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# Saudi Women's Experiences Studying At Canadian Universities Through The King Abdullah Scholarship Program

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## Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Saudi women studying in Canada through the King Abdullah Scholarship program. Considering both the benefits and challenges that these women faced, this qualitative study highlights the push and pull factors (Li & Bray, 2007; Mostafa, 2006) that Saudi women encounter when studying abroad. Data was gathered for this study by interviewing six Saudi women graduate students at one university in Canada. This study provides a greater understanding of the issues that Saudi women encounter when they choose to come to Canada to attend university, thereby helping other women who want to study abroad by preparing them for the challenges they may face so they are able to meet their educational and personal goals.

Keywords: Saudi women, Saudi Arabia, Saudi graduate women, Saudi scholarship program, Canadian universities, challenges, achievements, studying abroad.

## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family. Mother Tibah, Mother Sabihah and sister Hanan, without their ongoing encouragement this work would not have been crystallized. I am blessed to have such a caring and loving family that has always been proud of my accomplishments. I love you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since its inception in 2005, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program for graduate students has seen an increasing enrollment of students, from 5000 to 150 000 in ten years (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). Increasingly, women are participating in this scholarship program. However, the program is not without its tensions and women experience a variety of push and pull factors (Li & Bray, 2007; Mostafa, 2006) when making the important decision to study abroad. On one hand, Saudi women have been positively influenced by the benefits of the program. A number of scholars (Ahmad, 2012; Baki, 2004; Denman & Hilal, 2011; Moraya, 2012; Taylor & Albasri, 2014; Zahrani, 1986) have been interested in the effects of the program on Saudi women themselves, Saudi society, and the Saudi education system. On the other hand, there are a number of challenges that Saudi women face when studying in Canada. For example, every Saudi woman has to obtain permission from her guardian to be accepted into the program (Nafjan, 2011). Furthermore, a number of scholars (Akash, 2014; Al-Braik, 1986; Al-Johani, 2009; Al-Nafisah, 2001; Arishi, 1984; Jammaz, 1972; Zaid, 1993) note the difficulties that Saudi students face when learning English through the Saudi curriculum, and before they pass the language tests necessary for application to Canadian universities. Finally, Saudi women face the considerable challenge of adapting to Canadian culture. Scholars have studied the ways in which Saudi women adapt to living in a multicultural country like Canada and the impact this adaptation has on the women (Brown & Aktas, 2012; El-Orabi, 1967; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mostafa, 2006; Oberg, 1960). Having been through this experience myself and having faced the same challenges that these scholars identified, I decided to explore the topic of Saudi women's experiences receiving higher education in Canadian universities.

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program offers an interesting opportunity to study the phenomenon of Saudi women abroad because women have been specifically encouraged to participate in the program in order to develop Saudi Arabian society (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). Therefore, this qualitative study explores the experiences of six Saudi women graduate students, who are currently enrolled in Canadian universities through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. This study attempts to understand the push and pull factors that influenced the participants' decisions to both study and live abroad.

### **Context of the Study**

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program is quite far reaching in its scope. Students with the scholarship have the chance to obtain a bachelor, master, or doctoral degree, as well as pursue a medical fellowship (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Moraya (2012), who studied the influence of Western culture and English language acquisition on Saudi students, explained that students have the chance to choose from any of the recognized universities from the countries participating in the program. The program not only gives students the opportunity to study abroad, but is also designed to give them the chance to learn about different cultures and languages. Moraya (2012) noted that students in this program are selected according to two conditions: the needs of the Saudi labour market and the student's area of interest. That is, the Ministry of Higher Education annually updates the areas of study that qualify for the scholarship program based on jobs that require more qualified Saudi workers. Baki (2004) suggested that many students, especially women, are interested in studying areas that are considered new for Saudi women, such as journalism, pharmacology, and architecture, because these areas will secure them a future career. Saudi students studying abroad in fields that are new or absent in Saudi universities will help to transfer knowledge to Saudi Arabia, reflecting the concept of

globalization. In other words, Saudi students will not only improve academically, but they will also learn about other cultures and transfer this new knowledge to Saudi Arabia when they return. Denman and Hilal (2011), who studied Saudi students' mobility, found that the scholarship program aims to improve the level of education in Saudi Arabia by hiring graduates to work in the education system, thus benefiting from these students' experience.

The King Abdullah Scholarship program is an expensive endeavor because it covers tuition, books, and living expenses for each student (Denman & Hilal, 2011). According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau (n.d.),

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which was generously extended by the late King Abdullah until at least 2020, has grown rapidly over the last decade. To date, more than 200,000 Saudi Arabian citizens have been conferred degrees in over 30 countries. In 2015, the Saudi Arabian Government announced that it had allocated SR210 billion, a fourth of its overall budget and an increase from 2014, for the KASP's 10th cycle of students.

This is a promising sign for the future of the scholarship program. (para. 6)

Thus, despite the enormity of the costs, the Saudi government has indicated through its dedication to the program that it understands the positive impact the scholarship program has on Saudi society.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

The topic of Saudi women studying abroad has been a focus of numerous researchers. A number of scholars (Baki, 2004; Denman & Hilal, 2011; Moraya, 2012) have been interested in the effects of studying abroad on Saudi women themselves, Saudi society, and the Saudi education systems. Baki (2004) explored the impact of gender-segregated education on Saudi

society while Denman and Hilal (2011) examined the recent causes of improved Saudi student mobility around the world. Taylor and Albasri (2014) offer specific detail relevant to this study, that is, the impact of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program on students who pursued their higher education in American universities. Another relevant, although older study, by Zahrani (1986) discussed the impact of Saudi graduate students, who graduated from U.S universities, on the national development of Saudi Arabia. While this literature spans several decades and different locations, there is a gap in the literature with regards to Saudi women's goals in making changes in Saudi society. Previous literatures have focused on Saudi students in general and their positive impact on Saudi Arabia, regardless of the social obstacles that they faced in order to achieve this result.

Saudi students studying English as a second language during their educational experiences abroad is explored by a number of scholars (Akash, 2014; Al-Braik, 1986; Al-Johani, 2009; Al-Nafisah, 2001; Arishi, 1984; Jammaz, 1972; Zaid, 1993) who discuss the difficulties that Saudi students face in passing the proficiency tests. However, the gap in this literature is the lack of discussion about the ways in which students overcome the challenges. For example, the authors do not talk about the pathway system that some English institutions provide for international students. As well, they do not discuss the impact of being accepted to a university through a pathway system on the student's academic achievements. An important note in this discussion is the requirement of English language proficiency with the King Abdullah Scholarship.

Adapting to Canadian cultural norms is a challenge for Saudi students attending an education institution in Canada. A number of scholars (Brown & Aktas, 2012; El-Orabi, 1967; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mostafa, 2006; Oberg, 1960) write about the ways that Saudi

women adapt to Canadian culture and the impact of this adaptation on these women. However, the scholars do not mention the factors that could negatively affect adaptation, such as the navigation techniques women employed around the practice of cultural celebrations such as Ramadan and Eid in Canada. Furthermore, most of the studies which discussed the goals of Saudi women studying abroad point out their personal goals, failing to consider the students' desires to change social norms and shift Saudi life through their use of academic skills and problem solving skills acquired during their study abroad. The literature, as well, does not explore the requirement of guardianship under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in which female students are expected to travel with their guardian for the duration of their studies abroad.

As a result of these gaps, I have chosen to study the experiences of women participating in the King Abdullah Scholarship program, and more specifically, to explore the push and pull factors (Mostafa, 2006) that influence their experiences. I want to know what factors helped the women in this study to overcome the challenges that they faced, and, what aspirations they have based on their experiences, both in Canada and in Saudi Arabia, for their return to Saudi Arabia after the scholarship is complete.

### **Rationale**

The purpose of this research is to learn about Saudi women's experiences in the scholarship program. The rationale for doing so is that little is known about the women engaged in this program, since the majority of international students from Saudi Arabia have been men. There are many angles from which this research could be conducted. For example, given that the study focused on women's experiences, analysis could be done on the gender issues that Saudi women face in classrooms and how the social relations that govern these women's lives change as the women become engaged in western education. Indeed, studies are needed to engage

deeply with the cultural clashes between Saudi and western society and education as more students participate in the scholarship program. However, a study of this kind would require an in-depth longitudinal study, needing time to develop relationships with participants in order to build a trust relationship that would allow such exploration. In fact, given my familiarity with the fear that Saudi women feel in expressing some of the challenges they face studying in Canada with someone who they do not have a long-term relationship, I anticipated that conducting such a study would be beyond the capabilities I could do as a new researcher and chose to design this study to look explicitly at women students' experiences with the scholarship program. This was an intentional decision on my part as an emerging researcher. This is a cursory introduction to this area of study and from here more in-depth analyses can take place in the future. It is my hope that future studies will build on what students shared with me and perhaps engage in further studies that interrogate the social relationships more deeply.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

This research is motivated by my own experience as a Saudi student who is studying in a Canadian university for a Master's degree through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. I have been in Canada for almost four years. At the beginning of my journey, I studied English as a second language (ESL) for a year and four months. Afterwards I enrolled in an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation course for three months because it was a mandatory requirement for admittance to a university in Canada. When I achieved a score of seven on the IELTS and met most of the acceptance requirements of Canadian universities, I started to apply to the programs that I wanted to study in across many universities in Canada. During that time, I enrolled in a Continuing Education course in Business Administration for two

months. Then, when I got the acceptance from Western University, I started my Master's program immediately in the Fall of 2014.

Through this experience, of living and studying in Canada for four years, I have been through many challenges and difficulties related to different aspects of living and learning abroad including learning English, adapting to the Canadian culture, being a university student while trying to adapt to a new culture, feeling homesick, and working to achieve my goals. These challenges have affected me in many different ways. On the one hand, I have been positively pushed by overcoming challenges and achieving much more than I had planned for myself. I have learned so much and acquired many new skills, such as being independent, hardworking, and ambitious. On the other hand, I was pulled to go back to Saudi Arabia because of feeling homesick, being worried about my mother's health condition, and facing academic challenges. Once I got to the thesis writing stage, I decided to conduct research about students who have had the same experience as me. I wanted to have an insider look at their experiences and I wanted to know more about the ways they overcame the challenges that they faced. Furthermore, I wanted to explore how their involvement with the scholarship program and its requirements influenced their experiences. Obviously, conducting this study has benefited me on personal and academic levels. This study guided me to have a broader way of thinking and understanding Saudi women's goals regarding Saudi society. In addition to the goal of obtaining a degree that would secure our future careers, I learned that we, as Saudi women, share the same dream of changing Saudi women's role in Saudi Arabia.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching research question informing this study is: What are the experiences of Saudi women graduate students who are enrolled in a Saudi scholarship program when they are

studying abroad in a Canadian university? Additionally, the following sub-questions guide this study:

1. What are the positive features Saudi women graduate students have experienced while enrolled in a Saudi scholarship program in a Canadian university?
2. What are the most challenging experiences they have faced as graduate students in a Saudi scholarship program in Canada?
3. What would they recommend to other women who will be participating in the program?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of push and pull has been studied by a number of scholars in relation to international student mobility (Altbach, 1998; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001; Mostafa, 2006). Altbach (1998) pointed out that international students are usually pushed by the limitations in opportunities to study in their home countries and pulled by the scholarship opportunities that they get when they chose to study abroad. Mazzarol and Soutar (2001), who looked at the impact of higher education in global markets, found that Chinese students are usually encouraged to study abroad because of the variety of studying fields, opportunities to know the Western culture, and intentions to migrate after graduation. Mostafa (2006) examined the push and pull factors that motivated Muslim students to study abroad. In his study, Mostafa conceptualized the push factors as those unsatisfactory factors in the home environment that motivated students to go abroad, such as uncertain political climates in the country, limited economic capital, poor access to world-class universities and learning institutions, and narrow scopes of research specialization. Pull factors are those enticing factors from abroad which pull the student to want to travel abroad, such as better funding for study, increased opportunities for employment, interest in living in a diverse environment and higher social status from spending



time abroad. Mostafa's use of push and pull restricted the factors to be uni-directional, that is, that factors were situated at either home or abroad and that these factors were at play before a student departed for international studies.

Li and Bray (2007) have considered the limitations of a traditional push-pull model for understanding the factors influencing students' desires to study abroad. They argued that students' decisions to study abroad are also dependent on personal factors such as socio-economic status, academic standing, gender, age and aspirations. Also, Li and Bray pointed to Zheng's (2003) study to suggest that there is more interplay between what is considered to be a push or a pull factor. Home countries and institutions do not only provide unsatisfactory or negative forces. They may also have positive forces which pull a student to remain at home. In the same way, institutions abroad not only present positive forces to attract students, but these institutions may have negative forces which repel students. As Li and Bray state, "the decisions that students finally make depend partly on the interplay of the push and pull factors at home and the push and pull factors on the outside, and also on the students' personal characteristics and perceptions" (p. 794-795). To summarize, Li and Bray argue that both push and pull factors at home and abroad should be considered.

Drawing on the influences of Mostafa (2006) and Li and Bray (2007), the theoretical framework for this study acknowledges an interplay between push and pull factors both at home and abroad. Additionally, I consider some of the personal situations of the participants that are governed by the scholarship program, such as the guardianship circumstance for the women. Specifically, I was interested to know about the students' experiences in the scholarship program, both at home when they decided to study internationally and abroad when they were engaged in their studies.

The literature shows that there are a variety of factors influencing Saudi student mobility. According to Al-Johani (2009), Saudi Arabia has a significant amount of business with foreign countries which raises the importance of learning English. As a result, students have started to pay attention to the importance of learning English; thus, they believe that studying in Western countries will give them the opportunity to learn English and practice it well, regardless of whether they complete their university studies.

Despite the importance of learning English in a Western country, Hamdan (2006) found that Saudi women worry about the idea of mixing genders in the classroom and studying with men, because they have not studied in mixed-gender schools. In the Saudi education system, boys and girls are separated from kindergarten to the university level. Thus, imagining themselves sharing a classrooms or activities with men might make them hesitant to accept the scholarship. Another related pull factor is the discomfort students may feel while being alone in a new country and being unfamiliar with its language, culture, and education system.

Riedy (2013) suggested that international student mobility offers the chance to change common misconceptions among Westerners about Islam and Muslim women, many of which posit that Islam is oppressive to women. Some Saudi women aim to change this idea by first listening to the reasons that have led people to think that Islam is bad for women or that it perpetuates inequality experienced by Muslim women, and afterwards, make plans to help others understand the position of women from Islam's point of view. Muslim women may, however, feel overwhelmed when they think about the weight of this responsibility, which may make it difficult for them to make the decision to study abroad (Hamdan, 2006). Hamdan identified that these women may feel unable to reconcile their plans, study requirements, and family duties because of further responsibilities, including if they have children that they will have to leave in

daycare much of the time because of their studies. Consequently, they may choose not to accept the scholarship. Therefore, making the decision to study abroad is not only about having a degree from a foreign country, it is about a life changing experience for many Saudi women.

Given this information in the literature, I anticipated there are push factors that encourage Saudi women to apply to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, and accept their scholarship if granted, and there are some reasons at home that may cause them to pause or doubt their ability to go abroad. Also, I anticipated that participants would have conflicting desires to remain in Canada or to return home given some of the challenges they might face. As such, I draw on the more complex model of two-way push and pull offered by Li and Bray (2007) to examine the experiences both at home and abroad for the students, acknowledging that there may be factors at home that both pull and push students to go abroad and factors abroad that push and pull students to continue their studies given the ups and downs of being an international student.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced the research goal and the rationale for this study, and the gaps in the literature. Moreover, I presented the research questions and a description of the theoretical framework that guides this work. In the following chapters, I review the literature regarding Saudi students' experiences and challenges studying abroad, higher education and students' mobility, the knowledge economy, guardianship, language difficulties, and adapting to a new culture. Then, I outline the methodology of this study, and the rationale for using qualitative case study research. In Chapter Four, I present the major themes that emerged from the findings of this study. In the last chapter, I discuss the findings and respond to the research questions. In addition, I explore the implications for further research and the limitations of this study by mentioning recommendations for future studies in the same area.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I examine research and literature regarding Saudi students' experiences studying abroad. I begin with a brief overview of the impact of receiving higher education abroad and the implications for what is referred to as the knowledge economy. Next, I examine the literature discussing Muslim and Saudi women's experiences studying at Western universities. Subsequently, I address the challenges these women may face during their time studying abroad. Finally, I consider some of the ways in which women deal with these challenges.

### Higher Education and International Student Mobility

According to Shields (2013), the global labour market currently encourages a large number of students to pursue higher education at foreign universities in order to improve the students' knowledge and skills to better the educational systems in their own countries. Globally, the number of international students who studied abroad increased from 107 000 to 3.4 million between 1950 and 2009 (Shields, 2013). Students studying abroad focused their attendance on five English speaking countries: The United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Shields, 2013). Currently, however, many students are choosing to study in China, Japan, and Southeast Asia because of the variety of educational opportunities these countries offer (Shields, 2013).

Over the last 10 years, the level of education attained by women in Saudi Arabia has improved significantly. According to Alaugab (2007), the number of women's universities in Saudi Arabia has increased from 223 to 669 since 2005. Furthermore, many Saudi women are being encouraged to study abroad through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. These

changes reveal Saudi society's growing awareness of the importance of educating women.

### **Internationalization and the Global Knowledge Economy**

Human resource development is one of the most important goals for all nation-states when developing both educational and economic goals. According to Ahmad (2012), developing human resource capacity will not only help a country's economic system, but will also serve learners themselves by improving their level of knowledge of education and developing their skills. Olssen and Peters (2005) characterize the knowledge economy in terms of "the economics of abundance, the annihilation of distance, the de-territorialization of the state, and, investment in human capital" (p.331). Further to that point, the knowledge economy involves re-thinking the relationships between education, learning, and work (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2008) made a connection between the importance of educational qualifications and the labour market in employment and wages in which employers often ensure job opportunities for people with higher educational levels and they use education as an indicator for their skills and abilities to work. This in turn suggests a positive effect on the knowledge economy. Furthermore, countries cannot increase their economic productivity if they do not pay attention to their education systems (Harbison & Myers, 1964).

Globalization and internationalization are important for the development of knowledge economies. According to Altbach and Knight (2007),

globalization and internationalization are related but not the same thing.

Globalization is the context of economic and academic trends that are part of the reality of the 21st century. Internationalization includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions—and even individuals—to cope with the global academic environment. (p. 290)

For McCabe (2001), the difference between globalization and internationalization, in relation to the impact on programs for studying abroad, is that globalization is a worldwide process. This points to the sharing of cultural, economic, and educational systems throughout most of the world. In contrast to globalization, internationalization works on gathering cultures, economies, and education from specific countries. That is, globalization refers mostly to policies and systems, meaning that a number of countries follow the same laws for dealing with the same systems, while internationalization refers to social and cultural characteristics that allow citizens of one country to identify with the lives of citizens in another. Regardless of their definitions, McCabe (2001) points to the role of technology in increasing the importance of globalization and internationalization in knowledge economies. Therefore, educators should pay attention to the potential social, political, and economic encounters between peoples of the world and prepare their students to understand and deal with these potential differences.

According to Olssen and Peters (2005), globalization in contemporary societies has encouraged countries on a global scale to develop their educational systems by making them more globally interconnected, which in turn has led to economic development. This improvement in educational programming has positively impacted the labour markets of nation-states in some case. For example, the Saudi labour market has replaced many foreign workers with Saudi citizens in a number of employment areas, such as medicine and teaching (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). This in turn has helped to reduce the unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia. As well, it takes advantage of Saudi citizens' energies and talents instead of depending on foreigners.

Economic development has required increased attainment of higher education in many countries. Olssen and Peters (2005) point out that the global labour market requires highly

qualified workers in fundamental areas, such as medicine, engineering, and teaching. Such an expectation has helped individuals meet their financial needs through their work in these jobs. In addition, Olssen and Peters (2005) mention that liberalism has encouraged governments to invest in their societies, rather than relying on foreign workers to do so. For example, governments have worked to provide jobs for highly skilled workers who have benefited from developments in education. Moreover, governments have encouraged workers to create their own businesses, which in turn contributes to the development of the global economy.

Education plays an important role in developing knowledge, and, consequently, skills that will serve to improve the Saudi labour market (Harbison and Myers, 1964). The Saudi government actively encourages students to improve their level of education and income in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.); therefore, the government has attached great importance to skill development among its citizens. In 1989, the Saudi government established the “Saudization” law to ensure that only Saudi citizens work in governmental jobs. According to Zahrani (1986), who examined the impact of Saudi students studying abroad who then returned to work in Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Education worked for decades to bring qualified teachers from many Eastern and Western countries to work in Saudi schools because there were not enough qualified Saudi teachers. Currently, due to the presence of qualified Saudi workers who studied in many disciplines that were previously unavailable for study in Saudi universities, the Saudi Labour Law requires employers to hire Saudi citizens over foreign candidates when they are equally qualified. Not only is the Saudi government interested in the broad employment of Saudi citizens, but it now also encourages women’s involvement in the Saudi labour market by allowing women to study a number of fields that were previously

reserved for men, such as journalism, pharmacology, and architecture which will ultimately broaden Saudi women's participation in the labour market (Baki, 2004).

Looking at the impact of studying abroad for Saudi students, some scholars (Moraya, 2012; Zahrani, 1986) point out that the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has had a positive impact on Saudi society. The importance of having a highly educated population has led to innovation in the Ministry of Education (Zahrani, 1986). While studying the advantages of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, Taylor and Albasri (2014) identified that the country started sending students to study abroad in the U.S. and Europe in 1960. By 1975, studying abroad became a major component of education in a number of Saudi universities, such as King Saud University and the Islamic University in Madinah. That is, because all foreign workers were replaced with Saudi workers, the pressure on the Saudi labour market by the law of "Saudization" required higher levels of education than were possible in the Saudi education system. Certainly this trend to send students abroad is deeply embedded in the Saudi context in the increasing interest of foreign bodies in oil development.

Ten years ago the number of Saudi students who were studying in the U.S. was less than 5 000 (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). This number decreased after the 9/11 attacks because of increased security implemented by the U.S. and Saudi governments. In 2005, King Abdullah's agreement with, then, president George W. Bush allowed Saudi students to study in American universities. Following this agreement, a number of similar agreements were made with over 15 countries, including Canada, France, Germany, Australia, Japan, and Korea (The Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.).



## **Muslim Women Studying Abroad**

Saudi students have to deal with a number of challenges when they make the decision to study abroad. Several scholars (Ahmad, 2001; Ahmed & Mistry, 2010; Arar, Masry-Harzalla, & Haj-Yehia, 2013; Hamdan, 2006) have noted that Muslim women in general face many challenges, especially in regards to culture and language, when choosing to study abroad. Male domination in Arab societies, especially in Saudi Arabia, has controlled women's lives for decades and has prevented them from receiving education (Ahmed & Mistry, 2010; Hamdan, 2006). However, Hamdan (2006) found that there is an improved awareness in Saudi society of the benefits of educating women and an increased belief in their ability to make positive changes in Saudi society. That is, the role of Saudi women has expanded from being housewives to being active members of society through their participation in the workforce. Consequently, many Saudi families have encouraged women to study abroad because they now recognize women's potential to make a significant, positive change in Saudi Arabia. In addition to family being supportive of Saudi women's interest in studying abroad, Ahmad and Mistry (2010) found that Muslim women adapted more quickly to life in a new country when they consider the importance of their education and its impact on their society when they return home.

Growth in Saudi women's educational attainment outside of the country is also supported by a change to the education system in the country. The Saudi education system used to teach by relying on methods of conservatism and indoctrination without giving students the chance to express their ideas or share their experiences on a given subject. However, Hamdan (2006) found that switching from teaching based on conservatism, without deep understanding, to critical thinking has become mandatory in the Saudi education system because it improves the level of awareness and understanding among students. That is, as Hamdan (2006) highlights, the

foreign education system impacts Saudi students who learn the importance of critical thinking through education when studying abroad.

### **Challenges for Saudi and/or Muslim Women Studying Abroad at University**

In this section, I discuss three main issues that Saudi women may face during their experience studying abroad. These issues are related to women's guardianship (Bacchi, 2015; Nafjan, 2011; Saudi Arabia, 2008; Umberto, 2015), language (Anderson & Wrase, 1976; Jammaz, 1972), and culture (El-Orabi, 1967).

**Guardianship.** Guardianship is “the office or duty of one who legally has the care and management of the person, or the estate, or both, of a child” (Duhaime, n.d., para. 1). Every Saudi woman, by law, is responsible to a guardian. Guardianship is given to the father from the birth of his daughter until she marries, in which case her guardianship transfers to her male spouse. If her father dies and she is single, guardianship becomes the responsibility of her uncle or brothers who are over 18 years old. If her husband dies, her guardianship passes to her eldest son (Nafjan, 2011). By law in Saudi Arabia, no official documents can be obtained without the permission of the guardian. Without permission from her guardian, a woman cannot obtain a Saudi ID, acquire or renew a Saudi passport, open a bank account, enroll children in school, or enter a government department that has no women's branch. Some women find the policy of guardianship as a way to deny their ability to make decisions for themselves; because of this, they ask that the guardianship law be ignored, at least in some cases, such as those when the woman is over 50 years of age (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Currently, the Saudi government has been working to establish a new law to reframe the role of the guardian in the society. As a result, in May 2015, the Saudi government established a law that allows women, regardless of their age, to travel without their guardians' permission if

they have good reason. The Saudi government considers this step to be a starting point for giving women greater freedom, that which they have been requesting for many years (Bacchi, 2015).

**Language.** Language is “a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). A number of scholars (Anderson & Wrase, 1976; Jammaz, 1972) found that international students, for whom English is not their first language, face a number of challenges when enrolled in Western universities. Although students may study English in ESL schools, their reading, writing, and participation capabilities are not the same as native English speakers because the English curriculum in non-English countries is often very basic in nature. Anderson and Wrase (1976) found that learning English and being well prepared to enter a Western university is not enough for international students. They added that vocabulary is the most challenging issue for these students, especially for reading or writing, because of additional difficulties, such as spelling, silent letters, and vowels (Anderson & Wrase, 1976). In other words, international students must not only memorize vocabulary and definitions, but also each word form, spelling, pronunciation, and position in a sentence. In addition, Akash (2014), who studied the challenges that Arabic speakers face during their first year of learning English in middle school classroom, identified that Arabic speakers face more difficulties when writing in English than listening or speaking because English is written left to right, while Arabic is written in the opposite direction. Spelling is also a challenge for international students, especially with words that are not written phonetically.

Although teaching English in Saudi Arabia has recently improved, students are still required to memorize the grammatical rules and vocabulary as a requirement for passing their classes. As a result of teaching English in this way, Saudi students face a number of difficulties

when they start learning English in a Western country (Zaid, 1993). Jammaz (1972), who studied Saudi students and their challenges in the U.S., found that Saudi students need a longer amount of time to take notes and understand lectures because of the large amount of academic vocabulary that needs to be understood to follow along with lecturers in English. Additionally, Saudi students' biggest challenge comes when they are asked to perform critical analysis. Jammaz (1972) discovered that both essays and objective exams are difficult for Saudi students because they require a number of reading, writing, and comprehension skills that are not taught in ESL schools. He also noted that students in medicine, sciences, and engineering fields face more problems with understanding and memorizing the scientific terms than those in social sciences and humanities (Jammaz, 1972).

The IELTS and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are tests designed to measure the academic and general English language proficiency of international students. English language tests are a mandatory step in each international student's academic life. The IELTS and TOEFL tests, according to Zhengdong (2009), are designed to assess a student's ability to use English in his or her speaking, writing, reading, and listening skills. Although English is considered a second language in many Arab countries, international students face a number of language difficulties in Western universities. Given that students must pass these tests to apply to a Canadian university, many students enroll in special courses to prepare them for these tests when they have finished their ESL courses. Suryaningsih (2014) found that students spend much of their money enrolling in IELTS or TOEFL courses, taking the exam, and retaking the exam if they do not pass it. In some cases, students feel great pressure to pass the English language test, and they become obsessed with passing the test. Thus, students who have

taken the exam many times often do not improve their English because they are fixated on passing the exam, regardless of their level of English (Zhengdong, 2009).

***English in the Saudi Curriculum.*** Teaching English has become more important over the last twenty years in the Saudi education system because of the impact of globalization on Saudi society. A number of scholars (Al-Braik, 1986; Al-Johani, 2009; Al-Nafisah, 2001; Arishi, 1984) have studied the improvement of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. According to Al-Braik (1986), learning English as a second language in Saudi Arabia became important in 1930 after the discovery of oil. The employees of many American and British companies were asked to work in Saudi Arabia and, therefore, it became important for Saudi Arabians to learn English to communicate with oil company employees. Al-Braik (1986) added that improvements in the economic situation in Saudi Arabia have encouraged many Western companies to invest in the Saudi labour market, and as a result, English has become a second language rather than a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. In 1950, teaching English and French as optional subjects became official in Saudi public schools (Arishi, 1984). This situation changed in 1970 when English became a required subject for middle and high school students.

While teaching English has become a more important aspect of the Saudi educational system, it is not without its faults. Al-Nafisah (2001), who studied English teachers and curriculum in Saudi Arabia, found that teaching English was not effective for a number of reasons. Firstly, English teachers were not paying much attention to the importance of teaching English because of their limited time in the classroom and the shortage of teachers in which English was only taught four times a week for 45 minutes. In each of these classes, teachers were required to cover four areas: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Therefore, the English curriculum was basic and teachers did not have enough time to engage significantly with

the material. As a result, the students' English language skills did not develop to satisfactory levels. In 2011, teaching English became an official in primary schools as a preliminary step towards improving English levels in the Saudi education system (Al-Johani, 2009).

**Culture.** Culture, “the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts” (Zimmermann, 2015, para. 1), is another factor impacting international students' experiences abroad. Each society has its own culture that encompasses its norms, values, traditions, and beliefs. Amos and Lordly (2014), who studied international students' experiences in Canada, discovered that newcomers to Canada face a number of difficulties when adapting to Canadian culture. For example, when people from South Asia enter Canada three issues emerge: the culture of male dominance acceptable among South Asian countries is not as acceptable in Canada, Canadian values often differ from those of many South Asian nations, and some child discipline practices of South Asian nations are not acceptable in Canada (“Culture shock”, 1998). These difficulties depend on many variables, for example, the similarities between the country that the international student is coming from in comparison to Canadian culture; the student's personality and his/her ability to adapt to Canadian culture; and the community that the students will be involved in when he/she arrives in Canada.

Given the conservative values of the society that Saudi students come from (El-Orabi, 1967), many Saudi students find it challenging to adapt to liberal societies. Thus, as Moraya (2012) found, learning a country's language is part of learning its culture. However, teaching English in most Arabic education systems is about memorizing grammar and learning how to communicate rather than learning about Western culture. The diversity of English as a language in some multicultural countries can make it challenging for Saudi students to fully immerse

themselves in the country's culture (Moraya, 2012). For example, the United States has various dialects of English, including the African American English which makes it more complicated for Saudi students to become immersed in American society (Moraya, 2012). Teaching English for international students cannot cover the diversity of English dialects in the U.S., especially in the first year, which makes it challenging for learners (Moraya, 2012).

Turning to the issue of culture shock for Arab students studying in Western countries, a number of scholars (Brown & Aktas, 2012; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Oberg, 1960) have taken up this issue. Culture shock, according to Oberg (1960), is the shock that takes place in some international students when they lose familiar things, such as familiar educational, living, and shopping systems, and find it difficult to adapt to the new ones. McLachlan and Justice (2009) found that this shock makes the student's integration into the new society difficult, and as a result, harder for the student to achieve his/her academic goals. Brown and Aktas (2012), who studied Turkish students' ability to live in Western countries, discovered that culture shock is a serious issue for newcomers and should be taken into consideration by social support workers. According to Knutson (2014) from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), the most challenging situations that international students will face are instances when others challenge them on their own values and beliefs. Experiencing culture shock for international students is not unusual, especially in the first few months in Canada. According to Knutson (2014), the most common symptoms of culture shock include feeling uncomfortable, lonely, unhappy, bored, and unable to overcome this problem effectively. Therefore, Knutson suggests that international students should ask for advice or help from social support workers when they need it.

**Adapting to the New Culture.** Learning about a new culture is often one of the goals of international students when they decide to study abroad and is identified as a motivational factor for encouraging students to study abroad (Mostafa, 2006). Such learning does not include enrolment in “teaching culture” courses, but instead is about discovering other traditions, customs, beliefs, and norms (Rasmussen, 1998). International students should learn the culture of the country in which they wish to study because culture informs communication. However, adapting to a new culture is not easy.

International students can be divided into two groups when adapting to a new culture: the first includes students who face difficulties adapting to a new culture and experience negative impacts to their health and psychological wellbeing, and the other, are students who easily adapt to the new culture and are able to learn new things can drive benefits from the experience (Brown & Aktas, 2012; Hamdan, 2006; Scott, 2003). Scott (2003), who studied the perspectives of teachers of Muslim women in Britain, found that many teachers say Muslim students find it difficult to study cultural conflicts that may be part of the school curriculum. It is for this reason, as Scott (2003) mentions, that the British education system has worked to change its curriculums to avoid conflicting religious topics. Highlighting another area of difficulty for international students adapting to a new culture, Hamdan (2006) identified the idea espoused by some Westerners that Islam is responsible for Muslim countries’ delay in scientific achievement, which makes it difficult for Muslim students to be accepted as ‘educated’ in some Western countries. Hamdan (2006) also examined the importance of critical thinking in the Western education system. Instead of focusing on critical thinking, the Saudi education system formerly asked students to memorize information in order to pass their classes in which many Saudi students did not learn critical thinking skills. For example, as Hamdan (2006) pointed out, “a



student [in Saudi Arabia] is prohibited from asking questions related to religion or cultural traditions” (p. 54). Thus, adapting to a different educational culture might raise concerns for Saudi students. Therefore, Saudi students must be prepared to study by being creative, critical, and prepared to engage in analysis instead of simply memorizing material.

Students who adapt more readily to Western culture are using this opportunity to make change in their home countries. According to Hamdan (2006), many Saudi students still believe that women cannot address difficult problems or achieve high academic goals, such as engaging with issues in the fields of pharmacology or architecture. Women find it easier to pursue these educational goals in Western universities where it is more socially acceptable for women to hold such jobs, compared to attitudes in Saudi Arabia. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015), who studied the experience of Muslim women adjusting to American culture, found that the quality of education and the diversity of fields are the most important reasons for Saudi women to study abroad.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature on the experiences of Saudi and international students who study abroad. The following themes have emerged from the existing literature:

higher education and international students’ mobility, the knowledge economy, and the challenges for Muslim women who study abroad. The literature review explored the challenges that women students face during their study-abroad experiences. Some studies focused on the issue of guardianship while others explored the challenges of learning English and adapting to new cultures. The literature reviewed in this chapter helped inform the research process.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This study aims to explore the experiences of women graduate students from Saudi Arabia during their time studying in Canada through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. The core purpose of the study is to highlight the challenges these women face when studying in Canadian universities. To do so, I used qualitative research approaches to understand “*the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and their experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p.13). Furthermore, qualitative research is designed to uncover more about other people’s practices in depth (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, a qualitative approach was used to develop this study investigating Saudi women’s experiences at Canadian universities.

#### Case Study as Qualitative Research

Case study is a beneficial approach for qualitative research because it can be situated within different paradigms or designed using a wide array of methods. A case study “is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40), and according to Yin (2003), there are four types. First, there is exploratory case study which explores issues that have no clear outcome. The second, descriptive case study, is used to describe an existing phenomenon; this is the approach used for my study. Third, there is the multiple-case study, which allows the researcher to identify the differences between cases, which in turn helps the researcher to predict similar results elsewhere. Fourth, there is the collective case study, which involves a number of issues on the same topic, but uses multiple case studies to describe them. Stake (1995) adds two further types: the intrinsic case study, which should be used by a researcher who has a genuine interest in a case and wants to find a specific result, and the instrumental case study, used to support a theory that already exists. Using the case study

method helps researchers to form links between the literature under review and the current situation being investigated (Merriam, 2009). According to Roselle (1996), a case study could be described as a study that focuses on an issue that has affected a person or a group of people's lives.

Social constructivism/interpretivism is one of the qualitative research paradigms that frames experiences and subjective meaning. As a result, in social constructivist case studies, there are multiple meanings that researchers should understand from their participants. To do this, researchers should be directly involved in their study in order to interact with the participants in a meaningful way. In this paradigm, researchers' experience and frame their interpretations, and position themselves in the study in a way that acknowledges this. Instead of building on a theory, researchers form conclusions based on the data they collect (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

## **Method**

Merriam (2009) suggests that qualitative research should answer the question "what do I want to know in this study?" (p. 56). For this study, I wanted to know more about the impacts of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program on Saudi women's personal and practical lives. Therefore, I identified the similarities and differences between Canadian and Saudi Arabian lifestyles that Saudi women have experienced in Canada. Additionally, I pointed out the ways in which Saudi women deal with the challenges that they face and their recommendations for Saudi women new to Canada.

According to Merriam (2009), using a descriptive case study leads the researcher to deep understanding or thick description, which is "a *term from anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated*" (p. 43) phenomenon or issue under

study. This type of case study is creative because it allows the researcher to use different means, such as prose or stories, to convey his/her understanding of the study. Further to my use of qualitative methodology, I have chosen to use the descriptive case study approach to undertake this project using Mostafa's (2006) push and pull factors that encourage or discourage Saudi women from studying abroad as the theoretical framework situating this study.

### **Participants**

Because the King Abdullah Scholarship Program is designed for university students, six women who are currently enrolled in Canadian universities participated in this study, supporting Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007) who suggest that a sample size in qualitative research should not be large. The following criteria were used to select students to participate in this study: first, that they are currently enrolled in a graduate program at a Canadian university, because part of this study is designed to explore the challenges that students face, such as meeting the admission requirements; and second, they must have lived in Canada for more than two years because the scholarship program requires students to prepare for university by studying English for a maximum of two years and then enroll in a university program. Therefore, students who have scholarships from other Saudi university programs or who are studying ESL courses were excluded from this study.

## **Inviting Participants**

To recruit participants, I sent a request to a supervisor in the Saudi Cultural Bureau with a letter of information about my study to be forwarded to all students in the city in which the research was conducted. I requested that anyone who willing to participate in the study should contact me by email. Once the participant sent an email indicating her interest in the study, we identified a time and place that suited her schedule to meet for an interview.

## **Interviews**

According to Seidman (2006), interviewing is the best way of capturing other peoples' stories. Furthermore, people tend to choose the details that affect their experiences, which provides rich information for researchers, and more importantly, how people understand and treat these details (Seidman, 2006). This study never intended to simply list the challenges that Saudi women face during their time in the scholarship program, but aims to understand the effects of these challenges on their personal lives, academic achievements, and how they work to achieve their goals.

Semi-structured interviews lead participants to express their opinions in a unique way (Merriam, 2009). This type of interviewing is less structured and more flexible than structured interviews and gives the researcher the advantage of being open to new ideas and flexibility in understanding them. This method helps participants to feel more comfortable by answering general questions, instead of more detailed ones that are strictly defined by the researcher.

To collect data for this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant lasting one hour in length. I asked permission to record the interviews to better facilitate analysis and to allow the participants to review their interview transcripts afterward. The interviews included questions about the language difficulties that the participants have

encountered since their arrival in Canada, their experiences passing university entrance language tests, and the challenges they face when adapting to Canadian culture. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to give their recommendations and suggestions for Saudi women new to Canada.

### **Interview Questions**

1. At the beginning, I would like to start by asking you some general questions:
  - Are you single or married? Do you have children?
  - Are you here with your family or just the guardian?
  - What are you studying?
2. Tell me about making the decision to accept this scholarship opportunity.
  - What encouraged you?
  - What sorts of things made you hesitant?
3. There is no doubt that leaving family, friends, and home is something difficult. What was this like for you?
4. Tell me about the first time you remember feeling homesick?
5. Describe a memorable day or experience you have had since you've been here?
  - When was it?
  - What was it about?
  - What happened?
  - Why it is memorable?
6. What background preparation in English did you have before coming here?
  - Did you have to study English here before entering your current program?

-How would you describe your first day in the English school in Canada that you attended before university?

7. Besides the goal of obtaining a degree, what do you aim to do with the experience of studying abroad?
8. What do you do to balance your personal, studying, and family duties?
9. Imagine that one of your friends just got her acceptance for the scholarship program. What advice would you give her?

Because the interview participants are university students studying in Canada, they were expected to be able to conduct the interview in English even though their English was not perfect. However, they were given the option of using Arabic, in case they felt more comfortable doing so. The option was available in order to obtain the richest possible description of their experiences, but none of the participants take the advantage from it. The citations are taken verbatim from the interview transcripts to honor their voice as they responded to my questions.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For this study, data were collected by recording and transcribing the interviews. Merriam (2009) suggests that the researcher analyze the data while collecting it. The researcher should begin right after the first interview by reading the transcript and making notes about what is relevant to the study. By doing this, the researcher can rectify in subsequent interviews anything missed in the first interview. Then, once he or she has the transcript from the second participant, the researcher must compare the data from the two in order to inform the third interview, and so on. Hence, I identified the categories and themes that the participants shared by coding the data which made it easier to compare across the various transcripts. Finally, to ensure that I collected

data accurately, I used member checks. Merriam (2009) describes this process as “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from [whom] they were derived and asking if they are plausible” (p. 229). To do this, I returned the transcript to each participant and asked her to review it and make changes or remove information that she did not want included, if she chose to do so. The participants were also given pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.

According to Merriam (2009), researchers should go through three steps when collecting data: interviewing, observing, and triangulating. This research used triangulation, which is described as “using multiple investigators [and] sources of data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). Multiple sources could include a number of strategies, such as investigator triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, negative or discrepant case analysis, researcher’s position, and peer examination (Merriam, 2009). Some of the triangulation strategies used in this study included adequate engagement in data collection in which participants engaged in semi-structured interviews whereby I could get closer to the participants and understand their experiences. Then, after I transcribed the interviews, I met with each participant to validate her interview to support triangulation through member checks. This strategy helped me to understand the data while dealing with any possible personal bias I might have about the studying abroad experience.

I found emerging themes in the interview transcripts and then organized and analyzed them. This of course helped me to refine my interview questions with subsequent participants after the first interview. Merriam (2009) suggests that the interview transcripts should be coded, using a number of categories. Coding, described by Arthur (2012), involves “applying labels, the codes, to passages of text, sections of video or audio, or regions of images” (p. 254).

Interviews can be coded by single words, numbers, themes, phrases, or any combinations of



these (Merriam, 2009). Coding interviews is important because it helps to improve data analysis by providing a systematic way of interpreting. Merriam (2009) explains that without coding, the researcher may feel overwhelmed when analyzing data because of the number of transcripts and documents. Consequently, I coded my data in three steps: through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). First, I divided the data into general topics to make it easier to understand, a process called open coding. For example, if participants mentioned different ways of adapting to a new culture, this was labeled as “useful tips to adapt” through open coding. Next, I linked these topics together and narrowed them into categories or themes. This narrowing process is called axial coding. As an example, when participants talked about the conditions that led them to use the ‘useful tips’ and when these tips were useful for overcoming certain challenges, such as settling in Canada or dealing with difficulties, I grouped these again. Finally, I selected the categories that best suited my study and answered my research questions by means of selective coding, such as finding a link between the research question and participants’ tips and then making connections between the similarities and differences in their answers.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to conduct the study, I submitted a completed ethical review protocol to the Ethical Review Board. The protocol outlined the steps taken to address ethical concerns, such as confidentiality, gaining informed consent from participants and allowing them to withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any particular question without penalty and assuring them that there were no known risks involved in the study. Once I gained approval from the Ethical Review Board, I sent out letter of information/invitation to potential participants asking them to take part in my study. Each participant signed a consent form. If the participant chose not to participate,

refused to answer any question, or wanted to withdraw from the study at any time, she could do so without academic penalty, however, no participants chose to withdraw. All of the data that was collected remained confidential and accessible only by the student researcher and the supervisor of this study.

### **Challenges**

The biggest concern for me as a new researcher was the possibility of withdrawal of volunteers, or not being able to get enough data to complete the study. However, I was willing to find more than six women to participate in the study if needed. There were no problem enrolling this number of students. Additionally, I knew that the topic of the scholarship program could be a difficult one for students to discuss. It is not common for Saudi students to engage in critique of their government, and this program is one that is state funded. Consequently, I anticipated that students would have a difficult time to express the challenges they faced. I spoke with each participant about how this study could benefit future students and encouraged them to share what they felt would be helpful to make the program better for students. I felt that the participants spoke freely with me. However, I also expect that there were experiences that the students may have felt were too personal or too critical to share with me as a researcher.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodology of this study. Qualitative case study was chosen to understand Saudi women's experiences studying abroad. The data analysis process, ethical considerations, and anticipated challenges were also presented at the end of this chapter.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Data Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with six Saudi female graduate students after they received the letter of information for my study from the Saudi Cultural Bureau and the Saudi Association in Ontario and consented to participate in the study. This study aims to explore their experiences of being students on scholarship enrolled in higher education studies in Canadian universities, and the challenges that they have faced during this time. Interviews were set up by email and were held on the campus of a Canadian university, as the participants preferred it, and private rooms were provided by the graduate studies office. The interviews were scheduled for an hour. After each interview, I highlighted the main points that the participant shared and linked it with the previous interviews. Once I transcribed the interviews, I returned them to the participants for member check purposes.

The participants were between 26 and 30 years old and have been in Canada for at least two years. Two of them were married and have children and the rest were single. Four of the women studied ESL courses in a large city and the other two studied in a small city in Ontario, Canada. Five of the women received acceptance to study in a Canadian university through the pathway system, in which they first completed the required English language training at a language institute in Ontario and then were led into a university program. The sixth participant did not need to study English at an institution prior to entering a graduate program. The participants have been given pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.

The following themes emerged from the data collected in the interviews.

### **The Guardianship**

The guardianship plays an important role in each of the participants' experiences starting from making the decision to study abroad until the end of their experiences.

**Encouragement from the Guardian.** All of the participants in this study were encouraged by their guardians in their decision to study in Canada. Sara, who at the time of our interview, was in her last semester of a Master's program in Health Sciences and Rehab-Health Promotion. She had been studying in a Canadian university since 2009 with both undergraduate and graduate studies completed in Canada. At the beginning of her post-secondary education, she considered going to medical school in Saudi Arabia and did not think about studying abroad. However, her nephew, who was nine years older than her, told her about an opportunity provided by the Saudi Scholarship Program and informed her that he would agree to be her guardian if she decided to study abroad. So, she started to think about it seriously, and it did not take her long to make the decision to apply to the program. In our interview, she said,

I had the goal of going to med school ... [It was] my nephew who suggested [that I] apply for the scholarship. I didn't have it in mind at that time, but I said 'why not?' So we went through the paper work. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Similarly, Asma, who was in the first year of her Master's program in nursing at a Canadian university, wanted to have a job after she finished her undergraduate degree in Saudi Arabia. However, her father drew her attention to the advantages of continuing her studies abroad, and told her that he would travel with her as a guardian. She agreed with his suggestion and decided to take his advice. When I asked her about her opinion of applying to the Scholarship Program, she shared the following:

At the beginning, I wanted just to work; finishing my bachelor degree and work, but when my father talked to me and said that 'you have to continue your study in order to have a good job in future' and 'this is good for you,' then, I decided

to accept his decision and come to Canada. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

Rana received her scholarship while she was already living in Canada. Initially it was her husband who was accepted to the Scholarship Program and she had come with him even though she did not have plans to study in Canada. However, her parents encouraged her to continue her studies as well and to not miss out on the opportunity. When her husband started his studies, she considered her parents' advice and started to work on establishing her file in the Saudi Bureau as a scholarship student. Rana explained the process during our interview:

Actually at the beginning, my husband, he has the scholarship. My family, my father and my mother, before I travelled to Canada, they encouraged me to study. They said that I have not waste my time, and also the studying here will benefit me in my work. After that, I start thinking about getting an acceptance in university to not waste my time because he is staying here for two years and half.... So, I start thinking about it, and I start... at an English language program in September 2014, and I studied there for eight months until I got the acceptance. (Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016)

Nora, who was in the first year of her Master's program in linguistics at a Canadian university, thought about studying abroad while she was doing her undergraduate degree in Saudi Arabia and talked with her friends about it. She decided to ask her husband who encouraged and supported her immediately. In the interview, she shared the following:

I was in my fourth year of my BA, and just chatting with my friends about going and studying abroad. Then, I discussed the idea with my husband and he said, 'that's a great idea, let's go.' After I graduated, ... I applied for the scholarship

and I came. (Nora, personal communication, February 9, 2016)

For Eman, who was in the first year of her Master's program in nursing at a Canadian university, the story was different. She had the goal of studying abroad, though she had not talked about it with others; in her mind, she believed that she should not miss out on the opportunity that the Scholarship Program could provide her. In the beginning, her father was hesitant to accept her thoughts about studying abroad because he was afraid of leaving her to live alone in Canada. However, she attempted to persuade him to accept going with her because this experience would benefit her in the future. When I asked her about who encouraged her to apply to the Scholarship Program, she said,

Myself and then my father after I told him I have to do my Master's abroad, and this is a good opportunity for me to do my Master's or PhD studies outside of Saudi Arabia. First I told him about this opportunity cannot be given to anyone, [it is] just for special students and your daughter is a different person, so this is a good thing. The second thing, he knows that my dream is to do or finish all my studies: my Master's and my PhD, so this my first goal to do my Master's outside of Saudi Arabia. At ... first, he refused, you know, because of our culture and some time I [would] have to live here alone, so this is a big challenge for my family to accept it, but then he accepted that. So he supported me. (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016)

Reema, unlike the others did not receive much encouragement from her guardian; however, her brother and sister found that studying in Canada is a good opportunity that should not be missed and came with her.

**Chose the Right Guardian.** Because having a guardian live with the female student during studies abroad is a mandatory condition of acceptance to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, all of the participants had been through the experience of living with their guardians. For those whose guardians are their husband, their experience was smoother regarding the taking up of responsibilities. However, those who had their fathers or brothers as guardians found the experience to be more difficult.

Nora, who at the time of our interview had a son in grade one and a daughter in daycare, found that her husband was supportive when she asked him to take care of some of her responsibilities when she needed to work on assignments or prepare for exams. During the interview she said, “Yes, he does that sometimes if I have to work for the university. He stays with kids and takes care of them” (Nora, personal communication, February 9, 2016).

Rana, with a three-year-old daughter at the time of the time of the interview, acknowledged that she spent some of her time studying on campus and tried to do at least half of her work there. Because her husband was a student as well, she had a lot of responsibilities and could not depend on her husband whenever she needed him to help with these responsibilities. However, she found him willing to help her when she asked:

When I have an assignment, I try to stay in the university in a study room at the library to finish my assignment or at least half of it, so when I go home, I have responsibilities. I have to pick my daughter from the daycare; after that, I have to cook somedays. Yeah, it’s a lot of thing to do, but I’m trying to manage my time with finishing a part of the assignment in the university. Also, I have to work at home. My husband takes responsibility. Sometimes he takes my daughter to the daycare and bring her back. At home, sometimes he takes

care of our daughter so I can do some work for me. He is supportive enough.

(Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016)

Asma, who came with her father in the beginning, found it difficult to balance between her father and studying because of his poor health and limited English. Sometimes she needed to miss class to go with him to his medical appointments which had a negative effect on her academics. In the interview she shared the following about this experience:

My father is 62 years old. When I came with him I face lots of difficulties in terms of going to hospital, finding appointments for him. He needs, for example, dental appointments. He has hemorrhoids, so I have to go every month to hospital in order to a blood sample test and to see what happened with his medications. It takes time that ... sometimes I have to not go to school or university in order to go with him because he doesn't speak English. I felt

I am responsible of him. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

However, her life changed completely when her father went back to Saudi Arabia and her brother became her guardian instead. With her father, she felt that she was responsible for him, but she noticed a distinct difference with her brother because he took responsibility for her and her needs. She continued:

He is actually supported more than enough for me. He makes my life easier compared to my situation with my father. I always depend on him in everything: going to supermarket, even if I want to go [on trips to other cities], I tell him: ... 'Go and rent a car and let's go.' So I don't think about anything when I'm with him. He does everything. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)



Sara, who also had the experience of living with two guardians, found it more challenging to be with the younger brother than the older nephew. At the beginning of her study journey, she had her nephew, who is nine years older than she, as a guardian. Sara shared the following in our interview:

When I came before, I was with my nephew [this time], my nephew was take care of me although he gave me my space to be myself, I was, Alhamdulillah, so lucky to live with my nephew; such a great support for me... [stayed] by my side all the years long. We had agreements and disagreements for sure, but most of the time we were agree, and we never stopped each other. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

However, with her younger brother as a guardian, Sara found it challenging to take care of him because she had no experience with such a situation. As a high school student, her brother needed to prepare for the Saudi school system exams. She felt that she should monitor him because he is young and not mature enough to take responsibility. She explained further:

I feel more responsible of my younger brother ... especially he is young and he has never been outside, so you don't know what he is doing. It's added [an] extra job [for] me, so I feel like I'm responsible for this person, and I haven't been before.

(Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Sara's experience highlights the importance of choosing the right guardian before applying to a program abroad because the guardian plays an important role in the academic achievement of every female who wants to study abroad. Explaining her recommendations on choosing the guardian, Sara shared the following:

Of course, I support the idea of having the guardian ... if it's a nice person, ...

having someone with you will make it easier because you need support, emotional support. You need someone who is actually from home to be with you. ... So I would ask her first if that person is dependent... the Muharram [guardian] is a person she can live with. You don't wanna come here and have the stress of the language, stress of looking for the university acceptance, and the stress of living in Canada, and someone who is supposed to support you putting more stress on you. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016).

### **Homesickness**

Homesickness was another important theme shared by all of the participants. This was evident in the ways that they missed their families in general, and missed being away from home for special occasions such as Ramadan and Eid.

**Missing Family and Friends.** Homesickness is likely an emotion that many international students feel at some point during their studies abroad. As identified in this study, making the decision to study abroad and being away from home, family, and friends was a serious challenge for the participants. Sara thought that she was prepared enough before leaving Saudi Arabia to prevent feeling homesick; however, it was a big challenge for her when she arrived in Canada.

She explained that she was not prepared for these feelings:

I was homesick the first couple of days when I arrived. I was excited before I came. It hit me when I was in the airport, when I was saying goodbye to my family. ... You would assume that you would miss your family at the beginning and before you leave, but when I came here, I was all by myself. No my brothers, my mom, and my family gathering every Friday or Thursday.

It was hard, it was heartbreaking. I would cry every single day for first couple of months. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Homesickness for Reema involved a mix of fear of traveling without her family and missing them. Although she wanted to study in Canada, she said when it came time to leave, it felt like coming to Canada was “a joke” (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016), as though it was not going to happen. In our interview, Reema shared about her lack of planning: “There was no plan. I just applied with my friends to come to Canada. We didn’t know the consequences, how the life was going to be hard in Canada. We just applied” (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016). When the day of her flight approached, she became afraid to leave her family and could not control her feelings at the airport. She shared the following about this experience:

Oh my God! This is the hardest point to me: to leave my family, and my sisters, and my mother, especially my mother. You know, I felt like ... it was like a joke, going to Canada, ... because I can’t believe [I was going] to leave my mother and you know once the day is ... like become near and near, I felt very afraid to leave them. And the day of travelling, you know I made drama there. So I was crying, and my mother crying. It’s not easy to me, and actually it was the first time for me to leave my mother and my family behind. (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Similarly, Nora, who came at first without bringing her daughter, felt homesick from the moment she got on the plane because she had to leave her four-month old daughter with her mother to focus on her studies. So, when she saw a woman on the airplane playing with her daughter, who was about the same age as Nora’s daughter, she started to cry: “When I was in the

airplane, I saw a woman playing with her daughter, [who] was the same age of my daughter and I started crying” (Nora, interview, February 9, 2016, p. 2). Later, Nora brought her daughter to join her in Canada.

Eman tried to be strong when she faced the challenge of being homesick. It was her first time traveling without her family, so whenever she felt homesick, she reminded herself of the reason that she left: to have the chance to study abroad. She told herself not to be sad and not to let the sadness of missing her family affect her studies:

Sometimes I feel homesick and I feel ... it's challenge. It's the first time I traveled outside of Saudi Arabia to Canada - from Makkah to Canada - which is huge thing and so difficult. It was difficult for me, but when I remember that I'm here for a reason, I'm here for studying, to find an acceptance [to a university in Canada]. I challenge myself [to do more] sometimes too: 'This is your time, this is your opportunity, and you have to take all the advantages from this scholarship.' (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016)

For some participants, the feeling of being homesick was about more than being alone. Asma, for example, felt homesick in her first week in Canada, although she came with her father. She felt lonely and she started to worry about what she would do if she needed to talk about something with her mom or her sisters. It was difficult for her to accept the idea of being away from her family, especially her mom. Asma said:

A week after I arrived to Canada, the day before starting my school, I felt homesick because I was always with my family, especially my mother. Suddenly I just found myself alone. Even if my father is with me, it's different from my mom, and my sisters who are not with me, so ... when I feel sad, who

should I talk to? I missed them a lot. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

Rana was not sure she would accept coming to Canada with her husband because of her fear of homesickness. When she came, she felt homesick when she first arrived at the airport, and it took her four months to adjust to being away from her family. Rana shared the following about her experience:

The first time... actually, the first time when I arrived to the airport, I start crying. The first month, I was calling my family almost every day. Actually, it was very hard. The first month was very hard for me; after that, I start to adjust. (Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016)

**Experiencing Cultural Differences.** The participants experienced strong feelings of homesickness around important religious occasions such as Ramadan and Eid. Ramadan which lasts for a month, is an event celebrated by Muslims in which they fast every day from sunrise to sunset. The tradition of Ramadan in Saudi Arabia includes gathering in the family house in the afternoon where the women work together to prepare the meal that the family will share after the evening Maghrib prayer, the fourth prayer in the typical Muslim day. During this time, family share the meal called Iftar. Ramadan for Muslims is a social event, somewhat similar to having a party every day during this month. Sara felt homesick during the first Ramadan in Canada. She had arrived in Canada just as Ramadan was starting and because she was enrolled in an ESL program, she had to go to school every day for six to seven hours. Also, she was living with a Canadian family who did not understand how Muslims celebrate Ramadan. The fasting from sunrise to sunset felt long, especially when she thought about her family and their Iftar back

home. She avoided calling her family in Saudi Arabia during Iftar time because the pain of missing them:

It was so hard because I was doing my ESL program, and when I came for  
The first year, I was living with a Canadian family because I wanted to learn  
the language and experience the Canadian culture in depth. So, I was fasting  
for 17, 18 hours, and I would go to ESL program, come back, do my homework,  
sleep, prepare my breakfast [for the next day], and still not do the Maghrib  
prayer [yet]. I was suffering I would not talk to [my family] ... during the  
Iftar or Maghrib prayer because you miss that part, you miss their gathering,  
people working together, especially in the weekend ... because I would be  
emotional, and I would wish myself to be with them at that time. (Sara,  
personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Eid celebrations are very important for Muslims as well. The typical first day of Eid in Saudi Arabia starts from the last night of Ramadan. After having Iftar that day, families start Eid preparations by making food. People do not usually sleep that night and shopping malls are open until 4:00 a.m. At 6:30 a.m., everyone, from children to adults, is ready to go to the prayer service for Eid's prayer. The Eid's celebration starts from this time, so children are dressed up and families have small gifts to give to the children. Around 8:00 a.m., families gather in the grandparents' house to have breakfast and prepare lunch together. Typically, Muslims celebrate Eid for four days, and in Saudi Arabian law, there is no school during Ramadan and throughout the two weeks of Eid.

Although Reema chose to live in a building with many Saudi families, to avoid feeling homesick, she felt it strongly during the first Ramadan and the first Eid she lived in Canada. She

cried every day during Ramadan, and she could not celebrate the first day of Eid without her family:

In Ramadan, I felt homesick because I used to be with my family ... although I told you the building I lived in was full of Saudi students, but still I felt homesick. ... I was crying ... I remember I felt strong homesick in the first day Eid. I was far away of my family, and most of my friends went back to Saudi, and I stayed with two of my friends. It was, oh my gosh, I felt bad and even I didn't go to the Eid prayer with them. I didn't go anywhere until the next day. (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Similarly, Asma, was not able to feel the enjoyment of Ramadan or Eid because her father went back home during that time, stayed with her friend. She had school every day for six to seven hours and she was not prepared to look after herself because she did not know how to cook. She felt she could not celebrate Eid, either, because many of the important traditional aspects of the holiday were missing in Canada, and she was missing more than her family. Asma felt lonely and sad. She tried to attend the Eid's prayer service, but she could not make it because she was late. Remembering this time, she shared the following:

First, Ramadan was too difficult for me because my father went to Saudi Arabia, so I was alone. Not alone, I mean [I was] with Bayan, with my friend. Being with your friend is totally different compared to being with your family. It was difficult because when I was in Saudi Arabia, I stayed with my family, ate at specific time together, but here I faced difficulties when I was cooking food. Also here the duration of time of fasting is too long compared to Saudi Arabia. At that time, I had school, so I had to go every day to school; they didn't make

any exceptions for you even if you are fasting. It was difficult. I didn't like [my] first Ramadan here. I didn't celebrate Eid very well that day because I was missing several things, traditional things in our country at that day, so I didn't go outside. I just went to the mosque and I was surprised because I wanted to pray but there was nobody there. I arrived late and the prayer was finished. I talked to my parents that day, but I felt homesick because this day is a very important day in Saudi Arabia. I went to school on the second day. It's strange for me because in Saudi Arabia we usually take vacation for two weeks. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

It is obvious that feeling homesick affected the participants negatively during parts of their stay in Canada. However, the support that they got from their guardians, families in Saudi Arabia, or friends helped them to face this challenge and go forward with their academic pursuits.

### **A Life Changing Experience: “I Love Who I’ve Become”**

Studying abroad and living in a country with a different language and different cultural practices for up to five years is a significant challenge for most, if not all, international students. Rasmussen (1998) found that living abroad is a perfect opportunity to learn about another culture by immersing oneself in the customs, beliefs, and social norms. The participants of this study learned many new things by living in Canada and interacting with people who are from different backgrounds. They were happy not only with the impact on their personalities, but they were also grateful for this experience because it has helped them to succeed academically. All of the participants talked about their successes: either the ones that they accomplished in Canada, or others that they achieved while in Saudi Arabia but were recognized for in Canada. Some of the



participants acknowledged feeling proud on an academic level because of what they have achieved, such as their success, their research, or their volunteer work. Sara, who completed her undergraduate degree at a Canadian university, was proud of herself when she heard her name called at her undergraduate convocation and received the honor of her success. She felt that her years of studying made it all worthwhile for that moment. All of her feelings related to missing family and friends, being lonely, or tired and exhausted were replaced with happiness and joy because of a single moment that recognized her successes. Sara described this wonderful experience:

When I graduated from undergrad, getting onto the stage and being called by my name, and having the [chancellor] ... hold my hand ..., you just feel you want to cry. ... It felt like my five or four years before [were] worth [it] to get to that point. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Sara also shared that she was very proud of her Master's research which investigates what health means to young Saudi women in which she went back to Saudi Arabia and stayed for four months to collect her data. In addition, she volunteered to take a practical course with a foundation in Ontario to work as a health promoter, working to educate and improve client's knowledge about healthy eating and healthy lifestyles, and the relationships between healthy living and cardiovascular diseases. She explained that this experience changed her life when she became aware of the importance of her research message, and it opened her mind to see how educated and uneducated Saudi women think differently. She wanted her research to be published and spread all over the world. After her volunteering work in Canada, she decided to work on her project with Saudi women in Saudi Arabia. During our interview, she discussed her experience:

It was such a life changing experience for me because I worked on the project in the first days until we actually delivered the wellness fairs, and it opened my mind to so many things. Our culture is not educated; it's not well informed of health options they have. So, when I contacted my supervisor, I told her I am interested in doing a research [study on] Saudi women's health... She was so welcoming and she accepted me. My research now ... I want [it] to be spread all over the world, I want to publish it and present it in couple of conferences, InshaAllah. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Reema had a similar reaction to Sara's when she received an award for her high achievement at the university where she completed her undergrad degree in Saudi Arabia. She was proud and wished to be as successful at the Canadian university like she was in the Saudi one:

The first day when I came to the university in our orientation week, I was happy, and what makes me very happy was what they gave me ... award for students who have a good standing because I came with the high grades from [the] university in Saudi Arabia. So they give me like award, and it was a good day. I was proud and I wish I [could] have the same marks right now. I haven't.

(Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Reema also shared that she was very proud of her Master's research about Syrian refugees and their experiences and the challenges that they have faced. Talking about this research, she shared the following:

To do research about refugees, I was very proud to pick this population. You know what, I felt like there are very important people right now because of

the war and all of these stuff in the Middle East, so I believe that meeting with the refugees and listening to their experiences and what happened to them during the war and here, it's a good experience to me. Even [if] I don't finish my research, I feel like meeting with them is a good thing. (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Eman also felt proud of herself when she got her university acceptance. She only applied to one university in Canada because she was only interested in that university, and if she did not get in, she would go back home. She believed in herself, she knew she met the university's requirements, and she applied. She waited for two months to hear about her acceptance, and she could not believe it at the time. Eman was proud of herself because she thought that she deserved to be in that university. Recalling that time, she shared about her acceptance:

I remember when I got the acceptance from [the] university. I just applied for this university. I told myself [this university] and that's it. I don't want to apply to other universities. Then, I just waited for two months to get the acceptance. I remember the day was in morning, and I received an email from the graduate studies office, and they said: 'congratulation you are accepted in our program, and you have to submit your supporting documents and the financial guarantee.'  
... Ya, O.M.G my dream now becomes true. (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016)

There is no doubt that living abroad for a number of years would affect people in some way, especially for those from a different culture than the country in which they choose to study. The participants in this study, who are all from Saudi Arabia, came from a conservative society to a free and open society when compared to Saudi culture. El-Orabi (1967) found that some

Saudi students face difficulties and find it challenging to adapt to liberal societies because of the culture of Saudi Arabia. For the participants, the experience of living in Canada for up to five years impacted their personality, ways of thinking, and social life in positive ways. Sara, who had been living in Canada since 2009, noted that her personality changed a lot because of the many concepts that she learned about from being in Canada. For example, she has learned to be independent and to take an opportunity when its available. By living independently, she had the chance to learn how to cook and do laundry. While this might seem insignificant, the homes from which the participants came in Saudi Arabia have a house keeper who cooks, cleans, and does laundry, as is the case in almost in every home. So, independence to Sara meant a chance to learn new things, like cooking and cleaning. Moreover, she learned about social norms that are not part of life in Saudi Arabia. Talking about this point, she shared these thoughts:

So, there are so many nice concepts here that I learned, [such as] independence, human rights ... simple things. Independence, I would say here, I learned how to do my laundry, I learned to cook for myself, to clean my room. Some social norms we were not used to do. Like when we go to the mall, for example, the kids play, after you play, you get your food, and after you eat, you just leave it and you leave. So, in the Canadian culture, they don't do that. You actually take your plate, and you empty the container and you put the tray there. I started recycling things; we don't have the recycle system back home, but at least ... we should divide garbage to different bags, and that's the least thing we can do, and my mom actually likes that, so I got support from my mom sometimes.

(Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Sara also hopes to transfer what she learned in Canada to her society back home. Discussing her plans, she said that,

whenever I go home, I will try to implement something I learned in my own home. I would change my own family and start from there, so it's not just my degree or my education that I'm going back with, I have changed a lot over the past couple of years, and [I'll] stick with what I became ... so I'm hoping to change other people. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Reema expressed appreciation for the ways in which living in Canada for six years has changed her. She learned how to think about her future and prepare for it. She learned about some social norms that she did not use back home, such as greeting others or debating with friends and classmates. She used to stick to her own opinion even if she found herself to be wrong, and it was hard for her to be convinced by others. Reema considered this to be an important change to her personality and something important that she learned from living abroad:

Canada makes me more confident. I think I became more mature in Canada than Saudi Arabia. And also in Canada I learn how to think about my future and how to be responsible for that future. I learn how to appreciate people and how to say thank-you or sorry and stuff like that because it makes a huge change in your personality and in your way of dealing with other people. ... In Saudi Arabia I used to stick to my opinion: 'This is my opinion and you are wrong. Anyway, even if you try to convince me to be in your side, I feel no.' Now, I can be on your side, and I respect at least. I say, 'okay, I agree with you,

but this is my opinion and this is your opinion. (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Nora, who was fully dependent on her family in Saudi Arabia, noticed changes in terms of her personal life. She learned how to be responsible for others, take care of her children, and how to take care of spending money. Describing these changes, Nora revealed the following:

I used to be a quiet person, but now I am really social and I [get] upset and nervous easily, maybe because the studying and it's a lot of pressure. ...

One thing I learned here about the importance of having a family because when I was back home, I was spending most of my time studying and knowing nothing about my family, but here I know a lot of them because I miss them. I think I gain lots of skills here, such as in finance. Back home I didn't care about money or how much I [spent]. Here I care more and more where and how I'm gonna spend the money. Also cooking skills: now I can cook different recipes but back home I was depending on my family most of the time. Although I'm married, I spent most of my time with my family. (Nora, personal communication, February 9, 2016)

Eman explained that she loves the Canadian culture and the lifestyle because in her life back home in Saudi Arabia, she did not appreciate the importance of time management. She explained that the Saudi lifestyle forces her to be unorganized. For example, she described how the hot weather in Saudi Arabia leads people to wait until night, when it becomes cooler, to do their duties:

Everything [in Saudi Arabia is] designed to be done at night. Also the weather plays a big role ... in this; because we have hot weather, night is more

comfortable to go out. We have to wait sometimes until the weather gets cooler to go out. (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016)

During her time in Canada, Eman learned about being patient, waking up early, dividing her time based on her needs, and giving herself some free time to rest. Eman shared how living in Canada changed her:

To be patient, to live alone, to depend just on myself, to work hard, to be on time which is very important for us, to work hard, and to give yourself a rest time ... - this is what I saw all the Canadians do. I like the idea of waking up in morning. In my country it's different. People [in Saudi Arabia] usually wake up 10 a.m., but we spend most of our time in night, so I want to change this. I don't know how I can change it but I really want it to be changed. Here, I usually wake up at 7:00 and I study, clean my home, go to grocery store. I do everything in morning. (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016,)

Asma talked about her appreciation for the confidence she gained through her experiences in Canada. Studying abroad gave her the opportunity to express her opinion and share her ideas with others, without being shy or having doubt in herself. Talking about the comparison between who she was in Saudi Arabia and who she has become in Canada, she said:

My way of thinking has changed, my way of talking. I was shy - too shy, but now, no I'm more open, so I can talk to people. When I first came here, I felt always shy. Comparing to that time, I became stronger. This is the best thing that happened to me here. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

Rana used to have problems with managing her time. Because of her move to Canada, she was able to work on this skill as she learned from others she interacted with. She paid

attention to how they managed their time and their organizational approaches. She described the following observation:

I like the way that they [Canadians] manage their time; I mean in the week days, they work, they study, and do the work stuff, and on the weekend they enjoy every moment. So, this managing of time is very useful for our lives. Actually, I have a big problem in managing my time, so I like this idea of managing time.

(Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016)

The culture in Saudi Arabia does not encourage women to ask or interact with others, especially with men. Therefore, a woman in Saudi Arabia depends on her father, brother, husband, or son to interact with other men with whom she has no relationship. Rana identified that it was challenging to depend on her husband all of the time, especially when studying in a mixed-gender environment. At the beginning of her studies, she felt like she was doing something that did not align with who she wanted to be. Then, she learned that it is important to interact with others when needed: “Before I came to Canada, ...I can’t talk to strange people. Now, [I understand that] you have to talk to [everyone] to be alive in Canada, so I started to talk to strange people” (Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016).

Obviously, the experience of living and studying in Canada has affected the participants in positive ways. The benefits that they received from this experience have made them proud of who they are and allowed them to live in different ways than their lives in Saudi Arabia.

### **Enjoying a Different Way of Learning**

The education system, campus facilities, and teaching approaches used in Canadian schools is completely different than the Saudi system. The participants of this study expressed that they enjoyed their experience in the Canadian education system. Sara, who completed her



undergraduate and graduate studies at a Canadian university, found that there are many opportunities in Canadian schools that students should not miss out on, such as volunteer work and workshops. She felt that this is especially important for Saudi students because they do not have these kind of opportunities back home. While Sara was a student in an ESL program, she was too shy to speak up or discuss her ideas with other students because this was not her experience in the Saudi school system that she came from. Sara recognized that not having this skill seriously impacted her undergraduate studies, so she took up the task and decided to talk and interact with other students. In the beginning, she did not know how to do this appropriately, so she started sharing all of her ideas about any given topic. Then, day by day, she learned how to become an effective, actively participating student. Sara enjoyed her studies and began attending a number of workshops, events, and she participated in volunteer work that was not related to her field of study. She found that these activities were a perfect way to help her achieve her goals and have a successful study abroad experience. She decided that she wanted to do her graduate studies abroad as well because of the benefits that she gained from her undergraduate experience. During our interview, Sara shared her thoughts about this decision:

When I started my undergrad courses, you had to at least speak up and tell people that you ... exist and not ... [just] a number .... And my classes were 700 and 500 students, so I didn't get the chance to explore, but I had the experience to speak up and talk whatever ideas I have. ... I would network with other students, ... attending workshop[s] that's offered at the university, events that don't relate to my own fields. So I start to enjoy my university study from my second, third and fourth year. When I graduated, I wanted to do to a Master's because I explore more volunteer work, more events that I had to pay for it. I didn't go for free

[I had to pay for it], but it was worth it because I knew what I wanna do for my grad school. By fourth year, I applied for the Master's program before I graduated. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016)

Reema was surprised when she got into her first class because of the way that students participated in class. Students shared about everything that they did with others although it was not related to the topic. It took her a semester to adapt to this new type of classroom atmosphere, but then, she loved it. Reema found this to be a very good way of learning because it demonstrates to students that their ideas and opinions are important. Her experiences in the classroom affected who she became as a person as she became more active, confident, and strong willed through her interaction with others. Reema shared the following:

I was silent all of the time, just looking to the students. They talk about everything in their life, they talk even if they go washroom. They would say: 'yesterday I went to washroom and that's [what] happened to me.' I feel that they talk about every single thing happen in their life. We didn't learn that in our classes back home. We have not talk[ed] with the professors; we just listen to our teachers in Saudi Arabia. I found people here like to talk. Then, in the second year, I started talking and I loved that way [of learning]. I feel like it's very good when someone appreciate or respect your opinion or what ... you believe, even if you are the only one [who has] that belief ... I think that what makes my personality little bit stronger than before. (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Reema also complained about the Saudi education system because it excludes this component of teaching. In Saudi Arabia, there is no opportunity for students to speak up unless they are asked

to answer a question. Otherwise, students stay silent for the class or lecture and listen to the teacher or professor to learn what they need to memorize for the exam. Reema shared further:

I don't like in the Saudi [education system] that they don't give the student the opportunity to express their feeling, their opinion. Your talent, they appreciate that, and they don't ask you about that. They give you information and then you have to agree with this information. You can't say 'no, I disagree,' but here in Canada, I feel the system is kind of open, is kind of a dialogue. It's kind of yourself. I don't know, it depends on your personality and how would you react to the system. I love the way here. You know, I can't say our ... what we learn is bad, no it was very good and strong. The system in nursing in college in Saudi Arabia is very strong like here in Canada. The only thing that they didn't give the opportunity to speak or to express what we learn.

(Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016)

Nora had a similar opinion to Reema about the Saudi education system and how teachers deal with students in the classroom or how students participate during lessons or lectures. Nora also found that the Saudi education system misses out on important opportunities for students, such as volunteer work and the organization of student associations. Nora shared the following in our interview:

[The Saudi education system] is just about teacher focus; students usually are not in the [focus]. ... For example, in a lecture back home, the professor who talks all the time. There was less time for students to explain and to give their ideas, while here I think, the students ... talk and their teachers can just give some suggestions to them or recommendations. For example, back home

we don't have ... students' association that ... volunteer ... just [about] study, study, and study back home. There [is] no social connection. I think if we have back home, for example, social association with different departments, conferences, it would improve students to be at the same level of education in Canada or America. (Nora, personal communication, February 9, 2016)

Nora expressed interest in the campus environment because she thinks that the Canadian campus is more supportive of students and their needs for studying. For example, the library is open for long hours, someone is there to help, and rooms are available for booking in which students can study. However, in Saudi Arabia, campuses are designed differently. On campus, everything is closed by 2:00 p.m., the end of the day, and students are not allowed to enter the campus until 8:00 a.m. the next day. About her experience on campus, Nora shared further:

Back home, I usually just go to the university to attend lectures and going back home, but here when I'm in the campus, the environment encourages me to study because I have different friends from Canada, Ghana, who encourage me. ... Everybody asks me if I want help; you can ask anyone. So, I prefer to stay in campus if I have questions, concerns that I can share with them, but back home [you] just go study then go home. We do have a university library, but it's not like the library here. For example, back home we don't have private rooms that we can book to study in. If we had, I would use it, but I usually come here and book a room for myself and study. So, if I have something I can go and ask questions and share ideas with people. Back home, if you have questions, you have to call someone, and I don't like phoning. I prefer to meet face-to-face. (Nora, personal communication, February 9, 2016)

Eman compared the teaching of nursing in Saudi Arabia to Canada. She found that the teaching of nursing in Saudi Arabia is about giving students information to pass the exams based on memorization. However, in the Canadian system, she found that it is about practice and preparing students to be authorized to work in hospitals. During our interview, Eman explained the difference:

In my country when I studied my undergrad, they were focusing just on educating us, not the giving us the chance to practice, but here, when I came to Canada and communicated with Canadian students, I found it different. The system in Canada for nursing ... they focus more in practice, public health. They are eligible to work at hospital as nurses. (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016)

Eman also liked the facilities at the Canadian universities, such as the library and the writing support center. She pointed out the difficulties that she faced in Saudi Arabia when she was doing her final project in her undergraduate studies. She had to buy the resources because the university's library lacked the resources she needed and the librarians were not well prepared to help her. During our interview, Eman talked about her frustrations with the library at the Saudi university she attended:

The first thing is the library, I face difficulties when I did my research in my undergrad because I needed many resources but I couldn't [find them]. I used [the library] but it didn't work because ... first, it's far away from my building, and the other thing, I didn't find all the boxes that I needed. There was no guide or a librarian [to help me], so I had to buy the boxes which is not good and expensive and I will not need them anymore they were just for specific time. So, I found it here more convenient and easy. If I have a question, just go

to the library and ask for help, and they will tell me where can I find the book that I look for. Here I like the library system. Studying in library is something new for me. (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016)

Asma, as well, liked the facilities on the campus of the Canadian university and found that the environment promoted studying. She found the library system in Canada to be useful and students could get the help that they needed. The writing support center was a good resource that she used many times to help her with her writing struggles. Asma explained that the,

[The Canadian's campus] is very good. You can study whenever and whatever you want. I mean classes here are open and you can go and study alone by yourself. ... Even the library is very good here; it's open from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. sometimes, so you can borrow any book you want and read at the same place or take it home. I like the libraries here. Even the student support center, you can find someone to help you any time. For example, if you don't know the APA style in writing the references, you can go to the library and book an appointment with someone in order to help you with it. The campus here is very helpful and very nice, comfortable. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

Asma also mentioned the difference between the Saudi and Canadian professors that she dealt with. She found that the Canadian professor were available during their office hours, which indicates that they respect students' time availability. In Saudi Arabia, she had a bad experience with her supervisor who was not good with respecting time because she asked students to book appointments outside of office hours and would not be available for the appointment. Asma elaborated on this point:

I like [the professors'] ways here because if you want something you can

talk and discuss with them directly at the same time or after the class. In Saudi Arabia, sometimes you find difficulties with some professor teachers. When I was studying in [a Saudi] university, ... when I wanted something from my professor, who was my supervisor, she always says: 'you have to take an appointment.' When I took the appointment, she says: 'I'm busy now come after one or two hours,' and sometimes, 'come tomorrow.' Here, I didn't face this problem. Always when I wanted to talk with my professor, they [were] always welcoming and I could go to them in appointments any time. This is one thing. The second thing is their way of teaching in class, using technology, asking the students to talk about their opinions. You know, in Saudi Arabia, they don't focus on students' opinion that much. (Asma, personal communication, February 25, 2016)

Rana pointed out that Canadian professors assist student learning by outlining the course requirements in a syllabus which helps save the time of both the professors and students. In Saudi Arabia, courses are based on the professors' discretion and it is not common to give students an outline for the course. Rana shared the following:

The education system here is very different than our education system. I feel here like... the professors give us the requirements for the course from the beginning, and every time, every assignment has its requirements. You have to meet them to get the mark, so everything is clear, and everything is possible. If you attend all the lectures, and meet the requirements, you will get the mark. Actually, in our system, not all of the professors give the requirements, so I feel this the most difficult thing in our education system. (Rana, personal communication,

March 3, 2016)

Rana also talked about the differences in teaching practice between Saudi Arabia and Canada. She found that the approach to teaching in Canada encouraged students to share their ideas and express their opinions, while in Saudi Arabia, students miss this kind of communication between professors and students in classrooms. Rana explained further:

Here they ask and encourage students to participate in discussion. In Saudi, no, just giving the information and showing slides for the whole three hours. So, it's difficult because you don't have a chance to discuss. You have to study the material and pass the exam. Here you can discuss and understand. Also, the office [hours] here I really like it. It's flexible and every professor has two to three hours to meet students and discuss with them. In Saudi, we miss this. (Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016).

Like the other participants, Rana also appreciated the library in the Canadian university system. She appreciated that there were resources available for students to pick-up from the building or to use online. Rana shared the following about her use of the library:

Everything is organized. The library has a lot of resources, and you can [get] access to a computer anytime. Also, I like the internet, Wi Fi that [is] distributed it in everywhere. I like these things, that anytime you can access the internet and you can access the library online and get research paper[s] and everything you want. (Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016)

The participants expressed that the differences between the Canadian education system and their experiences in the Saudi system were not difficult to adapt to. Although the Canadian education system seems to be more complex than the Saudi one, the participants found it more



helpful and they were able to get more out of their studies. In general, it appears that they preferred learning based on the Canadian education system over the Saudi one.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the following themes that emerged from the finding of the interviews: guardianship, homesickness, a life changing experience: “I love who I have become,” and enjoying a different way of learning. These themes helped to answer the research questions that informed this study. In the final chapter, I present a discussion of the findings and offer a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (n.d.), in 2005, King Abdullah made an agreement with American president, George W. Bush, to increase the number of Saudi students studying in the U.S. Since then many Saudi students have enrolled in the program and have spent time abroad studying in another country. Currently, the program is the largest student scholarship program in the history of Saudi Arabia. This chapter offers a discussion of the research findings based on the themes that emerged from the data collection about Saudi women's experiences studying abroad under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.

### Evaluation of Interviews

In this qualitative study, I interviewed six Saudi women who were enrolled through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in a Canadian university to understand their experiences related to studying in Canada. The participants talked about many aspects of this experience, including making the decision to apply to the program, and their current experiences associated with being a student in the program. In general, the participants revealed that they were happy with their experiences studying abroad and were grateful for the advantages that they gained from participating in the program. In addition to noting their accomplishments, the participants also discussed the challenges and difficulties that they faced. However, the participants spoke about how these experiences made them stronger, and helped them to develop their own sense of determination. All of the students, as Saudi women, identified the same goal of trying to prove that they can contribute towards the betterment of Saudi society. They expressed their desire to change the commonly-held belief that women should have a limited role in Saudi society. Rather, they all talked about wanting to make a change in what women's roles might be in Saudi society and how their time studying abroad instilled that desire in them. Through their

achievements, they want to prove to Saudi society that they have value as women, and perhaps, to provide motivation for others to question whether certain practices in Saudi culture and laws, as influenced by Islam, might be the reason for Saudi women's social positioning.

Some of the participants took risks and made sacrifices while facing some cultural obstacles in Canada in order to achieve their goals. For example, Sara and her nephew needed to live with a Canadian family for a while when they first arrived in Canada because Sara was afraid of starting her life with only her nephew. This was not an easy decision for her because living with people who are not from one's family is unacceptable in Islam and in the Saudi culture. Sara's family did not know about this and she indicated in our interview that she has no plan to tell them because it is culturally unaccepted although she had her nephew with her. This experience for Sara was a challenge that she lived with for months and it will continue to be a burden as a secret that she will keep. Nora also made sacrifices; most notable was leaving her four-month-old daughter with her family to travel to Canada because she thought that she would not have the time to take care of her with all of the responsibilities that she would have in Canada. Of course this was not an easy decision for her to make; however, she could overcome this challenge by thinking about the goals that she had set for herself. All of the participants indicated that they were very proud of their experiences, benefits, and achievements that they received from studying in Canada.

As a Saudi woman, I was surprised at their confidence and their way of overcoming the challenges related to living abroad, because living independently is very different from life in Saudi Arabia. In fact, they admitted that it was difficult, but what shocked me was that they did not complain about overcoming the challenges and instead talked about it in a way that emphasized that they did something very important and everyone should know about it. I

believe that the participants simplified these challenges to emphasize their capacity to overcome the difficulties that might have kept them from achieving their goals. Although the participants were counting down the days to the completion of their studies so they could go back home, they were ambitious and knew that they had to continue their studies. It was obvious that the participants felt pulled by their emotions, such as missing their families, but were invigorated by their ability to overcome the challenges that they faced during their studies. At the same time, they were pushed by the image of a future that they drew for themselves in which they envisioned themselves as successful Saudi women who have the ability to make a change in the world.

In the next section, I answer the research questions that guided this study, highlighting a number of themes that emerged from the interviews, and analyze the data using the “push and pull factors” theoretical framework. Finally, I offer a conclusion.

### **Push and Pull Factors for Saudi Women Studying in Canada**

The work of Mostafa (2006) and Li and Bray (2007) provided a theoretical framework for considering the push and pull factors that influenced the participants’ experiences in the scholarship program. In this study, I use the terms push and pull factors that are both in the home and the study abroad context. That is, at home, while deciding whether or not to study abroad, the women may face push factors from their home contexts that propel them to go abroad and pull factors that draw them to stay. Once abroad, the push and pull becomes reversed as they experience push factors that entice them to return home and pull factors that keep them wanting to remain in Canada.

### **It's Worth It: Enjoying the New Life and Opportunities**

The first research question probed the positive features that Saudi women graduate students experienced while they were enrolled in a Saudi scholarship program at a Canadian university. Overall, the women talked about the factors that made them feel proud of their studies in Canada, the aspects of their experiences here that pulled them to remain in Canada studying even though they sometimes found themselves doubting themselves. One of the factors that pulled students to remain in Canada for the participants in the study was the different lifestyle that they were able to experience. According to the insights which the participants offered in the interviews, everyday living abroad for them was an opportunity to learn something new. However, the learning was not only about academics; it encompassed much more than that.

By making the decision to apply to the scholarship program and remain studying abroad, participants learned that they were brave enough to persist in achieving their goals. This was not easy for the Saudi women participants because of the isolation they felt being away from their families and the new independent lifestyle they were expected to inhabit during their experience in Canada. Sara thought it was easy to adapt to a new lifestyle; however, she cried every single day for months when she first arrived in Canada. She was shocked when she found out that she was alone and that she was expected to be responsible for everything in her academic and personal life. Moreover, she had to appear as being strong when she called her mom: "I would be the one who comforted her and say 'I'm fine,' and 'don't worry, don't cry,' and 'everything is fine,' but [when] I finished my call, I would be crying (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016). Reema, as well, found herself more confident in her ability to make decisions since she started her studies at the university in Canada. She started to determine her needs and decide

how to achieve her goals, asking herself, “How ... can I determine what I need? What [do] I want to be in the future” (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016).

Leaving their families and the luxurious lifestyle they were accustomed to, with close relationships with parents, and a house keeper and driver, the participants had to learn to be independent while studying abroad. Nora developed many skills that she needed to be successful in Canada because she used to be dependent on her family: “now I can cook different recipes but back home I was depending on my family most of the time” (personal communication, February 9, 2016). Eman appreciated what she learned from her study abroad experience. It not only benefited her academically, but she also developed skills that changed her personality in positive ways. She said that, “[I learned how] to be patient, to live alone, to depend just on myself, to work hard, to be on time which is very important for us [as Saudis]” (Eman, personal communication, February 24, 2016). These experiences helped them to feel accomplished in Canada and pulled them to remain here to study even though they faced feelings of being alone.

The difficulties in learning a new language, adapting to a different culture, and meeting the requirements of the Saudi Cultural Bureau and the university in two years, were identified as factors that initially pushed the women to consider returning home once in Canada. However, overcoming these challenges gave the participants something to feel proud of, and so became factors that pulled the women to remain in Canada. For example, Reema was embarrassed the first time she went to a grocery store in Canada, because of her English, when nobody could understand that she wanted to buy a lemon. Although she was confident of her English because of her nursing background in Saudi Arabia, she felt that she needed to work more than she planned to in order to improve her pronunciation. It is obvious that this experience did not push her back to Saudi Arabia, instead it pulled her to remain in Canada and to work harder and

overcome her problems. Rana, as well, was determined to get acceptance to a specific university, so she worked hard to meet the university's requirements. Her application was refused many times, but she kept trying until she was accepted. She was pulled to remain in Canada to do more and challenged herself to succeed. Therefore, she was proud of herself because she believed that getting the acceptance was an indicator of success in itself.

Being enrolled in a Canadian university, embedded in an entirely different education system than the Saudi one, allowed the participants to learn more about their fields of study. The need to practice English and participate in university classes prompted them to interact with others, which changed their personality from being an introverted to an extraverted position. The social norms that the participants learned in Canada had the biggest impact on their personalities. Sara identified that she used to be shy and someone who kept to herself. When she worked through her undergraduate studies, because the number of students in classes were around 500 students, so she did not get a chance to share her ideas in class. When she started her graduate studies, the number of students was much smaller, but still she remained introverted because she was not sure that her answers or ideas were right. However, after a while she became more confident and she felt that she needed to participate in class and let the professor and students decide if she was right or not: “[In my] grad study I had the experience to speak up and [express] whatever ideas I have. That might sound stupid to me; I would just let it go and talk; I would network with other students” (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016). Rana, who first came to Canada as a housewife, was influenced by her husband's studying experience to attend school in Canada. She acknowledged that the Canadian education system encourages students to interact with others, to explore their ideas, and discuss their concerns, while the Saudi system

does not give students this opportunity. In this sense, there was a pull to engage in studies from the interests she found in the Canadian system.

In general, the participants indicated that they do not accept the current status of women in Saudi Arabia, which was a significant push factors encouraging them to study abroad. Sara learned many things while studying abroad that changed her personality and her way of thinking; she believes that she should transfer what she learned in Canada to Saudi society. She tried to apply one of the social norms that she learned in Canada when she went to Saudi Arabia for a vacation. She realized it was strange in the Saudi context and that even her brothers were embarrassed. However, she has the goal of making a change in Saudi society, even if it is a tiny change, so she was happy when only her family supported her. She shared the experience:

The first year when I went back home, we went to Red Sea Mall [me] and my brothers ... I finish[ed] my food and I was taking the tray to the garbage and my brothers were so embarrassed. They were so embarrassed, and they were saying ‘people are looking at you.’ I said, ‘so what if they are looking at me?’ Maybe everyone will not except [this practice], but at least my family is accepting [it]. (Sara, personal communication, February 5, 2016).

However, some of the participants did not feel that change can be made easily because of the male-dominated nature of Saudi society. But, they believe there may be opportunities for change and they would not miss the opportunity of transforming what they have learned, but it needs time to see the results. Asma discussed some of the social norms that she would like to see transferred to Saudi Arabia, for example, lining up in banks or grocery stores. She said that if Saudi society applied these norms, there would be more respect for each other and time could be saved. It is not common practice in Saudi society is to ‘line up,’ although people do wait their



turn while waiting to be seen. Reema tried to line up when she went back to Saudi Arabia and nobody cared about her because it is not a common practice in Saudi society:

It wasn't easy. I was the only one standing in the line, [with] people on the other side. I just felt like I [was] alone [there]. No, [it] is very hard, you can't do that in Saudi Arabia to make a line or ask people to be organized. Nobody will listen to you. ... I [knew] that [would] happen; I wasn't disappointed, I knew it. They need time to do that. (Reema, personal communication, February 8, 2016).

All of the participants appreciated the advantages that they gained while living in Canada and its impact on their personalities. These advantages became major pull factors that encouraged the participants in this study to continue their studies enthusiastically even when they found things difficult.

### **'It Was Difficult but Not Impossible'**

The second research question asked about the most challenging experiences that the participants faced as graduate students in the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in Canada. As made evident in the interviews, there is no doubt that the participants of this study faced many challenges and needed time and made efforts to overcome them. The feeling of being alone as they sometimes felt isolated from their peers and away from their families was the hurdle that the participants talked the most about, which identifies it as a significant push factor for the students to go back home. As Li and Bray (2007) suggest, sometimes negative factors exist in the abroad location, and these factors may push a student to go back or quit their studies. The participants in this study explained that sometimes these feelings made them believe that they were not capable of continuing their program in Canada. Whenever they faced difficulties, such as learning difficulties, adapting to the Canadian culture, or studying long hours, they would remember that

they missed their families and they sometimes felt like they could not continue on without them. However, the desire to achieve their goals and to make a difference in Saudi society are factors that brought them face-to-face with these challenges to overcome them.

Gaining an acceptance offer to a Canadian university was one of the important factors that determined the participants' experiences in the scholarship program. According to the interviews, the university requirements were extremely difficult to meet, especially related to language proficiency. For the participants, it was not only about continuing in the program, but it was about their image in Saudi society. That is, if they failed in the program and went back to Saudi without a degree, they would prove the belief that Saudi women are only capable of being housewives, which was, obviously, contrary to their goals. Therefore, they worked hard to meet the university's requirements to get the acceptance which was an unforgettable moment for each of them in the study abroad experience. Once in Canada, the difficulty of the program pulled the women to keep working as they really wanted to succeed.

Although the participants in this study met the university requirements and succeeded in their language proficiency tests, their English stood as an obstacle to delivering their ideas clearly. Limited English language skills among international students not only have an effect on them academically, but also it affected their relationship with others and interaction with the public (Mostafa, 2006). Therefore, studying English for a maximum of two years under the Scholarship Program, for Saudis whose English is at a basic level, is not enough to be fully confident with one's ability to succeed. For example, a student who works on a paper or a project for days, only to find out that they did not understand what they were asked to do, would of course be shaken in their confidence to complete their studies and may think about giving up

all together. This was a factor that the participants suggested pushed them to go back home, but they worked to overcome it.

Mostafa (2006) discussed the importance of social relations in a student's experience while studying abroad. Meeting others from different cultures and experiencing a different lifestyle was one of the push factors that encouraged the participants in this study to apply for the scholarship program. However, according to Mostafa, it may also be considered a pull factor that prevents Arab Muslim students from deciding to study abroad because of the religious and cultural differences that they fear might impede them from succeeding. While in Canada, Rana felt lonely when she had only Chinese classmates because it was difficult for her to interact with them or to feel that they respected her as a classmate because she did not understand the Chinese language. In the interview she shared that, "actually at first, I was feeling that I [was] alone because there was no one [spoke] my language or [was] from my culture ... [and] I felt [it was] very hard to just join them" (Rana, personal communication, March 3, 2016). This might become a push factor that results in a student who is already abroad to give up and go back home, especially for someone who does not have sufficient self-confidence.

More recently, Carli and Eagly (2012) studied women's ability to succeed in leadership positions and explored the reasons that might block them from achieving success. The researchers found that there are some stereotypes that are known in societies that could work to prevent people from achieving success. For example, in communities that are dominated by men, there is often a belief that women are not qualified enough to study some fields, such as science, technology, engineering, or medicine, and rather, women are qualified for certain positions such as nursing or teaching. For the women in this study, they had strong determination to change this kind of stereotype completely. For them, it was not only about

getting a degree and gaining employment; they have a dream that they hoped would become a reality; namely to prove to everyone who does not believe in Saudi women abilities that their beliefs are mistaken. Once in Canada, this determination pulled them to continue with their studies, but could also be a factor in the future to push them to return home to make a change in their own society.

The push factors did not only arise from their experiences in Canada, though. There were pressures from Saudi society that affected the women when they were studying in Canada. The participants talked about how, generally, Saudi men believe that Saudi women are not able to be independent, and that they cannot be more than teachers, nurses, or doctors. Basaffar (2012) studied the changing role of Saudi women, from the that housewife to businesswoman and asserted that the Saudi society does not encourage women to work outside of the home because they believe that this is the men's work, while women need only to focus on domestic responsibilities. A decade ago, the Saudi government established the Scholarship Program which provides women with the opportunity to study abroad, which in turn contributes to changes in the Saudi community with regards to Saudi women's responsibilities. Yet, the participants mentioned that some men do not support offering scholarships to women and so the participants felt even more importance in succeeding. Therefore, the participants were pushed by this belief to first go abroad to study and then to return home to Saudi Arabia once their studies were complete to change the situation surrounding women's roles back home. They believed that if they gave up and went back home without completing their studies, they would prove to the men what they believed about their weakness. These Saudi women felt that they were in competition and they must win to achieve a broader goal for the Saudi community.

### **Importance of Preparing for the Experience**

The third research question asked the participants about their recommendations to other women who will be participating in the program in future. According to the interviews, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program misses a very important point about preparing applicants for the new life that they will live in another country. For example, the program does not provide applicants with university requirements, or their need to pass the IELTS or TOFEL tests, the proficiency tests that every university in Canada uses. This is important information that the participants believe should be taken up by the program as a program responsibility.

Most of the participants admit that they wasted their time by attending general English school instead of academic programs. Also, they regret their unwillingness to take the proficiency test earlier. Some of them lived in a city for more than 10 months because getting a university acceptance was impossible for them because of the high requirements of the universities in that city. Instead, they moved to another city and re-established themselves. Moreover, the lack of information about the laws, education systems, lifestyle, university requirements, and the weather in Canada caused problems for most of the participants because this was new information for them.

Application to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program requires female applicants to have a guardian with them for religious and cultural reasons in order to be accepted to the program. The participants emphasized the importance of choosing the right guardianship. For example, some participants needed to change their guardianship because of the guardians' health situation or inability to adapt, which caused the participants some delay in their studies. Therefore, they recommend to other women who will be participating in the program to choose the guardian who would be most appropriate for the experience.

Homesickness is a factor that almost every Saudi woman suffered from when studying abroad, according to the participants. Therefore, they recommend others to be fully prepared for this because if the participants did not challenge themselves to overcome these feelings, they would have just given up and quit the program. According to the interviews, feeling homesick can have a negative effect on academic achievements as well as personal wellbeing.

Experiencing Ramadan or Eid in Canada without families was a challenge for the participants and they needed strength to overcome this. Students need to remind themselves of the push factors and focus on their goals in order to help them with their feelings of homesickness and the challenges it causes.

Meeting Canadian university requirements was something that cost the participants a lot of time and effort. According to the interviews, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program should provide applicants with information about Canadian university requirements in advance to make them aware of the educational system in Canada. The participants of this study felt that they wasted their time by looking for a university that suited their situations. For example, they did not know that they could be accepted to a university through a pathway system that is provided by an ESL institution, instead of taking IELTS or TOFEL exams which caused them to waste up to one year of their scholarship program.

The education system in Canada was one of factors that the participants were interested in trying. According to the interviewees, the approach to learning in the Canadian university system, one that the participants described as a critical thinking approach, enriched the participants' knowledge about their own fields of study. For example, studying in Saudi Arabia was based on memorization used for passing an exam, while in Canada learning was about practicing and discussing and being involved in the learning process. The participants stated that

this approach helped them to better understand their fields. For me, as a Saudi student who studied in Saudi Arabia, I was surprised when I learned that the participants adapted easily to the Canadian education system because I understand through my experiences that it is not easy to change one's way of learning completely. While the participants used the term critical thinking, they did not go into elaborate detail as to what extent they were willing to be critical about their lives. Future studies could probe how Saudi students apply the "critical thinking" approach to challenge the assumptions and biases they have about their own society and their position in it, though this is beyond the scope of what this present study aimed to do.

### **Recommendations for the Program**

The King Abdullah Scholarship Programs needs to improve by adding some important components that will certainly support students. The programs should include sessions for applicants to attend during the application process. These sessions should provide information about the country that they will study in, such as the weather, the laws, the university requirements, the education system, cultural practices, and other information that students need to know about before leaving Saudi Arabia. Adding this to the program would have more positive implications for applicants when they arrive in the new country. Moreover, it would be helpful if the program recommended a number of specific universities for students to consider based on their field of study and the university's requirements. In this case, students would have an idea about which city they have to live in and where they should apply to, instead of trying to figure that out by themselves which would decrease time wasted in the scholarship. In addition, the students' supervisors in the Saudi Cultural Bureau in the in the countries where the scholarships are available should have a list of a number of choices for students who find themselves stuck or unable to do more; for example, telling them about the English language

institutions that offer a pathway system. This would help students to save time, especially in big cities that are full of language institutes.

Applicants, as well, should educate themselves in a professional way instead of depending on others' experiences. Therefore, they should read and ask about everything, such as finding out about the weather, culture, laws, university requirements, the educational system, transportation, rent, and the availability of halal food before leaving Saudi Arabia. Applicants should know that there are always other choices and they do not need to restrict themselves in one city or apply to only one university. If applicants prepare themselves well, they should have an easier time preparing for and completing their degree in which they might be able to achieve their goals faster.

Canadian universities also have a responsibility. Schools should work to introduce Saudi students to the Canadian system through cultural and academic programs which may help to smoothen the students' integration to social and academic life in Canada. For example, establishing courses or workshops to educate Saudi students about the Canadian education system would be of benefit. These sessions could give students a brief idea about what is expected of them in the classrooms, such as the importance of participating and interacting with others.

If Canadian universities continue to find value in accepting Saudi students from abroad, these Canadian faculties need to be aware about the Saudi culture, traditions, and religious principles that guide Saudi women students' actions. For example, for many Saudi women, their time abroad may be the first time for them to be in mixed gender classrooms. This might cause the women discomfort from working in groups or speaking out. Other religious issues might be seen in how some Saudi female may veil themselves or need to go to pray during class time.



There may be many professors and instructors in Canada who have little knowledge about Saudi culture. Therefore, the Saudi Cultural Bureau should work with university instructors to inform them about these kind of issues. This may be done by designing booklets or preparing workshops that explain general things that Saudi female students may face in Canadian classrooms. Such collaboration may become even more essential as the interest in bringing Saudi students to Canada increases.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study include the handful of participants that were interviewed. In order to fully explore this topic, it would be beneficial to expand the number of participants and include undergraduate students as well. The study is also limited in terms of gender, age, and field of study of the participants. The study would have benefited from including the women's guardians in order find out more about this component of the study abroad experience, especially if they are just accompanying women without studying or working themselves. Interviewing officials from the Saudi Cultural Bureau to discuss the issues that the participants identified would not only strengthen this study, but would also put to use the information that was collected during the research.

Given the earlier discussion about the difficulty for Saudi students to criticize government funded programs, it is reasonable to suggest that the participants in this study may have had more issues to discuss but felt unable to bring up these issues because they were afraid to talk about challenges. While the participants reflected that they believed in the importance of critical thinking in higher education, transferring this skill to look at one's own position can be difficult and it's possible that the students in this study would not have felt comfortable to do so

given the brevity of this particular study. That is, given that the study looked specifically at a scholarship program, the participants may have had some reservations in what they could share.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Further research is needed in order to fully understand the challenges that Saudi women in the scholarship program face, and the impacts of these challenges on the women's personal and academic lives. Research methods should also go beyond interviewing participants. For example, analyzing official documents about the scholarship program, and including some quantitative studies that map out statistical information about female students' achievements and its impact on Saudi Arabia would strengthen future work. Further research is needed to track Saudi women's achievements in Saudi Arabia and whether they can really transfer their newly acquired skills and experiences to Saudi society. Moreover, comparative research about the experience of female international students from different countries or comparisons between Saudi male and Saudi female experiences while studying abroad should be considered for further studies.

### **Conclusion**

This research study set out to explore the overall experiences that Saudi women face during their experiences studying abroad while participating in a scholarship program. The study also sought to find out how the women facing these challenges deal with them. To do so, a qualitative descriptive case study approach was used. I focused on guardianship issue and its positive and negative effects on the participants, their academic life experiences and academic achievements, as well as the challenges that the participants shared, such as learning English, meeting universities' requirements, adapting to the Canadian culture. I used thematic coding to summarize the findings from interviews in a number of themes, drawing on the theoretical

framework that considered the push and pull factors that influenced the participants' experiences, considering both the experiences in deciding to study and throughout their time in Canada. I presented some of the participants' suggestions for newcomers with the hopes of informing future policies and practices, such as choosing the right guardian and being well prepared for the study abroad experience. Finally, I recommended some points to be considered by the heads of the Saudi Scholarship program to better serve students. The implications for future research, such as meeting larger number of the participants and including their guardianships' experiences were mentioned. The limitations of the study were presented in this chapter as well.

To conclude, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program is the gate for each Saudi women to prove that she exists and deserves to be considered a successful student, daughter, wife, and mother. In this study, Saudi women stated that the journey of thousand miles always starts with a first step: their success.

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## APPENDIX A

**Letter of Information**

**Project Title:** Saudi Women's Experiences Studying at Canadian Universities through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program

**Document Title:** Letter of Information and Consent – Student

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Melody Viczko, PhD, Faculty of Education  
Western University

**Student Researcher:** Noor Ahmed, Faculty of Education  
Western University

### 1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research study which attempts to explain how Saudi graduate female students deal with the challenges that they face during their studying experiences in Canada. You are invited because you are a female Saudi graduate student enrolled in a graduate program at a Canadian university and sponsored by King Abdullah Scholarship Program.

### 2. Purpose of this Study

This case study is designed to explore the challenges and difficulties Saudi women experience studying in Canadian universities.

### 3. Length of Participation

There is one interview in which you will be asked to participate. It will take approximately one hour.

### 4. Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to respond to nine questions of an audio recorded semi-structured interview. Participants cannot take part in the study if they do not wish to be audio recorded. It is anticipated that the interview will take about 60 minutes. The tasks will be conducted at a time and place convenient to the participants.

### 5. Possible Risks and Harms

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

### 6. Possible Benefits

Although there may be no direct benefit to the participants, the research study would greatly benefit from their input as experienced students who travel abroad for higher education.

The experiences of participants in this study may give newcomer students from Saudi Arabia the opportunity to be prepared to overcome the difficulties that may face them, hence, maximize their chances of success in their studies.

#### **7. Participants' Right**

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know.

#### **8. Confidentiality**

The data set will be stored in a university drive. Electronic copies of the audio files and transcripts will be kept on the University's server, which is protected by password. The transcripts will only have pseudonyms. All research data will be destroyed in five years. Electronic data will be deleted from the server five years after the collection of the data, as per Western University's policy. The audio recording will be destroyed after the transcript is made, and confirmed by the participants. After the data is used for completing the dissertation, the student researcher will print a copy of the transcripts for the PI to keep locked in cabinet in her office on campus. If the participant chooses to withdraw from this study, her data will be destroyed and removed from the server. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to the study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

#### **9. Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

#### **10. Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or refuse to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any time, you can do so with no effect on your scholarship or studies.

#### **11. Contacts for Further Information**

Finally, if you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study you may contact Dr. Melody Viczko or Noor Ahmed. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Research Ethics.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**APPENDIX B****Consent Form**

**Project Title:** SAUDI WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES STUDYING AT CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES THROUGH THE KING ABDULLAH SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Melody Viczko, PhD, Faculty of Education  
Western University

**Student Researcher:** Noor Ahmed, Faculty of Education  
Western University

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the letter of information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Signature of participant

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### Guiding Interview Topics

1. At the beginning, I would like to start by asking you some general questions:
  - Are you single or married? Do you have children?
  - Are you here with your family or just the guardian?
  - What are you studying?
2. Tell me about making the decision to accept this scholarship opportunity.
  - What encouraged you?
  - What sorts of things made you hesitant?
3. There is no doubt that leaving family, friends, and home is something difficult. What was this like for you?
4. Tell me about the first time you remember feeling homesick?
5. Describe a memorable day or experience you have had since you've been here?
  - When was it?
  - What was it about?
  - What happened?
  - Why it is memorable?
6. What background preparation in English did you have before coming here?
  - Did you have to study English here before entering your current program?
  - How would you describe your first day in the English school in Canada that you attended before university?
7. Besides the goal of obtaining a degree, what do you aim to do with the experience of studying abroad?
8. What do you do to balance your personal, studying, and family duties?
9. Imagine that one of your friends just got her acceptance for the scholarship program. What advice would you give her?

## APPENDIX D



**Western  
Research**

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board  
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice**

Research Ethics

**Principal Investigator:** Prof. Melody Viczko  
**Department & Institution:** Education, Western University

**NMREB File Number:** 107478  
**Study Title:** Saudi Women's Experiences Studying at Canadian Universities through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program  
**Sponsor:**

**NMREB Initial Approval Date:** January 29, 2016  
**NMREB Expiry Date:** January 29, 2017

**Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:**

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Recruitment Items	APPENDIX A: Email Script for Recruitment	2015/11/24
Instruments	APPENDIX C: THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT	2015/11/24
Western University Protocol		2015/12/16
Letter of Information & Consent		2015/12/16

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer, on behalf of Riley Hinson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information: Erika Basile \_\_\_ Nicole Kaniki \_\_\_ Grace Kelly \_\_\_ Mina Mekhail \_\_\_ Vikki Tran \_\_\_

*This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files*

Western University, Research, Support Services Bldg., Rm. 5150  
London, ON, Canada N6G 1G9 t. 519.661.3036 f. 519.850.2466 www.uwo.ca/research/ethics



## APPENDIX E

### Curriculum Vitae

<b>Name:</b>	Noor Ahmed
<b>Education:</b>	
09/2014 – Present	M.Ed, Leadership Studies, University of Western Ontario Supervisor: Dr. Melody Viczko
05/2014- 08/2014	Continuing Education Course
06/2012 – 04/2014	English as a Second Language
05/2002- 05/2006	University of Dammam- Bachelor of Arts in Islamic Studies

### HONOURS AND AWARDS

09/2014	King Abdullah full scholarships for Higher Education Studies
06/2012	King Abdullah full scholarships for foreign language studies
09/2011	King Abdullah full scholarships for outstanding student

### EXPERINCE

09/2007 – 09-2009	High School Teacher in Kuwait
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### VOLUNTEER EXPERINCE

10/2012 – 04/2014	Administrative work and work assistance with student applications
07/2013 – 10/2013	Represented the ESL class and communicated with head office at York University
07/2013 – 09/2013	Led orientation group and welcomed all the new students to Culture Works ESL