Empirical Article

# Challenges Of The Re-Entry Experiences Of Returning Saudi International Students After Studying Abroad

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## ABSTRACT

*This research aims to describe the challenges of Saudis' re-entry experiences returning to Saudi Arabia after studying abroad. The total number of participants in the research was 21, consisting of 13 male and eight female participants returning from studying in the U.S., U.K., and Australia. With semi-structured individual interviews, the overall findings of this study showed that the returnees experienced some socio-cultural challenges that eventually dissipated over time and few educational challenges related to their work field. Implications of the findings and directions for future research are provided.*

**Keywords:** international education, re-entry experience, returing home, studying abroad, Saudi international students

## INTRODUCTION

Returning home after studying abroad is the most common type of re-entry found in the literature. In fact, there is no specific agreed definition explaining what 're-entry' is. Researchers (such as Westwood et al., 1986) defined re-entry from psychological viewpoints. They defined re-entry as:

> the continuum of experience and behaviours which are encountered when an individual returns to a place of origin after having been immersed in another context for a period of time sufficient to cause some degree of mental and emotional adjustment. (p. 223)

This definition specifies some level of acculturation in the host culture, both behavioral adaptation and psychological adjustment, to influence the stage for re-adaptation and re-adjustment upon returning home.

Without some acculturation to the host environment, students re-entering their home environment might not face re-entry issues. Merely skipping along the surface of another culture, for example as a tourist, would not provoke re-entry issues. Immersion is what sets study abroad apart from other forms of travel and contributes to the complexity of re-entry (Gray & Savicki, 2015). Similarly, Arthur (2003) defined re-entry as 'a psychological process rather than physical relocation home' (p. 174). On the other hand, other researchers defined re-entry from a sociological perspective. Adler (1981), for instance, defined re-entry as a 'cross-cultural re-adjustment as one transitions from a foreign culture back into one's home culture' (p. 343). Likewise, Jung, Lee and Morales (2013) conceptualised re-entry experiences more in terms of a cultural re-adjustment process.

Few published research studies on re-entry experience have been conducted by scholarship sponsors or the like. Szkudlarek (2010) and Young (2014) deemed that issues related to re-entry experience to home countries are as crucial as those associated with the host country while studying abroad. This issue is often neglected in academia.

One part of the re-entry experiences is exploring the re-entry challenges for returning Saudi international students after studying abroad. The significance of this research is obvious, especially with particular reference to the participants in this study. Although the recent statistics showed 140,000 Saudis studying internationally, mostly in English speaking countries such as the U.S., the U.K. and Australia (Ministry of Education, 2018), little is known about what challenges Saudi returnees experience upon returning home. This research is therefore significant for both the Saudi government and Saudi returnees in order to explore the issues of re-entry and help returnees re-adapt smoothly to their home culture. Moreover, this research is also significant for returnees' parents, educators, and businesses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Compared to the initial adjustment process of international students in their host countries, some researchers (such as Larson, 2006; MacDonald & Arthur, 2004) have argued that returning international students experience greater difficulties and challenges upon returning home. Nevertheless, many studies in the literature on international education have focused on the challenges experienced by international students during studying abroad. Yet challenges experienced by returning international students after returning home continue to be neglected in academia (Arthur, 2004; Young, 2014).

As noted, in the literature about re-entry experiences, most of the studies conceptualise the re-entry as a negative experience. It has been described as 'difficult' (Rogers & Ward, 1993), 'grieving' (Butcher, 2002; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Lester, 2000), 'painful' (Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010), 'problematic' (Brabant, Palmer, & Gramling, 1990), 'shocking' (Gaw, 2000; Thompson & Christofi, 2006), and even 'traumatic' (Pritchard, 2011). Most of the re-entry challenges explored in the literature could be classified into two main types: psychological re-adjustment challenges and socio-cultural re-adjustment challenges. Both of these terms are further reviewed in the following sections.

**Psychological Challenges: Reverse Culture Shock**

The psychological challenges are mainly termed as 'reverse culture shock' or psychological symptoms of reverse culture shock, such as grief, anxiety, interpersonal difficulties, fear, and a sense of helplessness and frustration (Butcher, 2002; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gill, 2010; Pritchard, 2011; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Uehara (1986) defined reverse culture shock as the 'temporal psychological difficulties returnees experience in the initial stage of the adjustment process at home after

having lived abroad for some time' (p. 420). Although some researchers describe reverse culture shock as somehow similar to culture shock (Gaw, 2000), it seems to be more severe because 'it comes at a time that the returnees believe that life is finally going to go back to normal and they discover that there is actually no going back' (Malewski, 2005, p. 187). It is indeed an unexpected phase experienced by returnees. Surprisingly, reverse culture shock has drawn the attention of scholars as early as 1944, when Schuetz, a sociologist and philosopher, investigated reverse cultural adjustment in returning armed forces veterans (Gaw, 2000). However, little research has been done on reverse culture shock (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). Therefore, reverse culture shock still needs much more attention.

Previous research has demonstrated that returnees experienced reverse culture shock or psychological symptoms of reverse culture shock upon returning home after staying abroad (Alandejani, 2013; Dettweiler et al., 2015; Hadis, 2005). Hadis (2005), for instance, explored the cluster of experiences that 536 returning students of the U.S. went through, both during studying abroad and immediately after returning home. It was found that 62.8 percent of the participants 'agreed' or 'very much agreed' with the following statement: 'When returning from studying abroad, I experienced reverse culture shock in the United States. Similarly, Dettweiler et al. (2015) conducted a study about the re-entry experiences of German students after six months of expeditionary learning program overseas. The findings from surveying 56 students showed that all participants experienced reverse culture shock. Moreover, Alandejani's (2013) dissertation, which examined the transformation stories of six female Saudi assistant professors who returned to Saudi Arabia after studying in the U.S. and the U.K., revealed that all the participants experienced reverse culture shock upon returning home.

Many researchers confirm that returnees also experience some psychological symptoms, like feeling anxious, less relaxed, stressful, grief and disillusionment, as a result of reverse culture shock (Butcher, 2002; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gill, 2010; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010), for instance, investigated the impact of studying abroad on the interpersonal relationships of 669 returnee American students. The results of their quantitative online survey showed that students scored significantly on a re-entry shock scale, reflecting their skepticism towards their home culture. They were also more likely to consume alcohol, and women who had studied abroad reported being less able to cope with anxieties, feeling less relaxed and more stressed in their relationships with a significant other. Moreover, Gill (2010) conducted an in-depth, qualitative case study and narrative interviews with eight participants (five females, three males) returning to China either directly or after a couple of years of working in the U.K. The purpose of Gill's study was to explore the individuals' overall experiences of homecoming. The findings showed that all participants experienced anxiety after returning home, primarily about their families' expectations for them to find work. Furthermore, Butcher's (2002) study examined the grief experiences of East Asian students returning to their countries of origin after studying in New Zealand. The results showed that their re-entry involved the loss of friends, overseas experiences and ways of life in the host country, giving rise to a type of grief that he termed 'disenfranchised', because it was viewed as illegitimate and was incapable of finding acknowledgement. Additionally, due to the sense of frustration, some returnee students reported that they wanted to return to their host country. In a qualitative phenomenological study, Christofi and Thompson (2007) interviewed eight students from different countries who studied in the U.S. and then returned home, they asked participants to describe their re-entry experiences in their home country and whether they could go home

again. They found that the returnees had less desire to go back home again, which illustrates the difficulties and frustrations experienced by many re-entering their home culture.

It is noticeable that returnees to their home culture after living abroad experienced reverse culture shock regardless of the extent of the status of their original culture. Studies indicated that individuals from developing countries experienced reverse culture shock upon their re-entry to their developing environment, as Butcher (2002) showed in samples of students from East Asia. On the other hand, individuals from developed countries also experienced reverse culture shock upon their re-entry to their developed environment, as Hadis (2005) and Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) showed in samples of students from the U.S.

Despite the fact that returnees experience reverse culture shock regardless of the development status of their home culture, literature shows that returnees experience reverse culture shock differently. The high or low level of reverse culture shock is subject to different variables such as personality of returnees, the availability of support services for returnees, and the cultural context of returnees. For instance, Gaw (2000) conducted a study examining reverse culture shock of 66 U.S. college students returning from overseas. The findings from the surveys showed that participants who experienced a high level of reverse culture shock reported problems that are more personal and retiring than those who experienced a low level of reverse culture shock. Moreover, a negative correlation was found regarding reverse culture shock and student support services. As the service usage decreases, reverse culture shock increases. Additionally, Leung et al. (2014) assessed the existence and severity of reverse culture shock in 42 music therapy professionals from the Asia Pacific Rim area who returned home after formal music therapy training in the United States. The findings showed that participants experienced low levels of reverse culture shock during the re-entry to their home country. Hence, the personality of the participants in this study and their job as professional therapists might have assisted them not to experience high levels of reverse culture shock.

Furthermore, Jandová (2014) conducted a study to examine reverse culture shock in Czech students returning from the U.S. by distributing questionnaires to 35 respondents. The study revealed that Czech students encountered reverse culture shock because they encountered a major surprise regarding the differences in behaviors and attitudes of both Americans and Czechs. Perhaps the historical backgrounds of Czech citizens and their general temperament as timid and shy people are what is considered as a big difference (Jandová, 2014).

The question that could be raised here is: what is the duration of reverse culture shock? The researcher did not find any study that specified the duration of reverse culture shock. However, what is expected is that reverse culture shock is not something that returnees will experience interminably. They will eventually re-adjust themselves to their home countries, although with some problems and difficulties. In a study conducted by Welsh (2015) exploring various long-term effects of reverse culture shock among 206 overseas alumni at a land grant institution, it was found that the long-term effects of reverse culture shock did not exist. However, the majority of the respondents did experience short-term impacts of reverse culture shock that dissipated over time. However, this study did not clarify the meaning of long-term and short-term effects.

Although most of the research findings show that returnees experienced reverse culture shock upon returning home, some other studies indicate that reverse culture shock is not something that was always present. This can be seen, for example, in a study conducted by Pritchard (2011) that examined a number

of Asian students' re-integration after studying in the West. The participants included 12 Taiwanese and 15 Sri Lankan graduates. The findings did not show any evidence of re-entry trauma or reverse culture shock in the psychological sense. However, it revealed some socio-cultural difficulties associated with tension between Eastern philosophy and Western philosophy, such as modernism and traditionalism, or individualism and collectivism. A similar phenomenon is found in Gill's (2010) study investigating the effects of studying abroad on Chinese students after returning home. The findings from the interviews with eight returnees showed that none of the participants considered the re-adjustment to China as a shock. However, they confirmed that what students experienced was some unexpected difficulties in daily life.

To conclude this section, most of the literature indicated that returnees experienced reverse culture shock regardless of the status of their home culture. However, the severity or low level of reverse culture shock are subject to different factors mentioned in this section. The literature did not determine the duration of reverse culture shock. On the other hand, this section showed that some returnees did not experience reverse culture shock in the psychological sense; rather it is about socio-cultural challenges resulting from living across cultures. These socio-cultural re-adjustment challenges will be explained in the following section.

**Socio-cultural Challenges**

Returnees to their home culture after living abroad experience socio-cultural challenges, as while studying abroad part of their cultural identity might have changed, modified or developed. However, upon their re-entry they experience challenges related to living between two different cultures. Existing literature shows that returnees undergo some socio-cultural re-adjustment upon returning home. These challenges differ from person to person and from culture to culture. This includes conflicting values, challenges with third-culture kids, and challenges with cultural norms.

*Conflicting values*

Casinader (1986) classified values into two main types:

> material values which is related to acquisition of physical objects that are considered important such as house, car, money and fashionable clothes. The second one is spiritual values which is related to feelings and or states of mind and body that are considered important such as happiness, good health and education. (p. 2)

Both types of values can be closely linked. For instance, the desire to own your own house (material) could be a direct result of the wish to have a general sense of security (spiritual).

It is acknowledged that there are common values between all cultures, either material such as house and money, or spiritual such as happiness and good health. However, there are also culture-based values. For instance, religious values are highly appreciated within Saudi culture and have great impact on Saudi people (Alkhidr, 2011; Ibn Sonitan, 2008). On the other hand, religious values might not have high status in secular or liberal societies. In the case of returnees, it is hypothesised that they acquire new values as result of living in a different culture. Upon their re-entry, these new values might be misread by people of the home culture and not accepted.        As stated by Bhabha (1994),

> the problem of cultural interaction emerges only at the significator boundaries of cultures, when meanings and values are (mis) read or signs are misappropriated. Culture only emerges as a problem, or problematic, at the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations. (p. 50)

Previous literature showed that returnees experienced some challenges in terms of conflicting values between themselves and their fellow citizens who have never been abroad (Brown & Graham, 2009; Gray, 2014; McNair, 2014; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). For instance, Brown and Graham (2009), in their study about discovering the self through the academic sojourn, found that their qualitative study showed that all participants described themselves as more culturally aware and more confident. However, they had difficulty re-adapting to their home culture as they were stuck between different cultures and sets of values. Similarly, the study by Wielkiewicz & Turkowski (2010) confirmed returnees experienced conflicting values and looked toward their home culture with suspicion. On the other hand, Gray's (2014) study contradicted with a line of results that returnees experience conflicting values in the re-entry. The participants of this mixed methods study were 81 U.S. university students who spent time studying abroad and returned to the U.S. The study found that the challenges were not related to the clash with the U.S cultural values upon their re-entry. Rather, they were personal challenges.

McNair's (2014) study provided a major reason for why returnees experience conflicting values and challenges upon re-entry. He used multiple qualitative and visual methodologies, including in-depth interviews, auto-ethnography, photo and object elicitation, and portrait photography with eight repatriates who either studied or worked overseas for more than four months and returned to the U.S. The findings showed that returning home after spending time abroad often provides returnees with a new, hybrid identity, which is complicated and unpredictable. It is noticeable from the above-mentioned studies that they indicated conflicting values as one of the re-entry challenges. However, they did not specify which values are in conflict with which. Detailing these values is mainly context-based, depending on the values of both the host culture and home culture of returnees.

### Challenges with 'Third Culture Kids'

'Third culture kids' is a term used to refer to children who are raised in a culture outside of their parents' culture for a significant part of their developmental years (Benjamin & Dervin, 2015). While the vast majority of literature focuses on returnees' challenges, there are not many details about family members accompanying them during their stay overseas, particularly about their children. However, some data sheds light on children's re-entry experiences. The existing data show that these returnees also face certain difficulties in their re-adjustment. This can be seen for example, from one part of the findings of the afore-mentioned Alandejani's (2013) study, in which she found that parents expressed their worries and sadness for their children, as they had to struggle to re-adjust to their home culture. In the case of this study, 61 per cent of the participants in this study (n=13) were married and had their children with them abroad and experienced the re-entry together. It would be interesting to know whether they mention anything about challenges with third culture kids.

### Challenges with Cultural Norms

Previous research has demonstrated that returnees experienced some challenges with cultural norms upon re-entry. They became more critical and suspicious toward their (heritage) cultural norms. Kartoshkina (2015) explored the re-entry experiences of U.S. college students who participated in a semester or one-year in a study abroad program and then returned to U.S. This study revealed that participants missed the host country's cultural environment. They were unable to communicate or share their experiences with people who had not been abroad, and they became critical towards the U.S. cultural norms. Similarly, Walling et al. (2006) conducted a study to explore the relationship between cross-cultural re-entry and cultural identity in 20 undergraduate college students who participated in short-term

international mission trips. The findings of this study showed that participants mostly reported negative reactions to their home culture. In particular, they became critical of U.S. cultural norms, including hospitality, pace of life, sexuality, and spirituality in the U.S. culture. In addition, they experienced personal anger and desire to dis-identify with their home culture.

It is interesting to note that the above-mentioned studies (Kartoshkina, 2015; Walling et al., 2006) were conducted on a sample of the U.S. returnees. Like returnees throughout the world, they too experience challenges with cultural norms, meaning that the host culture affected them upon their re-entry. Therefore, the idea that globalization (movements across cultures here) is a two-way process, not simply from the West to the rest, and is confirmed here (Barker, 2012; Eckersley, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). However, what about Saudi returnees who have a more complicated culture in terms of norms and traditions? (AlMunajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004). Do they experience challenges with cultural norms upon re-entry? A gap was found in the literature in this regard, and this study aims to fill the gap in the literature about whether or not Saudi returnees talked about challenges with cultural norms.

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research was to gain in-depth understanding of how Saudis returning to Saudi Arabia from studying abroad described the challenges of their re-entry. In order to achieve this objective, this study seeks to answer the following research question: *What challenges do Saudi returnees experience upon returning home?*

This study was theoretically underpinned by a constructivist paradigm (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Flick, 2006; Miller & Glassner, 2004) employing a qualitative case study (Stake, 2005, Yin, 2014). The procedures for recruiting participants were conducted in a number of ways, such as meeting with some key people in Umm Al-Qura University, emailing, and communicating via WhatsApp messenger. The total number of participants in the study was 21 Saudi returnees, consisting 14 male and eight female participants returning from studying in the U.S., U.K., and Australia. These 21 returnees are currently at the academia at Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with all male participants. However, due to the gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia (Alhazmi, 2015; Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015; Van Geel, 2016) individual interviews with the female participants occurred via video conferencing.

Approval to conduct this research was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC). Before conducting the interviews, the researcher emailed the consent form as well as the explanatory statement to each potential participant. The consent form described confidentiality and compensation information, as well as the assertion that participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the project at any time if they choose to, without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. The potential participants were given time to read the form and to ask any question, either by email or phone. If the potential participants consented to participate in the study, they needed to sign the form and return it to me as the researcher. Then, the time for the interview was organized. The explanatory statement contained information about the purpose of the research, the possible benefit, the time required of the participants, expected inconvenience/discomfort concerns, and other related issues. All participants were given a numerical and gender code to protect their privacy.

I developed a good rapport by introducing myself and explaining the protocol and the statements of confidentiality, consent, options to withdraw, and the use and scope of the results. It was important to

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show the participants that I was listening, attentive and interested in what they had to say, and that they could continue talking. There are several ways of putting interviewees at ease such as incorporating small talk, smiling and nodding, sharing personal stories like how long it took to drive to the site, or asking them to say a little about themselves. It is essential for the interviewees to feel comfortable, so that they were willing to cooperate with me. Moreover, I briefly explained my project and reminded the interviewees that their answers are confidential, that there are no right or wrong answers, and none of the interviewees will be identifiable from the interviews.

All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, subject to transcription to English by the researcher. The data analysis was conducted in four phases. In the first, after conducting the interviews in the Arabic language, the researcher transcribed it verbatim, word by word, into a document written in Arabic. In the second phase, the researcher translated the Arabic document into English. The third phase incorporated cross-analysis of the data, that is, the interpretation and creation of themes by the researcher. Here, I adopted a thematic content analysis approach. One common method for analysing qualitative data is to reduce the content of a large body of data to a smaller number of central themes or patterns (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2005).

**Demographic Information About Participants**

The following table (Table 1) summarises participants' demographic information. Note that each participant has been given a numerical and gender code to secure their privacy and make it easier for readers to recognise each participant. For example, F1 refers to a female participant number one, M1 refers to a male participant number one, and so on.

**Table 1: Demographic information about participants**

| Participant name | Age | Marital status | Period of study abroad | Host country | Time since return | Employed/ unemployed upon return |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1) F1 | 33 | Single | 4 years | Australia | 4 years | Unemployed |
| 2) F2 | 29 | Single | 2.5 years | U.S. | 3 years | Unemployed |
| 3) F3 | 31 | Single | 5 years | U.K. | 3 years | Unemployed |
| 4) F4 | 43 | Married | 7 years | Australia | 2 years | Unemployed |
| 5) F5 | 30 | Married | 10 years | U.S. | 8 months | Unemployed |
| 6) F6 | 29 | Single | 3 years | Australia | 3 years | Unemployed |
| 7) F7 | 40 | Married | 9 years | U.K. | 2 years | Employed |
| 8) F8 | 29 | Married | 5.5 years | U.K. | 9 months | Employed |
| 9) M1 | 39 | Married | 6 years | U.K. | 8 months | Unemployed |
| 10) M2 | 39 | Married | 8 years | Australia | 3 years | Employed |
| 11) M3 | 42 | Married | 7 years | Australia | 4 years | Employed |
| 12) M4 | 37 | Married | 7 years | U.K. | 4 years | Employed |
| 13) M5 | 44 | Married | 6 years | Australia | 5 years | Employed |
| 14) M6 | 37 | Married | 8 years | U.S. | 8 months | Employed |
| 15) M7 | 34 | Married | 5.5 years | Australia | 2.5 years | Employed |
| 16) M8 | 38 | Married | 6 years | Australia | 4 years | Employed |
| 17) M9 | 36 | Married | 6 years | U.K. | 4 years | Employed |
| 18) M10 | 30 | Married | 3 years | U.S. | 9 months | Employed |

| 19) M11 | 30 | Married | 2 years | U.K. | 7 months | Employed |
| 20) M12 | 37 | Married | 6 years | Australia | 6 months | Unemployed |
| 21) M13 | 35 | Married | 7 years | U.K. | 4 years | Employed |

## FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Two main themes emerged from the interviews with the 21 participants including socio-cultural challenges and educational challenges. The first main theme is related to four socio-cultural challenges experienced by participants, which include conflicting values and obstacles between the returnees and the rest of the society in terms of time management, caring about appearances, and the value of education. It is followed by portraying challenges with issues of third culture kids. The discussion is then followed by giving detail on the specific social challenge in Saudi Arabia called "Wasta" or favouritism, appearing as a result of the participants' good status in their careers. Last, but not least, is the bureaucracy issue. Following the first sub-theme is a discussion of the educational challenges provided in the second main theme, including their workloads as faculty members, pedagogy and curricula challenges, and students' academic standards.

**The Socio-cultural Challenges**

In this section, the researcher grouped for sub-themes emerging from the data as socio-cultural challenges. The first two sub-themes involve the challenges of conflicting values and obstacles for the third culture kids. The other two sub-themes are closely related to the context of Saudi culture and might not have been experienced by returnees from other cultures, such as challenges of Wasta and challenges of bureaucracy. These classifications are in line with the idea that some of the challenges experienced by returnees were related to cultural issues as result of the tension between modernity versus traditionalism, and individualism versus collectivism (Pritchard, 2011).

***Challenges of Conflicting Values***

This section discusses a sub-theme mentioned by five participants about some of the values that they have acquired from studying abroad. However, after returning home these values conflicted with their home culture's values, such as in terms of time management (mentioned by one participant), caring about appearances (mentioned by one participant) and the value of education (mentioned by three participants).

One participant, M7, discussed a conflict he experienced concerning time management. He found it as an advantage and a challenge at the same time:

Time management is one of the advantages of studying abroad. However, it is a challenge at the same time. I become more organised when I have a monthly and weekly timetable but unfortunately people here do not appreciate that. Sometimes they call me to attend some social events on the same day but when I say "sorry I can't come" they become angry because they think I am an arrogant man, but it is not true!

Another participant, F4, expressed another conflicting value related to a phenomenon she found after returning to Saudi Arabia where many females tend to value trivial material things, such as their bags, sunglasses, dress, and shoes. Whereas she sees that these values are different from her own values, appreciating knowledge and wisdom more than material objects. She was quite frustrated as she found that many women did not really listen to what she thought and said about these values.

M8, M11, and F2 reported that they experienced a dilemma between their attitude to value learning and education and the unfair fact that values common to the home society regarding education were merely about getting the certificate.

What I notice is that people are not interested in education nor to be educated for the benefit of their country. They just learn to get the certificate and for the pride of their family and friends. The evidence is that when they obtained the PhD they stop learning and stop doing research (M11).

There are many points that can be learned by looking towards the values that create challenges for Saudi returnees, such as time management, education value and caring about appearances. It can be clearly seen that these three values are considered as theoretically important values in Saudi culture, based on Islamic teachings (Al-Bukhari, 1997). However, in practice, these values are not sufficiently appreciated (e.g. time management and education value) or are sometimes exaggerated and misused (e.g., caring about appearance). By re-analyzing the interview transcripts of the five participants who mentioned their conflicting values as one of the re-entry challenges, it was found that most of these conflicts were related to clashes with current practices of Saudi culture that misapplied Islamic values. For instance, M7, who suffered from bad time management in Saudi Arabia, seems to be a very well-organized person as he was the only participant preparing himself for the re-entry (M7 interview). M8, M11, and F2 seem to be deeply appreciative of the educational values they gained from the host countries (M11, F2, and M8 interviews). Thus, they suffered from their relatives not appreciating education. F4 seems to be the most serious and practical participant as she participated in most of the activities that were organized by either the university or Saudi students' association while studying abroad. However, she complained about some people who were not practical and only cared about their appearance (F4 interview). This finding supports Gary's (2014) study, which found that most of the returnees' challenges are personal and not related to the clash between cultures (See 2.8.2.1). However, this finding seems to contradict previous studies by Brown and Graham (2009) and Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010). These studies revealed that returnees expressed skepticism towards their own culture after returning home. A possible explanation of why Saudi returnees did not show skepticism is because they might know that these values are also important in Saudi culture. However, the real problem seems to be that these values were agreed in theory but were not demonstrated in practice. An implication for this result is that returnees should work to summon and encourage people to implement the genuine Islamic values such as time management, caring less about appearances, and the value of education. They should be patient in facing any denial or resistance from people who have not had similar experiences of living abroad and returning home.

### Challenges with Third Culture Kids

As discussed in section 2.2.2, 'third culture kids' is a term used to refer to children who are raised in a culture outside their parents' culture for a significant part of their developmental years. This section discusses the sub-theme of third cultural kids as an issue mentioned by seven married participants when they talked about challenges faced by their children who grew up in different cultures and then returned to Saudi Arabia. The participants stated that their children experienced trouble with Arabic language after returning from abroad. The children used to speak the English language in the host country but after returning to Saudi, they found the reality extremely different. During their formal education at schools, everyone speaks Arabic only. English instruction is only applied in a few international schools located in certain cities such as Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam.

The following extract illustrates what M3 mentioned in this context:

After returning to Saudi Arabia, the most significant challenge I faced was my children. My son studied from the prep to grade four in Australia. When he returned to Saudi Arabia, he did not understand Arabic.

Similar issues were expressed by F7, M1, M6, M10, and M13, who reported that their children experienced this challenge, particularly in terms of language and schools:

After returning, we faced the barrier of language with our children. My son used to speak English only. When we were in the U.S., we were happy as our child spoke English fluently. We did not concentrate on Arabic. Upon returning, he did not speak a word of Arabic, so it was a problem. He joined an international school in Jeddah and achieved some simple improvement in his Arabic language but was still facing problems with reading and writing (M6).

To deal with this challenge, participants tried to put their children into international schools, although that particular kind of school is not available in every city in Saudi. As mentioned by M13, he could not find such an international school in Mecca. M1 also talked about the same problem, as he could not find an international school for his son. Therefore, he hired a private teacher to teach his son in his house for an afternoon class:

The problem is that my son did not like school. He returned from Britain with the ability to speak Arabic but with difficulty in expressing certain idioms. Therefore, I had to bring in a private teacher of Arabic every afternoon.

On the other hand, M4 narrated that his daughter did not have any problems in understanding Arabic after returning home as she used to study in a Saudi school in Britain that taught students in both Arabic and English.

The findings of this sub-theme show that seven of the participants stated issues associated to third culture kids. It can be said that Saudi returnees could not pay great attention to their kids while studying abroad as they were busy with their studies. In my experience, parents were happy to see their kids speaking English fluently, perhaps better than themselves. These kids were spending years abroad without understanding Arabic. Upon their re-entry, parents and their kids were surprised about the school environment and faced difficulties in re-adjustment. This finding confirms the study results of Alandejani (2013), mentioning that returning parents expressed their sorrow as they saw their children face difficulties in their re-adjustment. Based on these findings, the researcher would suggest policy makers provide affirmative support for returnees who return with their children by helping these kids to re-adapt easily. It would be very important for the parents themselves to prepare their children before returning home by focusing on and teaching them Arabic – the official language of education in Saudi Arabia.

### Challenges with Wasta (Favouritism)

This section discusses a sub-theme related to Wasta, another challenge faced by six participants upon returning home because of their newly acquired identity as university teaching staff. 'Wasta', or favouritism, refers to using one's connections and/or influence to get things done, including government transactions such as for managing a quick renewal of a passport, waiving of traffic fines, and being hired for or promoted in a job. M1 and M4 stated that their relatives approached them for Wasta because of their position at a university:

My relationship with my relatives has changed greatly. They have become closer to me. I do not know whether to name it 'excessive respect' or 'hypocrisy'. I am the same person as before scholarship. Is it because of getting the Ph.D.? I find many people approach me or need me in a "Wasta" because I work at university (M1).

I noticed that more people approached me to do favours for them at university or mediate for them. In addition, there are people who never called me before but now they call me regularly and ask

for difficult services, or illegal ones. It is a challenge for me because my tribe thinks that I can do anything at university. Really, it is tiring (M4).

M5, M10, and M11 experienced a dilemma in regard to Wasta as they learned from their experiences during study abroad that this kind of practice is ethically unacceptable. They tried to avoid Wasta but then failed:

The problem is that I have learnt in the West that the priority is towards the qualification and I should divide myself between my personal emotions and my job. However, here in Saudi it is very difficult, I tried but I failed because I feel I am alone, even with some people I know have studied abroad – they use Wasta even more than those who have not gone to study abroad because they have become more powerful, especially after getting their Ph.D. (M10).

Regarding the Wasta phenomenon, M2 argued that Wasta is becoming widespread in Saudi culture for two reasons: religious and cultural. He claimed that there might be some misconceptions in the way people interpret the verses of the Holy Quran, particularly in the case of Quran's encouragement to help relatives and friends. It is also because of Saudi culture, which puts special emphasis on the importance of family ties and tribes. Some people simply understand that we need to help our family members or relatives in any way or by any means.

The findings in this sub-theme have also not been previously described in the literature. This is mainly related to the impact of social factors in Saudi Arabia. Having the privilege of obtaining international qualifications and high positions in the university, six of the participants have been asked by their relatives, neighbours or friends for various illegitimate favours, such as helping the admission of unqualified students, employing their relatives or friends in their institutions, and other illegal services. The participants responded to this favouritism in two ways. They either accepted this view, which basically contradicted the values they gained from studying abroad (i.e. qualifications, professionalism, merit), or refused the Wasta despite being labelled by their relatives and neighbours as an unhelpful person. The finding in this sub-theme supports a previous argument presented by Ibn Sonaitan (2008) in his book *Saudi Arabia: politicians and tribe*. He argued that although returnees from studying abroad usually take high positions in the country, they failed to supplement the national culture to benefit from the West in establishing sustainable development for the country. Rather, they establish consumer behaviours and practise Wasta to employ their family members and relatives. To conclude, this finding indicates that social factors in Saudi Arabia are double-edged swords. While it helps returnees to be happy about their re-entry and to re-adapt smoothly, it has also been misused in terms of Wasta. Therefore, it would be very important to increase the awareness of the society about the dangers of breaking the rules and using Wasta. This study might encourage the Saudi government to pass some laws to criminalise Wasta practices.

### Challenges with Bureaucracy

Alamri (2011) argued that bureaucracy is one of the main obstacles in higher education management in Saudi Arabia. He further adds that it is a contradictory phenomenon in many Saudi universities, where most deans have been educated internationally but they have failed to eliminate the issues of bureaucracy. In this sub-theme, six participants talked about certain practical challenges they faced upon returning home, including bureaucracy. Most of them reported that they had difficulties in dealing with bureaucracy. As M1 complained:

Bureaucracy was another challenge in government transactions. I found it very difficult. I expected many things to change during the six-year scholarship period, but they remained the same. To be honest, there are changes but they are so slow.

Other participants, like M10 and F8, provided a further example of how slow the services provided by the bureaucracy were. They experienced a long delay for their monthly salary to be paid and a delay in their promotion as assistant professors:

> Of the problems I faced at university after starting work, the worst was salary delay. I stayed about eight months without any salary due to bureaucratic procedures, transactions, documents, etc., (M10)

F4, F7, and M8 talked about bureaucracy as a challenge. They sometimes compared this experience with what they used to experience abroad, where almost everything was completed electronically. However, they now need to use lots of paper in their dealings with the university documents. The process of managing so much paperwork takes longer to be approved.

The findings of this sub-theme have not been previously mentioned in the existing literature. Six of the participants talked about bureaucracy as a challenge. For instance, they experienced the delay of receiving their monthly salary or their promotion to be assistant professors after obtaining their PhDs. This challenge might be related to the common mindset that returnees share to compare the advanced situation in their host country to the not-so-advanced situation in their home country. During their study abroad, participants experienced quick and efficient processes for most services as the systems are electronically based (F4 and F7, interviews). However, after returning home, they found a different situation as they have to submit most administrative papers manually. One implication from the findings of this sub-theme is that the government should eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic procedures, especially in universities, that cause the delay of returnees' salaries and promotions. The returnees, however, are recommended to start applying new systems in higher education in Saudi Arabia based on their international experiences and to provide such suggestions to policymakers in order to eliminate obstacles in bureaucracy.

**Educational Challenges**

As all the participants of this study are returnees who are working in academia, it is not surprising that all of them talked about some educational challenges after returning home. These challenges include their workloads as faculty members (as mentioned by five participants), pedagogy and curricula challenges (as mentioned by eight participants), and students' academic standards (as mentioned by two participants).

M1, M2, M4, M7, and M9 talked about their challenges with teaching burdens. M7, for instance, reported his surprise of having to deal with the fact that he had to teach a large class consisting of more than 65 students in a classroom. He had never seen this in the university where he studied abroad. As a result, he felt that he could not really tackle his class well. Other participants, M5, M8, and F3, talked about pedagogy and curricula challenges. M8, in particular, complained about the old curriculum used at his university. He was wondering how a book written in the 1970s could still be used today:

> One of the challenges I faced is the old curricula. When I returned from Australia, I found a subject name "Geography of Topology"; this book was published in 1971. I know that the geography of topology does not change but science is developing and renewable. I called them out on the age of the curricula. Unfortunately, some professors still have old ideas although they have studied abroad.

In addition to this old reference, participants also mentioned challenges related to the mismatch between the curricula and what the society needs in the field. Mostly, participants such as M5, M12, F3, F4, and F8 considered the curricula they had as 'traditional', showing many gaps between teachers and students. The teachers are powerful in the eyes of their students. Students cannot really discuss matters with the teachers, as M5 explained.

M1 and M13 were frustrated about students' academic standards. They were frustrated that students do not have high motivation for learning and education:

> *One of the challenges I faced after returning is the weakness of the students' level. They do not care about learning. Therefore, there is a problem in reaching students and providing them with information (M13).*

Accordingly, the result of this study is expected to call policy makers to deal with these challenges, so they can improve them. The challenges included teaching workload, pedagogy and curricular challenges (e.g. outdated curricula, the mismatch of curricula to the society's needs), and students' academic standards. For returnees, despite such challenges, they are encouraged to wisely apply what they have already learnt from studying abroad.

## CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research aimed to answer the following research question: What challenges do Saudi returnees experience upon returning home? The research presented and discussed two main themes and four sub-themes in answering this research question.

The overall findings of this study showed that the returnees experienced some socio-cultural challenges that eventually dissipate over time and few educational challenges related to their work field. First of all, the findings showed four sub-themes classified as socio-cultural challenges. All these challenges are connected to some cultural practices in Saudi Arabia that were considered an obstacle by the participants. This included conflicting values between Saudi returnees and the rest of society, especially in time management, appearances, and the value of education. Moreover, challenges also comprised issues of third culture kids as the children could not speak and understand Arabic, the formal language of education in Saudi Arabia.

Interestingly, the last two challenges are strongly related to the Saudi cultural context. The findings did not appear in similar studies conducted in different contexts. They were challenges related to Wasta and bureaucracy. Moreover, the findings highlighted the second theme about the participants' educational challenges involving workloads as faculty members, pedagogy and curricula challenges, and students' academic standards.

The following are suggestions for future research. First, this study employed qualitative methodology with a small sample of Saudi returnees. Future studies could use quantitative methodology which could involve a larger sample of Saudi returnees to enhance the generalisation of data. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are beneficial for quantitative researchers to develop their questionnaires. Second, it would be beneficial for policy makers at the Ministry of Education to establish re-entry training for Saudi returnees before their departure from their host countries. The findings of this study can be used as a source for creating training programs. The training can be carried out online in order to ease them into attending it. Furthermore, it is recommended that policy makers can establish a league or union for scholarship returnees to communicate and exchange their experiences.

Finally, as this study was limited to returnees working in academia, particularly at Umm Al-Qura University, some research questions remain unanswered, such as 'What about the challenges of the re-entry of academics in different universities' campuses, particularly in rural campuses?', 'What about the challenges of the re-entry of returnees working in health sectors or military interfaces?'. Future studies are

expected to cover larger fields of work, such as government officials, health, military, and so forth. Covering these areas is expected to open new doors for different re-entry experiences.

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