Factors affecting the re-entry experiences of returning Saudi international students after studying abroad

BY

Dr. Naif Daifullah Z Alsulami

Umm Al-Qura University, Mecca, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research is to answer the following research question: *How do some important factors such as gender, age, marital status, period of study abroad, contact with heritage culture while studying abroad and religion affect the re-entry experiences of Saudi returnees?* **The total number of participants in the study was 21 Saudi returnees, consisting male (n=13, 61.90 per cent) and female participants (n=8, 38.09 per cent) returning from studying in the U.S. U.K. and Australia. By conducting semi-structured individual interviews with the participants. The findings showed that female Saudi returnees experienced greater challenges than males due to gender imbalances in the culture in Saudi Arabia. Concerning the age factor, participants responded variously. Furthermore, the findings revealed that most participants deemed that single Saudi returnees meet more challenges than the married ones. Also, the results indicated that the longer an individual is staying abroad, the greater challenges experienced upon returning home. Additionally, it was found that keeping contact with the heritage culture, either via annual visits or using social media, has facilitated the re-entry process for the participants. Finally, most of the participants were completely certain that positive impacts of the religion for their re-entry override the undesirable effects. Consequently, they became more aware of the essence of practising the religious teachings, helping them to easily re-adapt. Implications of the findings and directions for future research are provided.**

Key words: International education, re-entry experiences, returning home, studying abroad, Saudi international students.

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المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث للإجابة عن السؤال التالي/ كيف تؤثر بعض العوامل مثل الجنس، العمر، الحالة الاجتماعية، مدة الدراسة في الخارج، التواصل مع الثقافة الأصلية أثناء الدراسة في الخارج، الدين على تجارب ما بعد العودة من الابتعاث للطلاب الدوليين السعوديين؟ وكان عدد المشاركين في هذا البحث هو ٢١ من السعوديين والسعوديات العائدين من الدراسة في الخارج – ثلاثة عشر رجلا بمعدل ٦١.٩٠% و ثمانية إناث بمعدل ٣٨.٠٩ % ممن عادوا من الدراسة في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، المملكة المتحدة، أستراليا. وبعد إجراء الباحث مقابلات فردية مع المشاركين، أظهرت النتائج أن الإناث العائدات من الابتعاث يواجهون تحديات أكبر من الذكور. وبالنسبة للعمر فقد اختلفت إجابات المشاركين بشكل ملحوظ عما إذا كان العمر مؤثرا في تجارب ما بعد العودة أم لا. وإضافة لذلك، أظهرت النتائج أن غير المتزوجين يواجهون صعوبات أكبر من المتزوجين. وأيضا، بينت النتائج أنه كلما زادت فترة الابتعاث كلما واجه المبتعثون والمبتعثات تحديات أكبر بعد العودة. وبالنسبة للتواصل مع الثقافة الأصلية أثناء المكوث في الخارج، فقد بينت النتائج أن المبتعثون والمبتعثات كانوا على تواصل دائم مع السعودية إما من خلال الزيارات السنوية وإما من خلال استخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي لذا فقد سهل هذا التواصل القوي حياتهم بعد العودة وقلل من التحديات المتوقعة. وأخيرا، أكد أغلب المشاركين أن للدين أثر إيجابي كبير على حياتهم ما بعد العودة. وفي ختام الدراسة تم تقديم بعض التطبيقات والتوصيات من خلال نتائج هذه الدراسة.

الكلمات الافتتاحية/ التعليم الدولي، الابتعاث، تجارب ما بعد العودة من الابتعاث، الدراسة في الخارج، الطلاب الدوليين السعوديين

1. Introduction

One of the effects of globalisation is cross-border mobility, which has become a reality of daily life for many people. People from various languages, ethnicities and cultures have the means either to travel across the oceans to live permanently, as tourists, as immigrants or refugees, or to live temporarily as business people, missionaries and, most importantly for the purpose of this research, as international students (Arthur, 2003). Typically, the duration of stay for those who reside abroad temporarily is between six months and five years; hence, it is not classified as permanent migration. Consequently, returning home is a predictable chapter in the journey (Szkudlarek, 2010).

There are different types and categories of re-entry found in the literature: cross-cultural re-entry, such as re-entry of missionaries (Green, 2008; Walling et al., 2006; Weber, 2009); re-entry within a culture, such as prisoners' re-entry to the community after spending time in prisons (Dickey & Klingele, 2004; Hattery, & Smith, 2010; La Vigne, 2006; Pedlar, Arai, Yuen, & Fortune, 2018; Ward, 2017); and re-entry of learners who dropped out of school and subsequently re-enrol into schools (Alika & Ohanaka, 2013; Brown, 2010; Musita, Ogange, & Lugendo, 2018). However, the most common type of re-entry found in the literature is re-entry from international education (Allison et al., 2012; Butcher, 2002; Chamove & Soeterik, 2006; Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Dettweiler et al., 2015; Gill, 2010; Hadis, 2005; Jandová, 2014; Kartoshkina, 2015; Larson, 2006; MacDonald & Arthur, 2004; Pitts, 2016; Pritchard, 2011; Welsh, 2015; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010).

It is acknowledged that there is a dearth of studies exploring re-entry issues, not only in the Saudi context but also in the international context as a whole. Many studies explored the entry experiences of international students into their host countries. However, few studies have explored the international students' re-entry experiences, Szkudlarek (2010) and Young (2014) deem 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 factors affecting this re-entry 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. Despite Saudi Arabia being one of the largest countries sponsoring its students to study abroad, little is known about how do some important factors such as gender, age, marital status, period of study abroad, contact with heritage culture while studying abroad and religion affect the re-entry experiences of Saudi returnees? This study is, therefore, significant for both the Saudi government and Saudi returnees in order to explore the issues of re-entry and help returnees smoothly re-adapt to their home culture.

2. Contextualising the study

In the past decade, the number of Saudi international students travelling to study in English speaking countries such as the U.S., the U.K. and Australia has increased dramatically, as shown in Figure two below (Ministry of Education, 2018). This was prompted by the huge increase in oil prices that began in 2005, along with the ascension of King Abdullah to the Saudi throne. King Abdullah had a vision for educational reform through various projects such as the KASP. From September 2004 to August 2005, the number of Saudi international students before the launching of the KASP program was 6879, but this number tripled after the KASP launching in 2005-6 to 17452 students. Since then, the number has increased annually to reach more than 100,000 students in 2010-11. Most recent statistics in 2015-16 showed 174,333 Saudis studying internationally (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2018). (See figure one)
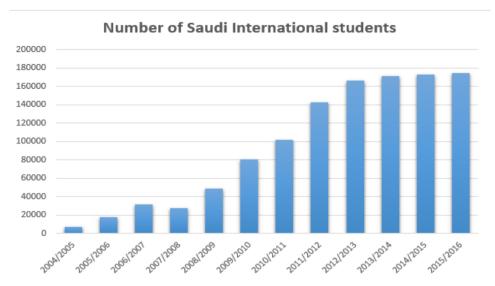
Figure 1: Number of Saudi international students

Importantly, it is acknowledged that most, if not all, Saudi international students do return to Saudi Arabia upon completing their studies overseas. As shown by Figure two below, the number of returning Saudi international students increased every year in the past decade (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2018).
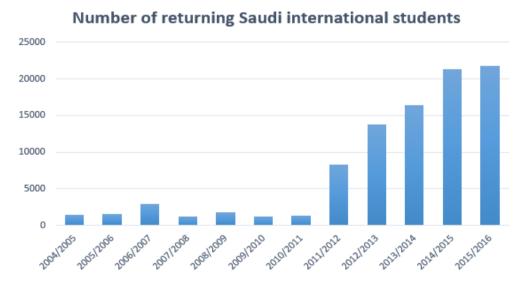

Figure 2: Number of returning Saudi international students

This figure points out that the number of Saudi returnees was 1468 in 2004. The number of Saudi returnees remained under 2000 returnees per year until 2011-12, and increased dramatically to 8287 when students of 2005-6 started to return home. The average number of Saudi returnees is 15000-21000 from 2013-14 to 2015-16 and it is expected to be around this figure in the upcoming ten years. Although the effectiveness of the scholarship program is mainly based on the returnees' experiences and how they can implement what they have learnt from studying abroad, little is known about how these Saudi returnees experience their re-entry to Saudi Arabia after studying abroad. It is unfortunate that knowledge of such experiences of re-entry was not available, especially since the Saudi government is spending billions of dollars for Saudi students to study abroad - as much as 14.7 billion Saudi riyals, (US$4 billion) (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2018). Hence, this knowledge gap will be filled by answering the research question of this study - about the factors affecting the re-entry experiences of returning Saudi international students after studying abroad.

3. Literature Review

The engagement with the literature of the re-entry experiences has made me realise that there are multiple important factors affecting the positive or negative side of the re-entry. These factors include gender, age, marital status, period of study abroad, contact with heritage culture while studying abroad and religion.

3.1 Gender

Gender factors can influence the success of one's adjustment to another culture, including the success of re-entry (Takeuchi, 2008). Although there are not many publications that directly focus on specific issues of gender regarding the re-entry, several studies consider that gender is one of the important factors that do affect the re-entry. The majority of the literature shows that females

experience more challenges in the re-entry experiences than males. This is confirmed, for instance, by Brabant et al. (1990)'s study when they investigated empirically a sample of 66 students who had studied in the U.S. regarding their re-entry problems with family and friends in particular, and with daily life in general. The quantitative results showed that gender is a factor that affects the re-entry experiences. It is also found that women have more problems with family, friends and daily life than men do. Similarly, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) investigated the impact of studying abroad on the interpersonal relationships of 669 returnees. The findings of this quantitative study indicated that females experienced more problems than males. The problems they reported include being less able to cope with anxieties, being less relaxed and having more stress in their relationship with their closed families and friends. Recently, Jung, Lee & Morales (2013) conducted a study to explore the common experience of Korean counselling students who returned to South Korea after studying in the U.S. The findings of this qualitative study showed that females reported more difficulties in re-adjusting to their home culture in terms of trying to find a balance between their work responsibilities and their families' expectations of roles and duties. On the other hand, some studies did not find any significant differences based on gender in the re-adjustment process. For example, Sussman (2001) investigated the re-entry of 44 managers who returned to the U.S. after spending between six months and four years overseas. The results showed that there was no significant relationship between gender and difficulties experienced during the re-entry transition. More recently, Dettweiler et al. (2015) conducted a study to assess German students' re-adjustment strategies after returning to Germany from overseas. The findings showed no significant differences in re-adjustment with respect to gender. In the context of this study, Saudi returnees include both males and females. It is not known how gender might affect the re-entry, bearing in mind the lower status of women in

Saudi Arabia (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015; AlMunajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004; Hamdan, 2005). This research will fill the gap in the literature by showing whether and how gender as a factor can affect the re-entry of Saudi returnees.

3.2 Age

The existing literature shows inconsistent results on age as a factor that affects the re-entry. Some studies show that older returnees reported more challenges in the re-adjustment. For example, Suutari and Valimaa (2002) investigated the re-adjustment of Finnish returnees, distributing a questionnaire to 79 students. The findings showed that older people reported more problems in re-adjusting than younger people. On the other hand, some studies indicated that older returnees experienced fewer challenges than younger. In the same vein, Cox (2004) examined the impacts of demographic factors, communication behaviour and cultural identity of 101 American missionaries returning to the U.S. from work assignments in 44 different countries. His study revealed that older returnees experienced fewer challenges than younger ones. However, what was really missing in these studies is a specific determinant of the meanings of older and younger. Considering there is no publication focusing on age as a factor affecting the re-entry of Saudis, this research is intended to partially fill in the gap in this area.

3.3 Marital status

Marital status is also mentioned in some literature as one of the factors that affects the re-entry. It has been shown that single returnees reported more challenges than did married returnees during re-adjustment. Cox (2004), as noted investigated the re-adjustment of 101 American missionaries returning from 44 different countries. His quantitative study found that marital status plays a central role in returnees' re-adjustment, in which those with single status reported greater re-adjustment difficulties than married people. Moreover, Hyder and Lovblad (2007) supported this finding in their reviews of related literature on the re-entry process. Because it is not known how marital status might affect the

re-entry of Saudi returnees, the present study will explore whether there is a difference, and to what extent it exists (if there is any), between single and married Saudis returning from studying abroad. Through my experience as a Saudi international student, most of the Saudi international students are married and they prefer to take their spouse with them during their study abroad. Therefore, after completing their studies, they experience the re-entry together, as a team. It is interesting for this study to find out the differences between single returning Saudis and married returning Saudis and to what extent this marital status affects the re-entry.

3.4 Period of study abroad

As in other factors, very few studies investigate whether or not a period of study abroad affects the re-entry positively or negatively. Although some studies, such as Black et al. (1992), found that returnees who spent more years abroad experienced more re-adjustment problems upon re-entry, Cox's study (2004) did not find any relationship between the length of stay abroad and re-adjustment difficulties. In the case of this study, some returning Saudis spent two or three years abroad studying their master's degree only. On the other hand, some returnees get a full scholarship for an English program along with Masters and PhDs. Therefore, their length of staying abroad will be greater. This research will find whether period of study abroad will affect the re-entry or not.

3.5 Contact with heritage culture while studying abroad

Contact with individuals from one's home country is one of the factors that affects the re-entry. As indicated by Chang (2009), that re-entry is not an individualised process of re-adjustment, as suggested by the existing literature. Rather, it is related to the connection between returnees and significant others through communication. Existing literature has shown that contact with individuals from home culture while abroad will lead to smooth re-adjustment after returning home. Moreover, visiting home during

the study abroad period can also lead to smooth re-adjustment (Brabant et al., 1990; Chang, 2009). Regular contact and home visits during the study abroad phase helped the returnees maintain personal relationships with people of the home culture. Additionally, it familiarised returnees to their home culture context (Martin & Harrell, 2004). Altweck and Marshall (2015) examined the re-entry experiences of 248 returnees who lived in a different culture and returned to their inherited culture. The findings showed that the strong identification with inherited culture was associated with smooth re-adjustment. Thus, this study stated the importance of contact with home culture while living abroad. Moreover, Cox (2004) looked at how communication through technology that sojourners used while living abroad affected the re-entry. He measured communication with home culture while being abroad by items such as 'e-mails, letters, phone calls, faxes and radio'. It includes other channels like mass-media information technology items, such as 'newspapers, television, movies, music and the Internet'. The findings of this study showed that communication with individuals from the home country, either by e-mail or through other Internet-based devices, helps to facilitate the re-adjustment process. However, this study could be described as outdated as it was conducted in 2004 before the boom of many new (social media) applications that easily help people stay in contact with families while living overseas, such as Skype, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Instagram and FaceTime. Hence, my study is important because it will contribute data on how contact with individuals from the home country through these new technological applications can lead to a smooth or difficult re-adjustment.

3.6 Religion

Religion could also be one of the factors that affects the re-entry process. However, it remains largely neglected in the literature. Although one previous study (Brabant et al, 1990) showed that religion is one of the significant factors related to challenges and

difficulties among students returning to the Balkan countries, this study did not explain how and why they reach this conclusion. The reason could be associated with newly acquired liberal behaviours and values that clash with the behaviour and the values of people in the home culture. In the case of Saudi returnees, Islamic religion holds a key place in Saudi culture (Alkhidr, 2011). Therefore, it could be expected that Islam might be a drawback facing those returning Saudis in re-adjusting to Saudi culture. One the other hand, it might be a key to solve returnees' re-adjustment problems through familiarity with reciting the Holy Quran and fulfilling the commitments of the religion and meeting people in the mosque. This study is important because it partially fills in the existing gap in the literature concerning religion as a factor affecting the re-entry.

3.7 Other factors

Other factors found in the literature that might affect re-entry experiences include cultural distance and time since return. Re-entry from cultures similar to the home culture may be assumed to be easier than from dissimilar cultures. The assumption would posit that a return from England to Canada, for instance, would be easier than a return from Canada to Saudi Arabia (Roberts, 2010). Then, the cultural differences between home culture and host culture can arguably affect the re-entry experiences. Herman and Tetrick (2009) argued that the more distance between the host country culture and the home country culture, the greater the challenge to re-adjust upon returning to the home country. Moreover, Black et al. (1992) in their study demonstrated that Japanese returnees experienced challenges because of the restricted social interactions in Japanese society, which is in contrast to and completely different from U.S. society. However, this study does not consider this a main factor because all the participants in this study are Saudis returning from Anglo-Saxon countries such as the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, and the sample did not include participants returning from other Arab

countries such as Egypt or Jordan, where some Saudis study as international students.

Second, time spent since returning home after staying abroad is one of the factors that clearly affects the re-entry. Some studies showed that the longer the time spent by returnees since returning home, the easier it is for them to re-adjust to their home culture. This has been confirmed by the findings of Gregersen & Stroh's (1997) study which surveyed 222 managers returning to Vienna from a government assignment overseas. The study showed that people re-adjust more smoothly to their home culture if they are given a longer time to make some re-adjustments. Conversely, Cox (2004) found that there is no relationship between the re-adjustment process and time since return. However, this is not considered a main factor in the current study because all the participants returned within the last five years. The researcher did not find information about Saudi returnees who had spent more than five years in Saudi Arabia since their return.

4. Methodology

The main objective of this study is to gain some in-depth understanding of how do some important factors affecting the re-entry experiences of returning Saudi international students after studying abroad. In order to achieve this objective, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

> *How do some important factors such as gender, age, marital status, period of study abroad, contact with heritage culture while studying abroad and religion affect the re-entry experiences of Saudi returnees?*
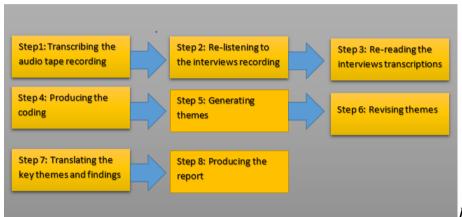
This study is theoretically underpinned by constructivist paradigm (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Flick, 2006; Miller & Glassner, 2004) employing a qualitative case study (Stake, 2005, Yin, 2014). The total number of participants in the study was 21 Saudi

returnees, consisting male (n=13, 61.90 per cent) and female participants (n=8, 38.09 per cent) returning from studying in the U.S. U.K. and Australia. Those returnees are currently working in the academia at Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. I conducted face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews with all male participants. However, due to gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia (Alhazmi, 2015; Alhazmi & Nyland, 2015; Van Geel, 2016) I conducted individual interviews with female via video conferencing.

When it comes to the language of interviews, Casinader (2014) suggested that the choice of language for the interview and using common language between interviewer and interviewees is important because it 'offered greater facility for the researcher to develop the sequence of questions in a more fluid, organic manner, exploring the ideas that might arise from responses during the interview' (p. 89). Although both I as an interviewer and the interviewees speak English, all participants confirmed their desire to be interviewed in Arabic. Therefore, I conducted the interviews in Arabic because it is the mother-tongue of us all. It is believed that conducting interviews in the same mother-tongue between the interviewer and interviewees (Arabic, in this case) enables better expression and articulation of ideas, 'even where they also fluent in English, using their mother-tongue encouraged more spontaneous and open discussions' (Barbour, 2007, p. 99). I recorded the interviews with participants' consent. The interviews were then translated into English by an expert translator. This stage was essential to avoid potential bias caused by my background as a Saudi, by my gender as a male, or by my ethnicity and identity as Arabic Muslim (Creswell, 2013).

The primary method of data analysis adopted in this study was 'analytic generalisation', following the principles of grounded theory, or '...an inductive approach for generating theories and

explanations' (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 47). The raw data in this study have been coded inductively to draw out and describe ideas from the transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al. 2012). Following the argument of Stake (1995) that researchers should find the method that works best for them in data analysis, the analysis of the raw data consisted of eight-step procedures (adopted from Creswell, 2014, Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). Each step is outlined in Figure three below

Figure

3. Steps of data analysis

5. 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.

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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

Table 1 Demographic information about participants

6. Findings, Discussions & Implications

This section shows six sub-themes have resulted from the findings. First, an explanation on how gender influences the re-entry experiences of Saudi returnees is presented, showing that female Saudi returnees experience more challenges upon returning home than do male Saudi returnees. The discussion then looks at the age aspect, demonstrating different responses from the participants when looking at job requirements, and how younger returnees do not face the same challenges as older ones. However, when they considered cultural difficulties, younger returnees faced more challenges than older ones. The next section deals with marital status as a factor affecting re-entry, which indicated most participants agree that single returnees experience more challenges than married returnees. After that, a description of how the study period influences re-entry is explained, showing that Saudi returnees who stayed a longer time abroad experience more challenges than those who stay for a shorter time. Then the section presents interesting facts on how interactions towards heritage culture while studying abroad affect re-entry; especially the role of cutting-edge technologies in facilitating re-entry adjustment. Finally, this section ends with an elucidation of how religion (Islam) contributes to the re-entry experiences of Saudi returnees, indicating that more than half of the participants talked about the positive impact of religion on their re-entry.

6.1 Gender

As indicated previously (see Section 5), the participants consisted of 13 males (64 per cent) and eight females (36 per cent). These percentages were not pre-determined by me, as I only received approval from those particular participants. However, this proportion is roughly in line with the ratio of male Saudi students to females (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2018). In this sub-theme, all participants – that is, 100 per cent – stated that gender plays an important role in the ease or difficulty of the return. All of

them provided similar answers – that Saudi females returning from study abroad face more difficulties and challenges than male Saudi returnees for several reasons, including the dearth of jobs for Saudi females, females' dependency on males in Saudi Arabia and cultural constraints on females. At the beginning, M11 stated that not only do females in Saudi Arabia face problems in the society, but also women in many parts of the world are right now confronting similar issues. However, the fact that Saudi females suffer from limited chances for employment is a challenge:

> *Females face problems in most societies not only in Saudi, even in the U.S. They are paid lower salaries than males. In Saudi Arabia, employment is so limited for females; either in education or hospitals, as a doctor or a nurse. That's why Saudi female returnees face more work challenges than Saudi male returnees.*

F5 agreed with M11 about the challenges of job limitations for Saudi females, and added:

> *Females face more challenges especially in terms of jobs opportunities. We do not have many choices for females. The jobs are usually limited to education or health sectors. It is also not easy to get jobs in these sectors because it is competitive. For example, if there are three jobs available, the applicants might be in the hundreds (F5).*

While M1 also indicated that females face more challenges than males due to the dearth of jobs in the labour market as result of negative cultural traditions toward female employees, M10 also stated that traditions and customs in Saudi Arabia are unfair to women:

> *Certainly, there are fewer opportunities for females after returning than for males. Here, female jobs are so limited and*

they cannot easily apply what they learned. I think that females are oppressed in Saudi Arabia.

On asking him about who oppressed them, he said:

It is our habits. Many families do not accept their daughters dealing with men or being a professor. I think that a female is an equal partner in society. Their achievements may be greater and more than males.

F2, F6 and F7 said that Saudi females face more challenges due to losing the independence they gained in the scholarship country. As F7 said:

I, as a female, face more challenges than males do because I used to manage my business myself when I was abroad. However, back here I lost that degree of independence. There are many things that are only done by males.

Similarly, F2 stated that females experienced more challenges upon returning home because they missed free mobility, mainly due to women not being allowed to drive:

Certainly, a female faces more challenges than a male because there was a big space for her freedom while studying abroad in terms of mobility. However, after returning home, we miss the freedom of mobility because of society not allowing us to drive, and there is no public transport we can use for our mobility. We are always relying on males, either father or brothers. But if they are busy we, I, have to postpone my duties.

Other participants mentioned some aspects of cultural constraints on Saudi females upon their re-entry. For instance, F8 revealed thoughts about inequality of chances between genders:

Females face more challenges here in Saudi Arabia because the chances are not equal. For instance, I have ambitions to be, like

a university director, a faculty dean or even a department head. However, the law does not allow me to be so. I can only be like deputy head of department for female section, but without administrative powers or making decisions. So, I always have to go back to a male department head.

Other participants such as M6, M7, M12, and F1 also pointed out some cultural constraints of Saudi females that might be considered as challenges and problems for them upon their re-entry, such as gender segregation policy, as mentioned by M7:

Females face more challenges than males because of gender segregation policy in Saudi Arabia.

Male Saudi returnees re-adapt quicker than female Saudi returnees. Meaning, the situations of a woman is complicated as she is required to bring a mahram on many occasions, such as in issuing a passport, travelling, or if she wants to buy a car.

Another cultural constraint mentioned by participants is the law of Mahram that does not allow females to go outside without an accompanying male, as narrated by F1:

I feel like females face more challenges because while abroad I was able to depend on myself. I could go outside freely, buying my stuff. The society there accepts that. However, here in Saudi Arabia, we have to follow certain norms, like it is not accepted for females to go outside without a "mahram", you know, we are always dependent on males.

Another cultural constraint mentioned by participants is the negative perception towards unmarried female returnees, as noted by M12:

Females experience more challenges than males because here there are more cultural restrictions that cause pressure on

female returnees, especially when they return unmarried. They might ask - you know, what is the benefit of education if a female fails to establish a family? And being single?

As the findings of this sub-theme showed, all the participants of this study, 100 per cent (n=21), stated that Saudi female returnees experienced more challenges than their male counterparts. For me as a Saudi researcher, this is one of the expected and understandable findings due to the cultural context of Saudi Arabia that restricts the role of women in society. There is a lack of jobs for females compared to males, there is a strong policy of gender segregation, and cultural constraints on females. Therefore, females mostly have to depend on males. A question emerged from this situation: 'Is this finding unique to female Saudi returnees?' In fact, some literature showed that this phenomenon occurred not only for Saudi females but was also experienced by other (traditional) cultures, such as: Korean females (e.g. Jung, Lee & Morales, 2013) (See 3.1). Hence, the findings of this study supported these previous studies. On the other hand, present findings contradict some studies, such as Dettweiler et al. (2015) and Sussman (2001) who found no significant differences between males and females in their re-adjustment challenges (See also 3.1). There are, however, possible explanations for why these studies did not find differences based on gender in the re-adjustment. First, the status of females in Sussman's study is quite strong, as they had power as managers. Moreover, the short-term period of staying abroad in the Dettweiler et al. (2015) study might reduce the females' challenges. An implication of this result is that there should be more attention focused on the needs of female returnees when establishing preparation programs for the re-entry.

6.2 Age

As indicated before (see Section 3.2), based on my own understanding of the average age of Saudi returnees, I have classified those who returned in their twenties or early thirties as

young returnees and those who returned in their late thirties or forties as older returnees. In this study, the number of participants in terms of age is quite close: there are 10 participants (48 per cent) classified as young returnees, while the remaining 11 participants (52 per cent) are older returnees. In this sub-theme, participants' responses about age as a factor affecting the re-entry are varied. Fifteen participants - 71.42 per cent - considered occupational aspects; they stated that younger returnees – mostly in their twenties, as they described - did not face as many challenges as the older ones, mostly in their thirties or early forties. Most employers prefer younger applicants due to their capacity and liveliness. On the other hand, six participants -28.57 per cent - considered the aspects of cultural challenges and maturity; they stated that the younger returnees faced more challenges than the older group.

For instance, F2, F3, F4, F5, F7, F8, M1, M2, M3, M4, M6, M9, M10, M11 and M13 reported that younger returnees experienced fewer challenges than older returnees because younger returnees will find jobs more quickly – as mentioned by F5, who was young and unemployed when she returned home:

> *Age has a role in personal, academic and employment level. For example, younger returnees will find jobs quickly because they have enthusiasm and ability to give and work hard.*

Similarly, F7 - who was older and employed when she returned home - stated that it is not easy for older returnees when they are in their later thirties to find a job:

> *When I returned I was employed. So I didn't experience challenges in terms of job, but I think the age will play role for unemployed returnees, especially if they are, like, in their late thirties. It is not easy to find a job at that age.*

Likewise, F2 – who was young and unemployed when she returned home – asserted that young returnees have more job opportunities:

> *The younger person has more opportunity as he has to learn and apply things he learnt especially for jobs. Compare, for example, those who return in their twenties with those in their late thirties regarding job opportunities. The younger will have more job opportunities.*

M10 – who was employed when he returned – talked about the job security employed returnees have and narrated his cousin's story of not getting a job because of his age compared to other friends who studied the same major and found a job quickly:

> *Employed returnees have job security. However, unemployed older returnees will experience more challenges than younger returnees because bosses are always looking for young employees and they are strict on age. For example, my cousin has got a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering from the U.S. When he returned to Saudi Arabia, he was 38 years-old and faced difficulties in finding a job, unlike one of my friends who got a Ph.D. in the same major, but he found a job quickly because he was 29 years-old at that time.*

On the contrary, other participants, like F1, F6, M5, M7, M8, and M12 responded in a completely different way. They did not think younger age was the important factor for job prospects. They considered maturity and experience as a more substantial factor. They stated that younger returnees faced more challenges than older returnees because of life experience, as mentioned by F1 and F6:

> *I feel like older returnees have more capabilities than young returnees to re-adapt and solve the re-entry challenges and they can re-adapt more quickly.*

> *When a person returns in his late thirties he experiences fewer challenges than those who return in their mid-twenties because he has had lots of experiences in his life*

M7 mentioned that younger returnees face more challenges because they were not immersed in their home culture before studying abroad and may criticise their home country after re-entry, which is not accepted by their community:

Certainly, age has a big role in the re-adjustment process. For example, younger returnees who return in their mid-twenties after completing their bachelor abroad will face challenges in terms of their communication with their home culture because they were not immersed in their home culture before studying abroad. However, while they were abroad, they learnt critical thinking. Therefore, upon their re-entry, they became critical of everything surrounding them and our community does not accept that.

M8 was afraid that younger returnees will lose themselves as a result of studying abroad; he recommended scholarships to be for postgraduate degrees only, as he explained:

Younger returnees who return in their twenties will experience more challenges than older returnees. That's why I suggest that scholarships should only be for postgraduate studies and undergraduate studies should be here in Saudi Arabia, because I'm afraid that undergraduate students might lose themselves and their culture while abroad.

Most of the participants in this study - 71.42 per cent (n=15) - reported that younger returnees did not face as many challenges as did the older returnees. However, 28.57 per cent (n=6) of the participants reported that younger returnees face more challenges than their older counterparts. In fact, the second part of the findings from this sub-theme, which showed that younger returnees experienced more challenges than the older ones, supports the previous studies, such as Cox (2004) and Hyder and Lovblad (2007) (See 3.2). However, the findings also contradict a study by Suutari and Valimaa (2002) mentioning that older returnees reported more

challenges in the re-adjustment than younger returnees (See also 3.2). However, the previous studies did not determine the exact age criteria to classify the participants into 'young' or 'old' returnees. The results presented above could be beneficial for other researchers to establish a clear determination on the meaning of young and old returnees in their research. As for employers, it is suggested that they should focus on the qualifications and skills to attract employees regardless of their age.

6.3 Marital Status

Saudi returnees from studying abroad may be either single or married at the time of returning home. As mentioned earlier (see section 5), four participants (19 per cent) were single at time of data collection while 17 participants (81 per cent) were married. Participants stated that the marital status affects the re-entry. In this sub-theme, 16 participants – 76.19 per cent - considered that the singles face more challenges than the married students. On the other hand, five participants - 23.80 per cent - mentioned that the married face more challenges than the singles. For instance, M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M11, M13, F1, F3, F4 and F5 stated that singles face more challenges than married. M1 and F4 considered starting a new life course for singles returnees as a challenge compared to those married returnees:

> *I think, singles face more challenges because they need to establish a new life after returning home. Trying to find a suitable wife, buying furniture and renting an apartment and other household stuff (M1).*

> *If a returnee is an unemployed single male, he will experience more challenges as he can't get married because he doesn't have a job. I know about three of my cousins. They returned from the U.S. but they can't get married because people always are looking for employed people to agree to get married to their*

daughters. Moreover, regarding female returnees, if she is an employed single and she's getting older, it is difficult to get married. You know, our society has a certain age for being married (F4).

Additionally, F1, F6 and M5 noted that married returnees could have emotional support provided by wives upon their re-entry. Based on that reason, they as well admitted that single returnees face more challenges than the married ones:

Singles face more and harder challenges because the married returning students can find help and support from their wives as males or their husbands as females (F1).

I think singles will face more challenges because married returnees can easily find someone who can help, either wife or husband (F6).

In fact, a wife can provide emotional services for her husband and vice versa. Therefore, I think that married returnees will not face as many challenges compared to single returnees (M5).

On the other hand, married returnees like M10, M12, F2, F7, and F8 declared that married returnees face more challenges than the singles for several reasons, such as family and financial pressures:

If a returnee is an employed married returnee, he will experience more challenges. I was employed when I returned, however, because of the bureaucratic transaction, I only got my salary seven months after the re-entry. I was really sick of this cause I don't know from where I would have to obtain money to spend on my family. However, if I was single, I could go to my room in my father's house and that's it- no more responsibilities (M10).

> *Well, there are challenges, especially with the married people that may result in divorce. This is because of family pressures, especially during the transitional period: one to six months after the scholarship ends. This period has many liabilities, so external interventions and personal and financial pressures arise, leading to uncontrolled problems. So, they may get divorced (M12).*

Another reason provided by participants of why married returnees undergo greater difficulties contrasted to single returnees were due to the 'third culture kids' challenges' and life commitments, as mentioned by F7 and F8:

> *Married returnees will face more challenges especially with their children, my kids were suffering a lot, and they couldn't speak Arabic fluently until now (F7).*

> *Married returnees will face more challengers. For example, last semester I had to teach until evening and then I went home late. Husbands should understand that and share the sacrifice with their wives (F8).*

As the findings of this sub-theme showed, most of the participants in this study, 76.19 per cent (n=16), stated that single returnees experienced more challenges than the married ones because a wife or a husband can provide much emotional support and help to their spouse to deal with re-adjustment challenges. These findings are consistent with the previous studies, such as Cox (2004) and Hyder and Lovblad (2007) that showed single returnees experienced more challenges than the married ones (See 3.3). An implication of this result might be affording special consideration to single returnees to overcome such challenges and re-adapt more easily to Saudi Arabia.

6.4 Period of study abroad

As mentioned before (see section 4.2) all participants stayed overseas for periods of between two and ten years. The majority of them – 76.19 per cent (n=16) – stayed more than five years overseas, while the remaining 23.80 per cent (n=5) stayed less than five years overseas. In this sub-theme, all the participants - 100 per cent - agreed that returnees who have spent more time studying abroad they will experience more challenges than those who experienced less time studying abroad. For instance, F2 – who stayed 2.5 years abroad (see section 5) - revealed that she did not experience many obstructions for her shorter period of staying outside the country:

> *Of course, I think that the longer the period of staying in the scholarship country, the harder it is to re-adapt after returning to Saudi Arabia. I, thanks to Allah, did not face many challenges after returning, as I stayed only a short period abroad.*

Similarly, M12 – who stayed six years abroad (see section 5) – said:

> *When a student stays in the host country for a longer period, it is difficult for him to re-adapt after returning, compared with those who spend shorter periods.*

In addition, F1 – who stayed four years abroad (see 4.2) – and M1 – who stayed six years abroad (see section 5) – mentioned that those staying abroad longer will confront more hurdles upon their return due to the incapability to maintain some cultural aspects of their host countries:

> *If a student stays longer abroad, he will experience more challenges upon returning home because his or her loyalty to a host country will be strong. I am talking about myself. I feel like I have strong loyalty to Australia and I call it my second*

country. I miss many aspects of Australian culture even though I stayed there only four years (F1)

In fact, the duration of studying abroad will affect the re-entry. For example, I lived abroad six years and formed my life in the way I want. However, after returning home, I missed my privacy and cannot form my life and organize my time as I want, due to interventions from my relatives (M1)

As the findings of this sub-theme showed, all the participants - 100 per cent (n=21) - agreed that returnees who spent more years abroad will face more re-adjustment challenges than returnees who spent fewer years. This finding agrees with other studies, such as Black et al. (1992), which found that returnees who spent more years abroad experience more re-adjustment challenges than those away for less time (See 3.4). However, this finding does not agree with Cox (2004), who found no relationship between the length of stay abroad and re-adjustment difficulties (See also 3.4). Based on these findings, special attention should be given to returnees who spent more time abroad through providing intensive preparation seminars for them.

6.5 Contact with heritage culture while studying abroad

The findings depicted that participants contacted their families while they were abroad in two ways; 1) using social media applications such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, Tango and WhatsApp or 2) leaving for annual travel to Saudi Arabia. All participants -100 per cent- agreed that keeping in touch with families helped to facilitate their re-entry.

Two participants, F7 and F8, disclosed that they used to share stories with families online, talking about things like occasions and festivals, while studying overseas:

Really, social communication means play a positive role in my re-entry. We – as international students - did not feel alienated. I

> *used to share all occasions with my family. In feasts I turned on the camera to watch them having breakfast and lived with them moment by moment (F7).*

> *I communicated with my family continuously. I talked with them via FaceTime and video calls. This facilitated my return and made me more close to them. I think it is a positive phenomenon. I used to attend my family occasions. I called and turned on the camera to share in their happiness (F8).*

Other two participants, M10 and M11, compared the role played by social communication means with current scholarship students and those in past periods. They stated the importance of technologies that have changed the experience of travelling as they assist them to be more closely connected with families during their time abroad:

> *I used to have contact with my father via phone calls as he didn't want to use new technologies. However, I contacted my mother and my brothers via Tango App or Skype, even my wife used to have contact with her family via Skype. Frankly, travelling nowadays with technologies is not travelling like before. Even my family knows all my news via Twitter and Facebook, even before I tell them. Certainly, social communication means have facilitated my re-entry (M10).*

> *Currently, thanks to social media, we communicate with families continuously, unlike the previous scholarship students in the 1980s and 1970s, when they said, "those who travel are lost and those who return are newly born". Now we can share with our families our daily events through WhatsApp or snapchat and let them know the minutest details about our lives in the scholarship country. I think it is a positive factor (M11).*

Similarly, M1 and F1 described the positive impacts of social communication applications they used during studying abroad in helping to facilitate their re-entry to Saudi Arabia. They stated that

social communication meant they connected strongly with their families during their studying abroad:

> *I used to have contact with my family via Skype. And I think social communication means have positive impacts in terms of making returnees closer to their culture and environment, which subsequently facilitated their re-entry (M1).*

> *Social communication means made my connection with my family strong. And I became close to them and they became close to me, although we were far away from each other. I used to use Facebook and Skype more on that time, and I think it has facilitated my re-entry (F1).*

It is worth mentioning that scholarship program regulations allow Saudi international students to have a maximum three-month annual vacation. A student and their accompanying family are given free round-trip air tickets to and from Saudi Arabia (SACM, 2018). All participants reported that these visits helped them to re-adapt to Saudi culture. Although returning home for a visit was different from actually returning home for good (Thompson & Christofi, 2006), it provides a small preview of the final re-entry issues. These short visits helped participants to keep in contact with their own culture and to be more aware of all the changes happening during their stay overseas.

Overall, the findings in this sub-theme are in line with previous studies, such as Altweck and Marshal (2015) and Brabant et al. (1990), that showed keeping in touch with families while abroad will facilitate the re-entry adjustment (See 3.5). Although all the participants had a strong connection with their home culture, either by annual visits or using social media for regular contact, they still experienced re-entry challenges. Therefore, it would be beneficial for returnees to be fully acquainted with the Saudi context before returning home and benefit from their short re-entry to Saudi

Arabia for holidays in the final homecoming upon completing their studies.

6.6 Religion

When considering religion as a factor shaping the re-entry experiences, it is clear that the religion focus in this study is Islam. To better understand this factor, it is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia introduced itself as a religious country. As stated in the first article of the basic law of governance (constitution) of the country: Saudi Arabia is an Islamic Arab state with full of sovereignty; its religion is Islam and its constitution is the Book of Allah (the Holy Quran), and the Sunnah (way of life) of his prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and its language is Arabic (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2018). Thus, the statistics showed that 100 per cent of the Saudi population is Muslim (General Authority for Statistics, 2017). According to Denman and Hilal (2011) 'the Islamic religion is considered as much a part of the Saudi identity' (p. 304). Consequently, in a country which could be considered as a religion-based society, there are huge impacts of Islamic laws - or in other words, the interpretations of Islamic law - in shaping and forming the Saudi national identity.

The findings in this sub-theme showed that 21 participants -100 per cent - agreed on the role of religion as a factor affecting their re-entry to Saudi Arabia. While 11 participants -52.38 per cent - provided expressions of positive impacts of religion on their re-entry, another six -28.57 per cent - reported negative influences. The rest, four participants - 19.04 per cent - however, gave a neutral answer to this question. For instance, participants, like M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M9, M10, F1 and F6 reported that studying abroad had a positive effect on their religion in the sense that the overseas life experience had made them feel more respectful of their own religious values, as well as helping them adhere to their religion. Consequently, they became more regular in practising their religious

teachings in general. **Moreover, participants reported that praying five times a day in the mosque helped them to establish a good relationship with their neighbours. As M7 and M10, for example, narrated:**

> *Performing prayers in the mosque introduced me to my neighbours and helped me establish a good relationship with them. Therefore, they trust me more, accepting my advice as an expert person who holds a PhD from abroad (M7).*

> *My faith, personally, has increased during and after the scholarship period, because I saw people embrace Islam through conviction, not just because it is the state's religion. Some Western Muslims' adherence to religion made me adhere more to my religion, although openness in the West is greater – but fear of Allah affected me more. Some teachings of Islam helped me to overcome feelings of loneliness when I returned through reciting the Holy Quran (M10).*

Similarly, M6 mentioned that religion had a positive impact on his re-entry and that his view towards religion has changed positively as a result of studying abroad:

> *I think that religion has a positive impact on the re-entry. I personally consider that I practise my religion more while abroad because I saw that people believe whatever they believe, not because the community believe, and they try to imitate them. It is because of their personal freedom. Therefore, my view toward religion has changed positively and I follow whatever I think is true among different interpretations of Islam and not only restricted to the common interpretations in Saudi Arabia (M6).*

On the other hand, participants like, F2, F3, F4, F5, F7, and F8 pointed out that they experienced negative impacts because of some interpretations of Islam in Saudi Arabia, mainly regarding female

issues such as wearing Hijab without covering their faces and the role of Mahram. When they called for new interpretations of the teachings of Islam outside the common Wahhabi interpretations, they met resistance from Saudi society, saying that they had acquired liberal values, which are against Islam, as they described in their answers. For instance, as F5 narrated, her new understanding of covering females' faces as not compulsory; however, such understandings were not necessarily accepted:

> *Me, and many other Saudi girls, do not cover our faces abroad, we are just wearing Hijab like most Muslim women do, However, when I came back I followed what I think is true; that covering the female face is not compulsory, but my friends and my family do not accept that and always argue with me, claiming that I have become more liberal!*

F3 for instance talked about the importance of re-vising the law of Mahram in Saudi Arabia:

> *I do understand that a female accompanied by a male and Mahram in the past is a good way to protect females. However, we need to review this role. There are many things I cannot do here without a male; I cannot sign a lease contract and I cannot travel by plane without a male, I feel like I have become more restricted!*

However, four participants, M5, M8, M11 and M12 gave neutral answers, saying that they are unable to confirm that religion can affect the re-entry either positively or negatively as it is really personal and depends on each person as a single case, as stated by M12. Moreover, M5 and M11 said that there is no impact of religion on the re-entry. M8 argued that the impacts of religion on the re-entry depends on the religious situation of the person before going for study abroad:

> *It really depends on how a person was practising his religion before travelling for studying abroad. For me, I am a special case as my father is a religious cleric and he has many publications about religion. Therefore, I do not think that there are either positive or negative impacts.*

As the findings in this sub-theme showed, more than half of the participants – 52.38 per cent (n=11) – talked about the positive impacts of religion on their re-entry. They even became more religious in their practising of Islam in general after returning home. On the other hand, comments from the clerics and religious scholars on Saudi scholarship programs, claiming that study abroad could divorce Saudis from their religion are illogical and unrealistic. What happened was not expressing their opinions or valid criticism of the scholarship program, rather just attacking everything new that is related to the West. Therefore, the country is still far behind because most of the people appreciate and live by what the religious leaders say. It is like when history repeats itself when many Saudi scholars are prohibited from watching television, cinema, satellite and the products of other civilisations. Afterwards, they legalised using it.

Alarfaj (2011) wrote a book analysing the opinions and interpretations of Saudi scholars. He argued that the Saudi religious scholars initially forbade 90 per cent of the modern material. Then, after many years, it became considered as normal. This point is very critical for understanding suspicious reactions from Saudi Islamic scholars toward new civilisations and societies. For example, the Saudi scholarship program was not welcomed religiously because it was perceived as a Westernising program aiming at changing the Islamic values of Saudis. Additionally, issues around living and travelling to non-Muslim countries were largely questioned in Saudi scholars' literature, as in the famous fatwa of the ex-president of the senior scholars' council, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin baz (who died in 1999): he warned the government against sending Saudis to study

abroad in non-Muslim countries except in emergencies (important knowledge that does not exist in Islamic countries). He advised the government that it should establish courses to prepare those students religiously for studying abroad, and those students should be supervised while studying abroad (Bin baz, 2017). Such views are prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, many distinguished Saudis have left to travel to study abroad, and all religious leaders criticising this program are called into question. The issue here is that this kind of program lacks the presence of qualified Saudis. Many missed the opportunity to study abroad and return to benefit the country because of the influence of such interpretations.

The findings also indicated that six female participants - 28.57 per cent - mentioned negative impacts of religion, particularly when they are looking for new interpretations of some issues of Islam outside the common interpretations in Saudi Arabia; especially regarding the meaning of hijab and whether or not it includes covering female faces, and the law of Mahram. However, these new developments do not break the major rules of Islamic teachings. Rather, they violate the common interpretations in Saudi Arabia. Participants in this study are not looking to implement Western values or practices. These findings – that Saudi female returnees were looking to implement new interpretations of Islam outside the common readings in Saudi Arabia in order to modernise and be engaged with the wider world – support previous studies, such as the ones conducted by Van Geel (2016) and Le Renard (2014). Van Geel (2016) conducted a study about the perceptions of Saudi women and their participation in public spaces. In this study, the researcher interviewed 48 Saudi women, including young female workers, female universities students, teachers and female Islamic scholars. The findings showed that the majority of the interviewees reject the idea of Westernisation (copying whatever comes from the U.S. or Europe: lifestyle, speech, and morals). However, they are looking towards being more modernised without breaking the main

teachings and rules of Islam. Most of the participants in this study reject the perceived growing secularity of Saudi Arabia and the changing society. In another study, Amelie Le Renard, conducted ethnographic interviews with more than 100 Saudi females in their mid-20s in the capital city, Riyadh, from 2005-09. This research is based on observation and spending hours in women's only spaces, such as in workplaces, university campuses, religious organisations and malls. As a result, the research overturns ideas about Saudi women as oppressed, backward and closed, arguing that they are modernised, regardless of the gender segregation policy in the country. However, most of the participants in this study rejected the idea of feminism that they see as coming from the West and as an imperialist concept (Le Renard, 2014). An implication of the results in this sub-theme is that some aspects of Islamic teachings, such as praying in congregations and reciting the holy Quran, can be used as coping strategies for the re-entry. Moreover, policy-makers can also benefit from the new interpretations of Islam offered by Saudi returnees in planning religious units in schools.

7. Conclusion, Limitations & Directions for future research

To conclude, there are six crucial factors affecting the re-entry experiences of Saudi returnees from studying abroad involving gender, age, and marital status, period of study abroad, contact with heritage culture while being abroad, and religion. In regard to gender, the findings showed that female Saudi returnees experienced greater challenges than males due to gender imbalances in the culture in Saudi Arabia. Concerning the age factor, participants responded variously. Most of them focused on the job requirements when responding to the interview question. They believed that

younger returnees did not face as many challenges as older ones. Others looked at cultural difficulties and stated that younger returnees discovered more problems than the older ones. Furthermore, the findings revealed that most participants deemed that single Saudi returnees meet more challenges than the married ones, primarily due to life commitment issues and difficulty in finding a suitable spouse. Also, the results indicated that the longer an individual is staying abroad, the greater challenges experienced because of their longing for and attraction to cultural aspects of the host countries. Additionally, it was found that keeping contact with the heritage culture, either via annual visits or using social media, has facilitated the re-entry process for the participants. Finally, most of the participants were completely certain that positive impacts of the religion for their re-entry override the undesirable effects. Consequently, they became more aware of the essence of practising the religious teachings, helping them to easily re-adapt. Nevertheless, some participants believe that negative impacts of religion on the re-entry undeniably exist. In their opinion, the negative effects did not literally mean the religion as a whole, but rather some strict interpretations of Islam concentrating mainly on female issues. They seek some new interpretations for Islam, other than the common versions in Saudi Arabia.

The limitations of the research could be summarised as follows: First, this study focuses on one research setting, which is at Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, Saudi Arabia - one of 34 universities in the country. This university was chosen as the research site because Mecca is considered as a multicultural city, thus it would be easier to find participants who could represent the diversity of Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, they cannot represent all potential participants from different universities around Saudi Arabia.

Second, considering the small size of the participant sample from one particular university, the findings are not generalizable. A qualitative research project like a case study is indeed a poor basis for generalisation (Gerring, 2006; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The generalisation in this study takes the form of advice to other Saudis returning from studying abroad in general and those who are working in the territory of education in particular. Finally, the data analysis concentrates on the emerging themes from the interviews rather than detailed descriptions for each participant experience. The analysis technique might be considered as a drawback for this study. Although such technique for data analysis provided an overall clear structure of the findings, the participants' complete stories of their re-entry experiences to Saudi Arabia were not specifically addressed. Therefore, this limitation provides a direction for further research to address it.

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. The findings of this study are beneficial for quantitative researchers to develop their questionnaires. Second, the research sample of this study was restricted to Saudi returnees who completed their postgraduate studies abroad. 29 per cent of the participants (n=6) believe that younger returnees faced greater challenges than older ones (See 6.2). Further work is needed to investigate the re-entry experiences of younger returnees (i.e. those who graduated from their bachelor degrees). Bearing in mind that most of these young returnees are unemployed, exploring their experiences will also be valuable to gain understanding of different experiences for different ages. Third, as this study was limited to returnees working in academia, particularly in Umm Al-Qura University, some research questions remain unanswered, such as 'how do some important factors affecting the re-entry of academics

in different universities campuses, particularly in rural campuses?', 'What about 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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