigate potential coercion, I made sure that my partner was not one of my research participants and that my research findings only included those who were external to his immediate social circle.

The cohort that made the most sense for my research project consists of men between the ages of 22-30. The main reason for this selection criteria was because of my initial research interest in the area of masculinities and migration. If I were to incorporate women into the research, this would affect my data set and the broader research objectives and questions. Another attributing factor is that there are very few Saudi Arabian women studying in Western Canada, and, as I learned through my friendships with Saudi students, often women who mostly study at the graduate level are here as companions with their husbands. In other words, a very limited number of women are enrolled in the scholarship Program, which leaves men as the dominant gender group. I realize that some may perceive the absence of women’s voices in this research as a real and important concern that only reinforces the hegemony of the Saudi male voice at the expense of those marginalized and under threat. While I do not want to be complicit in reinforcing this discrimination towards women, the focus of a small purposeful sample size of young men was more realistic given the limitations around access to research subjects and the larger goals of the project.

As mentioned previously, the main goal of this dissertation is to focus on the life stories and narratives of these students and how they navigate the pressures of studying abroad on the
KASP. Narayan writes, “stories are incipiently analytic, and that in the sequence of reasoning, analysis has a narrative form” (Narayan 2012, 8). As a well-known ethnographic method, a small sample size based on rich narrative data gives me the opportunity to analyze experiences on a much deeper level. As mentioned previously, while I had hoped to have ten interviews, my sample size was cut short due to the changing geopolitical relations between Canada and Saudi Arabia. This is something I address further in the conclusion.

The ethics surrounding a white North American woman asking Saudi men about gender norms, dating, interracial relationships, and other potentially sensitive subjects is an important ethical consideration. As a Master’s student with a background in International Education with a Bachelor’s in psychology, I had a good understanding of the cultural differences and gender norms before undertaking the interviews, which assisted me in understanding what might make the participant feel comfortable. As I mentioned previously, participation in this research project was entirely voluntary and research participants did not have to answer questions that made them feel vulnerable or uncomfortable. All interviews were conducted in a public or semi-private setting, such as a coffee shop or library, ensuring that as a mixed gender dyad we were not alone, which showed sensitivity to gender dynamics and also cultural norms of decorum and proper femininity. Each participant was given options to choose where they would prefer to take part in the interview. As I have said, I have extensive experience as an international advisor working with Saudi students and I remained sensitive to the religious and gender rules/norms pertaining to these students. For instance, in Saudi, gender is segregated and dating is prohibited, which is very different compared to Canada. Also, religion and familial relationships are the basis of everyday life, according to my participants. Being aware of these cultural distinctions prepared me for successful interviews.
1.8 Conclusion

Through my research, I hope to build on the existing literature but also move the conversation in some new directions that will focus on Saudi Arabian students studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, specifically in Canada. I also hope to assist professors, teachers, advisors, home stays, among others in finding a better understanding of the culture of Saudi Arabia from which these students come from and how to foster more supportive learning environments for these students. Recent developments between Canada and Saudi Arabia have also impacted my study, as some of the students that I interviewed have been made to leave Canada and return home, as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program was promptly cancelled because of political turmoil between the two countries. Several students I was planning on interviewing decided to withdraw because of how upset they were with having to return home and not return to Canada. These political challenges began as I was finishing up the interview process, and I will discuss in my concluding chapter how it has seemingly affected these students.

In Chapter 2, I give an overview of Saudi Arabia as a country, their Higher Education System, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, and a discussion of literature on the scholarship program from economic, social, and gender perspectives. In Chapter 3, I introduce the participants and discuss their interviews and personal narratives in regards to my first theoretical framework on international students and transnational mobility. In Chapter 4, I continue to discuss the interviews and narratives based on my second theoretical framework of gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world, with additional focus on greater aspects of dating, marriage, and discrimination. In Chapter 5, the conclusion, I summarize my findings
and deliberate the relevance of these discoveries. I also discuss the recent policy changes in Canada that have led to a dramatic cancellation of all Saudi Arabian students studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.
Chapter 2: Saudi Arabia and the King Abdullah Scholarship Program

In order to contextualize my research findings, in this chapter I begin with a brief overview of Saudi Arabia and the central role of the Saudi Cultural Mission/Bureau that administers the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). Drawing on mission statements, statistics and expectations around the KASP, I also situate these educational opportunities within the changing culture of higher education in the Kingdom. Finally, I also examine the specifics of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and discuss the existing literature from different educational and economic, social, and gender perspectives.

2.1 Saudi Arabia

With 32.94 million people, Saudi Arabia is the biggest country in the Middle East and is also one of the richest countries in the world because of its extensive oil reserves that were first discovered in 1938, becoming the home of the second largest oil producer behind the Russia. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia is also a country with significant economic and political influence on the world stage, especially in terms of its relationship with the United States, but also Canada. Saudi became a country in 1932 by Ibn Saud, creating a monarch with the Al Saud family, which is still in power to this day.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s current leadership is King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. He became King on January 22, 2015, succeeding his half-brother King Abdullah bin Abulaziz, who is the founder of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. In addition to its resource rich oil reserves, Saudi Arabia is also significant within the broader Muslim world because it is home to two important holy cities, Mecca and Medina, that draw millions of devout pilgrims from around the world each year. As one of the main pillars of Islam, it is the goal of
every Muslim to undertake pilgrimage or “hajj” in Mecca at least once in their life. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic theocracy, which means the basic law of government is in accordance with the Islamic Shari'a, or Islamic law.

In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism is the dominant faith and is part of the Sunni branch of Islam. Based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), Wahhabism claims to be the literal interpretation of the Quran in which Saudi Sharia law is based. To ensure that Islamic rule is followed, Saudi Arabia has religious police, called Haia or Mutaween, that enforce rules such as gender segregation, dress code, and prayer. While the Kingdom claims to be united under Islam and Sharia law, to this day, tribal relations and differences remain a strong determinant for group identities in the country. There are around 18 major tribes in Saudi Arabia.

With the new leadership under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz many have suggested that Saudi Arabia is moving towards a more progressive country especially in light of its “Vision 2030” plan. Under Vision 2030 the Crown Prince claims that Saudi Arabia is “determined to reinforce and diversify the capabilities of our economy, turning our key strengths into enabling tools for a fully diversified future” (Vision 2030, Foreword). The themes that are central to the document include building a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation for the future.

2.2 Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

In 1954, the Ministry of Education was established, and in 1957, the King Saud university was the first university opened in Riyadh. This was followed by the first elementary and secondary school for girls in 1960 (Almari 88, 2011). Currently, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2014), there are 32 colleges, universities, and technical institutes in Saudi
Arabia with 636,000 Saudi students enrolled and 6,360 international students studying in Saudi Arabia. Arabic is the main language of instruction at these higher education institutions, although English is also common in some private institutions (Clark 2014, 1).

When the Ministry of Education opened, the demand for improved Higher Education was high. One of the main reasons for the growth in higher educational institutions according to Majed Alamari (2011, 89) at the University in Riyadh, is the need to develop and oversee “special programs in accordance with the country’s needs,” as well as raise the “level of communication and coordination between institutions of higher learning.” This also involved the establishment of various cultural and educational offices in over 32 countries abroad to further facilitate opportunities for student mobility abroad. The growth in educational opportunities over the past decade in Saudi Arabia has been particularly significant, according to Almari, but there also strengths and weaknesses to this fast evolving educational climate. Part of the reason for the expansion of educational infrastructure and opportunities abroad is the countries close marriage with oil production as a member in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In fact, according to Almari, “the budget of the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia has increased significantly as the price of the oil increased in the last couple of years” (2011, 89). Capitalizing on this oil wealth, according to Zvika Krieger (2007) has led to rising living standards on the one hand, but it has also put considerable strain on a relatively small higher-education system that “has not been able to handle the growing demand, leaving large numbers of young people without college degrees and thus unemployable” (2007, 1). In Saudi Arabia, Krieger claims the higher education sector has not “kept pace” with the demand.

Thus, while Saudi Arabia has access to a growing budget from oil wealth, it lags behind other industrialized countries when it comes to attracting international scholars for its higher
education programs. For instance, faculty from Saudi Arabia receive a much higher salary than non-Saudi faculty, leading to discrimination in salaries and incentives (Almari 2011, 90). Almari and Krieger also claim that there is a lack of infrastructure and funding for research in Saudi Arabia (90). According to Krieger (2005), “Less than 0.25 percent of the country's gross domestic product is spent on research, and universities do not have strong links with the private sector” and for these reasons “faculty promotion usually has more to do with seniority and political connections than with the quality of a professor's teaching or research” (1). Due to poor funding, a lack of resources, and various bureaucratic hurdles that many professors and teaching faculty face this has led to a deterioration of the higher education system (Krieger 2007).

Although some effort has been made in recent decades to implement a more western style educational model in Saudi Arabia, according to Krieger (2007, 1), “Supporters and skeptics are at odds over whether Saudi Arabia can successfully import Western-style education into a decidedly non-Western culture.” Academic freedom and voice are also closely monitored, and faculty can be fired for expressing opinions that undermine the legitimacy of the ruling authorities. Although Saudi leaders are well aware of these tensions within the higher education system, many also have hope that the “universities will push the larger society to become more open” (2007, 1).

Gender segregation is also an important factor that shapes higher education in Saudi Arabia. In a study by Roula Baki (2004) she focuses on how Shari’a, or Islamic law articulates with higher education to create a gender segregated system that feeds the Saudi labor market. Although it is well known that the conservative Wahabi Saudi society treats the sexes differently, it also shapes the curricula at the university level which differs for women and men. Thus, although women are able to obtain higher education this is still largely dictated by Wahabi
beliefs (Baki 2004, 3). For these reasons, Baki is critical of the current education system and argues that much more could be done to prepare both men and women to succeed in the global economy (7).

2.3 The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Canada and beyond

“We ask Allah almighty to grant all our students success and prosperity as we eagerly await their distinguished graduation and return to their homeland opulent with education, knowledge, and rich experience, to join with their predecessors in the development of our benevolent country” (www.saudibureau.org/en/)

- Dr. Fawzy A. Bukhari, Cultural Head at the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Canada

In order to contextualize the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, it is important to provide some background on the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission which is the main administrator of the Program. The first office that opened for the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau was in 1951 in Washington, D.C. and was called the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission of the United States of America. The Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in Canada opened in Ottawa in May 1978. These cultural missions are an extension of the Ministry of Education, Saudi Arabian Universities, and any other government agencies that facilitate the sponsorship of students while they are studying abroad. In the 1990s, the government of Saudi Arabia and the Ministry of Education decided to launch a two prong higher education strategy that entailed growing the number of public universities within the Kingdom and launching more Cultural Missions throughout the world that could facilitate opportunities for students to study abroad and further
strengthen human resources and skills for the Saudi state. Thus, the main responsibility of these Cultural Missions worldwide is to “assume the responsibility of administering the government's foreign scholarship programs in each respective country” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). This includes Canada, where the main objective of the Cultural Mission is to ensure that the cultural and academic needs of each student are being taken care of while they are studying abroad. At the Cultural Mission in Ottawa, there are approximately 300 staff members that have expertise in higher education, scholarship administration, and academic advising (www.saudibureau.org/en/). Through the strategic placement of the Cultural Mission in various parts of the world, it creates opportunities for Saudi Arabian citizens to gain access to the best education in the world, while also having the expenses taken care of by the government, such as the case under the KASP. Thus, it would appear that the Cultural Mission has a dual role in terms of administration and surveillance. On the one hand, it plays an integral role in facilitating the student experience and responds to student needs, but it also keeps track of student progress ensuring they are following appropriate protocol.

According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission statement in Canada, it says that it “enables young Saudi men and women to take advantage of the high quality education and training in Canadian post-secondary institutions, considered to rank amongst the foremost in the world, by administering scholarships and providing comprehensive support services to ensure the cultural, educational, and social welfare of Saudi students and their families in Canada” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). In its vision statement, it is very clear that they hope to use education abroad to strengthen the Kingdom’s future. Elsewhere on the website it says that “distinguished generations will lead Saudi Arabia's transformation from an oil-based to a knowledge-based economy, with strengthened international partnerships, a world-class higher
education system, and a reputation for excellence in scientific research” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). Up until recently, Canada was one of the top destinations for Saudi Arabian students seeking world class education ranking 3rd just behind the United States and the United Kingdom. As of 2014, there were 16,000 Saudi Arabian students studying in Canada. This makes up about 10% of all Saudis studying abroad as of now (www.saudibureau.org/en/).¹

2.4 King Abdullah Scholarship Program: History and Application Process

In 2005 the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) was launched by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. According to the official mission statement, the goal of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program is to “prepare and qualify Saudi Arabian human resources in an effective manner to compete on an international level in the labor market and in scientific research” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). Thus, facilitated by the Cultural Mission, it was created as a way to “establish sustainable human resources in the Kingdom [and] aimed to equip thousands of qualified Saudi men and women with the education and skills to lead the country’s transformation from an oil-based to a knowledge-based economy” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). The Program was envisioned by the Saudi Government as a vehicle to develop the Kingdom’s human resources and strengthen its position as a global-economic leader.

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program has become a prominent vehicle for Saudi Arabian citizens to study abroad. Saudi citizens have the opportunity to study in over 30 countries with all expenses paid. The Program is headed by the Ministry of Education and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission and Bureau. As I mentioned previously, Canada is a popular

¹ Although the KASP was launched in 2005, it is important to highlight that is a predecessor in the Saudi Postgraduate Medical Program which started in 1978. During this time, there were 5,000 Saudi doctors that received their training in Canada and returned home to become doctors in the Kingdom.
host destination for Saudi’s and is currently the 3rd most popular destination until very recently. As for the stipulations of the Program, the students are required to return to Saudi Arabia after their education is completed to contribute to the working economy and human resources. Bringing their skills that they have learned abroad for the development and prosperity of the Kingdom is an important piece of the scholarship’s mission. Along with education, gaining proficiency in English language and experiencing different cultures, it is believed that students return with higher hopes at success in Saudi society.

One of the main catalysts for the Program was the former US President George W. Bush who requested King Abdullah to send more Saudi students to the United States for educational training and for strengthening social and economic ties between the countries (www.saudibureau.org/en/). In the first year of operation between 2005-2006, Saudi Arabia invested $7 billion Saudi Riyal (around $1.8 million USD) and sent 9,252 students to the United States (www.saudibureau.org/en/). This pilot Program was deemed successful by both the Saudi and the United States Government, so they decided to extend the Program for another five years. The Program continued to be successful and ended up being far bigger than King Abdullah and the Saudi Government had initially expected. The positive economic benefits were apparent to the government according to the Saudi Bureau, and it was also believed to have positive social and cultural benefits for the participants and families back home. As a result of young students sharing their culture and learning about others, the Saudi government believes that they are “sowing the seeds for future international cooperation and cultural understanding” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). For these reasons, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program was extended until 2020 despite the passing of King Abdullah in 2015. Currently, over 200,000 students have studied under the scholarship in more than 30 countries. The Saudi government
has committed another $210 billion Saudi Riyal for the King Abdullah Scholarship Program’s 10th student cycle and includes additional support services for families of students studying abroad (www.saudibureau.org/en/).

One distinguishing feature of the KASP Program is that the scholarship guarantees full funding for Saudi students accepted into the Program. This funding includes tuition fees for the University Program and English as a Second Language training, annual airfare to Saudi to visit home, monthly salary for living expenses (such as rent and food costs), and a 100% coverage health insurance package for the individual and dependents, such as spouses and children (www.saudibureau.org/en/). They also are given coverage for attending conferences, symposia, and other workshops as well as field trips needed for research purposes. The length of study that is covered by the scholarship differs depending on the program of study. For most degrees, the government pays for up to 18 months of English as Second Language training, as well as four full years of study expenses for an undergraduate degree (www.saudibureau.org/en/). According to my participants, when they have completed the four years but have not completed their program of study, they can apply for an extension semester by semester with the Saudi Bureau until they complete the degree. If students are also interested in gaining work experience, eligibility depends on the country where the student is studying. In this case, the Canadian government decides if they eligible for temporary work and how many hours on or off campus when issuing their study permits upon arrival.

Not surprisingly, the application process is demanding for the King Abdullah Scholarship. Local media and the Ministry of Education let students know when registration has begun and when the deadlines are. After the applications are submitted, an interview is also required for prospective students (www.saudibureau.org/en/) Each student that is accepted into
the Scholarship Program is listed publicly on the local news and on the Ministry of Education website. The student files that are accepted are then immediately sent to the Saudi Cultural Mission or Bureau in the chosen country.

If awarded the scholarship, my Saudi participants explained that they are required to sign a contract with the Saudi Bureau confirming that they will return to Saudi Arabia upon graduation and work there (or for the government) for a minimum of 5 years. Though they sign this document and feel an obligation to the Kingdom and family, some of my participants claim that they are not very strict on following up on this rule. One student told me that they will email the school and check the student’s graduation status, but past this, nothing else happens. Similarly, my former partner claims that they have you agree to these contractual formalities and there is pressure to return home once the you receive your degree, however, it is unclear the extent to which they follow up with each individual student.

**Process for Successful Candidates**

When a student is accepted into the Program, they attend a Scholarship Students Forum in Riyadh to prepare for their time abroad. When they arrive in Canada, there is a list of responsibilities provided by the bureau that are required before moving forward with their educational plan. For example, they must go on the website to open a scholarship file and receive a student ID number with the Saudi Bureau. They must also finalize their financial information and procedures for the tuition and the monthly stipend payments from the government. In order for the Cultural Mission to have access to the student’s personal information while in Canada, they also have to sign the Consent to Release Confidential Information Form. Finally, they must contact their Academic Advisor who is assigned by the Cultural Bureau in the host country. The
advisor’s responsibilities include initiating tuition payments, issuing Financial Guarantees/Sponsorship Authority Certifications, and following up on each student’s progress (www.saudibureau.org/en/).

**English Language Preparation**

As I mentioned previously, every Saudi student is encouraged to study English in Saudi Arabia before leaving for their host country. This gives them a better chance of being accepted into recognized universities and colleges in Canada. Students that have strong English skills have the opportunity to take the IELTS (international English language testing system) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) (www.saudibureau.org/en/). If they pass one of these tests, this enables the prospective student to go straight into their studies without any additional English classes. If they choose not to take either test and/or do not pass, they are required to enroll in at least 20 hours of group instruction per week of approved ESL classes in Canada until they meet the level that a particular school requires for study. ESL classes are paid for by the Saudi government as well.

**Approved Schools and Programs**

In Canada, there is a detailed list of approved schools chosen by the Ministry of Education based on “careful scrutinization and research” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). The government chooses majors and fields of study because of the needs of the country, including the ministries, national corporations, and the private sector. This list is updated each year and changes depending on the evolving needs of the country to ensure maximum return on its
investment. Online education programs, diploma and certificate programs, and programs specifically for international students are usually not on the approval list.

The majors that are currently on the list of options to study for the students are Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Engineering, Nursing, Business, Medical/Health Sciences, Computer Science, Natural Sciences, Law, Accounting, Linguistics, Education, E-commerce, Finance, Insurance, Marketing, Digital Media, Psychology, and Hospitality and Tourism. This list is always subject to change, depending on the needs of Saudi’s human resources. Currently, the countries that Saudi scholars are able to study in are Canada, USA, Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain, Holland, Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan, Malaysia, China, India, Singapore, and South Korea (www.saudibureau.org/en/).

Financial Guarantee

There are two types of financial guarantee letters. One for Admission purposes only, and one that is given directly to the university once a student has finished registering for courses. The Admission Purposes Only Financial Guarantee letter is used during the application process and is given to the University as guarantee of funding. The second letter is sent straight from the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau and is called the Scholarship Authority Certification (www.saudibureau.org/en/). This is sent as soon as the student accepts the offer from the University and meets all requirements for attending. This letter states that the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission is hereby financially responsible for the student and provides a breakdown of the total annual value of funding, expiration date, and contact information for invoices related to the student. When a university receives and accepts the Financial Guarantee for a student, they are required to provide the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau with the following information:
“monthly attendance reports (where applicable), student progress reports at the mid-term (where applicable), student reports at the conclusion of each academic term, module, or on a session-by-session basis, and student alerts (should the institution note issues or changes in student behaviour, consecutive absences or any other concerns that might adversely affect one of our students)” (www.saudibureau.org/en/).

2.5 Scholarly literature on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program

From my own review of the literature, there has not been very much focus on Saudi Arabian students studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Canada. There have been a few recent studies done by Master’s and PhD students in the United States, but I have had difficulty finding anything that has been done extensively in Canada. Two important dissertations that I refer to are those written by Terry Ryan Hall (2013) and Donna L. Shaw (2010). According to Hall (2013, 16), “there have been a few studies in the last decade concerning the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) and its participants, but this is an area where there is further room for study and review.” Similarly, Shaw (2010, 2) points out that as “a sizeable sub-group of international students, Saudis are under-represented in the literature.” Building on these works and my review of the broader literature surrounding the KASP, I have found that most of the studies can be divided into three larger subsections or fields that I briefly summarize below.

1. Educational and Economic Approaches

It could be argued that education in support of economic growth is the main focus of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. Gaining access to a world class education abroad and bringing this back to Saudi is arguably, the most important objective for leaders of the Kingdom
of Saudi Arabia. Based on a recent study by Albasari and Wasmiah called ‘The Impact of Saudi Arabia King Abdullah’s Scholarship Program in the U.S.” (2014), unemployment in Saudi Arabia is at 12% with “nearly half of the unemployed holding bachelor’s degrees” (116). Due to this high unemployment rate there are some concerns that this could negatively affect the funding for the Scholarship Program in the future. In the research by Albarsri and Taylor (2014), they also look at the academic barriers that Saudi students face in the United States due to the rigorous educational standards and expectations, concluding that Saudi students are ill-prepared for higher education abroad. According to Albarsri and Taylor, there have been over 500 Saudi students expelled and recalled from the Program as a result of “weak” performances and attendance (116). In response to these developments, the Saudi Ministry of Education now requires each student to go through an extensive orientation period depending on the country they are studying in order to prepare them for the educational system abroad. The aim of this orientation program is that this will prepare students to make these cultural and academic adjustments and lower the risk of being recalled. Similarly, Terry Ryan Hall suggests that the lack of English reading and writing skills can be a real detriment to Saudi students who struggle to meet the North American standards. Because the Saudi Arabia students are such a large demographic in various colleges and universities in North America, it is important to understand “the challenges these students face and provide the necessary support for them as their numbers grow” (Hall 2013, 5). Returning to the mutual reinforcement of education and economics, Hall also notes the benefits that Saudi students bring to the US higher education system. He writes that not only do Saudi students help “American universities overcome financial challenges, but also, at least ostensibly, advances learning on campus in unique ways that is beneficial for both American and international students. The potential to interact with students from other cultures is
an oft-cited advantage of bringing students on to campus, as it is argued that domestic and international students gain academically from these interactions” (4). Although Hall discusses Saudis in the United States, one could argue that it also applies to Canada, where the student exchange culture on campuses helps to contribute to a broader world view for both Canadian students, Saudi students and other international students.

In conclusion, obtaining world class education for Saudi citizens helps to improve the human resources within the Kingdom, but also comes with some concern given the rising unemployment rates and the growing amount of young people with degrees. Economically, it is the King Abdullah Scholarship Program that will benefit Saudi Arabia in the long run, but the countries where their students are also studying can be a significant financial contributor through international tuition fees.

2. Cultural Identity and Gender

In reading the literature on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program it became clear that one of the main goals of the Program, in addition to strengthening economic and education ties, was to ameliorate tensions between Saudi and the U.S., as well as challenge popular stereotypes of Muslims following the attacks of 9/11 to improve social perspectives of the Muslims and Saudi Arabia. According to Taylor and Albarsri’s article “The impact of Saudi Arabia King Abdullah’s Scholarship program in the US” (2014) the numbers of Saudi students studying in the United States was at an all-time low after 9/11. The student population of Saudi students studying in the United States was 1,024 and the total revenue loss as a result of this rapid decline was $40 million USD (Hall 2013, 8). Not only have students under the KASP served as important catalysts for the economy they also play an important role as cultural ambassadors. In
a study by Hilal et al. titled “The political, socio-economic and sociocultural impacts of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) on Saudi Arabia” (2015), they claim that when students were asked about how they could improve their country’s cultural/national identity, results indicate that students felt they had an important role to challenge certain stereotypes of Saudi Muslim people (261). On the basis of these findings they conclude that “Saudi Arabia students can play an important role in countering negative stereotypes by communicating with Westerners more frequently and trying to be proactive in changing the perceptions of Islam as an alleged vice for terrorism” (Hilal et al 2015, 261). In other words, students under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program also have an important social role as cultural ambassadors as well as economic contributors to universities and colleges throughout the country. In the same dissertation by Hilal et al. they found some risks and concerns among the population they surveyed showing that students worried about not finding adequate work with high salaries upon return, concerns regarding students who extend their stay abroad, and the possibility of eroding cultural and national identity (263). They found that 74% of respondents revealed that learning a different language was a strong motivation for studying abroad (Hilal 2015, 263). While this particular study is helpful in terms of empirical data drawn from surveys it does not take into account personal interviews with students that can be helpful to educators and advisors because it helps to understand and make sense of their educational experience and what their time abroad means to them. In an article by Hilal and Denman (2013), the authors explores the perceptions of Saudi Arabia (and the UAE) after the attacks on 9/11 and how it impacted study abroad programs, especially in Australia. The author claims that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has helped to remedy conflict and promotes “education as a tool for peace within the Arab region” (2013, 24). This particular study uses an online survey, focus groups and
interviews with students from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates concluding that students’ responses “reveal their gratefulness and gratitude, in different expressions, for being given the chance to study abroad and get to know the world with their own eyes” (34).

Turning away from the 9/11 conflict, in Donna Shaw’s (2010) doctoral research she focuses on “success strategies” and how Saudi students reflect on their educational experience in the United States. One of the real strengths of the Program, according to Shaw (2010, 2) is that Saudi Arabian students have developed resilience and intercultural competence to adapt to their new cultural environment. She found that the ability to “endure stress and bounce back” (231) was a theme that she found associated with Saudi students, with characteristics such as global orientation, self-confidence, strong support systems, optimism, motivation and self-discipline (231). The second quality she found important in Saudi’s students’ success is gaining intercultural competency, which certainly overlaps with my own research on how students navigate cultural and educational hurdles while studying in Canada.

Similarly, Hall’s study also revealed that there was a reflexive dimension to the Saudi experience abroad that encouraged the students to reflect more on their own culture as well as the host country. However, socialization was not always easy and due to language barriers it can be difficult to make friends in the host country and many Saudi students would stick together in a kind of cultural-linguistic bubble. While this has the disadvantage of not integrating with the host culture and broader student body, many Saudi students still undergo a transformative experience that involves learning more about themselves and their country from a distance (Hall 2013). Hall also found that the reliance they have with each other is comforting, but they are also aware that they could be missing out on opportunities to learn English more fluently and learn about different cultures (Hall 2013). Saudi men tend to change their attitude and behavior while
studying abroad and feel anxiety about showing this to people in Saudi Arabia when they are home, as they are expected to conform to a certain masculine ideal in their culture. For these reasons, Hall claims that they often hide their social media when abroad to make sure that no one from home can see what they are doing and question them (Hall 2013, 125). Related to this many Saudi students become friends with foreign women and often have romantic relationships while abroad. For example, my partner felt it was important to hide his social media from his family mostly because he was in a relationship with a white woman.

Gender has always been a subject of interest and a source of critique when discussing Saudi Arabia. Few would deny that the Kingdom is deeply patriarchal, which has also contributed to gender segregation, including education as previously mentioned. When male students study abroad one of the main challenges can be interacting with women on a regular basis, often with women who are in positions of power. Hall states that this is often the first time that Saudi men are experiencing women in positions of power and influence over their academics and life chances. Saudi woman are also interacting with men in a way that would be completely inappropriate back home. For these reasons, Hall claims that these reconfigurations of gender norms can lead to culture shock, anxiety, and can also hinder academic success (Hall 2013). This is particularly salient among male students who feel subordinate while experiencing female instructors in academics. Having to take orders from women, and sometimes being reprimanded by a woman in positions of authority can be an obstacle to their learning performance. Alhamzi, who is a Saudi international student himself, states, “a person who believes that gender segregation is part of the Islamic teachings does not only feel regret and guilt by disobeying his God if he/she practiced otherwise, but he also believes that he/she is on a ‘wrong Path’!” (Alhazmi and Nyland 2013, 8). In addition, gender segregation for Saudis is also important to
maintain because it is believed to provide a protection and screen that prevents both sexes from falling into ‘vice’ or in the words of Quran “prevention from conduct of adultery which is one of the major great sins in Islam” (8). However, in the study by Ahmed Alhazmi and Bernice Nyland (2013) that focuses on Saudi international students experiences of a mixed gender environment in Australia, they also argue that living and studying in gender-mixed societies has the potential to change these students, both socially and educationally, and this will have impact on the experience returning to Saudi Arabia. Thus, while being in a mixed gender environment is considered “a scary experience” and threatening, especially for female Saudi students, it also has benefits (Alhazmi and Nyland 2013, 7). As will become evident in the next two chapters, this is certainly the case among the student participants in my study.

2.6 Conclusion

The King Abdullah Scholarship Programs has influenced and changed the lives of many young Saudi Arabian citizens. Students are still being admitted to the Program until 2020, but its future remains uncertain. According to the International Trade Administration, there are rumors of the Program limiting its funding to only the world’s top 200 universities, which would cut the Program and student’s options significantly (International Trade Administration 2016, 2). They also state that, “although the Saudi government views education as a priority, there will be a 12 percent cut on education spending” (International Trade Administration 2016, 2). Despite these potential constraints, the Saudi Arabian Government sees the Program as a success. Past studies have found that students studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program experience many cultural and educational exchanges with the host countries. These experiences include various academic stressors, encounters with social difference, including mixed gender
classrooms, and more. In this chapter I reviewed the predominant source of literature that speaks to educational and economic approaches, as well as cultural identity and gender within the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. Most of these studies have been done in the United States and Australia, and there is room to build on this in the Canadian context, while also expanding our understanding of how Saudi students navigate the transnational pressures and expectations which I now turn to.
Chapter 3: International Students and Transnational Mobility

In this chapter, I discuss common themes that I have found in the interviews with my Saudi participants that relate to my conceptual and theoretical interest in international students and transnational mobility. I begin by looking at how Saudi students navigate a new and unfamiliar Canadian school system and culture, and how they view the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. I then discuss some of the factors contributing to their decision to select Canada and British Columbia as a destination for higher education, how they maintain social ties and relationships, and how they perceive the experience of studying abroad.

3.1 Navigating the Canadian school system and culture

Working through the expectations of the Canadian college and University system is a central challenge for many incoming Saudi students. Among the students I interviewed, one of the main concerns they raised was the cultural and language difference between Canada and their home country of Saudi Arabia. Most of the students who are enrolled in the KASP have no, or limited experience of North American culture prior to the first week of classes. Through her research, Vered Amit (2015) claims that the benefits of international education include new experiences, challenges, knowledge of other cultures, and self-discovery. From these interviews with these students, I found obvious similarities between these findings and my research. For example, Omar was a 27-year-old man from Riyadh in his final year studying in Canada. He grew up in the capital city, where his father was a computer scientist and his mother was an artist. He loved art, anything from animations, graphic design, and photography. He was the oldest in his family, with twin brothers and three sisters. He had moved a lot throughout his life and had been to many different schools. When he first came to Canada on the KASP, he spoke very little
English. Omar was also married at age 21 and had one young daughter, who was living back in Saudi Arabia. In Canada, he was working at a technology startup company while competing his degree in Computer Science.

Like many of the Saudi participants, there were a number of subtle cultural differences that were intertwined with struggles around language comprehension. As Omar explained, “the language for me is a really tough thing to learn because I don’t pick up language very fast.” And for Omar, this led to several challenges when it came to integration in Canadian society.

For example, being back home is totally different from here. Back home we don’t expect everybody to pay his bill. Usually one guy pays it. So, when I do this here they get confused. Sometimes if I’m doing this people think that I am stupid. But back home this how we do it. There are a lot of these cultural differences.

His brothers picked up the English language quickly when they moved to Canada, so he felt discouraged when he found himself struggling much more than expected while learning to speak English. Omar also mentioned that humor is an important part of his identity, but found it difficult to show his sense of humor in Canada because of the translation difficulties. He also found it hard to understand the jokes he heard in English. While these subtle differences and observations have little to do with education itself, as Omar suggests, these cultural hurdles impact the learning process and integration into North American society. In particular, he found that language barriers can be difficult to manage, especially when trying to connect with English speakers in order to make friends. Omar also mentioned how the school is structured differently in Saudi and how that can impact your life choices. He said “Studying in Canada is one of the best chances I have had in my life. Back home we have public schools …[and]… you cannot choose your major if your grade point average (GPA) is low.”
Another participant, Muhammad, also echoes these concerns, especially with respect to the way language is perceived by the listener. Muhammad was a 22-year-old man from Jeddah. His mother had a PhD in Psychology and teaches part time, as well as worked for the ministry of higher education in Saudi. His father worked for the Saudi Airlines for almost 35 years. He had two brothers and one sister, and two of his siblings studied under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in the US and Canada before him. His main field of study in Canada, like many of the Saudi students, was Business Administration with a specialization in marketing and management. When he first came to Canada four years ago, he did not know any English, but he had traveled quite extensively with his family in the past. He found that “In my daily life, sometimes I feel that when I am talking to people they don’t understand what I’m saying.” He explained that sometimes he means to say one thing, but it sometimes comes out wrong. This can be frustrating because it gives the impression to others that he is uncomfortable or confused. He even struggled to describe this experience with me including the persistence of these language barriers even after four years living in Canada.

When I asked another participant, Ali, how he navigated the cultural differences, he responded strongly. Ali was a 28-year-old man from Hiyal City. His mother was unemployed and his father was a businessman. His father had two wives. His first wife had 11 children and Ali’s mother had 8, so he comes from a large family of siblings with 19 brothers and sisters in total. Before he came to Canada to study, he had many expectations placed upon him as the oldest brother in his family and thus, had many responsibilities especially when his father passed away when he was a young adult. When he came to Canada in 2010 to study Business Administration, he did not speak any English. He had recently graduated from his Program and had returned to Saudi Arabia to seek a job. In his words,
The culture yes, because...[laughter]... back home I would go out with my dad before he passed away. My dad was like 92 years old and I was with him all the time. When I came to Canada, it was the first time that I’ve seen women, like wearing bikinis when I was at the gym and I was shocked. And the second thing, back home, we might shake a women’s hand, but in Canada I got shocked that you give women hugs. We kiss the men’s cheeks back home, and here we don’t. All this was so different. I was shocked.

Evident in this passage, the initial experience of being in a mixed gender society that did not adhere to the cultural and religious norms of Saudi Arabia was a real shock to him. However, after years of living in Canada they became much more naturalized over time.

Several of the students I interviewed also described how the school system in Canada is much more rigorous and strict when it comes to student behavior and expectations. To discuss this further, let me introduce Ahmed. He was a 30-year-old man from Riyadh. His mother was unemployed and his father was a retired government employee. He had two brothers and two sisters, and he was the second oldest in the family. He had been in Canada for 8 years and had recently graduated with a degree in Business Administration and is expected to return to Riyadh this year. He commented that the rules and expectations around education are much more demanding in comparison to Saudi Arabia. One thing that has been particularly challenging for him is the emphasis on punctuality at the university as well as the broader work environment. He said, “They [Canadians] are really strict with time. Being on time. At the beginning, I was not very good at this. And then I understood that it is disrespectful if you are not on time.” Although Ahmed has struggled at times with these expectations here in Canada, he also believes that living in a new culture has changed him for the better. He says “It is different than studying in Saudi Arabia. I have met many different people from different cultures so that has changed my way of thinking.”

Omar also believes that the rules are much stricter at a Canadian University than back in Saudi Arabia. Previously, when he was back home he failed a number of university courses but
there were few consequences for his poor achievements in the past. However, here in Canada he feels that as an ambassador of Saudi Arabia under the Scholarship Program, it is important for him to succeed or he stands to lose from this rich experience of being abroad. The reason he was able to get into the Program was because he came to Canada first without the scholarship, like many others, and proved that he would be successful. In his words,

For example, if I study back home at university I won’t be that serious, but here, because it is risky, I could fail or get kicked out and it costs lots of money. Everything is serious. Even the Saudi Bureau, they will talk to you like a police man. They will ask: ‘what are you doing? Did you pass all of your courses? Why are you doing this?’ There is a lot of pressure, but if I am back home no one will care if I fail. It’s kind of like military school, they are strict.

I asked him if he thought that these demands were a good thing for him and he replied, “Yes, yeah, of course I failed in two universities back home and suddenly when I am here, I feel like I am one of the best students at the university.” Clearly, he has changed the way he approaches his education since coming to Canada.

Another Saudi student who I refer to as Ibrahim believes that education back in Saudi is much different than in Canada as well. Ibrahim was a 30-year-old man from Jeddah, who was also in his final year studying in Canada under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. His mother was an Arabic teacher and his father was a businessman who sold electricity. He was the youngest child with two brothers and one sister. Before coming to Canada, he was a salesman at the King Abdulaziz Airport before moving to work as a customer service agent for a cell phone company. Looking to build his career, he moved to Canada to study Business Administration. Like my other Saudi participants, in Canada, when he first arrived, he did not speak English.

The educational environment here is totally different than back home. The Canadian education culture is different especially with regards to professors at the college. They respect me as a student, not as their son or a member of the family like they do back home. … [Back home] They don’t respect my views, which is encouraged here. It is good to give the teacher my opinion.
Expanding on the differences in professor/student relationships in Saudi Arabia versus Canada, he added,

For example, when you want to say something to your professor, students always are afraid, especially if they want to ask about their assignment. Here in Canada professors ask students to go to their office hours, which is not practiced back home. They just say to follow the instructions and they don’t give you any answers, even if you don’t understand.

These opportunities to meet with the instructor has really helped build his confidences as a student.

Similarly, Muhammad felt it was important to point out the cultural and educational differences between the college/university system in Saudi Arabia versus Canada. He said,

I’m going to give you some examples. At the college, we have around 30-40 students. The problems the students are facing is that when they get into a Canadian classroom they are not prepared. This is a very different education system here than the one we have in Saudi. So, for the student to feel comfortable in the classroom the teacher has to understand the background of the students’ culture and differences in educational systems, especially the relationship between teacher and student. Here its more casual, the relationship and the professor, but in Saudi it is different. If a Saudi student failed an exam, they don’t go and ask the professor for feedback because most of the professors in Saudi won’t do this … Some teachers in Saudi do not even allow the students to ask questions.

In other words, when Saudi students arrive in Canada they are not used to “speaking up” or asking questions and this can impact their performance in class. When I asked him if it was hard to adjust, he said,

Yes it was. At the beginning when I started it was very hard, but then I learned that it was better for me to do this and to be more talkative in the class and to share my opinion with other people. I also got to learn more. People also got to learn more about me and my culture. For example, in my leadership class there was a guy that brought the topic about arresting the princes in Saudi and no one knew I was from Saudi. That was the first or the second class. So if I wasn’t able to talk in front of the class I would not have been able to correct him because he was saying things that were wrong. So, I shared my opinion with them.
Muhammad also added that it would be helpful if the international office and advisors could be providing more training and mentorship on this, for both teachers and incoming Saudi students. This theme of Canadian cultural experiences is something I will also discuss further in section 3.4.

According to the research Hilal et al (2015, 263) found that 74% of their Saudi informants revealed that learning English was a strong motivation for studying abroad. Similarly, all of my participants spoke of the importance of English language proficiency as a key determinant. However, with learning a new language comes certain challenges and is likely one of the reasons why Saudi students seem to stick together in a “cultural-linguistic bubble” (Hall, 2013) as a cohort. The lack of immersion with local English speakers at the beginning of their programs could also be a contributing factor to their experience of isolation. Another important point that Hall makes is how there is a lack of mentorship and support for reading and writing skills early in the program which is a hardship experienced by many Saudi students. Because of this, he states the importance of understanding “the challenges these students face and provide the necessary support for them as their numbers grow” (Hall 2013, 5).

3.2 An Investment for the future of the Kingdom

While there are certainly a number of challenges and constraints that I will be discussing further in this dissertation, for the most part, all my interlocutors spoke highly of the Scholarship Program and the opportunity to undertake their post-secondary education abroad. The financial factor is a huge relief on the students because they do not have to worry about their tuition nor living expenses, which is often a problem for many international students, not to mention other Saudi nationals who are not registered under the Program. When asked about his experience, Muhammad expressed his appreciation to the Program and what this experience has afforded
him: “So far, it’s so good. I’ve learned a lot of things coming here and studying in Canada, the Scholarship Program has helped me a lot, especially because I don’t have to worry about the tuitions and other financial things because it is covered … [also] I get to go home and be with my family once a year because they provide me with a ticket which is good.”

Since the Program was first launched in 2005, Ibrahim had really wanted to apply for the Scholarship Program, but it was highly sought after when it was first launched. The Program was also very competitive, especially for those wishing to go to the United States. For these reasons, he was not successful in his application right away, but eventually he was accepted in Canada.

After three years I was in contact with one of my friends who used to live in the United States and he said it is much easier to come to the United States and Canada. He told me that I should go and study for 2 or 3 months and then send my transcript to the Saudi cultural bureau. Then they would accept me depending on my level of English and my grades.

Following the advice of his friend, he moved to Canada where he took classes for 2 to 3 months and then sent his transcripts to the Bureau. After showing the Saudi Bureau his competitive grades and level of English proficiency they accepted him into the KASP. Another participant, Yousef, also had many friends within the Program. Yousef was a 27 year-old man from Riyadh. His mother worked from home and his father worked in real estate. He was the middle child with three brothers and one sister, and was very close to his mother and sister. As a recent graduate with a degree in Business Administration and a specialization in Management, he was also nearing the end of his time in Canada and did not want to leave. When I asked him about his experience on the KASP he said, “It has been wonderful. Almost all of my high school classmates applied and studied under the scholarship, including me, and we all went to different countries. It has been a blessing to be honest.”
Omar stressed to me that I should also know that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program was not the first scholarship program that came out of Saudi Arabia. There were smaller initiatives that preceded this one. Most of the people leading the country today are from these earlier programs. Similarly, “I believe that this Program [KASP] will show its fruits a couple of years from now.”

While Ali’s experience on the KASP has been rewarding, other students struggled with several aspects of the Program. He admits that all of these concerns were his own doing and not the scholarship’s. In his words, “I have gained a lot of experience. I really loved it. I’ve been here [Canada] since 2010 but I have also lost my scholarship 3 times. I did not follow the rules. I changed my university without telling the Saudi Bureau and I did not pass my courses. It was my fault.” Although Ali was more forthcoming about his struggles with academics in Canada, he is certainly not an isolated case. While several Saudi students chose to highlight the positive benefits of the Program, some shared concerns as well, but most of it has to with their own work habits and performance. Omar, for example, expressed that the reason he has not had many problems with the Program is because he was a good student. “My experience overall was very good, because I had no problem with school. I haven’t failed any courses and my GPA was always high. So, they [Saudi Cultural Bureau] are happy. Even if I had some tough times or broke some rules they would say, ‘we know you’re good.’” This shows that the communication between him and the Cultural Bureau was positive and supportive. On the other hand, Ibrahim believes that everyone faces some degree of hardship during their time under the Program. He explains,

I think it happens to everyone. It depends on your education and your grades. If you have bad grades and you have failed courses then they will give you a warning about taking your scholarship away. They will reach out to you about it and ask about your situation at school. Also, they ask how they can help improve your experience. So, in the first year at
the college I had the warnings because I failed three courses in my first semester and they asked me how they could improve my situation. They told me that I have to study hard and if I had any concerns to give them a call or an email.

The great thing about Ibrahim’s experience is that the Cultural Bureau was able to recognize that this transition to university was difficult for him, so they made sure that he knew that they were there to support him if he needed anything. The Cultural Bureau also knew that he had never gone to university in Saudi and this was a new experience for him.

Muhammad explained how communication with the Cultural Bureau was sometimes a challenge. For example, on one occasion, he was taking classes in English as Second Language (ESL) and chose to purposely fail the course because he did not feel confident enough in English to move forward and needed more practice. As a result, his scholarship was taken away for two months, yet it was resolved after he explained to them the reason behind his failure. The Cultural Bureau seemed to understand his struggle because shortly after, they refunded his money. The importance of gaining confidence in English pushed him to work harder so he could prove to the Cultural Bureau that he was a good investment.

3.3 Factors for choosing Canada and British Columbia

With the opportunity to study in over 30 different countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, I was interested to find out what made these students decide to study in Canada, specifically British Columbia. The biggest reasons that I discovered was the desire to learn English as well as knowing either friends or family members that have studied abroad in Canada. Existing social ties to the respective Universities and Colleges was also a key factor in determining location of study. For example, Ibrahim was straight to the point when I asked him why he chose Canada. He said, “I had called one of my friends in the United States and he knew
someone in Canada studying so I applied to come to Canada in 2011 with the help of these friends.” Ibrahim also noted that while his original intention was to go to the United States, he soon discovered that he could be accepted into the Canadian program much faster at the point of his application because there were already so many students studying in the United States. Ali also talked about how he knew people that had studied in Canada and this was the main reason for choosing B.C.. He said, “I contacted one of my best friends who I used to go to high school with and he was studying in Canada. So I talked to him and he was encouraging me to come. He told me life was different in Canada and he loved the university that he was going to, so I decided to go.”

Unlike Ibrahim and Ali, Muhammad had family members that had previously studied in Canada, not just friends. He said he decided to come to Canada for the following reasons,

My brother was here and that helped me a lot because he knows the schools and helped me to apply. I was not planning on coming to Canada, I wanted to go to London but the United Kingdom had enough Saudi students and they weren’t taking any more applications at that time. That’s what made me come to Canada. Plus, with my brother in Canada I was able to stay with him for a couple of weeks upon my arrival.

For the students who were keen to get into a Program as soon as possible, Canada seemed to be a good option. Whereas for other desirable countries like the United Kingdom or the United States, they already had a high number of students and the wait time for acceptance was considerably longer. Like Muhammad, Ahmed also had a cousin studying in Canada and it was important that he went to an English-speaking country. He said, “They speak English. They have good education. These are my two main reasons. I could have gone to China or Japan but they do not speak English and I wanted to study and learn English”. The emphasis on quality education and the importance of a family-friend migration strategy, not surprisingly, was a theme that came up many times during several interviews. However, in the case of Yousef, his main motivation was
to get as far away from family and so he chose Canada because he had no contacts whatsoever. In his words, “I had three choices, either the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom and I decided on Canada. My older brother used to live in Ohio and the other lived in Liverpool, so I was like Canada! I want to be different.”

For Omar, one motivating factor for choosing Canada was the negative portrayal of Saudi Arabia in the U.S. media and this was a deterrent for him. According to Omar,

Well I had a couple of choices. I had Australia, the United Kingdom, United States and Canada. I was thinking of Australia or Canada. For the United States, I didn’t want to go there partly because of the news. I was afraid. Everything has been about terrorists and stereotypes about Saudis. In our social media, we know a couple of Saudi students who went to jail in the United States for no reason. So I didn’t feel like I wanted to go there for studying.

I do wonder if this negative perception on the United States is similar to other prospective international students. As a United States citizen myself, I was saddened to hear this. This is also a theme that emerged in the work of Hilal and Denman (1998) who write that growing media attention in the Middle East has made the geopolitical relationships between the West and various Islamic countries more tenuous. Muslims are poorly understood, especially in the United States because of the misrepresentations and stereotypes that frequently equate Islamic Fundamentalism or terrorist attacks with Muslims from the Middle East (Hilal and Denman 2013, 25). It is precisely these kinds of misrepresentations that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program aims to counter.

For example, when I asked my participants why they chose British Columbia in particular, in addition to the comments raised above, many of them mentioned the “quality of life,” “diversity”, and “kindness of the Canadian people” as desirable features. According to Omar,
My brothers studied here. When I searched online about Canada and British Columbia, it looked like the best choice for diversity. When I came to Canada, I did not want to feel like a stranger and the people ended up being so nice. Some people make jokes that Canadians are too polite but I like this.

Like Omar, for many Saudi students they seemed to have genuinely appreciated the opportunity to study in a diverse country like Canada and experience the multiculturalism as both a student and foreigner, something I discuss in the next section.

3.4 Canada: a different lifestyle, different opportunities

Having looked at some of the factors motivating Saudis to come to Canada, and B.C., I was also interested in looking at how the experience over several years matched with the earlier imagination of Canada. Inevitably, nearly all students face difficulties and challenges during the process of becoming acclimatized at a new academic institution, let alone a new cultural setting. For some students, these experiences can be terrifying and life changing I wanted to explore what they valued and disliked, what was shocking to them, and how their perception of Canada changed along the academic journey.

When I asked the Saudi students about Canadian culture, many of them described it as “multicultural,” “open minded to different backgrounds and beliefs” and “very different” from Saudi Arabian society. Similar to Vered Amit’s research on Canadian extended study abroad programs she frequently came across various “iterations of the familiar truism that ‘travel broadens the mind’” (553, 2015). This was certainly echoed by several of the Saudi students I spoke with who noted that their minds have been opened and that they will return home with a different perspective in comparison to the one they arrived in Canada with. Yousef’s short and sweet answer on what Canadian culture means to him also sums up many of the student’s views. Simply put, he said, “Freedom. Inclusivity. Multicultural. That’s how I would describe Canada.”
For Omar, he said, “Canadian culture means kindness and freedom to practice and believe whatever you want. There is no pressure and there is no stereotyping. Also, it is multicultural.” Ahmed’s answer was similar, but also reinforced the importance of education in Canada. He said, “I like the Canadian culture. I like how they are serious in education and are hardworking. They are open to meet new people from different cultures and who have different perspectives.”

Omar was also surprised to see so many people from different countries when he first arrived. He said, “When I was in Vancouver I was surprised by the number of foreign people and it was a good sign for me. I thought Canada was mostly ‘white people’ because it was the majority so I was shocked by the diversity.”

While in Canada, Omar also explained how he had a very close relationship with his professor, who is from Iran, a country that has long been in a proxy war with Saudi Arabia for influence in the Middle East. Hearing that he was able to build a great connection with an Iranian professor and put aside their differences was encouraging. For Ibrahim and Ali they had also noted several differences between Canada and Saudi Arabian culture. For example, Ali believes that the “open mindedness” that he sees in Canada is not present in Saudi Arabia. He claims,

Canadian culture is really different than our culture but what I like about the Canadian culture is how the people are open minded to people from different backgrounds. That’s one of the things that we don’t have in Saudi. I think Canada is more internationalized because there are people from all over the world coming to Canada to live and no one seems to care about their background or religion.

For Ibrahim, he experienced a great deal of culture shock when he arrived in Canada and echoed many of the statements above.

Canadian culture is totally different from our culture. When I came to Canada I had culture shock for everything. The work, the education, the weather, everything was totally different for me. Maybe because it was the first time that I had been to Canada and I knew nothing about Canadian culture. All I knew was that there were mountains.
Ibrahim also enjoyed meeting people from different cultures. He said, “I have learned about different cultures and views from living in Canada. I have met people that I have never seen in my life, from North America, Asia, Brazil, etc. I think that’s a big benefit for me to learn about the cultures of other countries.” He also told me that he finds Canadian people to be very kind. Most of the Canadians he met were willing to help him, even if they did not have the answer. “If you ask any question … or you are trying to get help, even if they don’t have the answer, they will try to help you anyway.”

One important point of difference between Canada and Saudi Arabia is the central role of the family and the expectations that surround them. In Saudi Arabia, according to Ibrahim, the culture is much more “family orientated” which is different from his experience living in a homestay during his studies in Canada. He told me that he has lived with two families in BC and that none of the family members were very close to each other. This was very shocking to him, because he finds family ties to be of great importance back in Saudi Arabia. The families that he lived with did not sit down for meals or gather daily. When asked, why he thinks this is the case, he noted that it may be because everyone in the family seemed busy with limited time, even the children were working at young age. Although he does not deny the love and affections between family members, the experience had a different texture than back home. However, he was very glad to have people show interest in learning about his own culture. He said, “I had met lots of Canadians at school and they always asked me about my country. Some of them have never even met with Saudis before.”

Building on my previous question, when I asked my Saudi participants what they especially enjoyed about living in Canada, the answers differed somewhat from the previous
responses. For example, Omar told me that while he missed his family, it was also a tremendous opportunity to get away and have time for himself. He said,

> When I was back home, the majority of my time was about socializing. I have a lot of social responsibility with my family. I have 55 cousins and sometimes there’s a wedding you have to go to and we have a lot of dinner parties. So, when I came here, I had all my time and I had control. I could do whatever I wanted.

Omar, like many of the students I interviewed come from families that are embedded within specific “tribes,” and this is a key form of social and group distinction in the Kingdom. He told me that spending time and socializing within his own tribe often feels like a “full time job” to him. Also, his family had strong preferences that his marriage be within the same community, which is the case when he was married at the age of 21. The importance of these endogamous networks is a theme I explore in more detail in the next chapter.

Ali absolutely loves Canada. He told me that he would live here permanently if he could, though he said that his familial responsibilities are too important for him to relocate. He told me that one of the things he really enjoyed about Canada is that he always felt welcome. “Everyone is friendly here and when I ask for help they will help you. I have never experienced any bad things actually.” I followed up by asking if there was anything specific that he loved and he just replied “Everything. I love it all actually.”

A number of reoccurring themes for these Saudi students was the “independence” and especially the opportunity to meet people from other counties and cultures while in Canada. For Muhammad, he said, “I’ve enjoyed meeting people from different countries and different cultures especially in the ESL program.” This also gave him exposure to different cultures and languages which he really loved. And then there was Ahmed’s response, which was quite different from the others, showing his appreciation for the environment and one of Canada’s
favourite pastimes, “mountains, lakes, the weather. It’s cold in the winter but summertime it’s really nice. Hockey, I like hockey.”

3.5 Maintaining social ties back home

So far the experiences of Saudi students on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program are likely not that different from other students abroad. However, a theme that came up in all the interviews was the importance of “maintaining” social ties back home. For all the Saudi students I spoke with keeping in touch with family and friends was essential but also varied to some extent depending on their year in the KASP. For example, just as my Saudi partner was speaking to family and friends on a daily basis, this was an experience echoed by my research participants as well. I found that many of the students kept in touch daily or weekly with both family and friends, and the main interface for these connections were popular social media platforms like WhatsApp and Snapchat. Each Saudi seemed to participate regularly in multiple “group chats” in order to keep in touch with different friend groups and family. Keeping in touch with their families is a big part of the experience of temporary migration and transnational mobilities for the students, specifically because Saudi society, according to my participants, is a collective culture with family being their main priority. For example, Omar told me some of the varying ways Saudi students stay connected to home. He explained that he had a Saudi phone number and that the phone company has a special plan for the students studying abroad so that they can contact home easily, costing no more than 10 dollars a month. In terms of connectivity, he said,

I have my phone 24/7 in my pocket so anyone can call me. We are using all of these social network and messaging applications. For example, WhatsApp is number one for Saudis. Each family has a group in the application, so now I have maybe 7 groups made up of my cousins, friends, and family. I think we are all connected with this technology.
He also noted that he talks to his parents weekly and his wife daily.

For Ibrahim, he also explained the significance of maintaining contact with his family. “I think it is very important to keep in touch with your family. My sister is always trying to encourage me to study hard to finish my degree as soon as I can. I talk to my parents every 4 or 5 days. My sister, brothers and I are always chatting on Snapchat or WhatsApp every day.” When asked about his friends back home in Jeddah, he said that the contact is becoming less frequent as he gets older, especially now that he was busy with family, jobs, and pursuing a degree. In his own words,

Most of them [my friends] are not like before because they have responsibilities now. Some of them have families now. Some of my friends are working and that’s why we don’t keep in touch every day with each other. We have busy lives, not like before when we were in the same city and we could hang out 2 or 3 days a week.

Ali had a similar experience as Ibrahim, especially when it came to maintaining contact with his friends back home. However, his reasons were a bit different, specifying the stress and pressure that mounts as the KASP concludes. He told me that at the beginning of his time in Canada he was in contact much more frequently.

When I first came to Canada I was calling my mom every two days because I was scared here and I didn’t know anyone. I was keeping in touch with all of my friends and they advised me and were saying nice things to me, like how they were proud of me. Since I learned English and met a lot of people, I started to keep some distance. These days, I just call my mom once a month or once every two months.

When I probed a bit further on why his communication had decreased, he added, that many of them are now married and living busy lives.

I don’t like to call them because they keep asking me when I am going to come back and I get stressed. I have lost a lot of time here in Canada because I did not pass my courses and even changed my university without telling my family because I was enjoying it so much.
In this instance, it would appear that Ali was being careless with his schooling but also wanted to prolong his time in Canada and this was causing stress with his family and friends who kept asking about his return. While Ali and Ibrahim had purposely limited their communication to friends and family, Yousef and Muhammad were actively engaged on social media with their friends from home every day. Yousef said, “My relationship with people back home is really important to me. They all know that and respect the time difference” and he feels an obligation to maintain these relationships. For Muhammad, these connections were very important. “I have about 4 or 5 close friends from home and we have a chat group on WhatsApp. We talk almost every day. I don’t talk to my mom very much because she doesn’t live in Jeddah now. She lives in Riyadh but she comes home every weekend.” Muhammad speaks with his brothers and sisters about once a week.

Ahmed also felt that it was essential to keep in touch, saying “It is really important for me to talk with family. I speak with my father once every three days. I speak with my mom about once a week.” Ahmed had a strong relationship with his father who has also come to B.C. to visit him during the Program.

In concluding this section, it is clear that most of the Saudi students worked hard to maintain social ties with family and friends, but in some cases when the Program reaches its end, the pressure and stress of returning home can be a deterrent. Social media, especially WhatsApp, is also a key interface for maintaining social ties and ensuring they have one foot back in Saudi in anticipation of their return. Keeping in close contact seemed to ensure that their cultural self-identity remained strong through their transnational migration experience of living abroad.
3.6 Expectations upon return to Saudi Arabia

Many of the themes that I have drawn from these students interviews about the King Abdullah Scholarship, as well as familial expectations have been close in line with the KASP’s mission statement to “prepare and qualify Saudi Arabian human resources in an effective manner to compete on an international level in the labor market and in scientific research” (www.saudibureau.org/en/). Several of the students mentioned the importance of contributing knowledge and education to the Saudi economy, workplace and society as a whole, and to learn how other cultures think and problem solve. Some personal benefits that arose in our conversations was the desire to be “successful” that was often equated with getting a “good job”, but also using the KASP as a catalyst to pursue further graduate degrees and further strengthen English language training. Connell (2005) writes about the concept “transnational business masculinity” (849) which I believe to be pertinent to the main goals of the Program. As previously mentioned, the KASP mission is to bring back internationally trained citizens to strengthen the human resources within the Kingdom. In this ways, masculinity is also idealized through power and success equated with jobs and career. Many participants claim they are expected to get a job and become successful in order to take care of their families. Therefore, masculinity to them seemed to mean money and success. I think that Omar explained the point of the Program very well, in the narrative below.

First of all, they expect that I add value to the workplace and to the economy in Saudi Arabia. When I go back I will bring many things. It’s not just about education. It’s about learning the culture, how western people think, how they live, and also how to adopt the good things from here. They send people all around the world, to China, Japan … everywhere. So everyone will come back to Saudi and bring the good things to the community and the workplace. I think the Program believes that instead of bringing the experts to the country we will push the students around the world and they will come back and sit together and say, ‘you know when I was in Japan they did this and that I think that would work here, let’s do it.’ Another guy from the US may say ‘you know when I was at MIT I had a professor say this and that and we should try this experiment
here. Let’s do it.’ So, when they gather together and discuss ideas I think everyone has his own global views. I think this Program will show the benefit 20 years from now.

It is clear from Omar’s explanation that he sees the KASP as an essential force that will raise the profile of Saudi Arabia as a global power. Terry Ryan Hall (2013) writes that “the impact that the exposure of the American culture has on these students will have an impact on the future of Saudi Arabia, even if the impact is not immediately felt” (117). Although his study is in America, the similarities are evident. Like Omar said, it is believed in the long run, Saudi Arabia will benefit from these worldly experiences that their young citizens are experiencing. The countries in which the Saudi students are studying benefits by bringing gifts of understanding for everyone.

Ibrahim also shared some of the same points, including transfer for knowledge, but also talked about the importance of his focus on education. He said, “The government always asks me to finish my education here and go back home and transfer that information from Canada to my society…to apply what you have learned and bring some things that are beneficial for the society.”

While Yousef agreed that he does face significant pressure to give back to the Kingdom, yet he does not plan to return to Saudi Arabia and wants to continue living his life in Canada. Despite this ambivalence, he says,

There are lots of expectations. To me, it was a huge achievement. I did not think that at one point I would speak English, let alone graduate from a decent college. So, my family and my country wants me to go back and help them out with my skills and knowledge. . . . They have had huge expectations of me.

Although Yousef does not want to disappoint his family, friends and country, he had also decided that he needs to follow whatever makes him happy and successful in his life. We will
discuss more on this matter later in Chapter 4, especially how the KASP and Saudi Bureau mitigates what I call ‘educational draft dodgers.’

For Muhammad, he tries his best to remain anonymous and does not tell anyone (unless they are close to him) that he is on the Scholarship Program. When asked why, he says, “My friends, most of them have been on the Scholarship Program. My brothers and sister were also on the Scholarship Program.” What I noticed about Muhammad is that he had very high expectations for himself. After the KASP he wants to apply for a Master’s program, and in order to gain acceptance, including scholarships, it requires a minimum GPA of 75%. In Muhammad’s case, it seemed like the high expectations do not come necessarily from the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, nor his family, but from himself. He said that since he was enrolled in high school, his parents have never asked him about his grades, but he knows how valuable this education is.

Ali also received a lot of support from his family, especially his mother. He told me a story about the time when his study permit was denied for renewal. When he went to renew his study permit after it expired, he said, they did not accept it because there was a misunderstanding involving one of the pages in his passport. In order to continue his studies he had to hire an immigration lawyer through the Saudi Arabian embassy. Due to these delays, he had to wait for another 6 months before he could continue his higher education. When he called his mother explaining the challenges, he returned home because he did not want his mother spending unnecessary money on him to live in Canada while he waited for his study permit, especially since his scholarship was frozen once they learned he was not enrolled in classes. Despite these challenges, his mother continued to support him. He said, “She told me I would never expect you to move back until you have your degree and your head is up. I was so happy. It was so nice.”
told me that through everything she has been very understanding and sympathetic, especially since he is her oldest son. He then went onto explain what is expected from his family when he does finally complete his studies and comes home.

I am going to hold all of the responsibility because my younger brother has been handling my family’s issues since I have been gone, like taking care of my father’s business. He is under so much stress. My family is expecting me to take over as soon as I get home because I have spent at least 9 years away from home. When I go back to Saudi I am going to take over all of the responsibilities and let my brothers enjoy their lives. This is why I am so insistent that I have to go home as soon as possible.

As is common in Saudi society, because Ali is the eldest son, his father went to the court and got an official letter stating that Ali is responsible for all of his family, including finances, arranging marriages for his brothers and sisters, as well as other obligations. Shortly after my interview, he has now returned to Hiyal City and is fulfilling his responsibilities as the head of the family.

Evident in these narratives, the desire to get a “good job” post-graduation was brought up by all of my participants. In other words, as Brooks and Waters (2011) describe “the relationship between education, globalization, and neo-liberalism is important in terms of understanding policy imperatives in this area as well as the perspectives and motivations of individual students” (8-9). Again, the motive of the KASP is essentially to contribute to the Kingdom’s work force and create global citizens. Therefore, going into the program with these aspirations in mind, the students know what is expected of them in terms of family and state. From what I have learned from my participants, employability is crucial.

3.7 Becoming a “global citizen:” goals and skills gained from studying abroad

When I asked the Saudi student if their experience studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program helped reach their goals and aspirations in life, I received all positive answers. My participants claimed that their personality and life perspectives were changed, they
improved as students and became more serious about life, among a variety of other accomplishments. Omar responded by saying that studying abroad was more about the “experience” for him rather than just educational. He told me to imagine moving to South Korea, where I did not speak the language and to think about how hard life would be. He told me that this is what he experienced when he moved to Canada, as he knew no English and he had to start fresh. He concluded, “This experience has changed my personality and also changed my perspective about life and how we should live this life. I have become a more serious person and it has straightened me out.” He further added, “Living abroad will give you a lot of life lessons. Of course, education is most important and when you study abroad you become more serious with your studies.”

When I asked Ibrahim about his experience studying abroad, he said that it had changed him as a person. “Yeah hugely,” he replied. For Ahmed he noted that the Program had helped him to reach his goals, to build his educational qualifications and to go home and find a successful career. “The thing is, I am going back to work for somebody, but I am not planning to work like that for my whole life. I am just going to work for maximum ten years and then start my own business.” He had big goals to start his own business, and he believes this experience has helped him build the skill sets that he needs to do that. For Yousef, he said “I had no expectations really, it was all a surprise. And here I am with a degree speaking a different language in a different country. So, I would consider that as an achievement.” Since graduating Yousef has also been able to find work in Canada and is trying to find ways of renegotiating his contract with the Saudi Cultural Bureau to extend his time in the country. Muhammad was also grateful for the opportunity to learn English, experience another culture, and build new skills. In his words, “Learning another language and other cultures is something that I have always wanted
to do. I always wanted to see how people in the western side of the world live and learn. Without the Scholarship Program, I would not have been able to achieve those goals.”

For many of these students, like Muhammad, gaining proficiency in English language was seen as a major achievement. He went on to add,

I had to be more reliant on myself. I had to learn cooking and to be responsible. Also, I learned that I have to be very careful in everything I do. Before I do anything, I go and ask the other people who have more experience than me. Not being shy and asking people for help when I need it, is a new skill [that I have] I learned. When I was in Saudi I did not ask anyone for anything, but I learned that if I wanted to continue my life here in Canada, I would have to ask people and be more social.

Ali also discussed how he learned skills like cooking and cleaning while living abroad that was a corollary to the educational experience in Canada. He said,

I have changed since I came to Canada. Not just with school but especially with my life because I was so spoiled. I have housekeepers at home. I started cleaning my own stuff for the first time when I starting living in Canada. I would really love to stay here. If I could I would love to stay.

As previously discussed, it is not unusual for Saudi Arabians to delay all forms of work until they graduate with their degrees, but in the case of Ali, he shared with me how working part-time in a restaurant in Canada has changed him because he has been able to earn his own money for the first time in his life. He said,

The first job I had was delivering food here in Canada. If I was back home I would see this kind of job as really low standard. But when I worked this job, I felt proud of myself and I told all my friends and encouraged them to find work as well. A lot of them started doing the same job, too.

My partner also worked as a part-time food deliverer. Like my Saudi interlocutors, my partner also seemed to appreciate the money he earned rather than being entirely dependent on the Saudi government through the King Abdullah Scholarship monthly salary.

When I asked Ali how he felt about earning his own money, he explained that back in Saudi, he would be judged poorly for working this kind of job, which he would associate with
poor immigrants from India and Indonesia, who are also doing menial jobs like construction. But overtime, his views on the matter have changed noting “I even told my mom that I worked delivering food and she was so proud of me. She knows that I have changed.”

This cultural shift was a big part of the transition of Ali through studying abroad. This kind of part-time work has also changed the way he views temporary migrants working back home. When I asked him what the larger benefits of studying abroad for him has been, he said that he has changed his habits. “Living abroad, I have gotten to know a lot of people. Sometimes I trusted them when I shouldn’t have. I been screwed over by many friends throughout my time in Canada but I have learned from it.” He had also learned how to manage and budget his money according to his needs. As the head of the household when he returns home, he knows that his sisters are going to like the changes that have happened to him.

The theme of becoming more “open minded” was also raised by Muhammad. He felt that his eyes have been opened to other people’s worldviews. When he came to Canada, he was very young, but he had traveled a lot with his family prior, so he had gained some international experience. While this made him feel less surprised with Canadian culture, he said, “I [have] learned how to respect other people more and to respect people’s opinions and beliefs. Like if I see someone who is not following my religion or is not agreeing with my views, I [have] learned to respect [their opinion] more.” I asked him if he thought that he had changed as a person and he replied,

Yeah, I have changed a lot. Especially when I go home people say that I have really changed, like I’m a totally different person. I was a really talkative person when I was in Saudi. People would even say that I was annoying. Now that has changed. I don’t talk that much now. Now I think before speaking, where before I was saying anything that came to my mind without thinking about it. Maybe it is because I have become older.
For Yousef, he also noted how grateful he is for this opportunity. “It’s been a really special opportunity. There are only positive impacts I would say. Literally just being out there and seeing people from other countries. There is nothing negative about it.” I asked him if he thinks that his experience in Canada has changed how he views Saudi Arabia and he replied, “Saudi Arabia is going through a lot of progress and that is why we are here. All of us are learning new languages and gaining knowledge that we will bring home. I just see Saudi Arabia getting better and better.”

The progressive changes as a result of these educational scholarships was also echoed by Ibrahim who emphasized the importance of this culture shift among the Saudi youth. He said,

There is a huge change between generations, especially for education, technology, and communication. It is all totally different from the older people. A big change is the relationship between men and women. Before we couldn’t speak to each other in public, even if they are working in the same place. Another thing is that the education back home nowadays is hugely different. Maybe this is because of the government . . . We now have the Crown Prince, who is in his 30s and he is closer to our generation. He is trying to change the things from the older generation, which was not that respectful to our generation.

Echoing a great deal of the education literature, many of these Saudis students claimed that studying abroad contributes to essential life skills. In a related article by Christopher Clary and Mara E. Karlin entitled “Saudi Arabia’s Reform Gamble” (2011) they discuss how King Abdullah’s attempt at reform, focusing on education and economic diversification has had mixed results. Although many see the Program as a transformative investment for the Saudi Kingdom many of the Western-educated Saudis, who bring “entrepreneurial energy” and “cultural fluency” back to the country are unwilling to do certain jobs that are now being filled by large numbers of foreign workers (Clary and Karlin 2011, 17). They refer to this social class as the “lost generation,” those Saudis between the ages of 28–40 “who experienced the windfall of
sudden wealth from the oil boom at a young age and, consequently, generally remain unwilling to work hard” (19).

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I looked at the varying ways international education is harnessed by the Saudi Kingdom and students as an opportunity for growth and transformation that intersects with aspirations for development and global citizenship. The main themes that have emerged throughout this chapter are the importance of overcoming language barriers, cultural integration, and the rewarding opportunities that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program provides. Part of the learning experience entailed learning to navigate and adapt to very different educational and cultural expectations that become part of their everyday life studying abroad in Canada. There were also several important differences that were highlighted when it came to educational pedagogy such as the professor/student interactions, the reversal of gender dynamics and expectations in the classroom. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program in particular was described as a great experience by these students, especially because they do not have to worry about tuition and finances. One student even called it “a blessing.” In this way their experience of hardship, one could argue, is relatively muted in comparison to other domestic and international students who make colossal financial sacrifices to pursue their education. In fact, few of the students explicitly acknowledged the privilege of their position. This is not to say that the students did not face challenges. In the interviews, each of them shared different points of struggle and strategies for success. They found that if you keep your marks high, then you can avoid conflict and challenge from the University/College and the Cultural Bureau that oversees the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.
The most common reason for my participants to choose Canada for their studies was because they had other family members or friends who spoke highly of their time in Western Canada. Also, they appreciated that the country is multicultural, polite and kind, and offers “world class” education. They also noted how different Canadian culture is to Saudi Arabia, outlining how open-minded Canadians are to the diverse backgrounds and belief systems. This is not to say their integration into Canadian society was not without its challenges. All of the students struggled with language (especially at the beginning), cultural differences, mediating family relationship and expectations, gender differences, culture shock, and bouts of homesickness. In regards to benefits from studying abroad, they all told me that they have learned a great deal and were taught many life lessons leading to growth as individuals. Again, they seemed to emphasize the importance of experiencing a new culture, learning a new language and becoming more open minded.

For most of them, maintaining social ties with friends and family back home through social media platforms, such as Whatsapp and Snapchat, were important to help mitigate the distance and pressure associated with their separation. Communication occurs usually daily or weekly, depending on the student. There are also high expectations from family and nation when the student completes the King Abdullah Scholarship and are forced to return home as part of the stipulations of the Program. They are expected to become major drivers of knowledge transfer and skills that will enhance the Saudi economy, workplace and society as a whole.

Returning to Amit’s notion of “circumscribed cosmopolitanism,” what is evident in these interviews is that there is also a disjuncture or tension between the aspirations that accompany the study abroad experience and the situated experience of cosmopolitanism on the ground. In particular, many of the students continue to rely on their own ethnic-social networks, maintain
family ties back home, and do not experience a great deal of cultural immersion at the local level. They are also impacted by the way in which education is structured for these “international” students through English classes, orientation programs, and housing, that does not always lead to enhanced opportunities to meet local Canadians and improve their English.

Another key aspect of the program is the aspiration for “global citizenship” that is central to the mission of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and a theme I explore in more detail in the conclusion. Due to the stipulations of the program, all Saudi students are required to return home after their studies and there is heightened pressure that this unique educational opportunity will lead to employability and economic growth. As mentioned in Chapter 2, these students are situated by their government as human resource assets and these high expectations, not to mention the considerable investment by the state, are not lost upon them. While few of these students would deny that studying abroad in Canada has been a life-changing experience, it is also important to examine the varying ways in which international education and transnational mobility are structured differently by state governments in ways that are aimed at producing certain types of subjects.

Now that I have shown some of the ways in which Saudi students navigate their educational program and the broader implications of the KASP within a transnational arena, I now turn to questions around gender, migration and difference, especially how masculinity is reconfigured in the context of these student mobilities.
Chapter 4: Identity and Difference in a Globalizing World

In this chapter, I take an intersectional approach to explore several themes related to gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world, with a particular focus on gender identity, dating and marriage. I begin by discussing some of the prevailing meanings and expectations around being “a Saudi man.” I then discuss several topics, such as the different experiences and perceptions of gendered youth in Canada versus Saudi Arabia, the role of women and gender segregation in Saudi Arabia dating, marriage expectations upon return, and some personal stories that include experiences with racism and discrimination.

4.1 Meaning(s) and expectations of being a “Saudi man”

Before I inquired about the specific responsibilities that these young men face at home I asked about their expectations as a young educated Saudi man and what masculinity meant to them. My reason for this was because R. W. Connell (1988, 4), in her article “Masculinities and Globalization,” suggests that “different cultures and different periods of history construct gender differently” and “more than one kind of masculinity can be found within a given cultural setting or institution” (1998, 4). When discussing with participants the varied meanings of being a “Saudi man,” I took the approach, following the anthropology of gender scholarship, that gender is not fixed and, furthermore, that different ideas of masculinity circulate within a cultural group (Mascia-Lee, 2010). I also wanted to be careful not to generalize what masculinity means to Saudi citizens. Most of the students I interviewed had not lived in Saudi Arabia for many years and had a heightened awareness that their lives would drastically change once they returned to Saudi Arabia after completing their graduation. The main reason they cited for these changes was that they would be returning home with a degree and therefore will be expected to get a job and marry, which translated into more responsibilities and pressures than they had known before.
The second reason for these changes was equated with developments around the young Crown Prince Mohammad who, many believed, is transforming the country in quite “progressive” ways.

For Ibrahim, he admitted that he had never thought about his future that much, but noted that he would be returning to a different life back home compared to before. Previously, he used to spend time with his friends all the time, but nowadays, getting older has brought more responsibilities, such as having a job and starting a family. Yousef also spoke to me about how important family was back in Saudi. He said, “We are really family oriented. We live with our families until the end. There is not a certain age that we have to move out. Everyone lives with their family. Each house has a room that is already set for us within the house.” Unlike in dominant North American society, in Saudi Arabia the cultural expectation is for young people to continue living inter-generationally until marriage (and perhaps beyond). In North America, a prevalent aspiration for many young adults is to gain independence by getting their own apartments or other living arrangements within a few years of completing high school. However, this is far from a homogeneous practice in Canada and is arguably changing as a result of growing economic inequalities, precarious labor, and influences of non-western social organization patterns.

Ali and Muhammad both described the changes that are occurring in Saudi Arabia and what they are expecting when they return. Ali said,

My country has totally changed since I left it. I haven’t been home in four years but the new Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has started to target our age group because he is trying to change all of the rules and all of the closed mindedness from my country. He is young as well, around 30 years old.

Muhammad said something very similar to Ali about the changes in Saudi currently. He said,

The new crown prince is paying so much attention to the young generation, especially in regards to women’s rights. Being able to drive will make a huge impact on women’s
lives. In the work force, women are now able to work in many more industries than they used to before.

When I asked them to share some of the expectations that they face back home in relation to family, community and society, they emphasized the importance of obtaining good marks in school, employment, family welfare, as well as their religion. I found that amongst my cohort of participants being the oldest brother in the family tended to involve added responsibility within the family hierarchy. For example, Omar explained that his family and society had high expectations for him as a result of his international schooling. In the past he was expelled from two different public universities in Saudi Arabia for poor academic performance. When he came to Canada, he started to take education much more seriously and he ultimately succeeded. He was able to study what he was interested in, unlike in the Saudi school system where students need very high marks to study their preferred Major. I knew that he was also the oldest son in his family so I asked him if he had any additional pressures. He told me that he did have more responsibilities, especially when his father lived in Kuwait for work, and he had to take full responsibility of his household. He compared the household to a kind of business that needed to be managed. His father had taught him how to take care of things, such as driving his mother and sisters around (even though they had a driver as well) and fixing vehicles if there had been an accident. When compared to other students who were not the oldest son, Omar had certainly faced added pressure as the head of his family. My Saudi partner was also the oldest son in his family and he had to face a great deal of expectations and social pressures from the family. For example, he was always very clear with me that he would have to return to Saudi to “take care of things” after graduation, which also meant the end of our relationship. Ali was also the oldest of his mother’s children. He explained to me the incredibly hard times he faced when his father, who had two wives and 19 children, passed away. In particular, he told me how hard it was when
his half-siblings were against him and his siblings in terms of the family estate. They fought a great deal over money. Ali spoke out, “This is the worst experience that I have ever had.”

On the other side of the age spectrum is Ibrahim, who was the youngest in his family. When I asked him about the differences between the expected roles of the oldest and youngest brothers and sons, he replied, “Most of my siblings take care of me because they are older. We are not in the same generation. All of them have children and do not live at home anymore. Still, we are very close to each other.” He went on to explain his responsibilities as a young Saudi man with respect to the household.

As a man, I am responsible for most things at the house for my mother, sister and my father. My sister used to go to university and I had to give her a ride every day. She has since graduated and has a job at the hospital as a dietician. When my family needed to go out, I would have to give them a ride. I just have one sister and that is why we have to take care of her because we are three men in the house except my mother and sister and they need me.

Yousef, who wanted to stay permanently in Canada explained, “it is required to spend a lot of time with family. Not responsibilities, more like obligations. You have to learn to divide your time between friends and family.” For Muhammad, not only were these family obligations important, but religion too was important too. The main responsibility given to him by his family and society was to make sure he led a good moral life as a Muslim. He told me that it was challenging praying on time, among other things, as a young person. In his words, “I do pray, but not [always] on time. My parents are expecting me to pray on time. That’s the only thing.” I followed up by asking if he was stricter with his prayers in Canada compared to when he is home in Saudi Arabia. He replied, “In Saudi, yes, because we have Mosques everywhere but here [in Canada] we don’t get the chance. So, it can be difficult, but back home yes, I do them all. [all five daily prayers].” The lack of prayer spaces and mosques is something that I have always wondered about for practicing Muslims and how that impacts their study abroad programs. From
my experience, they will pray wherever they are (if they decide they want to pray), but I am sure having the call to prayer is a strong motivation in Saudi Arabia, as it is in other parts of the Muslim world. Also, having a public Mosque in close proximity at all times must make it easier for them to stay dedicated to their prayer schedule.

4.2 Youth and privilege in gendered environments

When I asked participants how the behavior of young men in Saudi differs from that of young men in Canada, a theme that came up is that male youth in Canada appear to be more independent and also appear to take life more seriously than do male youth in Saudi Arabia. Unlike in Saudi, as transnationally mobile students, much of their independence was equated with the experience of greater responsibility that comes with being abroad, away from the protective bubble of their family. Back in Saudi their families pay for their needs and they always have a place to stay with staff and siblings to look after their everyday needs. My participants told me that young people also usually live with their parents until they are married which on average is around 30 years old (sometimes older). One could argue that these accounts suggest young unmarried men have limited responsibilities required of them in Saudi Arabia prior to marriage and indicates the privilege that they grow up with, including not having to work or worry about rent or bills.

For Omar, he explained that, in his view, young people in Canada are more independent and responsible, especially from an early age, than young people in Saudi Arabia. In his words, Canadians have to work and provide for themselves. For me, it is really tough. I am 27 now and I have never had a real job. I just started a new job, but when I was back in high school and even college, I had no job. Everything is provided by your family. You have your home where you can eat and sleep. If you need to go somewhere, you can take the car. So, I think people here are more independent and are sometimes more serious about
life. Back home, when you are a teenager its mostly about enjoying your time with no responsibility.

It was clearly shocking for Omar and other Saudi male students to see what they understood as different expectations and responsibilities of young people in Canada in contrast to their experiences in Saudi Arabia. I could relate to their characterization of North American youth culture since I have had a job since I was 14 years old even though this is not the same experience for all North American youth. When I began to date my Saudi boyfriend, I was surprised and a bit disappointed to learn that he had never had a job. I realized that my disappointment related to my own views of masculinity and what I expected of an American man. For me, I preferred a man that was a hard worker, and knowing he hadn’t had a job was hard for me to comprehend. After getting to know him and other Saudi Arabian students I came to learn more about how employment patterns among young adults adhered to certain cultural norms that were different between Canada and Saudi. These cultural differences were also noted by Ali, who said,

Back home in Saudi, most 20 year olds have never had a job in their lives. But here I found out that people have been working since they turned 14 or 15 and they pay for themselves. Back home, our parents pay for us and we live with them until we turn 30 or we get married. But here, everyone is independent. I talk to young people here, and they have a lot of experience with work.

Ahmed’s thoughts on the subject were similar as well. For Ahmed, he said,

Life in Saudi Arabia is easier than in Canada for young people because here you have to be responsible about everything in your life. You have to work to pay for your apartment, your education, and your car. In Saudi Arabia, it is different. Your family is going to help you. You don’t have to pay for school so life is easier.

These comments are also somewhat ironic because many of these young Saudis are pursuing degrees in business management but have no direct experience in a working environment accept for the household. I could imagine that this would be a challenge for some Canadian instructors
who are teaching these courses. For example, I saw that in my partner’s business classes, there was a lot of reference to job experience when he had none. Sometimes he had to ask me what he was supposed to write because he had never been employed.

For Ibrahim, he was certainly thinking about the path ahead once he graduated and completed the KASP.

People my age are mostly working, married and have children so they are totally different than young people without these responsibilities. When you have children, you have to take care of them. You are trying to keep them safe. You are responsible for renting or owning a house and in Saudi, you are responsible to give your children a monthly salary.

For Muhammad, he believed that one of the main ways in which manhood was achieved derives from expectations around religion. He told me that most young people in Saudi Arabia are religious and in Canada he saw this much less. He also expressed how he can’t really say too much on this topic because even in Canada, most of his friends are from Saudi Arabia. In his words, “I don’t really have a lot of friends in school, most of them are Saudis. For this reason, I don’t really know if there are many differences.”

I found that a lot of Saudi students in Canada that I met had a limited number of Canadian friends and I was glad that Muhammad brought it up. When I asked him if he had a hard time making Canadian friends, he said, “No, I am not having a hard time. I just have so many Saudi friends [laughs] that I was like ‘okay, that’s enough friends for me.’” For Muhammad, it did not seem like the socialization with Canadian friends was a priority, but he did say that meeting people from different parts of Saudi Arabia will be helpful for him upon returning home. He said,

I am from Jeddah and we have a totally different culture than people from other regions in Saudi, so I have been able learn about their culture, too. It will help me a lot especially if I end up working somewhere besides Jeddah in the future.
Terry Ryan Hall (2013) also discusses how Saudi students are meeting other Saudis from different parts of the country and that this experience can contribute to a greater sense of cultural unity in the country. From what I have found in this research, this is accurate and a lot of Saudis benefit from these friendships with a desire to interact and learn from each other, which is not that common back home.

When I asked my research participants about the similarities and differences between young people in Canada and in Saudi Arabia, a main response was that living in a culture with a mixed gender environment was a new change for many Saudi students. As I discussed in the Prologue, as well as discussed in Chapter 3, my partner often felt like he had two identities and frequently felt tensions between his Saudi collective and personal identity. His social identity was very much contextual and expressed differently depending on his social circle and how he understood and perceived these situations, especially in relation to gender.

According to Omar, he felt that Saudi Arabia was much more “modern” and “tech savvy” than Canada. He started the conversation by saying, “While we have many of the same ethical beliefs, such as treating people nicely, … I do feel Saudi Arabia is more modern than Canada.” I then asked him in what ways did he think that Saudi is more modern. He claimed that in Saudi, even the older generations do well with the newest technology and learn quickly. He said that through social media and television, Saudis are able to follow the latest fashions and celebrities that we also see in the western world. He also proudly noted that Saudis have a much better fashion sense. Despite the restrictions on women in the public sphere, he also felt that Saudi women have a better fashion.

Ibrahim also raised the question of mixed gender environments and how that differs from Canada and Saudi Arabia. He told me that women are now employed in various settings such as
hospitals, oil companies, sales jobs in the mall, customer service agents for mobile companies and office settings. Ibrahim also expressed excitement about women being able to drive in Saudi Arabia. When he told me about women being able to drive, he said that it will be empowering for women to work in other cities and find better salaries. I was happy to hear how enthusiastic he was about the positive changes towards greater equality for women in Saudi, however in most of the public sphere, gender segregation still remains the norm and is closely monitored.

According to Ali, one difference for him in Canada was seeing women enjoying shopping and going to the gym. While he is accustomed to his sisters undertaking these activities, “I have never experienced any other women besides my sisters until I came to Canada.” Like Ibrahim, he also noted how things are changing back in Saudi Arabia. He said, “Women drive now and all my sisters want to drive cars. The problem is that my mom is not allowing them because my mom is very traditional. She said that while she is alive, my sisters are not allowed to drive.” When probed a bit further on why his mom would not allow his sisters to drive, he said, it is because she wants to keep the culture the way things are because that is what she grew up with. “We are the young generation and we would be happy to let the women drive,” he said. He also explained that there are movie theaters now opening in Saudi, where before people had to drive to bordering countries, like Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates to see a film. Both men and women are also allowed in the cinema but there are different sections, just like at restaurants. He also told me about soccer and sports events. Another big change is that “women are allowed to go and watch soccer games if they are with family.” These changes are significant to Ali because he had never experienced a mixed gender environment like this in his culture before, especially because he will be responsible for his sisters once he returns to Saudi Arabia. Another obvious similarity according to Ahmed and Muhammad is that young people in both Canada and in Saudi
like to have fun. Muhammad said “I think that most the people here in Canada and in Saudi care about their friends. They hang out a lot and they love to party.”

4.3 Perceptions of femininity in Saudi Arabia compared to Canada

As previously discussed, for many of my Saudi interviewees, a mixed-gender society here in Canada was a big change for them. As previously discussed, for many of my Saudi interviewees, a mixed-gender society in Canada was a big change for them. I would argue that having a better understanding of the culture of these Saudi students in terms of gender norms would be helpful in improving their academic and social success. Following the work of Anthias, she writes that we need to consider “differences among migrants and indeed among both men and women migrants, not only in terms of geographical origin, but also in terms of the differentiated social positions that they occupy in the receiving countries” (2012, 106). Similarly, for Ahmed Alhazmi and Berenice Nyland (2013) in their article “The Saudi Arabian International Student Experience: From a Gender-Segregated Society to Studying in a Mixed-Gender Environment,” they discuss the potential benefits and possible barriers that come along with studying in a mixed gender environment. They found a number of emerging themes such as difficulty adjusting in the beginning towards a greater appreciation for mixing gender environments through their education. They claim, “Many countries are aware of the possibility of negative experiences if students are not appropriately prepared, and there is some evidence that pre-departure classes can ameliorate some problems” (Alhazmi and Nyland 349, 2013). They also write that “living and studying in gender-mixed societies has the potential to change these students, both socially and educationally, and this will impact on the experience of returning to their Saudi community” (347). They conclude that the experience of western mixed
gender societies may change their opinions and possibly make an impact on how gender is viewed back home in the Kingdom, however there also those who express caution and suggest these experiences could have negative repercussions on their cultural identity (247).

From what I have learned from the students, they generally agree that there are far more benefits to this exposure to mixed gender environments, but none of them were particularly critical of the gender segregation back home, let alone a desire to bring about greater gender equity. Although most of the students I interviewed expressed how their perspective had changed towards gender relations as a result of their experience with new cultural and gender norms in Canada, this was not always the case.

For example, when asked how my male research participants perceived women to act differently in Canada than back home in Saudi Arabia a number of themes were raised. One way in which some of these men reaffirmed the patriarchy and hegemonic ideal of masculinity back in Saudi Arabia was that they claimed women were actually very “spoiled” back home because everything was provided by men. This sentiment was shared by Omar who felt that women in Saudi were generally “better off” because “if you are a woman back home you get everything you want. The cultural expectation is that your husband will provide everything.” He continued, “For example, if you don’t want to have a job, you should feel safe because when you get married, your husband will provide everything. It is part of Saudi culture and religion that men should provide for their wives.” He told me that he thought that sometimes it is better to have a gender segregated environment with restrictions on what women and men can say, wear, and do when they are around each other. In his words, “Sometimes when I work with women I have to mind my language and be sensitive with how I act. Women are totally different than men. There
is a lot of change with mixed gender offices and women can now drive. But the core values are still there.”

Omar’s views on these issues were more conservative than others, but he also felt that some of the changes back in Saudi Arabia were for the better. In his words, “we have a lot of laws that were created many years ago and nobody has updated or changed them.” In particular, he was reflecting on travel restrictions that prevent young men and women from travelling without their parents’ permission until they are 21 years old. Despite his strong heteronormative stance about the values of gender segregation, he viewed this particular restriction on women’s lack of mobility as archaic and was glad to tell me that things are now starting to change back in Saudi Arabia.

With some of the recent changes initiated in Saudi Arabia under the new Crown Prince, some of my Saudi interlocutors attributed these developments to globalization, speaking positively about women’s choices, new job opportunities, and the ability to drive. For example, according to Ibrahim “Nowadays it’s pretty much the same. Women have choices and good jobs, so I think it’s pretty much the same.” He told me that since he has been in Canada (five years), there has been a lot of changes back in Saudi Arabia as a result of globalization. When I asked about everyday activities he said that women are now moving around to different places, hanging out and having more options. He also explained that women are allowed to gather more openly in public.

While some of my Saudi participants reinforced the patriarchal ideal, others like Muhammad had a much more liberal and moderate view that he associated with growing up in the city of Jeddah and having a mother who completed her PhD. Everyone in his family disapproved of arranged marriages. In his words,
With women, I can see many differences. Women here in Canada are more open-minded and are freer than in Saudi because here they have all their rights. In Saudi, if a woman wants to go out they have to have a man with them. Men control a lot of things in a woman’s life. The way they talk to men is also different, although my city has less strict rules when it comes to this compared to other places in Saudi.

When I asked Yousef about the differences, he replied, “Not really. Women in my opinion are smarter than men. I see women here being so successful and I don’t see any difference at all.” Yousef had many friends that were women, and felt very comfortable around them. When probed further about this contrasting opinion, he added, “In Canada they feel the freedom, so they are able to be themselves. In Saudi Arabia, they are just a little bit covered up but that’s the only difference that I see. Hands down women are smarter than the men that I have met both in Canada and Saudi.”

In asking my participants about how they perceived women’s actions in Canada and Saudi, it was clear through the interviews that views on gender relations and differences were quite varied. Despite the opportunities provided by globalization, including recent developments under the new Crown Prince, this also did not necessarily lead to a more critical stance on patriarchy and gender segregation by some of my Saudi interviewees.

4.4 Dating

According to Ali Nobil Ahmad (2009) sexual desires and romance are seldom discussed in migration studies, especially with Muslim groups, yet are a significant part of living abroad. He writes, “love, sexuality and romance lie at the heart of the migration process” (311). Through this research I learned that most of my participants have dated or were dating women from outside Saudi Arabia, especially from North America. Thus one exception to the trend of remaining insulated within one’s cultural-linguistic bubble as an international student are the
opportunities presented to date “foreign” women. Taking advantage of their social distance from Saudi Arabia and the accompanying familial pressure, some of these Saudi men look to experiment with dating and romantic relationships that would be prohibited back home. When I talked with the men about this aspect of their educational experience there was some initial reservation, but then followed by an eagerness to share their views and experiences. While I recognize that the term “dating” is not a universal and takes on different social and cultural meanings, in the context of their time in Canadian society, most of the participants had been in at least one relationship with a non-Saudi during their educational period. Two of them, Ali and Yousef, were or are currently in relationships. In contrast, Omar was married to a Saudi Arabian woman when he was 21.

Ibrahim was very open about sharing what he viewed as the underlying rules on dating in Saudi Arabia. He told me about his experience, saying, “I have had good experiences here in Canada with relationships. I have had girlfriends here. It is totally different than back home.” When I asked him “How so?” he replied, “Back home people are mostly Muslim and we are not allowed to have a girlfriend in our religion.” In Saudi, my partner and others told me that there are religious police that make sure that the people are following Islamic rules, and one of those rules being that dating is not allowed. When I asked Muhammad about dating he had no concerns. In fact, he acknowledged that he had also dated four or five girls in Saudi in the recent past. While in Canada, he also told me that he had a girlfriend here as well. I asked him if the connotations around dating in Saudi was the same as dating in North America and he replied,

The rules are different because dating is prohibited in Saudi so if you got caught by the religious police then you are going to be in trouble. But in Canada it is allowed so you feel more comfortable and you don’t have to worry about anything. Although in Jeddah we don’t have a big religious police presence so I was able to date.
For Omar, who described himself as more on the conservative side, explained that it is fine to date with the view of marriage on the horizon, but to date without intent to marry is wrong. He told me,

I think that having a relationship without seeking marriage is wrong. It’s wrong because if you don’t seriously want to commit then why do you bother? Also, I am quite conservative about sexual relationships before marriage. I believe that it is wrong.

When it comes to the prospect of sex before marriage he compared it to smoking cigarettes. He said that when people smoke they know that what they are doing is bad for them and internally they know, but they do it anyway. “That’s how I see dating,” he said. When I asked his opinion of interracial dating he said that it was fine from a personal and religious perspective. However, “I am from a family that is part of a tribe and it is expected that we marry people from within the tribe. My family will not accept if I marry a girl from a different country. So, this is a cultural thing. … It’s getting better but this is how it used to be.”

As Omar is already married and has a child, his experience was quite unique compared to the other participants that I interviewed. When I asked him about his wife, he replied, “Yeah, she is from a big family and a known tribe, so it was fine for me to marry her.” However, these decisions are not always in alignment with religious beliefs. In his words,

Religion actually fights this, saying there is no difference between you and the sky accept how you are good in life. So, this is what is determined if you are a good or bad. It’s not about your family, religion, or color. But we are Arab so we inherent the tradition of marrying within your tribe.

Expanding on this, he then expressed that he believes there should be equality and that people should have the freedom to believe whatever they choose to believe. Despite these liberal and moderate views, he still warns about the potential dangers that could arise in interracial relationships. He said,
There is no difference in color, religion, culture, background, or roots. But sometimes I encourage my friends to not cross these cultural lines. Sometimes the community will fight them back. Their kids will be affected from this marriage. You are being selfish and are not thinking about your children and how they are going to be treated. For example, your children may have trouble marrying because they are coming from a mixed race.

Although he was fine with interracial relationships, he did not feel that Saudi society was ready for this, but maybe in the future. Although it is fine to have children from mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds here in Canada, back in Saudi Arabia this could be a problem. When asked about his marriage and how he met his wife, he said, “One time I saw her at an event and thought she was pretty so I got her number.” They stayed in contact for a couple years and were texting back and forth before they decided to get married. When asked if she dressed in Abaya, which is the traditional clothing that women wear in Saudi Arabia, he said,

Yes, but I saw her without her Abaya. It was at someone’s house. I asked for her number then started talking to her. From the beginning, I told her I was interested in marriage, not just dating. She was okay with this and we got along great with each other. I told my family that I wanted to marry her and then I went to her father and asked for his permission. He said yes and it went very smoothly.

He told me that he had one daughter who was five years old and when I asked him if he was planning on having more children, he replied, “Yes. We say Inshallah.” Inshallah means “God willing”.

Like my partner and I, Ali was in a relationship for a few years up until he went back to Saudi. His partner and him seemed to have a very similar situation to ours, so I was intrigued to find out more about their experience. He told me,

I feel like I am married because I had never been in a relationship before. In 2015, I met a girl [in Canada] and we started dating. We have been together ever since. I have been honest with her from the beginning that one day I am going back home. I told her that my family is very traditional and my city is so conservative and when I finish my school I will have to go back home and get married. I guess the girl did not care because she was young. At the time she was 19 and she knew that she still had time if she wanted to date me for a while so she accepted it.
He told me that after dating her for three months, he met her mother and she asked him about what his plans were when he graduated. He was honest with her and told her that he planned to move back to Saudi Arabia. Her mom was shocked with his answer and questioned her daughter about why she would date a man when she knew he was going to leave her. She told her mother that she was fine with it, and ended up respecting him because of his honesty. He told me that in 2016, they moved in together up until last year. He said, “I enjoyed it, actually. I loved it and I wish I could marry her. But there are too many differences between our cultures and religions. She is a Buddhist, I guess. She does not believe Islam and she doesn’t believe in God at all and that is against my religion.” I asked him if he had ever faced any clashes with respect to these differences and how they managed these fault lines. He replied, at first “She always brought up these subjects,” but these days, “she prefers to not talk about it.” This differs from my experience, because I had an interest in learning more about my partners and I encouraged discussion on the matter. I also wanted to learn more about Islam and he was open to teaching me about it. He even bought me a Quran from Saudi Arabia.

Next, when I asked Ali if his family knew about his relationship, he said they didn’t. Similarly, in my own relationship, my partner’s family did not know about our relationships and never would. He told me what I expected to hear, that his family had no idea about his relationship. However, he did share that as a result of rumors spreading by his siblings, his family likely expected that he would be dating many girls in Canada. His mother even called him crying over the rumors on one occasion and he had to reassure her that they were not true and that he would be home soon enough. He also told me that he will be expected to marry shortly after he returns.
Unlike others, Yousef revealed to me that he was gay and was grateful to be in an interracial relationship with a Canadian. He said,

I love it. An understanding partner is what we all need. My partner helps complete me and does not put me down. If I am feeling down, he lifts me up. If he is feeling down, I lift him up. We complete each other.

When I asked him if he was open to talking about his sexuality, he replied, “Yes, certainly.” So, I continued to ask him questions about his experience in Canada. In particular, I was interested in how he negotiates social and gender differences, including the expectations around masculinity back in Saudi Arabia. From his viewpoint that the biggest challenge was,

Figuring out what being homosexual is because I knew that I was different and not like the rest, but did not really understand how. I did not know that being gay was a thing. In Saudi Arabia, nobody questions you about your sexuality. But here in Canada, they ask you how old are you, where are you from, are you gay or straight? It took me a while to just understand that there was a difference. To me, all I knew before is that it was just men and women and that’s it. But then I noticed that there is gay, bisexual, and more.

Having this realization must have been a transformative moment in his life, especially since he was not able to express this until he came to Canada. I asked him if he thought that live in Canada made it easier for him to come to this awareness and he said, “It made me figure out that there are [different] categories in sexuality.” I asked him about continuing to living in Canada and he said “Yes I will continue to live in Canada. I came here in 2010 and I will always stay here. Canada is my home.” I asked him how his family felt about that and he replied “Not good.” He told me that it has put stress and challenges on his relationship with his family. The last time he saw them was 2013 and he wasn’t planning to return in the near future.
4.5 Marriage expectations upon return

Not only is employability a significant factor that underlies the goals and expectations surrounding the KASP, but so are the familial pressures that these men will return to Saudi Arabia after their degree and get married. One could argue that these combined pressures help justify a period of experimentation with women that would be not be acceptable back home. The pressure to return and find a “suitable” wife was certainly evident in the interviews with all my participants. One exception was Omar who is already married, but he did have plans to expand his family and have more children when he returns.

Although each of the Saudi men experienced this family pressure they also felt that getting a job should be the main priority before marriage because they needed to provide for their wives. Ibrahim tried to downplay the significance when he said,

I do not think I am expected to get married. My family knows that I will try to find a good job first because I do not want to be married before I am going to be able to rent an apartment with my wife. I want to be able to be financially stable. If I do not do this, I know I will be frustrated and will not be able to give my wife a better life. My parents always ask me, but they are not trying to force me to get married as soon as possible.

Muhammad also wanted to delay marriages as much as possible, especially because he was younger than the rest. Expressing his usual confidence, he said,

I do not think I am expected to get married. My family knows that I will try to find a good job first because I do not want to be married before I am going to be able to rent an apartment with my wife. I want to be able to be financially stable. If I do not do this, I know I will be frustrated and will not be able to give my wife a better life. My parents always ask me, but they are not trying to force me to get married as soon as possible.

Muhammad also wanted to wait a while, especially since he was young. Being confident in what he wanted in his life, he said,

I don’t want to get married until I am in my 30’s but when I do get married I want to know the girl. I want to know her for at least two or three years before I make the decision that I am going to marry her. An arranged marriage is a big “no” for me.
I asked him what his parents thought about arranged marriage for him and he replied, “They don’t want that. Especially my mom, she does not want me to get married until I finish my Master’s degree.” Ahmed, on the other hand, seemed very eager to get married. He said, “I think that because I am 30 years old that when I go back my parents are going to insist that I get married.” I asked him if he was ready for that and he said “I think that I am ready, yes.”

For Ali, who was just coming out of a long-term relationship with a Canadian girl, he had some trepidation about this difficult transition in his life. In his words,

I am going to get married but here’s the story. Back in summer 2015 my mom told me to come back because she found the right girl for me. I was dating the Canadian girl at the time and I was enjoying my life so I told my mom I cannot come back home now because I have school and I have to finish. So, my mom had my younger brother who was 22 years old get married to a different girl. My mom needed someone to get married because my sisters were bothering her as a lot of my extended family were getting married. I guess they were excited about it and wanted me to get married as well. Instead, my brother was working at the bank so he was ready and he got married. My mom told me whenever I come back, and find a job, she wants me to get married, but I am not ready for it. I don’t feel like I am ready for it now. Maybe in 3 or 4 years.

Yousef had already shared with me his sexual orientation and desire to stay in Canada, so I was curious to know if this question would apply to his evolving situation. He replied “My mom already has a wife for me. I rejected it. I told her to let that poor girl be free.” I asked him if his mother was upset with his answer and he replied, “Well she has not texted me back. That was three days ago.” For Yousef, the pressure from his family to return had been a real challenge, not to mention his sexual orientation, which remains a secret among family and friends. He told me that his family reached out to him trying to get him to come home at least twice per week. They say to him, “Please come back, there is nothing for you to do there … we can find a better job back here, we have your cars and your house.” They made him offers to try and persuade him to return, but he stands firm in his decision.
Yousef exemplifies what I described briefly in Chapter 3 as a “educational draft dodger”—someone who aims to use their education and work abroad to prolong their stay to avoid the compulsory service period back home that is required of all successful KASP students. Returning to the article “The Political, Socio-economic and Sociocultural Impacts of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) on Saudi Arabia” (2015) by Kholoud T. Hilal, Safiyyah R. Scott & Nina Maadad, they also discuss how international education can also lead to the phenomenon of “brain drain.” In the context of education, they claim that “brain drain” refers to those students who study abroad staying and living permanently in the host countries and using their learned skill to benefit the host country and not their country of origin. They also suggest that there isn’t enough research on this to really know the larger impact of brain drain on Saudi students who choose to stay in the host country, especially given the contractual agreement that students are required to return for a period after the completion of degrees. In some cases, these authors suggest there may be an offset of brain drain because there are better income earning opportunities and resources in Saudi Arabia in comparison to other country destination countries such as China. As I noted in Chapter 2, the contract agreement to return to Saudi was signed by Yousef, yet he has managed to prolong his time in Canada through various strategies of delay. When I asked him about what the Saudi state would do to him if he continued living in Canada, he answered confidently, “absolutely nothing. I signed some paperwork, yes, but they have never asked me to go back… Yet.”

4.6 Racial discrimination within white spaces

While the KASP clearly provides new opportunities for the performance of identity and experimentation with pre-marital relationships, it also comes with challenges in the host country.
For example, when I asked Ali about his experience dating a white woman in Canada, he replied, “I feel that when we go out to eat at a restaurant, older people would look at us in a bad way.” He told me a story about one instance where he experienced a vehement form of racism inflected by Islamaphobia here in Canada. He said that a woman security guard at his apartment building where he lived with his girlfriend was suspicious of him because he drove a nice car and lived in a nice apartment without working. He said the security guard asked his girlfriend if she was being held hostage by “those brown guys.” She was very offended and told them that Ali was her boyfriend. Problems continued to grow between the security guard and them. The security guard started a rumor that he was a drug dealer and told the entire apartment complex. He tried to confront her but she did not pick up the phone or answer any of their emails, so he went and talked to the apartment agency, then to the police station to file a report. After this, she did not cause any more trouble. However, he no longer felt comfortable in the apartment complex and chose to move out because he did not want any more trouble. The demographic of Kelowna (and much of the Okanagan) is predominantly white, and experiences such as this challenges the so-called openness and/or multicultural discourse in which racialized male international students experience racism, more specifically Islamaphobia, even in the company of white women. In this case, one could argue that Ali experienced a form of subordinated masculinity, despite his prevalent social status in Saudi Arabia, as a result of the color of his skin and religion. As a white woman who was in a relationship with a Saudi man I had also experienced similar situations that are important for me to share. The first story happened in the United States when I first met my partner. I had been hanging out with some Saudis downtown, and was standing next to one of my Saudi friends in the smoking area outside of the bar. A drunk white college student came over to us and asked him if he had a bomb strapped to him and if he was going to blow him up. He
responded to him by saying something like, “trust me, if I did, I wouldn’t waste my life on you.” He remained calm and simply looked away from the man. He acted like nothing had happened, but in my mind, I was in shock. I was angry. He told me he was used to such treatment. I was speechless. I am sure that he perceived me as someone who cared about him, but he clearly wanted me to let it go and not discuss it. I wanted to do something about it so badly, but knew that was not what he wanted. He did not want to draw any further attention to the situation. This was the first time I had experienced anything like this with my Saudi friends. At that point, I was naive in thinking that these situations do not occur.

When I first started dating my partner in the U.S. he drove a silver Chrysler 300. It was a great car and I felt very cool riding in the front seat. One night we were driving back to his apartment from the gas station downtown. It was a Thursday and there were plenty of people out walking on the streets. I had the window down because it was a nice night. I was enjoying the ride when suddenly I heard a voice from outside yell “BOOM!” and laugh, indicating that they knew a middle eastern was driving the car and that there was a bomb associated with him. I felt shocked once again. Like his friends, he just rolled his eyes and ignored it. I was offended, and slightly embarrassed, so I rolled up the window. Another time, in a different car, I heard it again. I couldn’t see how anyone thought this was a funny joke. Each time, I got used to it and I began to realize how sad it was to have to get used to these forms of discrimination. Each time I tried to hold back my anger and brush it off, that is until Canada.

One wintery night in downtown Kelowna, I had just gotten out of a club and we decided to stop and get a slice of pizza. It was me, my partner, and two or three other Saudi friends we had just started hanging out with. After I got the pizza, I stepped outside to join the others where a small altercation had taken place between my partner and two white Canadian men who were
clearly intoxicated. One of them told my partner to “suck a camel dick.” This lit a fire in me. I went up to them and said very indecent insults to them. I told them to leave and they turned away, yet I continued to follow them and taunt them. I couldn’t help it and I finally hit a breaking point. I had no more patience.

These stories show my revelation and journey throughout the years of how I have experienced and perceived discrimination. When I first started to befriend Saudis, I ignored the discrimination because it seemed like this is what they preferred me to do. At the same time, I knew that I needed to stand up for them because this behavior was unacceptable. While I admire the humility and candor of my Saudi partner and friends I have found it important to call out this racism whenever it arises, including writing about it in the context of this thesis.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined some of the personal opinions and experiences of Saudi students studying abroad in Western Canada, especially in relation to gender, identity, cultural and racial differences, and dating. I learned some of the ways these Saudi men navigate the cultural differences that shape and inform their subjectivity in a transnational arena. In general, they find that life in Canada brings more responsibility than at home where they are ensconced in family and friend networks with limited room for mobility. However, when they return home with their degree in hand, there are strong expectations from family and country that they will become key drivers of success and are expected to have promising jobs, marry, and start a family, all of which contribute to an idealized image of a successful “Saudi man.” Many also noted that Saudi Arabia was also changing in progressive ways as a result of globalization, and new leadership under the Crown Prince Mohammad, specifically around women’s rights,
including the right to drive, and work opportunities in mixed gender environments. They also noted that young Saudi people are not expected to have jobs during high school or even before they have received their highest degree, which is different than in Canada. In Saudi, their families will provide for them until they get married, so expectations are much different.

All of these findings raise the question of whether or not the privilege that these young men receive from the King Abdullah Scholarship Program actually contributes to fostering greater social change back in the Kingdom, especially when it comes to greater gender equality. Broadly, the main themes that emerged in response to this question was that there are strong cultural and religious expectations that these men will become the breadwinners and must provide for their wives following marriage. Despite this benevolent sexism, many of my participants also expressed a desire to support women’s rights, the desegregation of gender in employment, as well as other personal experiences that show changing views on gender relations. Opportunities to date women in Canada under the KASP nurtured some of these views providing an important space of experimentation where gender, migration and identity intersect.

What is clearly evident in exploring these narratives is that notions of masculinity and gender change and are altered when they move across borders. As Mascia-Lee writes, these experiences that accompany international education under the KASP bring students into contact with new values, tensions and formations of identity through exposure to varied conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity (2010,10). The contextual and performative aspects of identity and masculinity was an important theme amongst my Saudi partner and interviewees, and many of these Saudi’s have adapted different “selves” depending on their surroundings. Mobility, in the context of globalization, is a key factor contributing to the tensions that underlie these different “selves” including their experience of diversity,
intercultural relations, and significant social distance from home despite efforts to ensure ongoing contact through social media. While all of the students are aware of what is expected of them on the KASP from the beginning, the social distance from the state and family during their time abroad provides certain opportunities and life experiences that would be not open to them if they were back in the Kingdom. Although all of my interlocutors reflected on the changes in their perspective and identity, it is not clear how their time abroad translates into broader cultural change back in Saudi Arabia, especially given the investment provided by state and the expectations placed upon them.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore Saudi Arabian men’s lives as students under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program whilst studying abroad in Western Canada. Specifically, I looked at how Saudi students navigate cultural differences and gender norms as well as social expectations drawing on two main theoretical frameworks: international students and transnational mobilities, and gender, migration, and difference in a globalizing world. I used an ethnographic case study of six Saudi Arabian men between the ages of 22 and 30 who are currently or recently graduated from the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in western Canada.

Through review of the literature and semi structured interviews, I was able to effectively answer my research questions and describe some emergent themes in relation to the interviews. In Chapter 3, I focused on questions surrounding international education and transnational mobilities, such as how education is affected through transnational ties, cultural experiences, and motivations and aspirations obtained during the Program. I found that each student perceived their experience with the King Abdullah Scholarship Program to be rewarding. Each student had difficulties with language, cultural and gender differences, as well as familial relationships and expectations, though they learned to adapt and navigate the difficulties that came with the new cultural and educational expectations of studying abroad. I also explored why they chose Canada, finding that family and friendship networks were generally responsible as well as the quality of higher education in Canada itself.

In Chapter 4, the questions were based around gender, migration, and identity that included topics such as dating, marriage, and experiences of discrimination. These questions allowed for a deeper look into their personal lives and insights in regards to more sensitive subject matter, such as interracial dating. I discovered that most Saudi students felt that they had
much more responsibility while in Canada versus in Saudi Arabia, and this helped to prepare
them for their lives back home, where they felt an obligation to respond to the KASP Mission
statement and give back to the country by finding a good job and getting married. Many of my
Saudi participants were also excited about the future direction of the Kingdom, especially under
the new Crown Prince, a greater move towards women’s rights and mixed gender work
environments. Most men I interviewed had also dated a foreign woman while studying abroad in
Canada, with the exception of Omar, who was already married, and Yousef, who is dating a
foreign man.

In relation to these interviews there are four main findings that are important to
summarize below. First, drawing on the work of Amit and Jefferess’ work on global citizenship
allowed me to define and relate the concept to my research. When I first started researching the
King Abdullah Scholarship Program, their mission statement clearly aligned with the goal of
achieving desired sense of global citizenship. UBC defines global citizenship as “willing to think
beyond boundaries of place, identity and category, and recognize all human beings as their
equals while respecting humanity’s inherent diversity. Within their own sphere of influence,
global citizens seek to imagine and work towards a better world” (Jefferess 2008, 29). Again, the
King Abdullah Scholarship Program and Saudi Arabia believe that they are “sowing the seeds
for future international cooperation and cultural understanding” (www.saudibureau.org/en/).
Hearing and learning about the life experiences that my participants have faced while living
abroad made me confident that they have experienced positive change with open-mindedness
and multicultural awareness despite the varying ways this cosmopolitan view becomes
circumscribed in practice. While it is believed study abroad programs are incubators for building
global citizens, in the case of Saudi students the contracted obligations of the Program along with
family pressure help to ensure these global virtues are anchored firmly in the Kingdom. In other
words, it is not clear if the opportunities provided by globalization such as increased mobility of
its citizens are available and enacted beyond the experience of education itself.

Secondly, with the opportunities provided by the KASP also comes the question of
privilege. One of the main differences between the KASP and other global study abroad
programs is that all expenses are covered by the state. This allows for mostly young Saudi men
to be free of financial constraints for the duration of their higher education. Although the
students are grateful for the opportunity there does not appear to be much reflexive questioning
around the students’ own social privilege that could have ramifications for the broader socio-
economic and gendered landscape back home in the Kingdom. Although we do see changes in
perspectives on gender during their time in the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, it begs the
question, do these changes last or does the privilege that accompanies these educational
opportunities abroad continue to reinforce dominant hegemonic forms of masculinity? Returning
to Amit’s (2015) concept of circumscribed cosmopolitanism is useful when thinking about the
temporary and situational impact of these programs in contributing to diverse views and
exposure difference but also their limitations. One of the ironies of this “lost generation” that has
gained enormous opportunities for international mobility is that the Saudi Kingdom relies more
and more on foreign labor to support their economic growth while young privileged Saudi men
seek qualifications in Business Management programs when few have any actual experience of
direct employment.

A third finding has to do with changing perceptions of identity, especially gender.
Tensions around identity (gender, class, religion, etc.) was a consistent theme throughout all the
interviews. One could argue that these challenges with identity are part and parcel of living and
experiencing a culture that is different from one’s own. Ahmed and Nyland (2013) discuss how study abroad programs give rise to both personal and collective identities and this can give rise to different performances of self, depending on the social group and context. For example, in chapter 4 I discussed how my own partner moved between different identities depending on who he was around, the language he was speaking, and the social environment.

This changing perception of identity was particularly important with respect to Saudi students’ understanding of masculinity that grows out of their experience in mixed gender environments, as well as romantic relationships and dating. These developments were also seen as mirroring progressive changes back in Saudi Arabia under the new Crown Prince, who had spearheaded a number of reforms. While experience with foreign women in Saudi seemed rather limited back home, in Canada, young Saudi men were able to have open friendships with many women and openly go out with them. Specifically, I found that these new experiences with women were deemed beneficial to them, and contributed to changing their viewpoints on some aspects of gender inequality (but not all). Five out of six students that I interviewed had experience dating foreign women (or men in Yousef’s case) while studying abroad in Canada, which is not allowed in Saudi Arabia. The chance to experience romantic openness was a significant draw for these students on the KASP and supported their fantasy of the West, but it also came with genuine affective entanglements with women that created its own set of painful challenges as a result of the “inevitable separation” by the end of the Program. In my own situation, the end of the relationship with my partner was painful, though we already know that it was unavoidable. It made it that much harder, knowing that the love will remain even though you cannot be together because of borders and cultural differences.
Finally, it is important to highlight that there are also certain instabilities built into the KASP in the context of shifting geopolitics, in this case, between Canada and Saudi Arabia. During my graduate program at UBC, including the time of my research interviews and fieldwork in the summer of 2018, a dispute between the two countries rapidly escalated and greatly impacted the students I was interviewing. According to the *The Business Insider*, on August 1st, the Saudi government arrested several female activists, including Samar Badawi, who is the sister of Raif Badawi, an activist that has been in jail in Saudi since 2012. Raif’s immediate family were granted Canadian citizenship in 2018 (Baker 2018). In response, Chrystia Freeland, the Canadian foreign minister, tweeted on August 3rd, “Very alarmed to learn that Samar Badawi, Raif Badawi’s sister, has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Canada stands together with the Badawi family in this difficult time, and we continue to strongly call for the release of both Raif and Samar Badawi” (Twitter, 2018). That same day, Canada’s foreign ministry sent out another Tweet urging that Saudi Arabia government to release the activists, saying, “Canada is gravely concerned about additional arrests of civil society and women’s rights activists in #SaudiArabia, including Samar Badawi. We urge the Saudi authorities to immediately release them and all other peaceful #humanrights activists” (Twitter, 2018). Two days later, Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry tweeted, “#Statement | The negative and surprising attitude of #Canada is an entirely false claim and utterly incorrect” (Twitter, 2018). Continuing with a series of 10 total tweets directed towards Canada, the foreign ministry demanded the Canadian ambassador in Saudi Arabia leave within 24 hours and cutting off all new trades and investments (Baker 2018). Canada then stood behind their statements, saying that they will always stand up for human rights. On August 7th, all flights were suspended from Saudi airlines to and from Toronto, Canada.
With the cancellation of flights, investments were cut with Canada, and some 15,000 students studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program were ordered to leave by the end of the month and to stop their studies (Baker 2018). They were given a ticket home and promised relocation in another English speaking country. One of my potential participants dropped out of this research because he was too upset to participate. Muhammad, for example, was unable to finish his degree and told to return home. He returned home for a while, but luckily, as events unfolded, he was allowed to return to Canada to complete his Program of study. All students that were projected to finish their Program by 2019 were allowed to return. For now, students in their first and second year had to move to a different country. The cancelation of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Canada has also effected universities and colleges, especially those with robust Business Management programs geared towards international students like the Saudis. For instance, it was estimated that Okanagan College in Kelowna will lose upwards of $850,000 because of the Saudi students’ departure (Turcato 2018, 1).

In a moving article published in the CBC shows a Saudi PhD students’ reaction to the news that he would have to leave Canada after years of hard work. In his words, he states “How did we suddenly transition from being the luckiest international students in Canada, with the highest financial and advisory support from a foreign government, into a pity case?” (CBC News 2018, 1). The students in my study, among other Saudi Arabians that I know studying in Canada, had a similar reaction. They were shocked and upset. Although the cost of moving countries and academic institutions was entirely covered by the government, many lost four months of schooling in the relocation process, not to mention the difficulties of abruptly departing and leaving behind a close network of friends, partners and mentors. When I followed up with
Ibrahim on the developments, he supported Saudi’s decision saying “it was not the first time that Canada exceeded the line on Saudi Arabia. Saudi has to react to that. They have decided not to spend another dime on Canada which will hurt the Canadian economy.”

The Program is currently cancelled in Canada. Huffington Post Canada says “Institutions with hundreds of Saudi students are anticipating the loss of several million dollars and a substantial blow to their subsequent revenue as the students will be likely banned from studying in Canadian schools for the foreseeable future” (Peek 2018, 1). Clearly, I did not see that this would end up being a big part of my conclusion, but luckily I was able to share the narratives and stories of these students before they were ordered to leave. It is not clear what will happen to the KASP in Canada moving forward. While both countries are certainly at a loss as a result of these political differences, what is likely is that in the absence of Canada as a host destination, the young Saudi students will find new locations to pursue their education and desires in this fast evolving transnational arena.

One of the goals of this research was to provide suggestions for more sensitive intercultural pedagogy that could support Saudi student success. I propose three prescriptions/guidelines on the basis of my findings. First, broader language integration experiences through local mentoring during English courses could encourage further success. My participants claimed that they met people from other cultures through English classes, but they rarely had opportunities to interact with Canadians during this time, specifically outside of the classroom. When they leave the classroom for the day, they generally resort to speaking Arabic with their fellow Saudi classmates. I propose that more integration within the community would encourage self-confidence and cultural learning, which could lead to more success as they enter university. Another prescription for success is to foster greater communication with peers and
instructors in the classroom. From what I have learned, as discussed previously, a major difference between Saudi Arabian institutions and Canada is the expectations around classroom communication. In Saudi Arabia, they are not encouraged to participate in class discussion and most professors do not hold office hours. Yet in Canada, a large part of learning involves discussion and communication with professors and other students, including group projects. Preparation and awareness by faculty and staff of these changes could benefit Saudi students attending university and college. Also, a prominent change throughout this research is the integration into a mixed gender environment. Perhaps more support with gender segregation transition through open communication with advisors and professors would benefit in this cultural “shock.” Lastly, faculty and staff awareness around fundamentals of job employment for Saudi Arabians, especially in the business major, could assist on understanding and instructing students on how to participate in assignments where prior work experience is necessary. As I learned, most of my participants had not had a job yet, which differentiates them from many Canadian students who often have job experience. My former partner had asked me what to do on assignments like these, and knowledge from the professors on this factor could help avoid these confusions in the future.
Appendix 1: Letter of Informed Consent

DATE OF INTERVIEW: ______________

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Research Project: Education and Desires in a Transnational Arena: Saudi Arabian Students on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Western Canada

Principal Investigator: Dr. David Geary, Assistant Professor of Anthropology in Community, Culture, and Global Studies, the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Campus, david.geary@ubc.ca, 250.807.8165.

Master’s Student: Jenna Goodall, (email: jenna.goodall@alumni.ubc.ca), Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies, the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Campus. The purpose of this research is pedagogical.

Introduction: The University of British Columbia - Okanagan subscribes to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of study subjects. The information provided here is being given to you for your own protection and understanding of the procedures, risks and benefits associated with this research.

This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you a basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details, feel free to ask the researcher presenting this form at any time. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. You must be 19 years of age or older, male and in the KASP to participate in this study.

Purpose of the Study: This research explores how young Saudi men who are international students negotiate cultural difference and gender norms around the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in western Canada. The purpose of this research is to share knowledge and experiences with this research sample that will have an impact on higher education and how Saudi students are perceived and understood. She plans to add and build onto the existing scholarly knowledge that is already published and to bring a Canadian perspective on the topic. By hearing and telling these stories, the institution will be able to have a better understanding of the lives of Saudi Arabian students. Often misunderstood, this thesis will explore the challenges and pressures these young men face as they negotiate cultural differences and various expectations under the KASP.

Study Procedures:
If you agree to participate in this study you will need to provide the researcher with 45 minutes to 1 ½ hour of your time. The interview will be conducted in a setting acceptable to you and mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher.

There’s a list of semi-structured interview questions, which will guide each interview, yet the questions do not need to be addressed in any particular order. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences while studying abroad in Canada. These may include questions about cultural differences, transnational ties, your aspirations and desires, as well as personal topics such as marriage and dating.

Potential Risks and benefits: There is minimal risk to the participant as all data collected will remain confidential to ensure privacy. The participant has the right to withdraw at any time. The risks associated with participating in this research project are no greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. However, some of the questions will require that you provide personal information about your background and life experiences as an international student in Canada. If you choose to participate you still retain the right, for any reasons, to not answer any individual questions you might be asked. Potential benefits include gaining self-reflexive knowledge relevant to negotiating education and desires while studying in Canada.

Confidentiality: All the information you provide will be treated as confidential. The interview will be recorded (audio only) and will be kept on a computer protected under a password only the researcher knows. Each student interviewed will be aware of the purpose of the research and have the right to withdrawal at any time. Throughout the research confidentiality will be ensured and all research informants go by pseudonyms in the interviews and publications. If there are any extensive quotes or stories that emerge from the interviews that may draw attention to a participant’s identity, students will be ensured that certain characteristics such as hometown, age, year in the Program, etc are changed to further confidentiality. Only the Principal Investigator and Research Assistant will have access to this data and will be kept in a locked file in the office of the for a period no longer than 20 years. After this period all research materials will be destroyed and/or returned to you if that is your preference. If a participant wishes to withdrawal from the study, his files and information will be deleted and not used in any further research. 

This research will be publically available on the internet via cIRcle.

Contact for Information or Concerns about the Study: If you have any questions, please contact Jenna Goodall, either by email at jenna.goodall@alumni.ubc.ca, by phone at 778-583-5119. 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 Services toll free at 1-877-822-8598 or the UBC Okanagan Research Services Office at 250-807-8832. It is also possible to contact the Research Complaint Line by email (RSIL@ors.ubc.ca). Please reference the study number (H17-03417) when contacting the Complaint Line so the staff can better assist you.

Consent:
You must be at least 19 years old to be legally able to give informed consent. By signing this letter, you are assumed to have provided your consent for your participation in this research project.
Do you give explicit consent for the research to record this interview? Yes or No

Name of interview participant (please print):

Participant’s signature:

Principal Investigator signature:
Appendix 2: Letter of Introduction

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Date: February 6, 2018

Dear ____________________,

Research Project: Education and Desires in a Transnational Arena: Saudi Arabian Students on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Western Canada

My name is Jenna Goodall and I am a Master’s student in the Interdisciplinary Studies program (IGS) at the University of British Columbia (Okanagan), Canada. My research focuses on Saudi Arabian international students and how they negotiate cultural difference, gender norms and socio-economic expectations around the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in western Canada.

My research objectives are to interview Saudi Arabian men studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and find answers to my research questions by analyzing themes, patterns and experiences. Through this research, I hope that the institution will be able to have a better understanding of the lives of Saudi Arabian students.

I would be grateful for your participation in this research endeavor.

Sincerely,

Jenna Goodall
Master’s Student, Interdisciplinary Studies (IGS)
University of British Columbia, Okanagan
Irving K. Barbers School of Arts and Sciences
Community, Culture and Global Studies
1147 Research Road
Kelowna BC Canada V1V 1V7
Phone 778 583 5119
jennalgoodall@gmail.com
Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me a bit about your background. (Age, place of origins in Saudi). How closely do you observe Islamic practices? Were you raised in a conservative family? Did you have maids growing up?

2. Tell me about your family in Saudi? Do you have brothers and sisters? Do you have a close relationship with your family? What work does your father and mother do?

3. What does it mean to be a young man in your country these days? Tell me about the kinds of expectations and pressures you face as a young a Saudi man in relation to family and community/kin?

4. How has your experience been as a student under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program? Was it difficult to get into the Program? What were some of the challenges and constraints that you experienced within the Program?

5. What made you decide to come to Canada, specifically British Columbia for school?

6. What is Canadian culture to you? Have there been surprises, i.e. things you didn’t associate with Canada before you came here? Have you experienced any difficulties or challenges adjusting to Canadian/North American culture? What have you enjoyed about being in Canada and what do you dislike?

7. Do young men act differently here, in your view, compared to back home? How? Do young women act differently here? How? Do you see differences in how men and women act in a university setting compared to outside the university, maybe at clubs or other social non-
university contexts? What about similarities you’ve experienced in relation to how young men and women act back home?

8. How important are ties back home? How do you maintain them?

9. What are your views on dating?

10. What are the expectations around marriage when you return home?

11. What do you feel are the main expectations placed upon you by your family and society as a student under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program? What is expected of you when you return home?

12. What are your plans after completing the King Abdullah Scholarship Program?

13. Do you feel this experience under the KASP has helped you in reaching your aspirations?

14. What do you feel are the larger benefits of studying abroad and how does that affect your views of Canada and Saudi Arabia?

15. Are there any other concerns or questions that were not raised in this interview that will help me get a better understanding of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and your experience as an international student?
Appendix 4: Recruitment Ad

Culture, Community, & Global Studies
University of British Columbia Okanagan

Education and Desires in a Transnational Arena: Saudi Arabian Students on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Western Canada

Are you a Saudi Arabian man studying under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program?

As a part of a Master’s research project at UBCO on international education and cultural differences, I am looking for participants who would be interested in taking part in an interview (45 min – 1 ½ hour).

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Jenna Goodall
Master Student at UBCO
at
778-583-5119 or
Email: jenna.goodall@alumni.ubc.ca

Research Supervisor David Geary
References


Barmin, Yury. "Can Mohammed Bin Salman Break the Saudi-Wahhabi Pact?" Al


"POINT OF VIEW | As a Saudi Student Being Forced to Leave Canada, I'm Going through the 5


