# Changing our understandings to enhance our connections: What contributes to successful learning experiences for Middle Eastern students in a New Zealand context?

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## Abstract

Studying abroad has always been a popular option with numerous benefits, despite the challenges for international students. New Zealand currently has a considerable number of Middle Eastern students studying in its tertiary institutions and there are many challenges in interactions, some based on cross-cultural misunderstandings. A better understanding of cultural differences around teaching and learning may significantly influence the learning experiences of students studying in a western context. Thus, some possible factors are explored in this paper in order to better understand the underpinnings of Arabic approaches to the higher education experience, in order to better inform those who support them. An organisation responsible for bringing Middle Eastern students to New Zealand is examined to clarify their expectations and understandings. The cultural understandings discussed here may lead to improving institutional approaches and learning support structures with the intention of ensuring greater Middle Eastern student success and satisfaction.

## Introduction

The impact cross-cultural differences have on the experiences of students studying internationally has long been identified as both a positive challenge and a negative tension for students and host institutions (Al-Harthi, 2005; Parker, 1976). Yet the many positive outcomes, which include the cultural diversity international students bring, the improved international understanding of local students, the benefits to local economies and the expansion of a nation's ability to cooperate with international partners, indicate that, despite tensions, international recruitment will continue (Fraser & Simpson, 2011). However, it is also clear that, in order for international students to be academically and personally successful, much needs to be understood about them, as determined by their country of origin and their related experiences, ethnicity, language, religion and political background (Aboudan, 2011; Faitar, 2011; Parker, 1976). This understanding needs to be tempered always by acknowledging individual differences and alternative worldviews within each culture. Recent increases in the number of Middle Eastern students, particularly from Saudi Arabia,

bring the issue to the fore and demand greater understanding of the potential influences at play on the student to ensure that New Zealand's approach is the most robust possible.

Aware that cultural backgrounds affect how individuals think, feel and act, and respecting the cultural diversity international students bring, New Zealand accredits institutions to deliver support compliant with national standards through the Ministry of Education's (2010) *Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students.* The *Code* requires institutions to have appropriate staff for pastoral care, to provide written and oral information in handbooks and orientation programmes, as well as ensuring that support is available, for example, in the form of counselling services, study and learning advice and/or first language support. *The Code of Practice* also expects that institutions will provide cross-cultural training for staff in regular contact with international learners and specifies that this should include the development of competency in and understanding of communication and behaviour patterns in other cultures.

Consideration of cross-cultural understandings and the potential challenges for Middle Eastern students therefore needs to include an understanding of how such societies may be structured, a consideration of Arabic traditions and their general approach to education, all of which may possibly indicate how members of the culture may behave and react in certain circumstances. With this in mind, the operation of one New Zealand example will be examined later in this article.

## Understanding Middle Eastern society a little better

Faitar (2011) noted that over 70% of the world's population live in collectivist cultures, most of them with a first language other than English, and in social systems which often contrast strongly with cultures seen as more individualistic. Hofstede (2001) noted in his 1980 model of four cultural dimensions that most collectivist Arab cultures have a preference for hierarchies which follow regulations and tradition, where the population has fewer personal rights and there is generally less concern for individuals within the group. As well, such societies are not disposed to promote creativity and openness to opinions. While Hofstede has been critiqued, in particular for the limited scope of his initial study, it is worth noting that his model is still considered relevant by later researchers who find it resonates in assisting to "better understand the influential national cultural features of some Arabian communities" (Obeidat, Shannak, Masa'deh, & Al-Jarrah, 2012, p. 512). Al-Harthi (2005), also writing from an Arabic worldview, commented that "collectivism pertains to societies such as the Arab society, in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups. A lifetime of protection is exchanged for an unquestionable reality" (p. 3).

*An oral tradition*

The Arabic language remains central to Middle Eastern cultural identity and its faith, and has a profound influence on behaviours (Obeidat et al., 2012). As the Islamic religion is traditionally orally transmitted, much of what is known about Islam has been passed orally through generations as a central part of the wider cultural meld of the region (Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-ul-Hassan, & Asante, 2012). "The motives for learning the recitation of the Qur'an are mainly religious, but what is considered properly 'religious' in Islam embraces cultural, social, aesthetic, and other dimensions as well" (Denny, 1989, p. 22). Most societal authority is therefore firmly based on Islamic principles delivered orally, whereas most western countries are more firmly grounded in a secular, written tradition, and the writings of such societies are not held in high esteem in the Middle East.

Qur'anic tracts are learned by rote, recited verbatim, and the spoken word carries a weight and importance of its own – as important as what one says is how one says it (Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2012). Proverbs and versions of the Qur'an are commonly used, memorised and delivered word-perfect and the messages in them are implicitly embedded in the language (Anderson, 2010). Some traditional attitudes and norms embodied in Arabic do not translate easily to western ears, such as ". . . saying insh'allah, meaning 'God be willing', [which] indicates the strong need to instill hope . . . while implicitly conveying uncertainty about, and yet acceptance of, the outcome" (Hashim et al., 2013, p. 105). Middle Eastern students faced with deadlines and study expectations, therefore, express a philosophical viewpoint embodied in an oral tradition which is difficult to express in English, when they respond to tutorial staff's deadline expectations, for example, with insh'allah. Staff in secular New Zealand institutions will learn to recognise that such Arabic expressions encompass many meanings which reflect the significant intricacy of the ways religion influences Arabic students' learning behaviours (Almoharby & Neal, 2013).

*The place of English in a Middle Eastern society*

Populations of the Middle Eastern society recognise the importance of English, although it is not the language of everyday use in the region – newspapers, magazines and television are in Arabic, and Arabic remains the official language of most Middle Eastern governments. Yet, while there is a wide and eager adoption of English by youth, there remains a muted sense of unease regarding any over-adoption of the English language and its associated cultural mores and behaviours, as "a fear exists that the spread of English, and its accompanying implicit values, could result in cultural degradation and social disorder" (Al-Mahrooqi et al., 2012, p. 40). Thus, a tension exists for many Middle Eastern students in appreciating and valuing both English and the written mode of transmitting vital information (Aboudan, 2011).

Conversations with the PINZ Scholarships Coordinator (D. Keene, personal communication, July 18, 2013) further notes that, while Middle Eastern students are competent oral users of language, they are primarily strong conversationally rather than academically, which challenges Middle Eastern students on their path to success

in a western study environment. Further, having a general rather than a subject-specific vocabulary can pose challenges in academic discussion settings where the previously-acquired vocabulary may not meet classroom expectations. Thus, coming from a predominantly oral-delivery learning background can become an issue for Middle Eastern students who may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with note-taking, written comprehension and other forms of learning from the written word; despite higher scores in international language exams in listening and speaking than in reading and writing, the consultation at the heart of Islamic and Middle Eastern societies' oral tradition, through discussion and debate, is not always mirrored when studying in secular academic institutions (Al-Marooqi et al., 2012).

*Religion in a Middle Eastern society*
In the Middle East, where religion, family and ethnic affiliations are the traditional backbones of the principally patriarchal social structures, with Islam binding component societal parts together in collective solidarity, the collective interest will almost always outweigh the autonomy of the individual and societal rules will be imposed (McCabe, Feghali, & Abdalla, 2008). Therefore, education is conducted in a more authoritarian and imitative manner, a style which does not encourage independent and creative learners because the purpose of education and learning in a collective sense is to maintain cultural stability as well as to ensure that students, as the outcome of their learning, are able to perform tasks readily rather than "learning how to learn" (Kotey, 2010). Thus, education can become prescriptive training within narrow parameters, rather than the academic freedom expected in western institutions (Hofstede, 2001). The teaching philosophy is more often teacher-centred and didactic, placing emphasis on the transmission of information and the memorisation of facts through rote learning and verbal repetitions, which may mean that the learner-centred approach used in western institutions is unfamiliar to Middle Eastern students (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2010).

Anderson (2010) explained that the value of the student-centred western model allows increased participation in class, and increased consideration of the student voice where the class is not driven by lecturing, stating that the "traditional [Arabic] method conceives of the master teacher as the source of all knowledge and the student is mainly a receiver, often not allowed to challenge the voice of the master" (p. 27). Thus, while competency in a subject remains of vital importance for success, other cultural underpinnings will influence the way learners are able to approach their own learning, as all learning "has political implications for the society at large" (Anderson, 2010, p. 27).

Students can be resistant to modifying their thinking in order to take more responsibility for their own learning when coming from an education system where passive learning and memorisation of tracts is the expected way of learning (Hofstede, 2001). For example, working in teams or groups may also be challenging, as collectivist values do not align precisely with the attributes of a good team member (Kotey, 2010). Moreover, students from a collectivist background who operate

independently and seek help remain strongly traditional in approach and have high expectations of the quality and quantity of the assistance given by fellow students and staff.

When they need to, in fact, Middle Eastern students are generally very assertive in ensuring their own best outcomes and self-interest (D. Keene, personal communication, July 18, 2013). Ensuring their own best outcomes, however, may include academic dishonesty, something which may be tolerated more often in cultures where uncertainty is something to be avoided. Academic dishonesty is sometimes tolerated because, as Ting-Toomey (2005) contends, the "face" of the group is always more important than any individual, and loyalty to tradition and the group is still emphatically required of the individual. McCabe et al. (2008) identified more academic dishonesty and acceptance in Lebanese students during their study, where indeed there appeared to be an expectation that cheating would be tolerated - and on occasion students may even be directly encouraged to help other students during exams. Thus, the perception of the behaviour of peers may be strongly influenced by collectivist norms, although this cannot be generalised to all Middle Eastern cultures.

Unconscious cultural prompts can also influence effective communication between Middle Eastern students and staff in host institutions. The Middle East is described as having an associative culture rather than an abstract culture, such as is evident in New Zealand. In a culture described as having associative characteristics, people may create and understand links between events which may be dissimilar, whereas someone from an abstract culture will be more likely to identify a cause-effect relationship based on a different kind of logical thinking. Behaviours will be matched with each situation separately rather than utilising more general rules of behaviour. Mendonca and Kanungo (1996) explained that "in associative cultures [developing countries], people predominantly use context-sensitive rules. In abstractive cultures [Western countries], one finds the dominance of context-free rules" (p. 69).

Awareness of this can enhance understanding during communication, as it may explain why a Middle Eastern student is polite and charming in one context, and impolite and impatient in another, yet sees no discrepancy between the two modes, whereas a student from a different background may attempt to apply the same behaviour in both contexts. Some cultures tend to apply rules related to, for example, politeness, respect or environmental issues in a context-free way, that is, in the same behaviour in all situations, and to all people, regardless of their status, age or ethnicity. Middle Eastern behaviour however, may "reflect a sense of always living in the present, and since the 'present' is constantly changing . . . will prove to be highly unpredictable with regard to performing uniformly" (Mendonca & Kanungo, 1996, p. 71).

Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2012) explored further factors potentially responsible for the difficulties Middle Eastern students may experience in trying to motivate themselves to learn, confirming that many influencing factors were socio-cultural, often beyond

the understanding or control of individual learners. As a result, EFL teachers working in Middle Eastern countries have needed to utilise a wide range of motivational strategies in the classroom where intrinsic motivation is lacking, and this is also the case for Middle Eastern students who are studying in countries such as New Zealand (D. Keene, personal communication, July 18, 2013). Host institutions will need to know their students well to maximise opportunities for success, and to know the areas where particular effort needs to be made to assist students to overcome cultural habituation. Utilising models such as the 10 characteristics of quality teaching, as devised by Alton-Lee (2003, as cited in Honeyfield & Fraser, 2013), may support the diversity Middle Eastern students bring. In particular, New Zealand institutions and their curriculums could assist in building student success through ensuring curriculum alignment with internationalised goals, addressing the need for institutional responsiveness to student learning processes, and including effective and explicit links between education and other cultural contexts.

Time and the observation of its conventions can create difficulty in cross-cultural relationships. In Western cultures, a mono-chronic view of time is generally prevalent, in that people tend to engage in only one activity at a time, keep a strict schedule of their appointments, and show a strong resistance to deviating from plans.  In a collectivist Middle Eastern culture, a poly-chronic view of time is the norm, so that people often engage in more than one activity at a time, appointments are approximate and may be changed at any time, and schedules are not as important as relationships (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001). An inflexible adherence to schedules and plans is, after all, only as beneficial as the quality of those schedules and plans, yet they are often seen by Westerners as immutable. Such inflexibility can be a liability because unforeseeable events often necessitate changing plans and, similarly, the habit of working on multiple tasks at once may also help in coping with rapid change (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001).

## One New Zealand case

Middle Eastern states in recent years have produced large numbers of graduates who are best suited for work in the public rather than the private sector. This is a cause of concern for governments who desire economic growth and development; and nor does it adequately prepare the graduates for comprehensive understanding or integration into global economies (Baki, 2002). Therefore, many states are prepared to fully support their citizens to study abroad in order to gain international perspectives and an education more appropriate for entrepreneurship and global initiative. As a result, PINZ (Polytechnic Incorporated New Zealand) has brought almost 200 Saudi Arabian students annually to New Zealand through the King Abdullah Scholarships programme since 2008, as part of a large international initiative. The students study in a variety of institutions, across a wide range of subject areas.

All host institutions are signatory to the International Students' *Code of Practice* and are thereby accredited to delivering support compliant with national standards to

students in their programmes. Further, host institutions are asked to do initial skills assessments on all students and then propose whatever additional support they think is needed, which can then be externally funded if deemed appropriate. Students need to receive a one-week orientation with material delivered in line with the International Students' *Code of Practice*.

D. Keene (personal communication, July 18, 2013) confirmed that Saudi students come from a very teacher-centred learning environment and that they need to considerably adapt their learning styles to cope with being in a student-centred environment. He also noted that students from collectivist cultures are more likely to expect increased amounts of attention from, and interaction with, their tutors, to ensure they know exactly how to perform their tasks, as Al-Harthi (2010) similarly stated. Further, successful PINZ students have positive personal relationships, as much support as they need and are "treated like family" (D. Keene, personal communication, July 18, 2013), thus ensuring high levels of motivation. Thanasoulos (2002) confirmed this when he stated that students require both opportunities and support to succeed in their learning.

## Discussion

All New Zealand tertiary institutions provide additional support external to the classroom, such as Learning Centres, libraries and other specialist staff whose task is to assist students to overcome learning challenges. The availability of additional support from Learning Centres was noted as an important  adjunct to learning by Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2012), although not always well utilised.  Aboudan (2011) noted that in the United Arab Emirates, IELTS students have an expectation that "someone" will always be available whenever they need them. Many New Zealand institutions rise to this challenge by providing additional language classes, social events outside the classroom and developing peer relationships with domestic New Zealand students.

What is not specified in the *Code* is that additional learning support may be required, as despite having qualified for admission to a New Zealand institution with IELTS or TOEFL, some students will require further grounding in subject-specific areas as well as in English (D. Keene, personal communication, July 18, 2013), as well as assistance in overcoming the effects of cross-cultural misunderstandings. It may prove necessary to provide English language specialist staff to work alongside the students as well, to identify those who would not necessarily self-identify. Waistell (2011) also cautions that both cultural and individual characteristics should be used carefully as tools for assessing students' needs as, while cultural understanding may shift, differences between individuals may remain intact.

Additional and reciprocal sharing of information between institutions and students may need to be in place to ensure New Zealand staff better understand their Middle Eastern students and better meet their needs. Emphasising collaboration and interdependence, and the cultural dimensions of teaching and learning must be

considered in educational settings in this context. Above all, it needs to be recognised that cultural practices and behaviours are deeply embedded and are not always easily diagnosed.

Cross-cultural training for teachers, which assists in enabling tertiary staff to operate in a culturally diverse environment, is a central pillar of the *Code*, as students with enhanced images of self, family, and culture, and who understand their own abilities and strengths, are better learners, and of course are much more likely to become so in a culturally responsive setting (Faitar, 2011). International initiatives, where teachers are required to take and pass courses in cross-cultural understanding as part of their adult educator programme's curriculum, better prepare teachers for their role and enhance an institution's ability to deal with diversity. Ongoing and serious commitment to the aim of deepening cultural understanding is essential to assist students working in a student-centred learning environment within a culturally empathic environment (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2010). However, not all institutions assiduously ensure their staff up-skill in this area, and so additional national insistence on compliance with this expectation, and monitoring of existing programmes would increase the beneficial effects for students of the *Code's* intent. Further, the training provided needs to be not only generic, but also expressly tailored for particular groups where the numbers are high - in this case, Middle Eastern students would benefit if tutors had a greater understanding of their cultural context. This is an area institutions need to look at more closely, to ensure programmes specifically cover the needs of Middle Eastern students.

## Conclusion

While the Middle East has been changing rapidly in recent years, and the traditional loyalties described in this paper are being boldly challenged, there remains the potential for incompatibility between Middle Eastern and Western cultures which can be demotivating for learners in overseas settings. When domiciled out of their own country, without direct cultural imperatives and operating in a disparate cultural paradigm, some Middle Eastern students may become demotivated and derailed, and the task of re-motivation will rest with staff who have recognised the importance of cross-cultural understanding. It is likely that listening to the student voice and offering a participatory learning experience will increase, not only the commitment to learning, but also the motivation. The journey to understanding will of course always require thoughtful consideration and an open mind, and will better  assist the successful transitioning of students from their home countries to academic achievement in New Zealand.

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