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## **Cross-Cultural Issues Affecting Saudi ESOL Students in the United Kingdom**

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### **Abstract**

Crossing cultures is not considered easy because an individual faces various challenges when attempting to adjust to another culture. When international learners decide to study abroad, they likely face some challenges because of the different cultural beliefs, traditions and customs. This study examines the cross-cultural issues affecting Saudi ESOL students in the United Kingdom (UK) and reviews existing literature relating to this topic. The main purposes of this study are to (1) investigate whether Saudi students (SSs) encounter negative cultural experiences when studying in the UK, (2) examine how the English language influences their academic performance and (3) establish whether the SSs report any issues relating to food, climate, communication and social interactions in their studying experiences. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is used to obtain accurate perspectives. One hundred and thirty-three SSs responded to the questionnaire online, and semi-structured interviews were conducted via email with four participants. The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using different statistical analysis techniques, and content analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The results indicate that the SSs experienced a negative cultural experience, which was culture shock. This study also found that the students' English language ability influenced their academic performance while they were studying. The results found that SSs face difficulties adjusting to the UK weather. Implications of the results and further research directions are presented.

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

Imagine leaving everything you have known and going to an unfamiliar place where everything seems new; you are facing a plethora of challenges to know how everything works. Leaving everything that you are comfortable with and moving to a new place is like being tossed about by the waves in the sea. You are trying to swim, but the storm and waves get more powerful and you are afraid of drowning. You are afraid of the unknown; this fear develops every day as you face different challenges that you are unsure how to handle. This was my feeling when I left my country and came to the United Kingdom (UK) to study. I am certain that many international students feel the same when they leave their country to study in another environment for a period of time.

Various researchers such as (Mapp, 2012), Stroud (2010) and Young, Natrajan-Tyagi and Platt (2014) have discussed the issues of crossing cultures that international people may face because adjusting to another culture is not an easy task. The aforementioned studies attempted to explore the problems experienced by people who travel abroad to live, work or study.

One reason people become cross-cultural travellers is for the education. Students travel abroad to study a language or obtain a degree, and a large number of universities in the UK attract international students. The UK is considered one of the preferred destinations for international students, as it has the second highest number of international students in the world (Kemp & Rogers, 2011). However, it seems to be overwhelming and culturally difficult for international students to pursue their degree abroad because of the need to transition from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment (Lin, 2012).

According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in London (UKSACB, 2016), “Knowledge is the foundation of the renaissance of nations”. For this reason, the Saudi Arabian government created the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme in 2005 to develop human resources in Saudi Arabia, support Saudi universities and the public and private sectors to achieve high standards and make a bridge between Saudi Universities and the International Universities Board (UKSACB, 2016).

Most existing research on the topic of challenges international students face in the UK focused on the language difficulties and failed to examine other challenges. However, international students may face cultural and social challenges because of the transition from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment. This research study thus investigates the major cross-cultural issues affecting Saudi ESOL students while they are studying in the UK and finds ways to overcome these challenges to improve their academic performance.

### **Significance of the Study**

I have recently arrived in the UK to complete a Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics and TESOL. I came to realise that studying in a different cultural environment is not easy, and have considered the following question: What are the challenges facing SSs in the UK? The findings of this research aim to address three audiences:

- 1) Teachers – to widen their awareness of dealing with multicultural students in the classroom.
- 2) Researchers – to understand students’ experiences better, especially those of Saudis when living in the UK.
- 3) SSs – because this research reflects the cross-cultural issues that they face in the UK.

The findings of this study might help SSs to overcome the challenges and to feel that they are not alone in this experience. This study will provide them with some helpful recommendations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Numerous researchers from various countries have studied how cross-cultural issues affect international students abroad over the last three decades. While a limited number of research studies focus on cross-cultural issues affecting SSs studying in the UK, the number of scholarships awarded to SSs to study abroad has been continuously increasing. It is, therefore, essential to focus on issues affecting SSs. Al-Musa (2008), the minister of the scholarship programme at the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, stated that 70,000 students had enrolled in this programme in the last four years. He claimed that only 1,573 scholarships were cancelled because of factors such as moral, legal misconduct, absenteeism or low grades (Al-Musa, 2008).

According to UNESCO (2013), the number of SSs who studied abroad during

the previous five years is over 80,000; thus, Saudi Arabia follows China, India and Korea as the fourth highest country to participate in cultural exchange and promote the mobility of students.

### Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the cross-cultural issues that affect Saudi ESOL students in the UK and therefore aims to answer the following questions:

What cross-cultural issues affect SSs in the UK?

- Do SSs encounter negative cultural experiences while studying in the UK?
- How does the English language influence the SSs' academic performance?
- Do SSs report experiencing issues relating to climate, food, communication and social interaction?

Answering these questions will provide the respective audiences (teachers, researchers, SSs) with significant information about crossing cultures and increase the effectiveness of this research.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The research design is considered a fundamental step in the plan of the research before conducting data collection and analysis (De Vaus, 2001). The research design provides a framework for the project to ensure that the evidence obtained will provide answers to the research questions. Rasinger (2013) described the research design as a structure of the study's organisation, and Bryman (2012) described the research design as a 'strategic plan'. Moreover, Vogt, Gardner and Haefele (2012) indicated that an effective research design legitimates the research questions of any project; thus, the design should be chosen carefully to ensure the research purpose is met.

### Methodological Approach

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is applied in this study to explore the different cultural issues affecting Saudi ESOL students in the UK.

### Selection of the Participants and Data Collection Tools

**The participants.** The sample in this study comprised 137 Saudi ESOL students, who were studying in the UK. I chose ESOL students because as they are academic who are living in the UK long term, they are likely understand the cross-cultural issues more than people such as tourists, who fail to comprehend the cross-cultural challenges during a short vacation. The participants, whose original language is Arabic, were studying in various academic places such as universities, colleges and academic institutions in the UK. Of the participants, 55% were male and 45% were female, aged between 19 and 49 years old. For the quantitative approach, 133 participants completed a questionnaire online, and for the qualitative approach, four SSs participated in semi-structured interviews via email.

Kendall (2008) stated that the questionnaire affords a large amount of data from a significant number of respondents. To obtain a large number of participants, I contacted the Saudi Arabian cultural bureau in London to obtain the contact details of the 36 chairman of Saudi clubs in different cities in the UK, who invited and encouraged students to participate in the study. The questionnaire gathered data from

male and female students to investigate the challenges that affect each gender. Additionally, the age group was specified up to 49 years because one of the conditions for a PhD scholarship – the highest degree level in the programme – is that students are no older than 35 years old. This age group also includes students who are self-sponsored; however, the Saudi culture of studying rarely occurs at a late age. Administering the questionnaire online saves time and paper, while obtaining feedback a large number of respondents.

**Data collection tools.** This study uses a survey design. Vogt, Gardner and Haeffele (2012) claimed that a survey design is the most commonly used design in social studies because it is effective for collecting large amounts of data. A survey design seems to be the most accurate and effective method to use in this study for the following reasons stipulated by Vogt, Gardner and Haeffele (2012): (1) Data can be obtained by asking people questions, (2) the questions are asked online using an electronic questionnaire and by conducting interviews via email, (3) the data is obtained directly from the participants, (4) the data obtains brief answers to the questions, (5) a sufficient response rate can be expected and (6) the researcher can have a clear idea of how to use the answers to address the research problem. Furthermore, Hakim (2000) recommended using a survey design for cross-cultural studies.

Cohen and Manion (1994) recommended using more than one tool to collect data. This study therefore uses two tools – a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews – to gain a deeper understanding of this specific topic, to strengthen the value of the results and to increase confidence in the findings. In addition, these two data collection tools have been used frequently in linguistic studies that have yielded different perspectives. For instance, Obaid (2015) carried out a study on a similar topic to this study using the same two tools and obtained valuable findings.

**The questionnaire.** Aimed to explore the cross-cultural issues affecting SSs, comprised 32 questions and was divided into two parts. The first part contained eight personal questions to obtain details such as the participant's age, the name of the university they attended and the length of residency in the UK. The second part contained 24 statements associated with either cross-cultural challenges or second language learning (see Appendix 4). The SSs were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the written statements. Gillham (2007) suggested that sociologists and social anthropologists should use a small-scale questionnaire to discover the role of cross-cultural situations and its effects.

The questionnaire was adopted from Al-Daheri's (2013) questionnaire, which was designed for the same context. I deleted statements that were unrelated to my research questions.

**Semi-structured interviews.** This study also used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Kendall (2008) pointed out that interviews are a valuable source to examine the participants' opinions and perceptions. Because the SSs were inaccessible during the summer holidays, when the interviews were conducted, the interviews were administered by email, and the interview questions were adapted from Alsaygh's (2015) interviews, which addressed the same topic as this study. The participants were asked to answer twelve interview questions regarding their study experience in the UK and about cross-cultural challenges they faced, starting with more general questions (see Appendix 5). Of the ten invitations I sent to the SSs by email inviting them to participate voluntarily in the study, only four students agreed to take part in the interview. The students were males and females attending different universities in the UK. After five days, I sent another email reminding those students who had not

yet responded to provide their feedback.

The semi-structured interviews used in this study contain open questions (Clifford, 2016). While structured interviews limit the participants' free expression of their opinions, unstructured interviews make it difficult for the researcher to keep time and control the topic.

Cassell and Symon (2004) demonstrated that using an electronic interview is useful for collecting data, especially for those who find it difficult to express themselves freely in a face-face interview. Additionally, the respondents can reply in their own time, they do not need to travel to meet the interviewer and it costs less than other methods, such as a telephonic interview.

## **Literature Review**

### **Challenges Associated with Studying Abroad**

The UK receives an increasing number of international students every year. In 2014 and 2015, 436,585 students went to the UK from around the world (UKCISA, 2016). According to UK international student statistics, the majority of international students come from countries such as China, India, Nigeria, Malaysia, the US and Saudi Arabia (UKCISA, 2016). The UK benefits from international students in different ways. The international students add cultural variety to the British students' classes (Sandhu and Asrabadi, 1994) and contribute largely to the UK economy; the international education income reached £14 billion in 2016 with a projection of reaching £26 billion by 2025 (UKCISA, 2016).

International students face various challenges when studying abroad besides the differences in language and cultural backgrounds. Their adjustment to the new environment includes homesickness, academic demands and loss of social support (Pedersen, 1991). Various linguists and researchers have studied the issues that may affect international students in various languages. For example, Alyami (2015) examined the impact of cultural principles and racial identity of SSs in the UK on their combined self-esteem, acculturative stress and thoughts. The findings suggest that maintaining the students' original cultural ethics and morals is a constructive predictor of combined self-esteem. The results also show significant differences between students who are new to the UK and those who spent several years living and studying in the UK. However, this study failed to include SSs' geographical and family backgrounds, which would likely have had a significant impact on the findings.

Young, Natrajan-Tyagi and Platt (2014) conducted a study to examine how students identify themselves when studying abroad. They applied a qualitative method of conducting phenomenological interviews for collecting data. The participants, who were second and fourth year undergraduate students from a college in Southern California, had enrolled in four-to-eight-week programmes in countries such as the UK, Spain, Italy, Taiwan and China, even though this was the students' first experience to live abroad. The findings suggested that the students were affected emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally as they negotiated their identities and adjusted their self-images while abroad (Young, Natrajan-Tyagi & Platt, 2014). However, the researchers limited their interviews to those who had spent only five weeks in the UK and Spain. Different results might have been found if the study had been conducted for longer. For example, more reliable data could have been obtained on the modulation of the students' self-image if the students had stayed in the countries for a semester or longer period.

Additionally, Clarke, Flaherty, Wright & McMillen, (2009) examined US

students' multicultural skills when participating in a semester abroad programme. The results of this study revealed that students who study abroad might have increased intercultural proficiency and openness to cultural diversity compared with others who remain in a traditional campus setting. However, Clarke, et al. (2009) only included one experimental group from one international location; therefore, to understand the intercultural sensitivity and obtain a clearer picture, it would have been better to include participants from various locations.

Concerning cultural competence of international English language learners, Obaid (2015) carried out a comprehensive review relating to SSs studying the English language in the UK. The aim of the study was to investigate the cultural competence of the Saudi Language learners and discover how well they were prepared by their sponsor in terms of cultural diversity. In this study, Obaid (2015) used quantitative and qualitative approaches by conducting questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings highlight the importance of cultural awareness events, such as workshops, for increasing competence and positive experiences among Saudi language learners studying in the UK. However, this study shows the remarkable significance of cultural competence because Obaid (2015) shed light on how understanding cultural competence could influence the students' academic performance.

In a study titled, 'Who Plans Not to Study Abroad', Stroud (2010) investigated various factors that may affect US students abroad, such as the student's major, gender, cultural attitude and distance (from college to home). Stroud (2010) used surveys to collect data from 3,318 male and female full-time university students from Massachusetts. The findings indicate that females gave distance the highest priority when choosing their place of study. These findings differ from the abovementioned studies in which students were living more than 100 miles from their preferred university and were interested in studying abroad. Although this study included a large number of students and investigated a number of various factors, the results could not be generalised because the data were only collected from students at Northeastern University in the US. Several US studies have focused on the effect of cross-cultural experiences. However, the results of these studies could not be generalised to other student populations because of the cultural differences of each community or society where the students live.

Gender is one aspect of cross-cultural issues on which researchers and linguists have focused. For example, Alhazmi (2010) carried out a pilot study to examine how Saudi international students' transition from a gender segregated culture to a mixed gender environment in Australia and explore how gender might influence the SSs' identities. Alhazmi (2010) used a qualitative phenomenological approach by applying intensive and detailed interviews with two SSs, one male and one female. The findings of this study revealed that the extreme Saudi gender segregation culture has a negative impact on SSs experience in the Australian community, especially in terms of their communication with peers in a coeducational environment.

A considerable amount of literature has focused on cross-cultural issues affecting international students. However, studies relating to SSs have been relatively few, and no studies explain the reasons why SSs, in particular, encounter negative cultural experiences. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by investigating cross-cultural issues such as language, climate, food, social interaction and other aspects that may influence SSs who are studying in the UK. This study also examines how English language issues affect the SSs' academic performance.

### Overview of Culture

**Cultural differences.** Over the last four decades, Saudi Arabia has been developing into a modern society at an incredible level. Thus, Saudi Arabia has developed a remarkable balance between its Islamic morals, culture criterion and modern development (Long and Maisel, 2010). Based on the latest United Nations estimates, the population of Saudi Arabia has risen at a growth rate of 3.7% to over 32,000,000 in 2016 (Worldometers, 2016).

Studies by Peterson and Hofstede (2003) and At-Twajjry and Al-Muhaiza (1996) highlight the main cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the UK (see Figure 1).

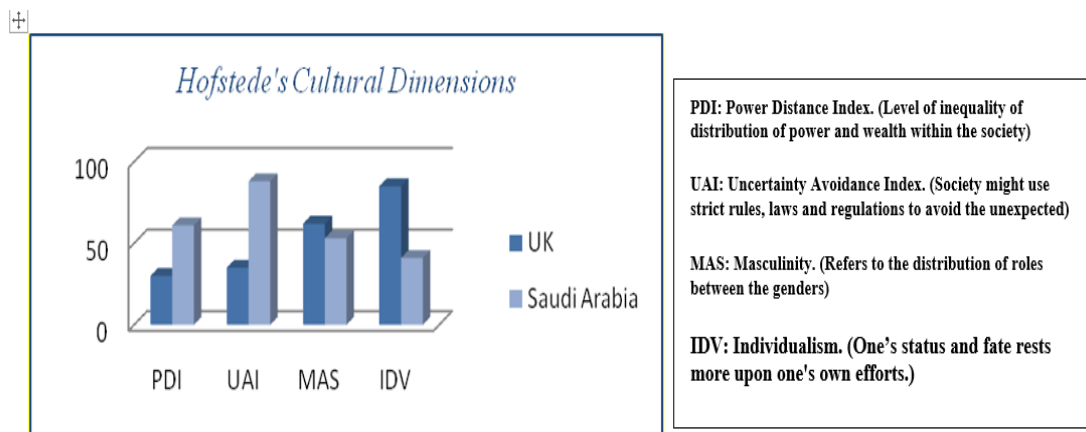


Figure 1. Hofstede's cultural dimensions for the UK and Saudi Arabia (Hofstede, 2001; At-Twajjri & Al-Muhaiza, 1996).

Figure 1 indicates the vast differences between the two cultures which might affect SSs' adjustments in the UK. First, the power distance index (PDI) indicates that the dissemination of power and wealth is considerably more moderated in the UK than in Saudi Arabia. Second, the uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), which refers to the use of strict laws and regulations to avoid unexpected occurrences, indicates extensive use of rules in Saudi Arabia, which are more than double those of the UK. Third, the masculinity (MAS), which refers to the distribution of roles among genders, is at similar levels in Saudi Arabia and the UK. Last, individualism (IDV), which refers to individuals taking responsibility for their fate, indicates the collective nature of Saudi culture compared to the high level of individualism in the UK. The vast differences between the two countries might affect SSs' ability to cope with the new culture in their daily lives.

In addition, one of the main differences between the British and Saudi cultures is the mixed gender experience. SSs face a challenge when moving from an environment of gender separation to a mixed-gender environment. Gender segregation is considered a cultural custom in Saudi Arabia, where the mixing of genders in places of education, such as schools and universities, is forbidden (AlMunajjed, 1997). Therefore, all Saudi schools are single-sex schools, including public, private and religious schools. The only exception is King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which was established for international research. However, KAUST has been criticised by some Saudi societies for its co-educational system. As a Saudi female who is studying in the UK, I think it is essential for SSs to prepare themselves to handle the new experience. I grew up in a society where my friends were all girls and I only attended female educational institutions. This study only

refers to gender differences if they are reported by the participants.

Another difference between the two cultures is the education system. Prokop (2003) stated that in recent times, people worldwide have become aware of the evolution of education in Saudi Arabia. However, despite the education development in Saudi Arabia, Fatany (2009) claimed that critical thinking and open discussions are rarely allowed in Saudi Arabia's education system. There is a huge difference between the Saudi educational system and the Western education system, which encourages positive criticism and open discussion. These differences might affect SSs' academic performance in the UK, as they need to take time and make an effort to cope with the new education system. Various scholars throughout history have pointed to the importance of critical thinking in education. For instance, Paul (1995, pp. 97–98) referred to critical thinking as 'the heart of well-conceived educational reforms and restructuring because it is the heart of the changes of the 21st century'.

### **Crossing Cultures**

**Concepts associated with crossing cultures.** Storti (1989) pointed out, the failure to adjust to the local culture might incur personal, emotional, professional and financial costs. In addition, Storti (1989) viewed that a lack of understanding of the host country's culture might lead to various consequences for the relations between countries such as military, diplomatic and political relationships. Nevertheless, Storti (2011) named several factors that cross-cultural travellers should consider to help them cope with the new culture including the climate, favourite items, illness and routine. The first of these is the climate of the country, a significant change in climate might affect the travellers' bodies, health and lifestyles. For instance, as SSs leave a hot and dry climate background, it is a challenge for them to cope with the variable and much colder British weather. The second factor is items that the traveller used to have in their own country. These things are itemised under a list entitled 'they don't have that here', and not being able to get the things on this list may affect the expatriate's emotions and make them feel upset and dissatisfied. Examples include favourite food, sports, books in their mother tongue, and even spices used in cooking. This study thus examines whether SSs raise issues concerning these items. The third, getting sick abroad can have not only physical influences on the SSs, but it also may affect their physiological and emotional sides. Finally, losing an accustomed routine can affect a person's wellbeing. Storti (2011) indicated that meeting unfamiliar faces from the local culture is a part of adjusting to the new culture, but expatriates could experience 'homesickness' when they miss their family members, friends and loved ones.

**Culture shock.** Owing to the significant differences between the Saudi and British cultures, SSs are likely to experience culture shock while studying in the UK. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004) explained that culture shock results from the interactions between people from various cultures. These interactions may cause psychological anxiety.

Scholars in several fields of study have different perceptions of the term 'culture shock'. For instance, Furnham and Bochner (1989) referred to the anthropologist Kelevor Oberg (1960) who coined the term 'culture shock'. Oberg (1960) stated that culture shock is the anxiety resulting from losing an individual's familiar symbols of social communication. Oberg (1960) associated six different factors with culture shock: (1) Anxiety resulting from the effort of psychological adjustment, (2) a feeling of loss or dispossession, (3) being rejected by the host culture, (4) a misunderstanding of the role anticipation, (5) astonishing nervousness



and annoyance due to the host and home culture differences and (6) a feeling of weakness resulting from not adjusting well to the new culture (Oberg, 1960 cited in Furnham & Bochner, 1989).

Oberg (1960) presented several stages concerning culture shock. He suggested that a traveller undergoes the four following stages when attempting to adjust to a new environment: (1) The honeymoon stage, which refers to the initial reaction to the new place, involves enjoyment of the new culture, scenes and the food; (2) the crisis stage, which follows the positive experience of the first stage, occurs when the traveller starts to feel frustrated, overwhelmed, anxious and angry; (3) the recovery stage in which the newcomer attempts to resolve the crisis, understand the culture better and learn survival skills; and (4) the adjustment stage in which the traveller begins to enjoy the surrounding environment and their effective adaptation to the new culture (Oberg, 1960 cited in Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

### **Acculturation and SLA**

The ability of international students to adapt to another culture affects their success of acquiring the second language. Hence, if SSs acculturate effectively with the local people in the UK, they will likely succeed academically and overcome the language barriers they might face.

**Definition of acculturation.** Acculturation, which refers to the meeting of different cultures and the consequences of this meeting, is one of the major topics concerned with international students (Sam and Berry, 2006).

Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) presented the process of acculturation-adaptation (Figure 2) and indicated that acculturation-adaptation can be classified into two groups: psychological and sociocultural adaptations. Psychological adaptation presents a stress-coping framework, while sociocultural adaptation presents the culture learning framework. Figure 2 links stress-coping strategies with culture-learning strategies and focuses on the interaction between the sociocultural, psychological and cognitive outcomes, while differentiating between them at the same time.

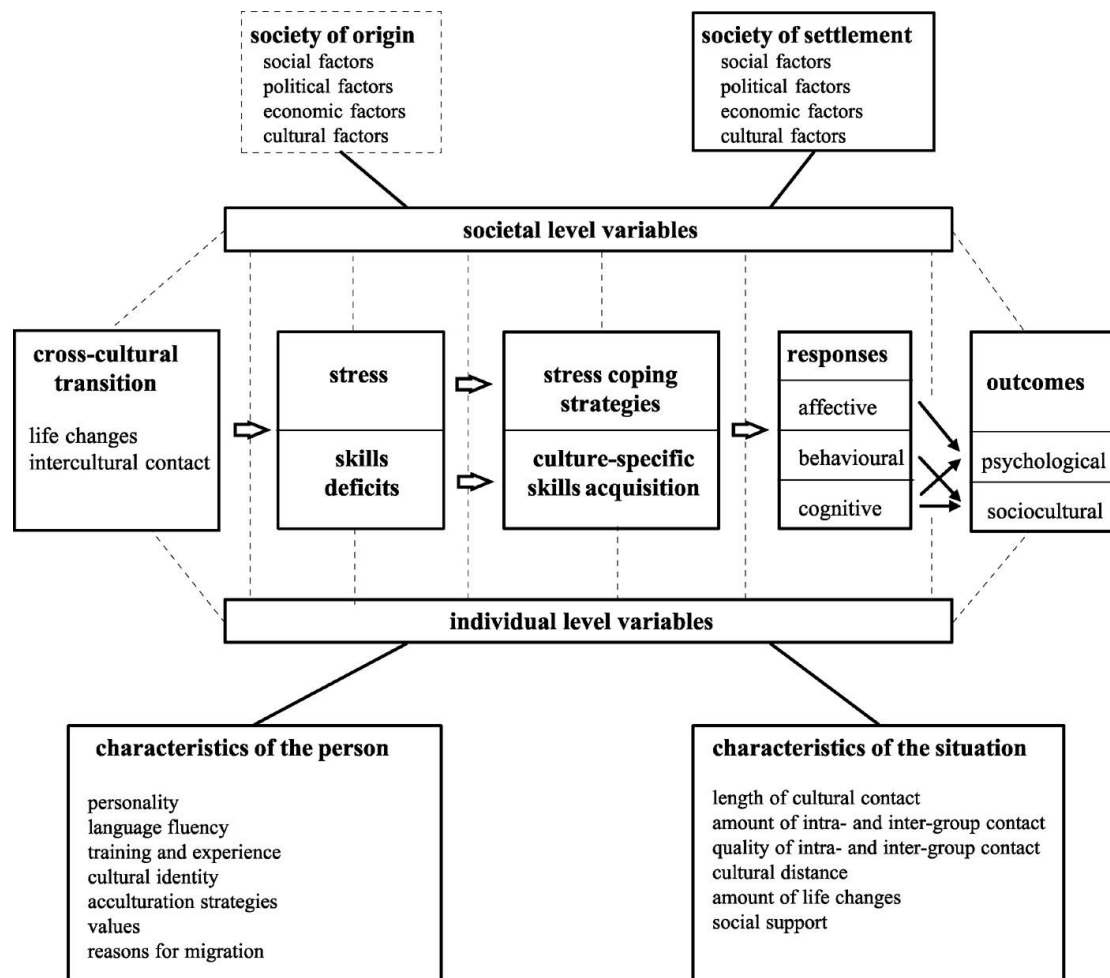


Figure 2. The acculturation process (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001).

Berry (1992) and Berry (1997) suggested three ways to intellectualise the results of acculturation: behavioural shifts, acculturation stress and acculturation adaptations. Behavioural shifts are non-problematic changes that occur, involving three various sub measures such as social shedding, learning and social conflict (Berry, 2005). The social shedding and learning measures refer to the accidental or slow loss of previous behaviours that are eventually replaced with new behaviours, which allow the individual to fit into the new host society more smoothly. Where cultural conflicts occur, the acculturating person usually adapts to follow the behavioural types of the dominant group (Berry, 2005). The most striking result of coping with acculturation changes is called ‘acculturation adaptations’ Berry (2005).

**Major concepts associated with acculturation and SLA.** In relation to the field of SLA, Brown (1980) defined acculturation as the competence to adjust to a new culture (Brown, 1980 cited in Ellis, 1985). Based on this definition, Ellis (1985) claimed that acculturation is the main factor of SLA for two reasons: (1) language is a notable feature of SLA and (2) acquiring a new language within a new cultural environment is connected with the relation between the learners’ community and the new culture’s community.

Schumann (1978) is the pioneer of the acculturation model. Schumann (1978) shed light on various factors that affect social and psychological distance. The social distance impacts whether the learning environment is good or bad. Schumann (1978) pointed out that the learning environment is ‘good’ when the target language (TL)

group and the second language (L2) group share the following points: (1) both groups consider each other equivalent socially, (2) both groups are concerned about the adaptation of the L2 group, (3) both groups expect the participation of the L2 group in public activities using the TL, (4) the L2 group is small, (5) the L2 group's culture is pleasant toward the TL group, (6) both groups have a positive attitude toward each other and (7) the L2 group imagines settling in location of the TL for a long period. However, if the previous conditions are opposing or non-existent, the learning environment is considered a bad environment (Schumann, 1978, cited in Ellis, 1985).

## Data Analysis and Results

### Data Analysis

**Analysis of questionnaire data.** In total, 133 questionnaire responses were received. The questionnaire data were quantitatively analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Scientists (SPSS) software and charts were prepared using Microsoft Excel. The questionnaire data were subjected to the following statistical tools:

- 1) Charts, which present a graphical view of the data, are useful for understanding the distribution of data.
- 2) Descriptive statistics provide the basic summary of the data and help to understand whether the responses to a particular question were neutral or biased in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.
- 3) Independent samples t-tests compare the means between two unrelated groups on the same continuous, dependent variable.
- 4) Cronbach's alpha indicates the reliability of the questionnaire instrument. A Cronbach's alpha value between 0.6 and 0.9 is considered ideal.

The following charts show the results of the analysis of the participants' demographic profile.

Most of the respondents are aged 19 and over suggesting that these SSs are either in higher education or preparing to enter higher education institutions. There is a fairly even distribution of respondents in terms of youth (aged between 19 and 29) and middle-aged students (aged between 30 and 49).

The proportion of male and female respondents was close to even, with males representing 55% of the participants. As Saudi culture is gender biased, males and females may have different perspectives on cross-cultural challenges.

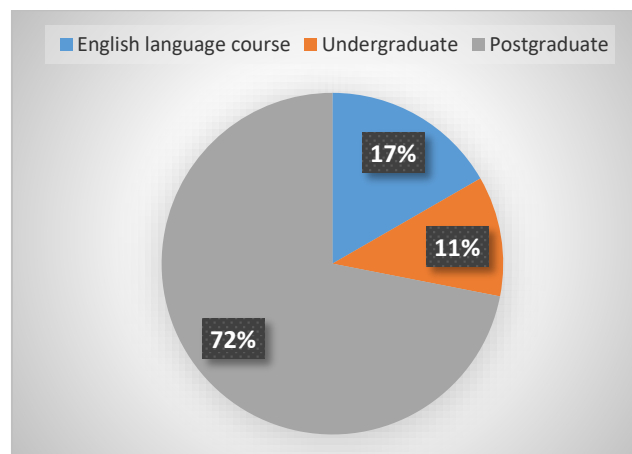


Figure 3. Participants' current programme of study.

Of the participants, 72% had finished their Bachelor’s degree and were currently studying for their Master’s or PhD. Nearly 11% of the participants were pursuing Bachelor’s degrees, while 17% were studying to improve their English language. This indicates that most of the students in the sample were mature students, many of whom had professional work experience. Since the Saudi workforce is culturally very diverse, there is a strong likelihood that these mature students have had some experience of cross-cultural diversity at the workplace.

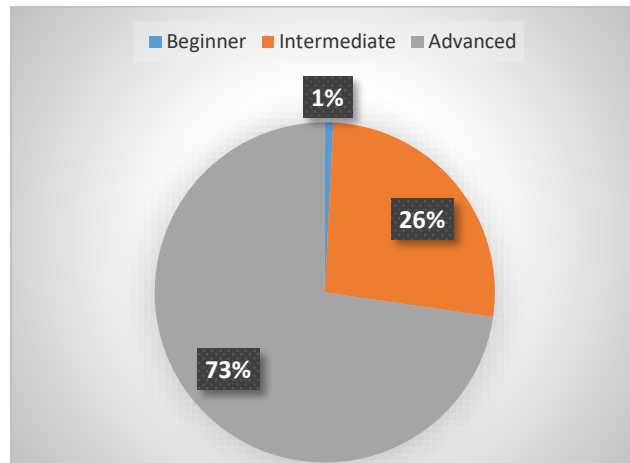


Figure 4. Proficiency in the English language.

Language is a key aspect of assimilating into a new culture; thus, a lack of knowledge of the local language can lead to several cultural issues. Most of the participants were proficient in English; 73% belonged to the advanced level and 26% belonged to the intermediate level. This indicates that language difficulties are unlikely to be the main contributor to cross-cultural issues that the majority of the participants faced.

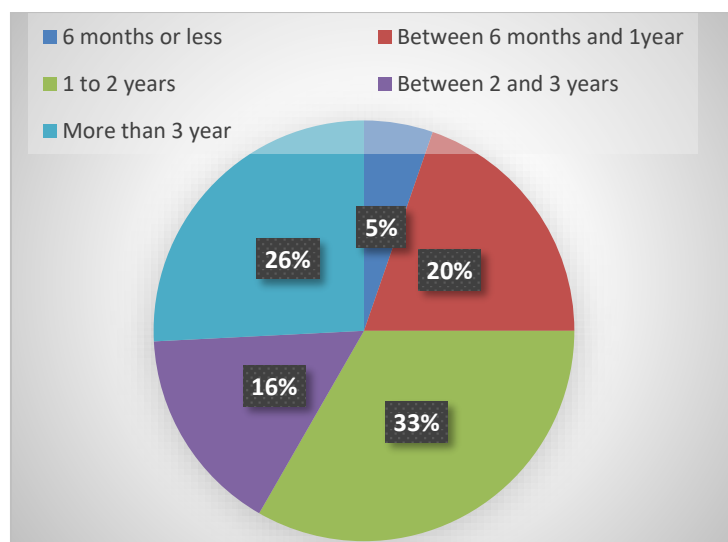


Figure 5. Length of residency in the UK.

Around 75% of the respondents had spent at least a year in the UK. It is expected that most SSs will face a culture shock when they arrive in the UK but, over time, they will become accustomed to the local culture and blend in to some degree.

Therefore, the SSs who have been in the UK for over a year are likely to face fewer cross-cultural issues compared to individuals who have spent less than a year in the UK.

In the analysis of the questionnaire survey data, descriptive statistics provide the basic summary of the data, which helps to understand the responses of the sample as a whole. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the responses received from the questionnaire survey.

*Table 1*  
Cross-Cultural Challenges

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
My knowledge of the British culture is excellent.	133	3.17	.783
The British culture is different from my home culture.	133	4.24	.997
I would like to know more about the British culture.	133	3.24	1.186
When I first arrived in the U.K., I felt frustrated and anxious.	133	3.59	1.172
When I first arrived in the U.K., I felt lost and lonely.	133	3.29	1.245
When I first arrived in the U.K., the new climate affected me physically.	133	3.18	1.301
When I go outside, I feel that people look at me differently.	133	3.01	1.201
Since coming to the U.K., my dress has changed.	133	2.80	1.257
Since coming to the U.K., my understanding of the British culture has deepened.	133	3.53	1.194
Since coming to the U.K., there has been a notable change in my behaviour.	133	3.64	.901
Since coming to the U.K., I tend to stay away from people who share my home culture.	133	3.30	1.151
Since coming to the U.K., I spend a lot of time at my house without contact with people.	133	2.66	1.178
While in the U.K., frequent sickness has affected me emotionally and physically.	133	2.91	1.275
In the U.K., I have trouble communicating with people in English.	133	2.89	1.187
In the U.K., I am not affected at all by the cultural challenges I have faced.	133	2.47	1.263
In the U.K., I am having trouble finding my favourite foods, drinks or spices.	133	3.05	1.161
In the U.K., I often feel homesick.	133	2.80	1.232
In the U.K., I have not been able to keep in contact with my family and friends at home.	133	2.99	1.195
I often feel shy when talking in front of my classmates.	133	2.53	1.162
My British teachers have a good understanding of my home culture.	133	2.53	1.244
I believe that I can learn English without interacting with British people.	133	3.18	1.062
I believe that some cultural beliefs in my culture prevent me from learning English effectively.	133	2.80	1.215
I prefer sitting beside classmates who share my home culture.	133	2.42	1.192
Studying in the U.K. has drastically changed my daily routine.	133	2.53	1.213
Valid N (listwise)	133		

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the questionnaire items, which indicate the cross-cultural challenges reported by the SSs. The item with the highest mean (4.24) was the vast differences between the British and the Saudi cultures (item 2). The main cross-cultural issue that affected the Saudi ESOL students was culture shock, indicated by their feelings of frustration, anxiety (mean=3.59; item 4), loneliness and a feeling of being lost (mean=3.29; item 5) when they first arrived in the UK. Some SSs also reported feeling homesick (2.80; item 17). When combined to create an overall average, culture shock obtained a mean of 3.48. These results thus indicate that the SSs faced negative cultural experiences.

The results of the questionnaire also showed that the SSs considered their English language ability to have a slight influence on their academic performance (mean=2.89; item 14), and the different climate affected them physically to some extent (mean=3.18; item 6). The SSs had difficulties finding their favourite food (mean=3.05; item 16); however, they had few difficulties communicating and interacting socially (mean=2.66; item 12), even though few SSs chose to sit beside classmates from the same culture (mean=2.42; item 23). The mean score for this statement (2.42) was the lowest of all responses.

*Table 2*  
Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Cross Culture	Male	74	2.9717	.53963	.06316
	Female	59	3.0064	.48375	.06298

Table 2 indicates that the level of cross-cultural challenges faced by male SSs in the UK is somewhat less than those experienced by female students. However, to check whether a statistically significant difference exists between the means of the two groups, I conducted an independent samples T-test.

*Table 3*  
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.853	29

The Cronbach's alpha value was determined to examine whether all items within the questionnaire provide the same result in repeated trials. Table 3 shows that the Cronbach's alpha value of the scales included in the study is above 0.6, which indicates that all items are reliable; a Cronbach's alpha value of more than 0.9 indicates that the questions are too similar to each other, while a Cronbach's alpha value of less than 0.6 indicates that the questions are exactly the opposite of each other (Stengel, Bhandari & Hanson, 2009).

**Analysis of interview data.** The semi-structured interviews aimed to ascertain whether the SSs had any negative experiences. The questions were administered to four participants and started with a discussion about their experiences and challenges of studying in the UK. Questions focused on identifying the differences in the cultural values and beliefs of Saudi Arabia and the UK.

Two males and two females who were studying in different universities in the UK participated in the interviews. The students were aged between 20 to 40 years old

and had resided in the UK for 3 months and 7 years.

Interview participant A revealed that he had been studying in the UK for seven years. He faced some significant difficulties associated with language and communication when he first arrived in the UK. He explained his cultural background failed to provide much support and language remained his major academic challenge. He believed that the UK has one of the best educational systems in the world, thereby offering opportunities to gain competitive knowledge through educational facilities and libraries. To overcome the challenges faced on a personal and academic level, he was unsure whether his cross-cultural study experiences in the UK affected his personal values and beliefs, and he encountered no personal challenges while studying in the UK.

The same questions were asked to the participant B, who had previously spent a few years in the country to study a Master's degree, then returned to the UK to complete her PhD at Cambridge University. Participant B considered time management is a major challenge that a student would face while studying in the UK. To overcome academic challenges in the country, she stated that motivating and reminding oneself of one's goals and objectives are the best way. Regarding personal challenges faced while studying in the UK, the respondent replied that social challenges are major obstacles. She still finds it difficult to socialise with the local people because social events revolve around drinking, which is very different from the Saudi culture; this makes it difficult for non-drinkers to fit into social groups. She considered that the environment of the UK is positive in terms of living and studying overall, and she was unaware of any big challenges that needed any special attention. Participant B focused on learning to respect the differences in the cultures.

Participant C had been studying in the UK for more than three years and was studying a Master's degree in Sociology. She found that her basic understanding about the cultural differences was insufficient when she started studying in the UK. Participant C faced several academic challenges including studying in a different language, the self-studying method and presenting academic presentations in English. To overcome academic challenges, she worked hard to develop her language skills. Additionally, she found it difficult to adjust to the weather in the UK. Regarding the cultural differences between the UK and Saudi Arabia, she pointed out the methods of teaching which required her to learn more about the culture of Britain before her studies. Participant C learned to accept all the differences and benefit from the knowledge of the beliefs and values of the new culture. Finally, to overcome the challenges faced in the UK, Participant C recommended making an effort to change people's beliefs about Muslims and Islam in general and become more open to the world.

The last interview participant, Participant D, who was doing a PhD in Virology at Cambridge University, had been studying in the UK for four years. He considered the good reputation of the UK universities to be a major factor for selecting the country. He was, therefore, able to cope quickly with the new environment. Participant D believed that his cultural background gave him the strength and encouragement to respect other cultures. In terms of the academic challenges faced in the UK, Participant D considered the language difficulties as the major obstacle. The personal challenge Participant D faced while studying in the UK was missing his family. To deal with this, he focused on remembering that he was working hard in a new country to make his family members proud, which kept him motivated towards his goal. Regarding the cultural differences between the UK and Saudi Arabia, Participant D stated that he was still learning about British culture but

found it very different from that of Saudi Arabia. While his cross-cultural study experiences in the UK had little effect on his personal values and beliefs, Participant D reported that studying in a different culture had been a great experience where he learned a lot about a different culture. Participant D's overall perception is that it was the most important stage in his life. He believed in his strengths and efforts to overcome any challenges he faced while studying in a new country.

### Discussion of Results

**Discussion of the results from the questionnaire.** Figure 8 shows the results of the analysis of the questionnaire data regarding the cross-cultural issues most affecting SSs in the UK.

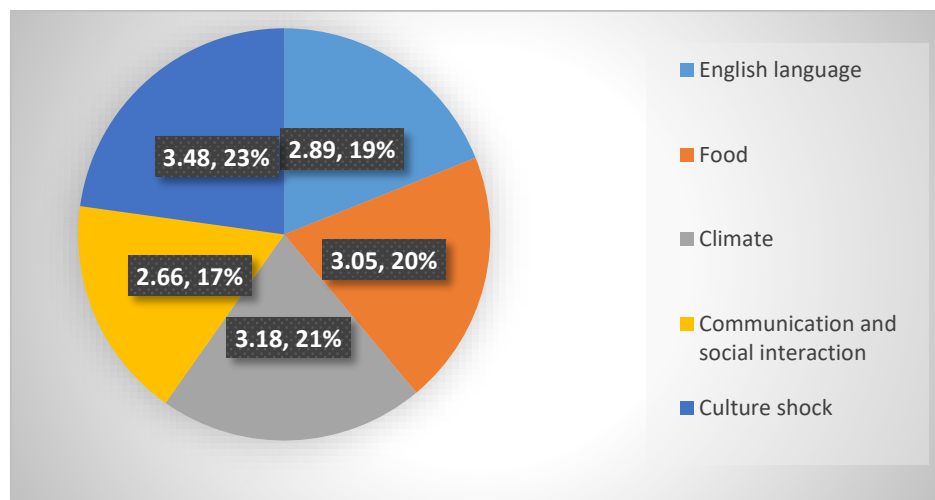


Figure 6. The cross-cultural challenges affecting Saudi ESOL students in the UK.

**Culture shock.** As Figure 8 shows, 23% of the participants were affected by culture shock, as they expressed feelings of frustration, anxiety, loneliness, of being lost and homesickness when they first arrived in the UK. Culture shock was found to be the main negative issue of these SSs, as the majority reported finding considerable differences between the British and Saudi cultures. Sheehan and Pearson (1995) reported that culture shock varies between international students depending on the level of culture differences between their home and the host country. These results supported Oberg (1960), who indicated that one factor associated with culture shock is astonishing nervousness and annoyance due to the differences between the host and home cultures. The results also support the arguments presented by Berry (2003), who stated that international students experience culture shock because of the differences they face in language, lifestyle and food. Oberg (1960) also referred to some factors associated with culture shock, which the SSs reported in this study, such as feeling anxious because of the effort to make a psychological adjustment and the feeling of loss or dispossession.

**Climate.** The results from the questionnaire show that 21% of SSs are affected by the UK climate, which is the second highest percentage. Thus, the differences between the Saudi and British climates have a considerable effect on the SSs' adjustment to the new culture. This result can be compared with the views of Storti (2007), who explained that climate should be considered by the cross-cultural traveller as the climate change might affect their bodies, health and lifestyles. SSs who move from a country with a hot climate for most of the year and a moderate



temperature in the winter might have difficulties coping with the UK climate. As the climate in the UK has a noticeable difference between seasons, a very cold winter, and a variable climate from one day and another, the climate might pose a challenge for SSs.

**Food.** The responses found that 20% of participants faced difficulties in finding their favourite food. As Berry (2003) indicated, the differences between the types of food available in the host country might contribute to the culture shock experienced by international students. As food is considered part of an individual's culture and identity, it has a powerful effect on the SSs' adjustment to the new culture. This supports Storti's (2007) view that cross-cultural travellers should consider items that they used to have access to before moving, such as a favourite food and cooking spices. Having access to Arabic food might remind the SSs of happy family gatherings, which would help to curb their homesickness in the UK, and this has an effect on their academic success. The UK has a diverse range of international shops and restaurants in big cities such as London and Manchester. However, SSs who are studying in smaller towns such as Cambridge are likely to face difficulties in finding rare Arabic food.

**English language and academic performance.** The responses to the questionnaires showed that 19% of SSs reported experiencing difficulties with English language barriers, which influenced the SSs' academic performance slightly, even though few SSs reported issues with communication and social interaction. This supports Ellis's (1985) view that if the learner succeeds in communicating with people of the local culture, they will succeed in acquiring the language of the new country. I personally found that several factors affect SSs' academic performance, including the education system, which varies between the UK and Saudi Arabia; the self-study method; and the workload. Becoming proficient in the English language thus remains one of the main barriers facing overseas students.

**Communication and social interaction.** The results showed that only 17% of SSs reported experiencing issues related to communication and social interaction; this is the lowest percentage of all aspects affecting SSs in the UK (Figure 8). The students were found to be willing to communicate with people from the host country and other international students, as a large percentage of them reported that they tended to stay away from people who share their home culture. The low percentage is likely because the UK promotes international exchange and encourages people to make friends from all over the world. This also supports Berry's (2005) view that effective psychological adaptation in the host country is highlighted by social support and making friends. Moreover, the rich social life and the university clubs in the UK provide opportunities for SSs to interact with local people. The public transport services also help SSs to get around the UK to meet friends and enjoy the British cities. This result also underlines Alhazmi's (2010) study of SSs in Australia, which indicated that SSs are comfortable communicating and interacting socially in the Australian community, except with their peers in a coeducational environment. The findings from the questionnaire indicate that the cross-cultural issues have a negative impact on the Saudi ESOL students in the UK.

#### **Discussion of the results from the interviews.**

**Benchmarking the results from the interviews.** A content analysis technique was used to identify the key themes emerging from the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. The results of the interviews clarify that the SSs who are studying at universities in the UK found it difficult to cope with the language barrier. From the first day of their arrival, they faced challenges associated with the English language,

and even after several years of studying in the country, Participants A, C and D lacked confidence in their English skills. The SSs often encountered problems with the English language when communicating with their friends and peers because of their different cultural backgrounds (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). In addition, while Participant B was uncomfortable with the drinking culture of youths in the British society, others made deliberate efforts to adjust themselves psychologically to the new environment, which is a completely different culture. These scenarios indicated that the SSs faced a culture shock, which often occurs because of an unpleasant surprise or shock experience with the host culture (Furnham & Bochner, 1989); this can create a feeling of being rejected by the host culture and give rise to a misperception of role expectations (Oberg, 1960).

Another point of significance that arose from the results of the interview is associated with the various challenges of studying abroad. Alongside the language differences, the SSs considered the major challenges they face while studying in the UK as the cultural differences, homesickness, different teaching methods and tough academic demands (Participants C and D). They also highlighted the difficulties adjusting to the new environment and the anxiety experienced when taking children to the new country while studying in an international location. These results can be benchmarked with the views of Pedersen (1991), who explained that the academic demands, loss of social support and homesickness pose major challenges while studying abroad. These results indicate the psychological impact the SSs experience from the differences between the two cultures. Participants C and D reported that they felt the support from their cultural background in terms of respecting the different cultures. However, the other two participants failed to receive such support from their home country's culture. The students explained that they always try to accept the new culture and adjust while retaining their original ethics and morals. The results indicate that the students who had lived and studied in the UK for a longer period had learned to adjust to the cultural differences while retaining their original cultural ethics and morals (Alyami, 2005).

All of the participants reported that they worked hard to improve their language skills and adjust to the cultural differences to avoid any conflicts or anxiety. They were positive about accepting new values and beliefs, which contributed toward remarkable changes in the SSs' cultural adaptability. These results support (Mapp, 2012), who explained that the cross-cultural adaptability of students is not affected by the native country's language or the time spent in their home country.

Overall, the results from the interviews showed that all the participants faced academic difficulties and language barriers when attempting to assimilate into their lives in the UK. Three of the four participants were affected by a negative culture experience in the UK: culture shock. One participant reported experiencing difficulties with communication and social interactions, while another participant reported experiencing difficulties adjusting to the UK climate. None of the participants who were interviewed experienced issues with finding their favourite food.

### **Conclusion**

Education has a significant effect on an individuals' life since it provides people with skills to navigate the world. One reason people travel abroad is to receive a good education. Many UK universities have attracted international students to pursue their studies from all over the world. A considerable number of SSs also make the decision to study in the UK, despite the huge economic, cultural, religious and

education system differences between the two countries. Consequently, modifying and adjusting to a new environment is not simple.

This study contributes to the limited literature that has attempted to investigate the different cross-cultural issues affecting SSs in the UK by answering the following research questions:

- What cross-cultural issues affect SSs in the UK?
- Do SSs encounter negative cultural experiences while studying in the UK?
- How does the English language influence the SSs' academic performance?
- Do SSs report experiencing issues relating to climate, food, communication and social interaction?

The following important conclusions can be drawn from this study: (1) The main cross-cultural issue that affected the Saudi ESOL students was culture shock, as the SSs reported feeling frustrated, anxious, homesickness, lonely and lost while they were studying in the UK. (2) The vast differences between the British and Saudi cultures had a psychological impact on the students. (3) The students also faced difficulties adjusting to the UK weather and food. (4) Some SSs experienced difficulties communicating and participating in social interactions. (5) The SSs found that the different education systems between the two countries affected their academic performance. (6) Some respondents experienced difficulties mastering English and therefore had problems meeting the required academic demands of giving presentations. The students worked hard to improve their language skills to ensure a good academic performance at the universities in the UK. (7) Last, the results indicated that no significant difference exists between male and female students in regard to cross-cultural challenges.

The findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature by enhancing our understanding of the cross-cultural issues affecting Saudi ESOL students in the UK. The study investigated how issues, such as the climate, food, communication and social interaction affect SSs assimilation in the UK, which existing literature has failed to address.

Besides all of the issues that SSs encounter when moving to the UK, most of them agreed that working hard is the key to accomplishing their goals. Storti (1989, p. 80) stated that 'the most obvious reward for being culturally effective is that it greatly increases your chances of accomplishing whatever objectives you had in going abroad'.

The results of this study suggested significant findings because the approaches such as the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews that were used to analyse the collected data were chosen academically for this purpose. For example, Dörnyei (2007) and Harden and Thomas (2005) indicated the significance of using these two tools to obtain more perspectives of specific topics.

### **Research Limitations**

The results of this study cannot be generalised because the study focused on cross-cultural issues faced by SSs. Additional limitations include the following:

- 1) The size of the sample population (137) was fairly small because the participants comprised only Saudi ESOL students.
- 2) The age, length of residency and education background of SSs is limited.

Though various cross-cultural issues such as culture shock, the language barrier, food preferences, the climate, communication and social interaction were considered and analysed, it was not possible to include other issues such as family responsibilities, finances and living in halls of residence due to the time and word

count limitations of this study.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been made:

- Recommendations for all institutions and universities in the UK:
  - A. Improve the students' cultural awareness and make them familiar with the education system by conducting compulsory workshops or seminars rather than lectures at the beginning of the course. This would help to increase the academic success of SSs who intend to study in the UK.
  - B. Limit the number of SSs in the language classes to help them communicate and interact with international students.
  - C. Organise outdoor activities for SSs to communicate and interact with British native speakers to share their cultural values and exchange information on customs and traditions. This will allow SSs to talk about cultural issues and their personal experiences freely with British native speakers, and vice-versa.
  
- Recommendation for SSs:
  - A. Research the new destination before leaving the home country to find out about the country's culture, climate and education system and to prepare for a better adaptation to life in the UK.
  - B. Socialise with international students and British people to minimise the possibility of experiencing negative cross-cultural impacts.
  
- Recommendations for future research:
  - A. Compare the results of cross-cultural issues affecting Saudi ESOL students in the UK with SSs in another English-speaking country such as the US. The purpose behind this to compare the different factors challenging Saudis in both countries.
  - B. Examine the effects of gender variation on assimilation to life in the UK.
  - C. Examine issues such as family responsibilities, finances and living in halls of residence to obtain a full picture of the cross-cultural issues affecting SSs in the UK.
  
- Recommendation for sponsors such as Saudi universities:
  - A. Encourage sponsored students to study the topic of assimilating into the UK to help next generations to succeed in their experience of studying in the UK.
  
- Recommendation for the Ministry of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia:
  - A. Conduct an orientation programme for SSs before they travel to the UK. Although they currently provide a workshop for students to attend before leaving the country, it is insufficient as it provides general advice for all students planning to study in approximately 14 different countries. Special programmes designed to cover specifics of the country where students intend to study will increase their awareness of the cultural differences between the two countries.

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