

PARENTS AND FEMALE STUDENTS' ACCEPTANCE OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEMALES STUDYING ABROAD: A CASE STUDY OF THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

Safiya Rashid Sabeeh Al-Makhmari ^a, Ismail Hussein Amzat ^a

^a Department of Educational Foundation and Administration, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman.

^a Corresponding author: u082881@squ.edu.om

©Ontario International Development Agency ISSN: 1923-6654 (print)

ISSN 1923-6662 (online). Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

Abstract: This study examines Omani parents' perceptions about sending their daughters to study outside the Sultanate of Oman and how female students view this phenomenon. In addition, it investigates whether the parents in Oman support or oppose the idea of Omani women studying overseas. Moreover, the research studies the difficulties that Omani women faced while studying abroad and their solutions. This research embarks on a journey to review the literature on the topic that shows the reasons that motivate people to study abroad and the procedures that parents and their children should follow before choosing a host country. Twenty Omani parents and twenty female Omani students who have been to Australia were involved in this study, as well as twenty female staff workers at Sultan Qaboos University. The research is a survey in nature, using questionnaires as well as employing descriptive statistics with graphs and figures in answering the research questions. The findings of this study indicated that Omani female students were excited when they were given the opportunity to study overseas. Omani females who are studying or studied abroad have not faced difficulties in terms of social life and language barriers in host countries. They faced difficulties such as homesickness, cultural shock, food, host families and transportation. The majority of the parents consider the cost of studying abroad as an important factor in allowing or

preventing their daughters from studying abroad, while it is less important for their daughters. Moreover, parents have identified five important factors that determine their choice for the host country. The most important of these factors is the religion of the country to which their daughters are sent, while it is the least important factor according to their daughters. Parents supported and accepted to send their daughters abroad for studying while they were hesitant at the beginning. Parents didn't welcome the idea of their daughters travelling alone without a protector

Keywords: Abroad; female students; Oman; Parents; Studying.

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is every student's dream. It has many undeniable advantages, such as exposure to other cultures, gaining new experiences, civilization, interaction with different backgrounds and nationalities, broadening the mind, widening the scope of knowledge, seeing life in different ways, and experiencing other people's ways of doing things. Studying overseas prepares students intellectually and spiritually.

Moreover, in terms of language, studying abroad helps non-"native speaker" students to improve their language skills and fluency since the second language is the medium of instruction and interaction.

According to Graham and Peterson (2005), the authors explain that the goals of studying abroad are different, and the following aspects are involved in studying overseas: (a) Facilitate students' intellectual growth (b) Contribute to students' professional development (c) Accelerate students' personal growth (d) Develop students' skills for relating to others who are culturally different from them (e) Enhance students' self-awareness and understanding of their own culture. Contribute to the internationalization of the student's home department, college, or university.

Furthermore, many researchers have proven that personal growth, academic performance, and intercultural awareness are the strongest goals for people studying abroad, followed by professional development and language (Edwards C., 2005).

Upon these qualities and experiences, it is reported that some foreign students when studying abroad suffer from some psychological problems such as homesickness, loneliness, alienation; discomfort with the environment, food, culture and religion which could cause them to have negative perceptions or phobias of studying outside his or her country.

Why Study Abroad?

Studying overseas is an important phenomenon nowadays. People have their own purposes to make this decision. They make this decision either because of home countries' conditions or to gain long-term benefits from the study abroad experience.

Altbach (1991) discusses the factors that influence the individuals to make a decision about studying abroad. To begin with, some of these factors are related to the sending countries (home countries). For instance, as a result of economic development, countries need personnel who are well-trained and skilled in certain fields. Therefore, some students are sent to master important skills abroad, especially with oil producing countries (p.309). Yet another reason is that some of the sending countries lack facilities and effective institutions that are responsible for teaching students important skills needed in the job market (p. 310). Altbach states a clear example of this reason: "The Indian government encouraged many students to study abroad and provided significant funding, since facilities in many academic fields at home were inadequate" (p. 312).

The factors that Altbach mentions in his article are vitally important because he indeed provides a key point that lends support to study abroad—that study abroad is not only beneficial to individuals but also beneficial to the sending countries. The facilities that the host countries offer help to develop the economics of the sending countries. In fact, Oman is one of the oil producing countries which sends its students to industrialized countries to master the

skills and become professionals in the field of oil. As a result, the Omani economy has improved, and families' income has also increased.

For the great majority of people, the factor that affects them to make a decision about studying abroad is to derive benefits from this experience that will help them to improve their personal life. "If you ask anybody who has studied abroad, he or she will most certainly tell you that it is a life-changing experience and one of the most rewarding things he or she has ever done"(Why study abroad, 2010, p. 1). A number of key examples about the benefits of studying overseas arise from this article; for instance, the best way to learn a language is to learn it where it is spoken. Students will be exposed to the language on a daily basis; consequently, they will master that particular language quickly. One cannot possibly ignore this fact about learning a second language because if students are learning a language in their home country, they will not be able to master that particular language as efficiently as those who study the language where it is spoken. This is because they will not practice using the language outside the classrooms.

Moreover, students who study outside the borders of their countries have a chance to travel and explore the host countries during the weekends. Since they are likely to be in a country on other continent, everything will be new, and they will have the opportunity to visit new places. It cannot be denied that studying overseas is like doing two things at the same time. Students can study and achieve their goals and at the same time can enjoy themselves and discover the host country. Furthermore, this article mentions that "study abroad allows you get to know another culture first-hand"(p. 1). Students will experience new language, new food, different social behaviors, and new life styles. This will broaden their knowledge about other cultures, and they will learn to respect the differences between their culture and the host country's culture.

From the researchers' point of views, the most important point that this article has noted is the chance to get to know other cultures. This will lead the student to cope with different incidents and adapt to the social life of the host country. Therefore, this experience will teach the students how to deal with people and to solve problems pertaining to social life. This will help students later in their jobs in dealing with different groups of people who also come from different backgrounds. They may work with foreigners in the same work place; as a result they will know how to deal with them. As everybody knows that there are many foreigners working here in Oman in different fields, and the study abroad experience will help them to interact with those foreigners.

In "The Benefit of Study Abroad" (2009), Wei states some long-term benefits that students gain from studying abroad; for instance, it helps students to master important skills that are indeed needed in the job market. Students can master teamwork skills, verbal and written communication skills, analytical skills, interpersonal skills, and others (p. 2). Employers seek these skills in their employees; therefore, "students could be more popular and more competitive in the job market" (p. 3). Here in Oman and the Gulf in general, applicants who have foreign degrees are likely to be accepted in more prestigious jobs with high salaries. Additionally, studying overseas not only develops students academically, but also non-academically.

To illustrate this point, studying overseas enhances students' personalities; they become more independent, self-confident and mature (p. 1). It cannot be denied that when students are far away from their parents, they are forced to depend on themselves to solve problems and to deal with new situations. They are also encouraged to think critically about things and come up with their own ideas. Another benefit Wei points out is that studying abroad gives students the chance to build "long-lasting friendships" with the citizens of the host country (p. 1). Students can go outside with them and ask them about anything related to the host country. This leads us to believe that friendship will allow the students to get to know new people, to know about their culture and traditions, and to know about their way of thinking. With time, students will have the ability to communicate with different groups of people from different backgrounds. This also will help them later in their jobs so that they will be able to deal and communicate with different people whether in the work place or in everyday life

One of the most important factors here that motivates people to make the decision about studying abroad is the mastery of skills. Since people want to get prestigious jobs, they will master the skills that the employers are looking for in the employees. Consequently, people's purpose from studying abroad is to enhance their economic status. We will find out in the research if this factor is considered the most important purpose behind foreign study. In view of these facts, it is quite likely that parents will consider studying overseas as an opportunity that will enhance their children's future by the endless benefits it offers. They may encourage them to go through this experience. The research will show whether parents' acceptance of women studying overseas is to gain a particular benefit from this experience.

Choosing a Destination and Cost of living

The first aspect of studying overseas to point out is choosing a destination for study. This is the first step that people are likely to do pertaining to this issue.

Statistics have indicated that the USA, the UK, Italy, France, Ireland, Australia, Spain, China, Mexico, and Germany are top ten destinations for studying abroad (Study Abroad Statistics, 2010). The article "Helping your students choose a destination" (2010), recommends parents and their children to carefully choose the host country. First of all, they should keep into consideration the field that their child wants to study. To illustrate this point, some countries are considered as desirable places for some fields in particular, for instance, if the student wants to study international business, he or she is likely to choose India, China, and Japan as they are "three of today's international financial centers"(p. 1).

However, if the student is interested in Western Art, France and Italy would be the suitable destinations for this field, as mentioned in this article. Economics students will enjoy studying abroad in Korea. Another key point that this article discusses is that parents and students should keep the cost of the academic programs in mind. Parents should also be aware of the economic condition of the country that their child wants to travel to. They have to consider the cost of living, housing, medical insurance, the length of the students' stay and transportation. Besides that, parents should bear in mind their budgets, and whether they are financially capable of affording the cost of studying abroad or not. Helping your students choose a destination (2010) gives essential advice for parents and students about the cost of foreign study to avoid any problems concerning this issue.

Sometimes, the cost of studying overseas is considered as an inveterate problem that faces the majority of foreign students. In an article entitled 'Impact and Adjustment: foreign students in comparative perspective' (1991), Altbach makes the point that "the economic problems faced by many foreign students are serious, sometimes resulting in an interruption of studies, part-time work, health difficulties, the failure to complete degrees and others"(p.311).

In view of these facts about the cost of studying overseas, it is quite likely that parents may prevent their daughters from studying overseas because they may not be able to afford to pay for all these requirements. It will be revealed in the research if the cost of studying overseas is one of the factors that make parents prevent their daughters from studying abroad.

Additionally, another point that parents and their children should pay attention to is the policies that the sending countries have concerning the host countries. For instance, "Malaysia has the list of overseas universities that are approved and accredited by the Ministry for Malaysian studying in foreign countries" (Altbach, 1991). Parents and students should be aware of this vital policy that most of the

home countries have. When students follow this policy, their chances to get good jobs are high. Oman is a similar case as well. There are universities that are considered approved for foreign study; namely, Queensland University in Australia is one of the approved universities for foreign study. This is because it has extensive experience in the design and delivery of English Language Studies Programs to groups of overseas students from colleges and universities.

Perhaps we should also point out the fact that parents and students should choose a destination which matches with the students' interest. If the students are forced to study in a particular country which they are not interested in, they are likely to not enjoy living there (Helping your students choose a destination, 2010). Both "Helping Your Student Choose a Destination" (2010) and "Impact and Adjustment: foreign students in comparative perspective" (Altbach, 1991) are striking articles about studying overseas. This is because they involve parents in helping their children to choose a destination for study, which seems to confirm the idea that parents are an essential part in decision-making process concerning studying abroad. And this is important here in Oman because parents have the absolute authority to allow or prevent their daughters from studying abroad.

Parents' Involvement

Students cannot make this decision alone; they need their parents' supervision and direction. Therefore, parents should help their children in this transition, not be an obstacle in their way. Additionally, one should note here that these two aforementioned articles provide crucial advice for parents and students about studying overseas. If parents and students work on this advice, this could prevent many problems from occurring related to the choice of the host country, and they will choose the most appropriate country for their child. If they were following the right direction from the very start, the ending would be as right as the beginning.

Both of these sources are quite similar in widening parents' eyes to pay attention to certain details concerning studying overseas; for example, the policies of approved universities for foreign study. They also have drawn their attention to the cost and the problems that are associated with the incapability of affording the required cost. It must also be kept in mind that these two articles introduce reasonable aspects that determine the choice of the host country. I think the cost of studying abroad is the most important factor that determines the choice of the host country. If parents have enough money to cover all the requirements, they will begin to choose the host country and the approved university for their child.

On the other hand, if parents' budgets cannot afford the cost of foreign study, they will not be able to send their child to a host country. Consequently, female students may be prevented from studying overseas because parents are unable to afford the cost of foreign study, or they may take a loan to pay for the requirements. Here in Oman, parents may consider other factors which determine the choice of the host country; for example, the religion and the political conditions of the host country. If the host country and the sending country have different religions, parents may prevent their daughters from studying abroad because they think that they will not be able to practice their religion freely. It is also the same for the political conditions. If the political conditions of the host country are unstable, parents may not allow their daughters to go overseas to study. We will find out the factors that Omani parents consider when choosing the host country that their daughters are going to.

The Importance of Studying Abroad: Omani Women perceptions

Case Study: Sarah Woodworth makes the significant claim that "after spending spring semester 2009 studying abroad at the Anglo American University in Prague, Czech Republic, I feel like I have a better understanding of the world around me. These other countries you hear about in the news are not just a far away imaginary place; they are real, with real people living there. And for a small space of time, I feel that I got to be a part of this other place. I also felt a great deal of independence that I have never been able to experience before. But in a study abroad setting, this independence was more fun than frightening" (Woodworth, 2010, p.1).

Many studies lend support to Sarah's claim about the great benefits she gained from studying overseas. In fact, studying abroad is a rewarding experience, which goes beyond being independent. It is generally agreed today that studying overseas is the desirable place to master a language and simultaneously have a good chance to have fun and travel. Helping your student choose a destination (2010) noted that studying abroad develops one's personality; for instance, he or she becomes more self-confident and more mature. Yet another benefit of studying abroad is that it helps students to master and develop important skills which are needed in the job market. Additionally, studying overseas breaks the routine of students' everyday life style by allowing them to experience a new culture and meet new people (p. 1). In light of these facts, it is quite likely that most students want to go through this experience to gain these benefits.

One should, nevertheless, consider the issue from another angle. The vital point that needs to be said is that there are hindrances facing students while

studying abroad. They may face difficulties with adjustment to a new life, dealing with people and home-stay families, accepting some social behaviors, or they may face difficulties with food and weather. However, the existence of these problems does not mean that the students cannot overcome them and continue to study abroad. There are certain steps and solutions that may help the students to overcome these hindrances and even become as one of the host country's citizens.

In Oman, we could perhaps go further and ask ourselves whether female students have the same opportunity to study abroad as males or not. The focus of this study is on female students rather than male students because in Oman some female students are prevented from studying abroad. Some parents do not accept this idea and consider it as something which contradicts their traditions and social norms. Therefore, this study was conducted to find out why parents accept or oppose the idea of female students studying overseas.

In addition, if on the one hand it is said that female students are incapable of facing these problems alone and they will be like a fish out of water, the same is not true for some people who see that female students have the right to study abroad. One should, however, not forget that every cloud has a silver lining. Omani parents may think of all the negative aspects that studying overseas carries with it for women. They may think of their traditions that consider women studying abroad as scandalous, or think about the cost, or the difficulties that the women will face. However, upon the completion of studying abroad and after women undergo this experience; parents should be able to realize the significance of this opportunity not only in their daughter's life, but also in the family and society as a whole.

Since studying abroad develops students academically and socially, it is vitally important to know about Omani parents' and female students' attitudes toward studying abroad. Whether or not they support or oppose the idea of studying abroad will be revealed in the research. Specifically, this research paper attempts to answer a key question: How Do Parents and Female Students in Oman View Studying Abroad? It is crucial to emphasize that this study intends to find an accurate answer to this question, and it also aims to convince parents that studying overseas is very beneficial to women and would be one of the most vital opportunities that their daughters will have.

As a first step in attempting to answer the research questions, chapter 2 will deal with a number of issues: the benefits of studying abroad, helping students to choose a destination, and difficulties that students face when studying abroad and their solutions.

Students studying Abroad and the impact on learning

The students who are enrolled in study abroad program in the University of Delaware reported that after spending a year in Paris that not only were their professional and career skills developed, but also their interest and knowledge about the French culture were deepened and broadened. During this year, their attitudes changed positively towards education, which led to increased progress and commitment in the subjects they were studying. What's more, the study abroad experience contributes to individuals' personal enhancement as they become more self-confident and independent as well as increases their understanding and appreciation of diversity and new ways of life (As cited in Bond, (2009), p.15).

Moreover, the result of the disconnectedness from the host country resulted positively in developing and mastering second language skills since they are immersed on a daily basis with international students. Besides, as those students live in a new country, they become more aware of the issues that concern the globe as a whole not only their countries (Bond, 2009, p.15).

Students studying Abroad and intercultural and intellectual development: Intercultural Development

Good intercultural communication skills are a sequence of the individual's capacity to adjust to the life of the host country. They learn the similarities and differences between their culture and the new one. They also learn to respect any cultural differences and manage to not offend the nationals (as cited in Williams, n, d, p.6).

Furthermore, students' reports about participating in study abroad programs and intercultural development show the gap in global awareness and understanding international issues and cross-cultural skills pre-departure and after settling down in the host country. The students expressed that they are ready to work in a multicultural milieu. In addition, the study abroad experience enhances students' cross-cultural communication skills as they become familiar with different cultures and different ways of thinking (p.16). One employer confirms the significance of having cross-cultural communication skills in the employees and says "students become more inter-culturally competent and you know the reason I bring that up is that they become way more attractive to employers... a student who is inter-culturally competent can communicate better and be a more effective employee...Employers love to hire students with international field experience and students can pick their careers more easily (Bond, 2009, p.25)."

Intellectual Development

Does the study abroad experience have an impact on the individuals' intellectual development? The study done by (Berg, n, d) shows that students who are enrolled in study abroad programs have better oral proficiency gains than students who study at institutions in their home countries. Another newsworthy finding noted by the aforementioned author is that students who studied second language at the institutions in their home country are likely to become fossilized or reach a plateau where they never make any progress in their second language acquisition. On the other hand, students who have been abroad scored higher level in oral proficiency and made progress in their language level (p. 8). Thus, "students who spent time abroad, and more time according to Bond (2009) was better, achieved higher development in second language skills (p.16)."

What are the difficulties that may face students when studying overseas? And what are the suitable solutions for these difficulties?

Studying overseas offers endless benefits to students in terms of academic and non-academic aspects. One should, nevertheless, consider the other side of the coin. Studying overseas is a totally new experience for students and at the beginning they may feel that they are like a fish out of water. Popadiuk (2009) states that "they are 'dropped into' [a] new culture" (p. 230). As a result of this sudden transition, students may face adjustment problems in the host country such as culture shock, learning problems, and interpersonal relationships with the people of the host country. It would also be interesting to find out the most appropriate solutions to help students uproot these difficulties.

Culture Shock

One of the most important problems that face international students while studying abroad is culture shock. Culture shock has been defined by Oberg in (Culture Shock, 1954) as "the anxiety that results from losing all the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 1). Correspondingly, culture shock has also been defined "as a disease from which the sojourner would ideally recover from over time"(as cited in Jenkins & Galloway, 2009, p. 159). When students arrive in the host country, they will notice that some social norms are different from what they are used to in their home countries. These norms and behaviors may seem unfamiliar to them; therefore, they may feel uncomfortable and reject the host country. Oberg (1954) has pointed out the symptoms of culture shock as manifested by international students. For instance, they exaggerate in washing their hands, they are worried about food and dishes, they are afraid of being cheated, and they are afraid of physical contact with the nationals of the host country. One of the most striking features of this

problem is "[the] terrible longing to be back home" (p. 2).

Oberg suggests some solutions to help international students to bridge the gap and get over culture shock; for example, she recommends students to read about the country's culture to which they are planning to travel to. As a result of this, they will be familiar with the nature of the host country's culture, as well as be able to deal with the nationals and to avoid offensive behaviors. Yet another solution she suggests is to get to know the people of the host country "by joining the activities of the people, to try to share in their responses, whether this be a carnival, a religious right, or some economic activity" (p. 5, 8, 9).

I think the most effective solution that Oberg suggests to solve this problem is to read about the host country pre-departure. This will help students to avoid any offensive behaviors to the nationals, as well as be familiar with life styles of people. In the researcher's point of view, knowing about the social life in the host country and what is acceptable and what is not, may help the student to adapt to the social life easily.

From these facts, one may conclude that parents may consider culture shock as an inveterate problem that their daughters will not be able to deal with while studying abroad. Therefore, they may prevent their daughters from studying overseas because they will be worried about them. Whether culture shock is considered as one of the contributing factors behind parents' opposition of the idea of studying overseas or not will be revealed later in the research. It will also be shown if female students, who have been abroad, have faced this problem.

Learning Problems

In the article "Learning Problems of Overseas Students" (1987), Samuelowicz discusses some learning problems that face international students while studying in Queensland University in Australia. Learning a language and adjusting to the new educational system are some of the learning problems that are mentioned in this article. An example of the difficulty that students face when learning a second language, as one of the students states, is "thinking in another language. Not to be able to use a second language as efficient as my native language is a limitation to self-expression. To have a different accent being spotted as soon as I speak as a 'foreigner'" (p. 122).

According to Jenkins and Galloway in their article "The Adjustment Problems Faced by International and Overseas Chinese Students Studying in Taiwan Universities" (2009), the reasons behind the difficulty that students face when learning English language are because students are engaged in advanced English courses without training or because they are taught English by non-native teachers of English whose

mistakes and errors are transmitted to the students (p. 167). Learning a language is considered a serious problem that faces students when studying overseas, as Samuelowicz (1987) found that "over half (52%) of the students surveyed ranked language difficulties as 'very important' or 'important'" (p. 122). The second learning problem that faces international students in Queensland University in Australia, as mentioned by Samuelowicz, is adjusting to the new educational system.

At the beginning, foreign students cannot understand and cope with the new educational system of the host country's university because it is totally different from what they used to in their home country. An example of this, one of the Malaysian students stated that the educational system in their home country does not require students to do outside reading for further understanding. He mentioned that students depend much on lectures; however, in Australia lectures seem to be brief (p. 123). Another example of the learning styles that foreign students used at home countries is stated by a computer science student in Queensland University: "I believe that overseas/migrant students rely more heavily on memorization and less on understanding than Australian students" (p. 123). It cannot be denied that it is a normal thing that international students face difficulties in adjusting to the new educational system.

Furthermore, Samuelowicz (1987) introduces some solutions that will help students to overcome learning problems. Both parents and academic staff play crucial roles in facilitating learning for the students. Parents should encourage their children to take responsibility for their learning. Moreover, the role of the academic staff is to help the students to develop new learning approaches by encouraging them to think critically instead of repeating others' ideas. Academic staff also can help the students to understand the educational system, for instance, explain to the students what is expected of them and the standard they should follow (p. 129 & 130).

The solutions suggested by Samuelowicz to overcome learning problems are effective ones since she involves parents in helping students get over these problems. This indicates that parents have an enormous effect on their children since they know the nature of their child intimately and are aware of his or her need of emotional support. When parents put their trust in their children's ability to overcome these problems, encourage them to take responsibility for themselves and to deal with any difficulty they face, their children are likely to get over these problems by determination and the direction from their parents and academic staff. Therefore, parents should not oppose the idea of studying abroad because they think that their daughters are incapable of dealing with problems while studying overseas. They should

not make this prejudgment and underestimate their daughters' potentials in uprooting any problems. This is because parents are one of the solutions that may help their daughters in overcoming adjustment problems.

Jenkins and Galloway (2009) also introduce some solutions to help students to overcome language problems. They argue that universities should pay attention to the faculty members who teach English language, that they are actually English speakers. They also advise universities to provide "bilingual copies" of the materials, so that students will be able to understand what they are studying. Another suggested solution is that universities have to pay a lot of attention to the newcomers (foreign students) by examining their English level and demanding specific scores for admission (p. 167).

It will be revealed in the research if Omani female students have encountered hindrances concerning learning English or adjusting to the new educational system while studying abroad. We will find out if they consider it as one of the major problems they faced.

Interpersonal Relationships

The moment foreign students arrive in the host country; they are fascinated by the new. They are eager to get to know the nationals, make friends and live with the home-stay family, if the program of studying abroad includes living with a host family. Some students face difficulty in handling these relational issues. They face problems as a result of not being accepted by others; for instance, they encounter difficulty in making friends and dealing with home-stay families, in case students are living with them.

In "Unaccompanied Asian Secondary Students Studying in Canada" (2009) Popadiuk presents examples of the hindrances that face foreign students when they try to make friends and deal with home-stay families. One example of the incidents that foreign students may face is when they want to make friends with their classmates. As one of the Asian students' states, "I wanted to become friends with the popular group at school. I was invited by one of the girls to go to Starbucks for a coffee and to talk because that is what they usually did together. When I got there, most of the other girls just ignored me. I felt very upset and lonely. I also wonder if I would ever be popular" (p. 237).

As a result of this behavior, foreign students feel ignored, sad, lonely; disappointed, and want to get back home to their families and friends (p. 236). In addition, the role of home-stay families is vital in helping the sojourners in adjusting to the host country. However, if the host family is not helpful and keeps harassing the student, he or she will feel insecure, discomforted, and angry as one of the Asian

girls expressed her attitude towards her home-stay family: "I had done something that my aunt didn't like. My aunt refused to speak to me for four months because she was mad at me. She would get me to do things by saying it to another family member and if I asked her something, she completely ignored me. I felt so sad and lonely. I just wanted to go home to my parents" (p. 234).

Popadiuk believes that the cause of these relational issues which international students face is that students did not receive the appropriate information about these social issues before they left their home country (p. 238). In addition, Popadiuk also introduces some solutions to avoid such problems. She suggests that the "newcomer" of international students attend meetings with other foreign students who are still studying in the host country, so that those newcomers will benefit from other students' experiences. She also encourages the idea of establishing social skills workshops; for instance, teaching students how to speak in public, how to be confident, and how to make friends (p. 240).

Relational issues are worth discussing as one of the serious problems that international students face while studying abroad. If the visitors' relationships with their classmates and their home-stay families, if the student lives with one, go well, this will provide indeed a perfect atmosphere for studying for foreign students. They will feel comfortable, welcomed, and have a sense of belonging to the host country; therefore, they will enjoy living in another country and willing to study to achieve their goals. What is more, it is a good idea to establish social workshops for the newcomers and it is the most effective solution for relational issues because it prepares them to deal with various groups of people from totally different culture. They may discuss issues related to the nationals of the host countries; for example, what behaviors are considered acceptable or not, how to greet people, and so forth.

There are certain conditions that both the host families and the students have to agree on to ensure a stable relationship. For instance, the family should let the student know their rules, the food that will be provided, and the type of rooms that will be given and such information. It will be interesting to find out if Omani parents prevent their daughters from studying abroad because they are afraid of the citizens of the host countries. Or maybe they are conscious about their daughters to be influenced by the citizens and acquire some behaviors which create conflict with their own culture. I expect that the relational issues will be the most difficult problems that students face while studying abroad.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

(a) To examine the Omani parents' perceptions about sending their daughters to study outside the Sultanate

of Oman and how female students view this phenomenon. (b): To investigate whether the parents in Oman support or oppose the idea of Omani women studying overseas. (c): To study the difficulties that Omani women faced while studying abroad and their solutions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Oman, some female students are prevented from studying abroad; some parents do not accept this idea and consider it as something which contradicts their traditions and social norms. Therefore, this study is conducted to find out why parents accept or oppose the idea of female students studying overseas.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research has shown some significant factors to consider and attentions to ponder upon. The importance of studying abroad to improve students intellectually, socially, and culturally is accepted worldwide. These days, the number of Arabs studying abroad has increased remarkably. Therefore, it is very significant to study generally Arabs' parents and females' perceptions and Omanis' specifically towards sending their daughter abroad to study.

Besides, this research contributes to the body of knowledge since there is a scarcity of research on how Omani parents view sending their daughters to obtain educational degrees and the Omani female students' point of view on studying in western countries.

In addition, this research bridges the literature gaps since there is very little literature that explores their issues and a lack of findings reported on how Arabs view studying outside their countries.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study has a few limitations on sample size, location, duration and country. For the sample size, the research does not include all the students who travelled to Australia for short courses. Besides, a few parents involved in this research and a few staff participated in this survey.

In terms of location, the researcher discovered that the students who participated in this study went to only one to two cities or states in Australia. Thus, there is a limitation in term of duration and time spent in Australia. Hence, there was not much time for the students to explore and become familiar with the Australian environment, culture and situation. Regarding countries, this study selected only four countries and selected the participants who studied or visited the USA, UK, Australia and Canada.

Therefore, the results of this study should not be generalized to other countries abroad and there should not be wrong perceptions, judgments or prejudice against the selected countries and others.

Table 1: Female Students' perceptions towards the phenomenology of Omani women studying overseas:

No	Statement	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	A study abroad experience is beneficial to Omani women.	20	100%	0	0%	0	0%
2	Studying abroad will help me to get a good job.	19	95%	1	5%	0	0%
3	Parents are an essential part in the decision-making process concerning studying abroad.	16	80%	2	10%	2	10%
4	Parents have the right to prevent their daughters from studying abroad.	13	65%	3	15%	4	20%
5	The adjustment problems that you faced were insurmountable.	0	0%	4	20%	16	80%
6	Omani women should not be prevented from studying abroad.	19	95%	1	5%	0	0%

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Twenty Omani parents, twenty Omani female students, who have been and studied in Australia, and twenty Omani female staff, who have studied in the USA, UK and Canada, were involved in this study. The research is a survey in nature, using questionnaires. For the analysis, descriptive statistics were used with the graphs and figures in answering the research questions.

FINDINGS

Female Students: Demographic Analysis

For the demographic data, the analysis shows that the ages of all the girls who have been to Australia were between 21 and 23 years old. Thus, 60% (n=12) of the students were 22, 20% (n=4) were 21 while 20% (n=4) were 23 years old.

Regarding the place where the participants come from, the questionnaire was distributed equally between girls who come from villages and cities of Oman. 50% (n=10) of respondents come from villages while 50% (n=10) come from cities.

Female Students' Perception about Omani Women Studying Abroad

Table 1 shows to what extent Omani female students who have been to Australia agree upon the given statements regarding women studying outside the borders of Oman. It indicates that, for Item 1, all girls agreed that study abroad experience is beneficial to Omani women. In item 2, 95% of the respondents agreed that studying abroad will help them find better jobs. In item 3, 80% of the female students agreed that parents are an essential part in the decision-making process pertaining studying abroad while 10% of the students disagreed with this idea. 65% of the respondents agreed with item 4 that says that

parents have the right to prevent their daughters from studying overseas, whereas, 20% of the girls disagreed with the statement. In the fifth item, the majority of the students which is 80% disagreed that they were not able to overcome the adjustment problems they faced in Australia. In the last statement, 95% of the girls agreed that Omani women should not be prevented from studying overseas.

Open-ended Questions Results

Open-ended questions in this study concerns in knowing the students' parents' reaction or perceptions about studying abroad, the purpose of studying overseas and the major problems those girls faced while living in Australia. In the first question, 50% of the parents agreed immediately with the decision: "They agreed with my decision because it was for the sake of studying and they always encourage me to catch any chance for study," as one of the students says. "They liked the idea and encourage me to go," adds another student. On the other hand, 45% of the parents refused the idea at the beginning. Then their daughters succeeded in convincing them and changed their mind. "They refused and I talked to my uncle to interfere and he convinced them," as one of the girls says and another student says: "They firstly refused the idea, but with time they agreed and encouraged me to do so."

The second question of the open-ended questions looks for finding out the purpose that these girls want to gain from the Australia program. Three common goals have been identified by those girls. All of the girls wanted to gain a general life experience, become more experienced in dealing with people, wanted to experience new cultures and new ways of living. 45% of them want to improve their English language and 25% of the girls wanted to get certificates that may help them in finding better jobs.

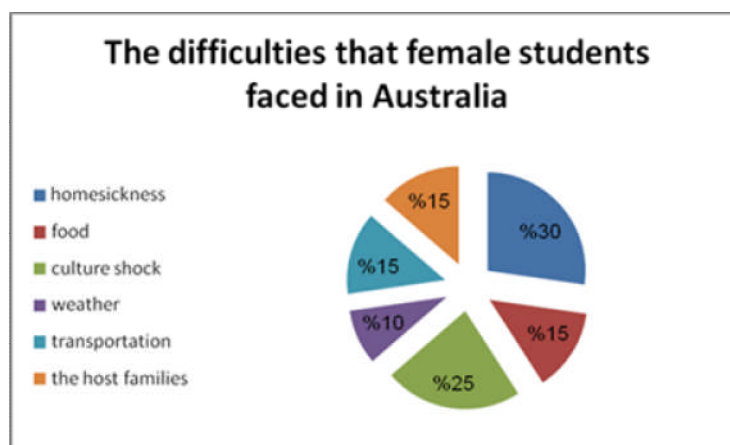


Figure 1: The difficulties that the girls faced in Australia are illustrated in the chart below:

The figure 1 shows the difficulties that students faced when studying abroad. The chart shows that 30% (n=6) of the students faced homesickness, 25% (n=5) of the respondents faced culture shock, 15% (n=3) of the girls faced problems with each of food, transportation, and home stay families, while 10% (n=2) of the girls faced difficulty regarding weather condition.

The last question of the open-ended questions seeks to find out whether these girls have faced educational problems in the university. The girls stated that there weren't any educational problems in the university. They confirmed that the educational system of Queensland University is not totally different from Sultan Qaboos University's educational system. All students have to take placement tests and then they are placed according to their levels.

Parents: Demographic Analysis

Twenty Omani parents were involved in this questionnaire and the number is equal for both genders.

Pertaining to the level of education of the participants, the data shows that 0% (n=0) of the parents are uneducated, 10% (n=2) of parents have finished high school education and the same percent and number for the parents who have PhD degree. The rest of the respondents which represents 80% (n=16) have a university degree.

Regarding the place where the participants come from, the questionnaire was distributed equally between parents who come from villages and cities of Oman, that 50% (n=10) of respondents come from villages and 50% (n=10) come from cities.

Parents' Perception about Omani Women Studying Abroad

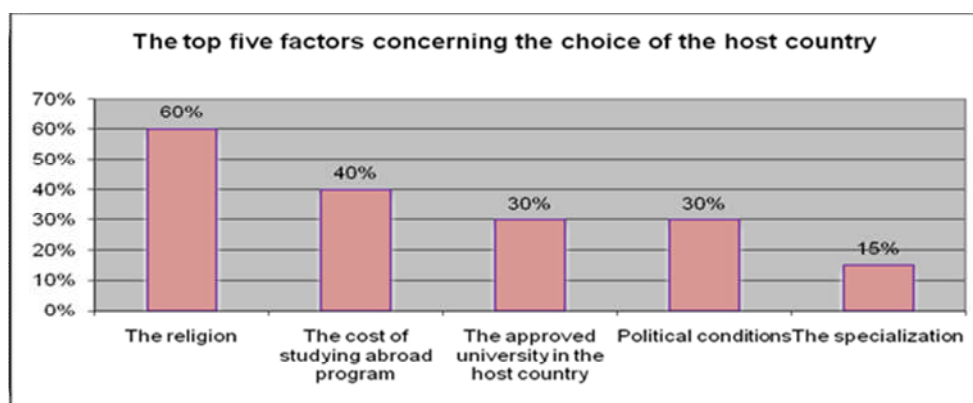
Table 2 shows to what extent Omani parents agree upon the given statements regarding women studying abroad. In item 1, the majority of parents of 65% agreed that Omani women have the right to study overseas if they want to; whereas 10% of the respondents disagreed with the statement. In item 2, 60% of the parents agreed that studying abroad helps women to get better jobs when they return to their home country while 5% disagreed with the statement. In item 3, 60% of the participants agreed that Omani women are capable of taking responsibility of themselves and no one has disagreed with this statement. In item 4, 25% of the respondents agreed that Omani women will not be able to adjust to the life of the host country; on the other hand, 55 % of parents disagreed with the statement. In item 5, a low percentage of parents agreed that their norms and traditions do not accept women to study abroad while 40% of the parents disagreed with the statement. In item 6, 60% of Omani parents agreed that the cost of studying abroad is an important factor in allowing or preventing their daughters from studying overseas, whereas, 15% of the participants disagreed with the statement.

Open-ended Questions Results

The opened-ended questions attempts to know parents' opinion about specific areas regarding studying abroad. One of these areas is the factors the determine parents' choice for the host country. The factors that have been selected by most parents are the religion of the host country as a top determiner, where most parents prefer to be a Muslim country, the cost of studying abroad, the approved university in the host country, and the political condition of the country.

Table 2: Respondents' perceptions towards the Phenomenology of Omani women studying overseas

No	Statement	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
1	All Omani female students have the right to study abroad if they want to.	13	65%	5	25%	2	10%
2	Studying overseas helps women to get better jobs.	12	60%	7	35%	1	5%
3	Omani female students can take responsibility for themselves while studying abroad.	12	60%	8	40%	0	0%
4	Omani female students will not be able to adjust to the life in the host country.	5	25%	4	20%	11	55%
5	Your norms and traditions do not accept the idea of women studying abroad.	5	25%	7	35%	8	40%
6	The cost of studying abroad is an important factor in allowing or preventing your daughters from studying abroad.	12	60%	5	25%	3	15%

**Figure 2:** The top five factors concerning the choice of the host country

The last question seeks to know the reasons behind parents' acceptance or disapproval of the idea of Omani women studying abroad. 70% of parents supported the idea and confirmed the great benefits that women gain from this experience. On the other hand, 30 % of parents disagreed with this idea as illustrated in one of the parents' responses: "I don't think that studying abroad is beneficial to Omani women because all specializations are available in Oman."

SQU Female Staff: Demographic Analysis

In this study, twenty female staff working at Sultan Qaboos University are involved to know about their experience with studying abroad. Pertaining to the

level of education of the participants, the data shows that 100% (n=20) of the female have completed their Master degree.

Regarding the place where the participants come from, 55% (n=11) of the respondents come from the cities of Oman, while 45% (n=9) of the females come from villages.

Staff's Experience on Studying Abroad The first part of the questionnaire seeks to know the countries in which those female staff studied. The data shows that 50% (n=10) of the respondents have studied in the UK, 30% (n=6) in USA, and 20% (n=4) have studied in Canada.

Table 3: Respondent initial preparation before studying Abroad

	Statement	Yes		No	
		%	n	%	n
1	My parents agreed immediately with my decision about continuing my degree outside Oman.	20%	4	80%	16
2	I chose the university that is approved in my country.	100%	20	0%	0
3	I read about the country I went to before departure.	5%	1	95%	19
4	The religion of the host country was important in choosing it.	0%	0	100%	20
5	My parents didn't welcome the idea of me travelling alone.	80%	16	20%	4
6	The cost of studying abroad is crucial in choosing the country.	20%	4	80%	16
7	I decided to study outside Oman because it is prestigious to have a certificate from a foreign country.	90%	18	10%	2

Table 4: Respondents' difficulties in studying Abroad

No	Statement	Yes		No	
		%	n	%	n
1	I faced difficulty regarding my religion and the way I dressed.	20%	4	80%	16
2	It wasn't difficult to adapt to the social life of the host country.	70%	14	30%	6
3	I faced problem in socializing with the citizens	15%	17	85%	3
4	I didn't face any difficulty in understanding the educational system of the university.	90%	18	10%	2
5	I didn't face problems regarding the weather of the host country.	80%	16	20%	4
6	I faced problems in moving from one place to another.	10%	2	90%	18
7	I didn't face problems with food.	60%	12	40%	8
8	In case of living with a host family, the family I lived with was friendly.	40%	2	60%	3

Preparing for Studying Abroad

This section investigates the procedures that were followed in order to prepare for studying abroad. Table 3 shows the steps that female staff followed while preparing for their studies. For item 1, 20% (n=4) of the respondents agreed that their parents agreed immediately with their decision about studying abroad; whereas 80% (n=16) disagreed with the statement. In item 2, all the participants agreed that they chose the university that is accredited in Oman. In item 3, a very low percentage of the staff of 5% (n=1) agreed that they read about the host country before they left; on the other hand, 95% of them didn't read.

Regarding the religion, item 4 shows that, all the respondents disagreed that the religion of the host country was an important element in choosing the

country. For item 5, 80% (n=16) of the respondents' parents didn't welcome the idea of their daughter going to study alone. In item 6, the majority of the participants of 80% (n=16) disagreed that the cost was crucial in choosing the country, while 20% (n=4) of them agreed. For the last item, 90% (n=18) of the females agreed that they studied outside Oman because it is prestigious to have a certificate from a foreign country.

Difficulties while studying Abroad

Table 4 shows the difficulties that SQU female staff faced while studying abroad and item 1 shows that 20% (n=4) of them faced difficulty because of their religion and the way they dress, while 80% (n=16) did not face difficulty regarding religion. In item 2, 70% (n=14) of the respondents did not face problems with the social life of the host country, while 30%

(n=6) couldn't adapt to it. 85% (n=17) of the participants in item 3 did not face any obstacles in socializing with the citizens. In item 4, 90% (n=18) of the staff expresses no difficulty in understanding the educational system of the university where they studied.

Referring to item 5, 80% (n=16) of the respondents didn't face difficulty pertaining to the weather of the host country. The majority of the staff of 90% (n=18) in item 6 did not face problems regarding moving between places in the host country. In item 7, 40% (n=8) of the staff faced problems with food in the host country, while 60% (n=12) didn't. In the last statement, which is about living with a host family, 40% (n=2) of the participants' home-stay families were nice and friendly with them 60% (n=3) weren't.

DISCUSSION

The data showed that 60% of Omani parents think that studying abroad helps women to get better jobs. This fact lends support to the point that is mentioned in the article "The Benefit of Study Abroad" (2009) by Wei, that "students could be more popular and more competitive in the job market" (p. 3).

The results of this research found out that 60% of parents are concerned over the cost of studying abroad and they consider it as an important factor in allowing or preventing their daughters from studying abroad. The responses for this statement confirm the point that Altbach (1991) has mentioned about the cost of studying abroad in the article "Impact and Adjustment: foreign students in comparative perspective". He mentions that "the economic problems faced by many foreign students are serious, sometimes resulting in an interruption of studies, part-time work, health difficulties, the failure to complete degrees and others" (p. 311).

Additionally, 30% of the Omani parents in this current study have mentioned that the approved university for foreign study in the host country is an important factor that determines their choice of the host country, which is also discussed in the literature review by Altbach (1991).

This study showed that the Omani female students did not face any educational problems in the University of Queensland in Australia and all girls say that they did not find any difficulty. They said that the educational system of Queensland University is not totally different from Sultan Qaboos University's educational system. All students have to take placement tests and then they are placed according to their levels. This fact contradicts the point that is mentioned in the literature review by Samuelowicz (1987) about the learning problems that face students while studying abroad. He mentions that the learning problems that face international students are serious (p. 122).

In "Unaccompanied Asian Secondary Students Studying in Canada" (2009) Popadiuk presents examples of the hindrances that face foreign students when they study overseas; they face problems when they try to make friends and deal with home-stay families. In this study, the students have mentioned that they have faced some problems regarding home-stay families. Moreover, the study showed that culture shock is one of the problems that those students have faced in Australia as Oberg in (Culture Shock, 1954) mentions that culture shock is one of the problems that foreign students face.

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

Based on the data analysis, the study has drawn some implications from the findings that focus on: (a) The factors that parents bear in mind when choosing the country for their daughters for foreign study. (b) Parents' gender and decision-making pertaining studying abroad. (c) Parents' level of education and its impact on allowing or preventing their daughters to study overseas.

Factors: As most parents prefer their daughters to study in a Muslim country, this may lead to some female students being restricted to study only in Muslim countries.

Gender differences and decision-making

Omani female parents disapproved this phenomenon more than male parents and this finding suggests a subject for research to investigate who oppose this idea more, female or male parents? And what are the reasons behind it?

Level of education

Parents' level of education didn't affect their decision regarding their daughters studying overseas which indicates that their beliefs and norms have a great impact on their decision.

Religion factor

The findings of this study revealed that Omani females somehow overlooked the religion and culture of host countries and didn't take it into consideration when choosing countries for foreign study. This could have an impact on their Islamic tradition and culture.

Therefore, further research is needed to investigate whether host countries' religion, culture, and environment have influences on Omani females' movement, Islamic tradition, and culture upon the completion of their studies.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to find out about the perception of the Omani parents and female students towards Omani women studying outside the Omani borders. The results show that the majority of Omani parents support the idea of women studying overseas and they believe that this opportunity is very crucial for

developing Omani women academically and non-academically.

The study abroad experience means a lot for Omani female students in terms of employment opportunities and social life. Omani female students were excited when they were given the opportunity to study overseas. They were clever enough to choose a great country and a well-known university that is approved by the Omani government. The cost of living and fees tend not to be important issue to look at when choosing a host country, perhaps they are under a scholarship. It is also interesting to see Omani females studying abroad without facing any difficulties regarding social life of host country and language barrier. Moreover, Omani parents are the decision-makers of approving their daughters to study abroad or not.

Strangely, the religion of the host country was not put into consideration when choosing a host country according to the working staff. Female students tend to face some difficulties and challenges such as, homesickness, cultural shock, food, host families and transportation. Negligently, students tend to overlook reading about the host country before departure. According to parents, the host country's religion frightens Omani students' parents and the fees of studying abroad as well as the approval of the university at home country are top concerns for parents. In addition to this, Omani parents hesitate to accept the idea of Omani women studying alone outside Oman without a protector.

Therefore, based on some difficulties and challenges faced by the Omani female students, it is advisable for parents and government to take the host country's religion and environment into consideration because these factors could influence their way of life, region and culture. The issue here is not about intimidating, disapproving or disallowing Omani females from studying abroad. They should be encouraged and supported to study overseas but with caution on religion, tradition and culture. In this case, it is recommended for parents and government to monitor their daughters' movement overseas and the government should send delegations to visit those who are sent abroad for studying.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Altbach, P. G. (1991). "Impact and adjustment: foreign students in comparative perspective". *Higher Education*. 21(3): 305-323.
- [2] Berg, M. V. (n,d). "Intervening In Student Learning Abroad: A Research-Based Inquiry". *Council on International Educational Exchange*. 1-21.
- [3] Bond, S. (2009). "World of Learning: Canadian Post-Secondary Students and the Study Abroad Experience". *Canadian Bureau for International Education*. 1-80.
- [4] DuBois, C. (1954). *Culture Shock* (Oberg, K. Ed.). This talk was presented to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- [5] Helping your students choose a destination. (2010). *Iiepassport*. Retrieved February 19, 2010, from http://www.iiepassport.org/pages/sitecontent/parent_destination.aspx
- [6] Ingraham, E., C., & Peterson, D., L. (2005). Assessing the Impact of Study Abroad on Student Learning at Michigan State University. [online] *Frontier Journal*. Retrieved from: http://www.frontiersjournal.com/issues/vol10/vol10-05_IngrahamPeterson.pdf
- [7] Jenkins, J. R. & Galloway, F. J. (2009). The adjustment problems faced by international and overseas Chinese students in Taiwan universities: a comparison of student and faculty/staff perceptions. *Asia Pacific Education Review*. 10(2): 159-168.
- [8] Popadiuk, N. E. (2009). "Unaccompanied Asian secondary school studying in Canada". *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 31(4): 229-243.
- [9] Samuelowicz, K. (1987). "Learning problems of overseas students: two sides of a story". *Higher Education Research and Development*, 6(2): 121-133.
- [10] Study abroad statistics. (2010). *World Language & Culture*. Retrieved February 21, 2010, from http://www.vistawide.com/studyabroad/study_abroad_statistics.htm
- [11] Wei, L. (2009). The benefit of study abroad. *Digitalparlor*. Retrieved February 19, 2010, from <http://www.digitalparlor.org/sp09/guthrie1/sites/digitalparlor.org.sp09.guthrie1/files/To%20Lanny%20from%20Sasha.doc>
- [12] Why study abroad. (2010). *World Language & Culture*. Retrieved February 21, 2010, from http://www.vistawide.com/studyabroad/why_study_abroad.htm
- [13] Williams, T. (n.d). "Impact of Study Abroad on Students' Intercultural communication Skills: Adaptability And Sensitivity". *Education Abroad Coordinator*. 1-28
- [14] Woodworth, S. (2010). Study abroad. *Edwardsville*. Retrieved March 24, 2010, from http://www.siue.edu/studyabroad/sarah_woodworth.shtml