

Challenges Faced by International Students in pursuing doctoral study: A case study of Saudi students in American higher education programs

ABSTRACT

Many international students aspire to seek admission to higher education and pursue their studies, especially in the US. Therefore, institutions in general and American institutions in particular must realize the students' perspectives and offer support so they can face their unique problems during their education. This review aims to look into specific learning and adaptation-related experiences of international higher education students during a challenging transition to a large, public research university in the United States. The study was conducted at an American university in the southwest. The program enrolls students worldwide seeking master's and doctoral degrees in languages and social studies. Students may select from a wide range of concentrations, such as teaching English as a Second Language, bilingual education, and social justice, to name a few. These students are often encouraged to study interdisciplinary subjects to improve their understanding of the realm of education and how it is affected by society and politics. Professors teaching these interdisciplinary subjects who descend from various countries and teach in multiple disciplines hold controversial and sometimes even contradicting visions on education and research issues. This review explored the challenges and problems that Saudi international students face while pursuing higher education. A qualitative data collection and analysis method was followed to arrive at conclusions. 6 Saudi students were interviewed in detail. Study findings revealed various academic, social, cultural, financial, and family implications. It is concluded that Saudi international students encounter specific difficulties in US institutions, such as mentoring hardships, adjustment to a new educational system, lack of administrative support, and communication gaps between the supervisors and the researchers.

Keywords: Higher education; English education; second/foreign language; academic writing; challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of international students studying in the United States of America (nearly one million for the academic year of 2014-2015) exceeded the total number of international students studying abroad in other nations altogether (Wetherill, 2015). Wetherill and Clayton (2014) indicated in their study that the population of international students represents 4% of the total population of students in the United States of America. However, nations like the United Kingdom and Australia have succeeded in obtaining and sustaining higher retention rates of international students than the United States of America (Burkholder & Holland, 2014). As an international graduate student who pursued his higher education in the United States of America, what factors are at play that contributed to such a paradox between America and other nations in terms of the retention rate? What supporting components need to be added or fixed for international students in the U.S. but were successively made available and efficiently functioning in other nations? Why do international students in the United States of America seem to need help in their academic journey? Is the problem pertinent to academic readiness?

20 1.1. From my own experience, I believe that a significant and logical reason behind the presence of those international
21 students in America (or any other nation) is their exemplary academic excellence back home; otherwise, they would
22 not have been nominated, selected, and sponsored by their governments to represent their nations in international
23 universities. A considerable number of international students, at least those I was privileged to meet, have reached a
24 certain degree of fluency and eligibly passed some achievement tests that qualified and legitimized their admitted
25 status at American schools. Therefore, the probable cause of such a struggle that some international students in the
26 U.S. endure goes beyond their academic aptitudes. It is probably factors that deal with the new educational structure,
27 academic life, and social world the international students have just entered (Burdett & Crossman, 2012). Their
28 struggle revolves around issues intersecting with their cultural and national boundaries and expectations more than
29 the lack of a specific set of academic skills. It was noted in the recent past that Saudi students face many challenges
30 of different types: cultural issues, adaptation problems, family responsibilities, financial crises, general health, social
31 and emotional problems, and language and academic challenges. (Albeshir, 2022). While Alasmari (2023) confirmed
32 adaptation-related issues.

33 1.2. Problem statement

34 This paper endeavors to critically tap into some obstacles and issues that international students are confronting in the
35 United States of America. Its ultimate goal is to help school administrators and academic advising services better
36 understand this group of students. It also aims to assist the school administrators in tailoring their future initiatives towards
37 more equitable comprehension and inclusion of this minority group of students and to alleviate the issues and obstacles
38 they face. It mainly studies the advisor-advisee relationship and communication breakdowns/malfunctions between
39 international students and their committee members or advisors. As a graduate student, I have realized that international
40 students are more likely to experience more hardships than their American fellows due to cultural differences and the
41 education system. So, this paper strives to inform stakeholders (school administrators, faculty, and international students
42 alike) and disclose some of the hardships lived by and discrimination against international students regarding their access
43 to fair use of school advisory resources. All school resources should guide students' professional development in a way
44 that helps them 'read the world' in which they live.

45 2. Literature review

46 2.1. A review of multiple factors

47 An international student's ability to succeed in an American college no longer solely depends on his/her
48 intellectuality, intelligence, or linguistic competence. It is also contingent upon and intertwined with so many factors. The
49 path to success in foreign universities is more complicated than it appears. From my experience, it takes more than a
50 sophisticated and well-formed set of academic skills to persist in the American educational system. I, and others with
51 whom I was pleased and privileged to meet, have felt a sense of alienation and frustration, especially in our first year of
52 studies. These sentiments were echoed by first-generation doctoral students, as revealed by (Gardner, 2013). A sense of
53 belonging, which academic advisors can cultivate, is a very influential factor (Heisserer & Clarette, 2002). Affiliating with
54 some community dramatically enhances one's self-esteem and efficacy. As a human being, feeling and gaining that sense
55 of belonging and respect is significant to succeed in a context whereby all surroundings, communication patterns, and
56 expectations look challenging and entirely novel. The advisors' appreciation, acceptance, and respect of the international
57 students' backgrounds enhance the international students' outcomes on the personal and academic levels alike (Cadioux
58 & Wehrly, 1986). The findings of the latter accord with others in which effort, personal and academic development, and
59 improved learning outcomes were found to be three influential factors that an advisor of international students can inspire
60 and accomplish by being more attentive and appreciative of the students' backgrounds and funds of knowledge (Luo &
61 Jamieson-Drake, 2013).

62 The criticality of the college level is emphasized in this article because, to me, a college is a place where first-hand
63 unfamiliar spaces and identities are enormously created, given the increasingly multi-ethnic, racial, and cultural
64 demographic in which one has to blend (Wetherell & Clayton, 2014). In higher education programs level, international
65 students are often obligated to cross the boundaries of their comfort zones to engage in unexplored experiences that
66 could challenge their ability to thrive academically. New campuses and novel national experiences can be overwhelming
67 (Burdett & Crossman, 2012). This unfamiliarity that international students undergo in college threatens and undermines
68 their life chances because the college level is a critical crossroad. One avenue for students to escape this maze is to
69 utilize counseling/advising resources through which navigating this complex educational system becomes possible, as
70 Petress explained that there is a close connection between academic performance and comfort level. He mentioned some
71 crucial factors contributing to the student's quality of life and achievement. (1996p. 92, as cited in Prop & Rhodes, 2006).

72 In a very racially and ethnically diverse educational context, as is the case of any campus in most American universities, it
73 is expected that a decent advising service is made available for students, which is, to a large degree, the case in most
74 American schools in the U.S. However, the fact that these counseling services were made 'accessible' may not
75 necessarily evoke positive outcomes. Perry, Weatherford, and Lausch (2016) have revealed that international students

79 have experienced more difficulties collaborating with their academic advisors. Their study produced results that
80 corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work of (Hwang et al., 2014; Valka, 2015), who showed that
81 international students exhibited more concerns about their advisor-advisee relationship than their western-students peers.
82 The heterogeneousness of students' cultural backgrounds and expectations of what a decent counseling experience
83 should entail and look like represents a challenge to school administrators. This heterogeneity results from the distinct
84 dispositions and habitus that students bring with them. What I mean by habitus is "the embodiment of what one brings to
85 bear on a particular moment of being with the other in life and classroom: all the intellectual tools, languages,
86 perspectives, social practices, and so on that one has acquired or learned" (Jones & Enriquez, 2009, p. 147).
87

88 It is uncommon for students' preferences on advising to come to a consensus. Research has revealed that some students
89 found it more beneficial when advisors are known for their technical competencies rather than personal merits
90 (Pascarella, 1980). Other students value a healthy advisor-advisee relationship at the expense of other technical
91 competencies (Winston & Sandor, 1984). Nevertheless, regardless of how inconsistent the students' preferences for
92 advising are, research has shown some broad grounds amidst these diverse expectations of advisors. These broad
93 expectations are twofold: An advisor as an academic developer and a personality mentor. These two merits are what
94 students usually seek out in their advisors. However, to some extent, literature has highlighted these two features for
95 advisors to acknowledge. Why is it still a fact that breakdowns between international students and their advisors are still
96 persistent and prevalent? This inquiry is addressed in this paper.
97

98 **2.1. Socio-cultural problems**

99 It has always been challenging for international students to settle down in a country with a different language and culture from their
100 home country, especially when the educational setup is unfamiliar. (Rabia and Karkouti (2017). However, Jameel et al. (2022) found
101 that most Saudi students were finally happy in Australia.
102

103 **2.3. Financial issues**

104 Financial problems are always considered significant because students almost always need money for different reasons. In this
105 context, it is not that crucial for Saudi students because most of them receive funds as financial aid from the Saudi government
106 (Alremaih, 2016). Aldossari (2016) and Alhajjaj (2016) conducted similar studies and supported Alremaih's findings. However,
107 Alhajjaj (2016) and Alremaih (2016) noted that married students having children are more likely to face financial challenges because
108 they have to utilize the facility of nurseries for their young kids. Albeshir (2022) also confirmed specific difficulties, including
109 finance, which Saudi international students face in the US.
110

111 **2.4. Family responsibilities**

112 Most doctoral students live with their families during their studies in the US. Males have multiple family responsibilities that they
113 want to do, but it is hard, especially at the beginning of the study, to find the time that they need to do household chores. Female
114 students face issues, too. Managing time between their responsibilities toward family and education can be challenging. Female
115 international Saudi students said they need nurseries to keep their kids safe while they are away for studies on campuses. However,
116 many nurseries are too expensive and difficult to afford, especially in populated cities.(Alramadan, 2016; Alremaih, 2016).
117

118 **3. Methods of the study**

119 **3.1.Setting of the study**

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121 The study was conducted at an American university in the southwest. The program enrolls students worldwide seeking
122 master's and doctoral degrees in languages and social studies. Students may select from a wide range of concentrations,
123 such as teaching English as a Second Language, bilingual education, and social justice, to name a few. These students
124 are often encouraged to study interdisciplinary subjects to improve their understanding of the realm of education and how
125 it is affected by society and politics. Professors teaching these interdisciplinary subjects who descend from various
126 countries and are majoring in various disciplines hold controversial and sometimes even contradicting visions on
127 education and research issues. So, students find themselves urged to encounter different social, cultural, and even
128 academic and scientific challenges, having to deal directly with professors unrelated to their academic interests or beliefs.
129 The study followed the qualitative method for data collection and analysis.
130

131 **3.3. Participants**

132 A group of six international students were recruited in 2016. These students were pursuing their higher education at an American
133 university in the Midwestern region and descended from different ethnicities and genders. The group comprised three males and
134 females. All of them have advanced in their coursework phase. Four of them had their program of studies finished and the other two
135 were about to complete their courses. All but one of the participants were married and had teaching experiences of at least four years.
136 Four of the participants have children. All participants are in their mid-thirties of age. The participants' advanced position in their
137 programs of study will inform the tentative findings in this project as the participants have experienced and gained adequate and rich
138 knowledge about the nature of academic relationships in the American educational structure. It is also worth mentioning that the

139 participants and the researcher shared a solid academic relationship. We used to attend many conferences and professional
140 developmental workshops that the school used to organize. The next pseudonyms refer to the participants in the findings/discussion
141 sections: Michel, John, Zizo, Suzan, Sarah, and Brittney.

142 **3.4. Instrument and implementation**

143 To collect data for this paper, an 'interview' was designed and implemented to collect qualitative data. As a researcher, I wanted to
144 collectively discuss and shed light on some critical aspects that some of us (international students) might have or are currently
145 experiencing. I offered the interview at different times and days to best suit each one's time. The participants have agreed on the
146 location and date for the interview. Unofficial consent forms (invitations) were also sent to the participants. The participants were also
147 informed that our discussion would be recorded. Two of them attended the interview, while the rest responded via Zoom.

148 **3.5. Research questions**

149 The research aimed to explore the following questions:

- 150 1. What challenges, if any, do international students experience in graduate studies?
 - 151 2. Are you content with the academic support you received in your graduate studies?
 - 152 3. To what extent do Saudi international students face financial concerns?
- 153

154 **4. Analysis of qualitative data**

155 Data were recorded, transcribed, and coded as per the norms of thematic analysis. Thus, themes were finalized based on the objectives
156 and research questions of the study. Five major themes were finalized, and analyses were done accordingly.

157 **4.1. Thematic Analysis of the Interview**

158 **Theme.1- Mentoring hardships&cultural differences**

159 Based on the interview responses and available literature it can be said that there are many educational differences
160 between the two countries such as the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. (Alenezi, 2019; Alhajjuj, Almotery,2009; Alobidan, 2020;
161 Brutt-Griffle, et al., 2020). It also was noted that various academic challenges arose due to many reasons, both cultural
162 and academic of kind. On the one hand, students found difficulties selecting their academic advisors because the latter
163 had a rigid set of culturally related expectations that international students still needed to meet. So, most participants
164 experienced disappointment with the quality of advisory services they received from their academic mentors. It took a long
165 psychologically daunting process to get a mentor who accepted the participants for who they were. On the other hand,
166 many participants still had to compromise many of their research interests to get accepted. Many participants agreed that
167 their mentors needed to see more added value in the research areas suggested by international students. It was
168 uncommon in American education to explore the topics that interest international students. This process of being different
169 from the "norms" of what is expected to be worth exploring in the American higher educational system costs the
170 participants psychologically. Many participants felt that power dynamics infiltrated and, therefore, they felt unsupported
171 academically. It is also a fact that while seeking admission to American universities, the candidates keep such differences
172 in mind, and are ready to accommodate or adjust (Alenezi, 2019, Alobidan, 2020)unless the issue becomes 'religious'
173 which a Muslim may not tolerate. (Alqahtani,2020). (Alramadan, 2016). It took the participants some time to settle and
174 adjust to studying in the American higher education system. Adjustment issues are not only associated with cultural
175 factors but also linguistic as some participants struggled to meet the expectations of their mentors in using the English
176 language for academic purposes. (Alsanea, 2017).

177 **Theme.2- Family Issues and Dependence**

178 Most of the Saudi students at higher education level study in the US when they are married. They depend on each other.
179 Sometimes they feel more independent in the US. Females felt more independent in their daily lives (Lefdahl-Davis &
180 Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Macias, 2016; Alruwaili, 2017; Alenezi, 2019;). While they are independent to a great extent, It
181 becomes challenging for some female students to balance family responsibilities and studies. In this connection, the
182 female students were found as more indifferent towards their para-academic responsibilities because they were
183 overburdened with their studies. Out of many challenges for female students, one is related to children's education as
184 there are not many available nurseries or elementary schools near the international students' residences. (Alramadan,
185 2016; Alremaih, 2016).

186 **Theme.3- Financial difficulties**

187 Financial issues are not a big issue for Saudi international students studying in the US for those who get funds from the
188 Saudi government (Aldossari,2016; Alhajjuj, 2016; Alremaih, 2016). However, those with additional family responsibilities
189 face real financial challenges, especially those with young children to be educated (Alhajjuj, 2016; Alremaih, 2016).
190 Nursery in the US is not free like in the KSA. Moreover, not all students can work part-time due to regulations and a
191 shortage of time.

192 **Theme.4- Academic challenges related to the English language**

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English language education has been noticed as one of the crucial challenges for Saudi International students. (Heyn,2013; Melius, 2017; Young, & Snead, 2017; Alqarni, 2018; Alenezi, 2019; Alobidan, 2020;BruttGriffle, et al., 2020) Many Saudi students agreed that their inadequate English language proficiency has adversely affected their academic achievement (Sandekian, et al.,2015). In addition, reviews of studies revealed that thesis and project writing is also a challenge, especially for those who could improve at academic writing.(Alenezi, 2019; Alhajjuj, 2016; Alqarni, 2018; Alromahe, 2018; Bar, 2017; Brutt-Griffleet al., 2020). As perceived by many professors, the academic writing skills of many scholars could be better; therefore, supervisors are not entirely happy.(Alenezi, 2019; Almorshedi, Alromahe, 2018; Bar, 2017). On the other hand, some researchers have explored that by the time students advance and progress, they face fewer academic reading issues (Melius, 2017; Alromahe, 2018; Alenezi, 2019). English language issues are related to all the skills, including listening and speaking. The fluency issue is quite crucial. (Sandekian, et al., 2015). Language anxiety and hesitation are other factors that hamper such skills, especially when there is a big audience. (Unruh &Obeida, 2015; Alhajjuj, 2016; Young, & Snead, 2017; Alqarni, 2018; Albahlal, 2019).

Theme.5-Academic Admission

Another significant challenge Saudi students encounter is admission approval from American universities. It has been noticed that some students are not satisfied with many universities' administration in the U.S. and their admission requirements, such as the high score in the TOEFL, which is very difficult for quite many Saudis (Almorshedi, 2011; Almotery, 2014; Alremaih, 2016). International Saudi students have felt a lack of quality support and coordination.

5. Discussion, Findings, and Conclusions

5.1. Discussion

Many of the critical aspects that were taped into during the interviews concerned exploring and critiquing power systems. One of the critical points deliberated in this article was the vital role of language in perpetuating the status quo of the power dynamics predominant in interpersonal relationships in school settings. I sparked the discussion by briefly exhibiting the potential of language and its powerful effect in shaping our social relationships, how a specific and dominant ideology can be manufactured and carried over by language, and how language has created a set of norms for students to follow. Then, normativity in schools (especially in the advisor-advisee relationship) has become a significant aspect of our discussion. We exchanged insightful deliberations and engaged in informed discussions about how language and norms in the school, as a social structure, dictate human subjectivity and agency, leaving them in a false consciousness (Adorno,1982). In addition to the specific questions asked and answered, the participants reflected on their stories. They showed how it was difficult for them not to follow the "norms" when approaching their advisors. "I always overthink what to tell my advisor a thousand times and ahead because I do not want to make her feel like I disobeyed."

It became clear that through language and social structure, members are unconsciously commanded to follow the socially reproduced, preconditioned, and looked-for "norms"(Gallagher, 1992). We also agreed that critical literacy is a practice that involves resistance in social contexts. The participants could articulate their feelings and share their experiences while dealing with their advisors. Through critical reflection, we came to a consensus that there was a vacuum in the educational system that nurtured the occurrence of these obstacles between the advisors and their international advisees. When the participants were asked to bring on their experiences in this regard, one of the participants took the initiative and said, "I do not know where to start. It has been tough. I mean, um, can you believe that for two years, I was not allowed to register for the courses I wanted to have? I mean, it is unbelievable. My advisor is very knowledgeable in my area, but this does not give her the right to treat me like an undergrad."

It is clear from this example that the Saudi student felt intimidated by his advisor's authority and control and was confused and frustrated. Although a sense of respect seemed to feature the participant's relationship with his advisor, which can be inferred from his word "knowledgeable," a sense of being oppressed also coexisted, "does not give her the right to treat me like an undergrad." John echoed the same sentiment. One other participant (John) supported the former's disposition by saying: "I had the same experience, but I approached it differently. My advisor in my first year told me she was a directive person from the beginning. She imposed some courses on me, and I could not take it. So, I asked for another advisor".

Although all students agree that an advisor should always be "knowledgeable," "supportive," and "critical" in giving feedback, it is clear that these two examples indicate the exertion of authority over international students. Another powerful example is in Sarah's comment: "I need my advisor to deal with me as an adult who has families, kids, and another life besides the one on campus (says Sarah in her stories/part of her interview). When I carefully analyze her words, it can be arguably inferred that there is a lack of understanding from the advisor. This lack of understanding was the catalyst for the resulting breakdown between the two.

Feedback was a recurring theme in the interview. All the participants have agreed on its importance. What is worth mentioning, though, is Michel's and John's complaints and dissatisfaction about the inconsistency they have noticed in

257 their advisors' amount of feedback. "I was not expecting such treatments from an advisor. I felt that my professional needs
258 were not met and even not respected. I came to the U.S. to learn and improve my skills from expert professors, as
259 everyone expects when he goes to a university in a leading country. I needed more feedback and a room for more
260 discussions ... to develop my research skills" (Michel, 2016).

261 John's narrative about feedback differed from Michel's in that he noticed his advisor's inconsistency and discrimination
262 against him. When I asked him to clarify, his response was, "We students talk. And what I noticed is that my advisor is not
263 consistent in treating all students. Some are getting critical feedback, and others' topics, I would say, are being laughed
264 at" (John, 2016). He continues, "Every time I asked him for feedback, he would say "yes" and "sure" but would never get
265 back to me. Furthermore, whenever I think of asking him, I think he will misunderstand me or get mad at me. Sad! What
266 even makes me crazy is that every time I visit him in his office, he always has something more important to do and says,
267 "Oh, I did not find time, and let us do that next time" (John, 2016)

270 John's and Michel's responses can be partially explained in light of the Expectancy violations Theory (EVT), which
271 analyzes how individuals respond to unanticipated violations of social norms (Burgoon, 1993). Although beneficial, this
272 theory does not explain all the breakdowns and malfunctions between international students and their advisors. The EVT
273 theory solely focuses on the expectations different interlocutors of a conversation have for each other. It overlooks the
274 potential of power dynamics in creating and sustaining obstacles for international students. The examples mentioned
275 above provide a compelling explanation of the role of the educational system in withstanding an oppressive cycle and
276 power hierarchy in the interpersonal relationship between advisor and their international students.

277 The participants' responses differed when encouraged to brainstorm to suggest a way out of this maze. On the one hand,
278 some found this idea appealing. On the other hand, others deemed it challenging to designate a document or take an
279 action that tolerates no discrimination against international students regarding access to and benefit of academic advisory
280 resources. Brittney stated, "I would not write anything since I did not have any negative experiences with the advisors"
281 (Brittney, 2016). Michel deemed it hard to "think of the document as an agreement"; he continues,... "The academia is a
282 community of practice where its members share, exchange, discuss, and help each other without an agreement or
283 contract" (Michel, 2016). However, John and Zizo had a different view in this regard. A common ground between the two
284 is evident in Zizo's utterance: "If we were to suggest an agreement, we would make sure it includes the following. First of
285 all, new graduate students must meet with the department's head or anyone in charge to explain to them explicitly the
286 rights and responsibilities between Ph.D. candidates and committee members" (Zizo, 2016).

289 Zizo's powerful utterance is one example that speaks to the participants' conclusion. Susan and Sarah proposed the
290 establishment of a workshop to take place at the beginning of each academic year. "I think it would be great if we can get
291 some from the department talk about, you know, what kind of assistance to expect from your advisor, like a bill of rights to
292 be shared" (Susan, 2016) is Collective, all the participants, including me and Brittney who experienced no obstacles at all,
293 found their proposal appealing and reasonable that the school should consider organizing and designating a particular
294 workshop in which the school representatives specify and demonstrate the students' and advisors' rights and obligations.
295 This will preserve all parties' justice. Students complain about the "lack of feedback or "guidance," "acceptance and
296 understanding of backgrounds," and undervalue of their "views and decisions" and many other issues they think their
297 advisors must acknowledge and respect can be resolved if the school prearranges such workshops. When these
298 workshops are publicly organized for students and advisors to attend, it becomes easier for students to identify and
299 express any discrimination, prejudice, and injustice practiced against them because they would have already learned what
300 to expect and their rights.

302 **5.2. Findings Summary**

303 5.2.1. Research questions and findings

304 **Research question. 1- What challenges, if any, do international students experience in graduate studies?**

305 A review of previous studies and the responses of the current study's participants confirm that most Saudi international
306 students face different kinds of problems and challenges: cultural differences & adjustment, family issues and
307 dependence, financial problems, academic and linguistic barriers, etc.

308 **Research question. 2- Are you content with the academic support you receive in your graduate studies?**

309 It has been found from the responses of the participants that mentorship challenges and power dynamics infiltrated the
310 program and impacted the student's study plans. Almost all participants had felt disappointment with the quality of
311 academic supervision in a higher education program in a leading country. Some students suffered financially and spent
312 more time than they wished only to obey their academic advisor. In short, it was noted that most students face such
313 issues, and don't get enough support from any ends.

314 **Research question.3- To what extent do Saudi international students face financial concerns?**

315 Finance-related issues are crucial for international students. Saudi students also encounter such problems due to many
316 genuine reasons. Saudi government provides funding in most cases, though.

318 5.3. Conclusions

319 This review studied different challenges faced by Saudi international students while pursuing higher education in the
320 United States. The challenges were summarized under certain specific themes/heads. It is concluded that Saudi
321 international students encounter certain difficulties in the US institutions such as mentoring hardships, adjustment to a
322 heterogenous educational system, lack of administrative support, communication gap between the supervisors and the
323 researchers, family responsibilities, and financial crisis. Stakeholders in the American higher education system need to
324 consider these challenges to provide tailored academic support for the increasing number of international students
325 enrolling in American universities annually.

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429 **Appendix-A: A sample of interview questions & responses**

430 Following is an example of questions asked to each of the interviewees:

- 431 • Do you face any social or cultural issues? If yes, what kinds?
- 432 • How crucial is the financial problems faced by you as an international student?
- 433 • To what extent is your family a factor that contributes further to challenges?
- 434 • Do you think living alone would be better than living with your family?
- 435 • Is English language/accent also a challenge? If yes, to what extent?
- 436 • Do you mix up with non Saudis in gatherings? If yes, which nationalities do you interact with, and why?
- 437 • Did you find it difficult to choose a preferred course/program?

438 **A transcription sample of the participants' responses:**

439 ****Do you face any social or cultural issues? If yes, what kinds?***

440 Michel: yes, there are. We are identified as member of a different community, and sometimes treated differently.

441 John: Cultural identities are really crucial.

442 Zizo: Interactions outside campuses are limited because it is difficult to find the time to make friends.

443 Suzan: Local administration is perhaps not much aware or concerned with the Saudi international students.

444 Sarah: We face the loss of connectedness to important family members and the lack of local community support that perhaps increase their socio-psychological distress.

445 Brittney: Our collectivist cultural background lead to interactions and mixing up locally.

446 **** How crucial is the financial problems faced by you as an international student?***

447 Michel: The cost of life is quite high. It affects living in general.

448 John: Despite a good financial support from Saudi government, there is a need to be economic in all dimensions.

449 Zizo: Since we live with families (and children), nurseryis also quite costly. We are used to frequent and even fun shopping which is not easy here in the US.

450 Suzan: We often face financial anxiety due to limited funds but extra needs.

451 Sarah: It's quite obvious in the US as we spend in dollars.

452 Brittney: Not much. I get financial support from my father too.

453 **** To what extent is your family and kids a factor that contributes further to challenges?***

454 Michel: I am living alone.

455 John: family responsibility is crucial because we have to do all the works alone.

456 Zizo: we are blamed for neglecting family especially children.

457 Suzan: I am not worried about. My husband takes care.

458 Sarah: maintaining a balance between education and family responsibility is really challenging.

459 Brittney: Ladies are supposed to take care families. Keeping a maid in the US is extremely expensive and sometimes unsafe.

460 **** Do you think living alone would be better than living with your family?***

461 Michel: No, it will be more troublesome.

462 John: not our culture to be away for a long time.

463 Zizo: It has advantages and disadvantages both.

464 Suzan: can't say exactly.

465 Sarah: Family is a big support.

466 Brittney: it affects anyhow: living together or not.

467 **** Is English language/accent also a challenge? If yes, to what extent?***

468 Michel: Yes, it is. Communication gap matters.

469 John: In the beginning for a few months, it was hard to grasp the accent, pitch and stress patters apart from vocabulary.

470 Zizo: English has different varieties so we need to understand.

471 Suzan: Well, sometime sound patterns negatively affect understanding and expression.

472 Sarah: sharing is caring.

473 Brittney: Though American English is different, not impossible to comprehend.

474 **** Do you mix up with non Saudis in gatherings? If yes, which nationalities do you interact with, and why?***

475 Michel: rarely.

476 John: sometimes (with my family)

477 Zizo: yes, when important.

478 Suzan: mostly not.

479 Sarah: We feel isolated and we are neglected too.

480 Brittney: not our culture to interact with strangers especially in private parties/gatherings.

481 **** Did you find it difficult to choose a preferred course/program?***

482 Michel: it was difficult in the beginning.

483 John: it was hard as we had not mustered enough support.

484 Zizo: we had to do everything, therefore exploring the right thing and right way was not easy.

490 Suzan: well, yes.
491 Sarah: I initially struggled.
492 Brittney: not exactly.
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494

UNDER PEER REVIEW