Exploring the Experiences of Arab Students at
Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, British Columbia

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late parents who left us to the eternal life (May Allah Rest Their Souls in Peace), your ideas continue to inspire my quest for knowledge. This critical step of my life would not have been possible without the support of my wife and soulmate Fadwa, and my children Farah, Marah, Mohammad, Omar and Amin. … You made the ultimate sacrifice for me. A special dedication goes to my dear sisters Aisha, Mariam, Aminah and also to my brothers Ahmad, Amin, Shahin, Jamil and Belal.
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Abstract

Although there exists extensive literature on the experiences of international students studying at post-secondary institutions in North America; there is scant literature on the unique challenges experienced by Arab students who are studying in Canadian universities and colleges. This study explored challenges faced by Arab international students at Vancouver Island University (VIU) in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Data was collected using interviews from 6 international Arab students studying at VIU and analyzed into themes using narrative analysis. Accordingly, the audio recordings from the interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher and transcripts shared with participants which ensure precision and accuracy of data. Results revealed that international Arab students studying at VIU face several challenges: cultural and religious adjustment and differences, personal experiences related to isolation, homesickness and isolation, stereotypes and prejudice, and academic challenges. These students employed several strategies to overcome the identified challenges: hired tutors, sought support from tutors and professors, put in time and effort, utilized social support from their friends, sought help via religion, and utilized campus resources. This result confirmed that international Arab students studying at VIU have unique requirements and therefore, represent a unique group of students due to their Arabic culture and the nature of their religion. This uniqueness makes them to experience unique challenges identified in this study. It is, therefore, important for the university to come up with specific strategies and programs to assist these students in adjusting and accepting the Canadian culture and society.
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Exploring the Experiences of Arab Students at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, British Columbia

Chapter 1: Introduction

Although there exists extensive literature on the experiences of international students studying at post-secondary institutions in North America; there is scant literature on the unique challenges experienced by Arab students who are studying in Canadian universities and colleges. Consequently, it remains unclear how these students deal with the challenges they experience while studying abroad. However, there is clear evidence that each year thousands of international students from Arab countries join North American and in particular Canadian universities to pursue various courses (Deardorff, & Jones, 2012). Deardorff, and Jones (2012) revealed that there are about 300,000 international students in Canada. These students serve the important function to continue to grow the Canadian economy. According to HRSDC (2012) international students contribute about $8 billion each year to the Canadian economy, and form a valuable part of Canada’s pool of skilled future immigrants. Other benefits to the host country include increased income to the university, the improved wellbeing of research, and educational and research issues (Green & Powell, 2005; Todd, 1997; Selvadurai, 1998; Leder & Forgasz, 2004).

National Academies (2005) also emphasized that international students contribute to the host country economically and academically. National Academies (2005) revealed that international students foster cultural knowledge which promotes understanding among the local of the host country and make the country more competitive in science and engineering. They enable these locals to gain understanding and mutual respect for new cultures, and students
promote science and engineering in the host country and contribute to new publications and inventions. Similarly, Todd (1997) explored the contribution to the host country and revealed that international students create opportunities for supervisors enabling them to gain a better understanding of learning and teaching as they seek to meet the learners’ cultural and educational needs. Researching on the same subject, Selvadurai (1998) observed that international students enable universities and colleges to further international understanding and maintain universal educational values. Selvadurai (1992) emphasized that education serves as the means for fostering personal and academic goals. It is an instrument via which developing countries achieve political, social and economic development. Selvadurai (1998) further indicated that colleges and universities welcome international students and scholars to maintain a universal value of education. Elsewhere, Leder and Forgasz (2004) noted that international students are a source of revenue, enlightenment and cultural diversity. These studies emphasized the value of international students in the host countries and in their home countries and the importance of seeking further studies abroad. For students from developing nations, findings of these studies reinforce their resolve to seek knowledge abroad. Importantly, findings of these studies dispel the preposition that international students only accrue benefits to their home countries. However, it is important for these students to understand that there are challenges that come with the pursuit of further education abroad. These reflect the uniqueness of the host country and specific university or college.

Common challenges for international students studying abroad have been identified as isolation, ignorance of support services, cultural shock, difficulty in finding friends, lack of support systems, homesickness, financial challenges, and complexity of doing things in a non-native language (Humphries, Rauh & McDine, 2013; Cignac, 2013). For example, Humphries et
al. (2013) surveyed 1500 international students in Canada. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the participants indicated that they had very few Canadian friends. Humphries, Rauh and McDine (2013) concluded that international students in Canada find it hard to adjust to life in Canada and to make new friends. Surprisingly, the overall perception was that Canada is a welcoming and friendly country as 78% of participants indicated that Canada was a welcoming and friendly country that provides opportunities for learning. In another study, Cignac (2013) found that international students experience challenges when it came to adapting to Canadian culture and life and that they need to be assisted through acculturation to enable them to meet their immigration and academic goals.

1.1 Personal Context

As an international student of Arab descent, I concur with Cignac (2013) and others that international students and in particular international Arab students in Canada experience challenges when studying abroad. However, from my personalized experience at Vancouver Island University, it is worth emphasizing that each university and college in Canada is unique with characteristics that define each one. As such, the decision to study abroad exposes international students to unique challenges. I realized that these challenges differ between students depending on students’ cultural and religious background. For instance, as an international student from Arabic background, I have experienced the common challenges that were identified in the literature as common to most international students, but I have also experienced challenges that reflect my cultural background and those that are unique to Vancouver Island University. It should be with no surprise that language tops my list of challenges. For me, it was a case of departing from the habit of using Arabic to using English (two languages that are written in opposite directions). In the West, pages are written from left to
right, while in the Arab world, books are often read from right to left. My inability to express myself in fluent and grammatically correct English like native Canadians affected virtually every area of my life and in particular my interaction with others. From college to home, to buying food in the university cafeteria, I found it challenging to express myself freely using English that grammatically deviated from that spoken by native Canadians. This made me to realize the importance and value of developing multi-lingual skills.

Cultural shock was my second greatest challenge. My struggles stemmed from a case of two cultural extremities (West-democratic culture and East-conservative authoritarian monarchy culture) coming together and my ability to adjust and make sense of this new climate. Cultural differences between my home country and Canada made a big impression on my arrival to Canada. I realized that Canada differs from my home country in terms of social customs, religious diversity, and attitudes towards gender, sexuality and ethnicity. This cultural shock made me feel socially isolated as I struggled to connect my culture and values with what seemed to be socially accepted here in Canada. Having come from a society with strong traditional structures in the community, missing the support of family friends and extended social circle was a big factor for me. I felt lost, disorientated and alienated as I tried to adapt to the Canadian system which seemed to me to be characterized by individualism. Other challenges included adjusting to new weather, racism and prejudice, transportation issues, difficulty in accessing services, difficulty in securing a house, difficulty in securing employment, difficulty in adjusting to new curriculum, homesickness, feeling of internal loss, alienation and identity transformation.
1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the experiences and challenges faced by Arab students at Vancouver Island University. It provided an opportunity to Arab international students to reflect on their challenges, perspectives and experiences of studying at Vancouver Island University.

1.2.1 Statement of the problem

Studying in Canada and other North American countries remains one of the dreams of students from Arabic countries. This phenomenon exists largely because studying abroad is associated with a range of benefits, including developing language skills, experiencing a new culture, making friends from other countries, preparing for the international workplace, studying in a global hub, travelling more widely, exposure to better technological and academic facilities, increased employment opportunities, increased access to financial support, personal recommendations and social links, living in a diverse culture/society, potential for higher wages and salaries, and employers’ increased willingness to higher qualified foreigners (Nelson & Malone, 2004; Wisker, 2005; Humphries, Rauh & McDine (2013). These benefits inform the increased number of international Arab students in Canada and in other North American countries (Humphries, Rauh and McDine, 2013; Altamimi, 2014). The increase in the number of international Arab students translated into increased number of international Arab students in Vancouver Island University. However, despite this increase, there is limited literature on challenges experienced by these students in specific Canadian universities and in particular Vancouver Island University. Informed by this gap in research, this study explored experiences and challenges experienced by international Arab students in Vancouver Island University. The study explored how challenges and experiences impacted on the students’ ability to achieve their academic success, and how the students are navigating and managing these challenges.
1.2.2 Motivation for the Study

As an international Arab student studying at Vancouver Island University in Canada, I have had a fair share of personal experiences and challenges. These challenges and experiences motivated me to explore literature on challenges and experiences being experienced by other international students and in particular Arab students in North American universities. It was interesting to learn that there is a gap in literature on challenges and experiences being faced by international Arab students in Canadian universities. However, it was unclear whether these challenges were unique to institutions suggesting that international Arab students at Vancouver Island University could be experiencing unique challenges that require unique solutions. It was envisaged that by understanding these challenges and sharing them, international Arab students’ social and academic experiences at Vancouver Island University would be enhanced. It was envisaged that exploring these challenges and experiences would positively influence on international student offices, faculty members, as well as international Arab students themselves.

1.2.3 Research Questions

This study sought to respond to the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of international Arab students at Vancouver Island University?
- What are the specific challenges faced by international Arab students at Vancouver Island University?
- How do these challenges and experiences impact on the students’ ability to achieve their academic success?
- How do international Arab students at Vancouver Island University navigate and manage their challenges?
• Are the experiences of international Arab students similar to the experiences of international students in general as outlined in the established field of literature, or are there unique experiences to these international students?

1.3 Organization of the Study

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: literature review (chapter 2), methodology (chapter 3), data analysis (chapter 4), discussion (chapter 5), and lastly (chapter 6), conclusions and recommendations.

As demonstrated in chapter 3, data was collected from 6 international Arab students studying at VIU using interviews. Arab international students that enrolled in full-time academic program at Vancouver Island University were included. Students with accompanying family members or who had family members in Nanaimo were not considered for inclusion in this study as they had additional support and other advantages that may have helped them overcome challenges or issues experienced by those without family members close by.

1.4 Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, international students were defined as students who are in Canada from foreign countries with the objective of pursuing further studies at post-secondary institutions. These students possess a study permit to pursue their studies in Canada. These students were not legally authorized to remain in Canada beyond the specified terms of the study permit as they lacked the “permanent resident” status.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviewed literature on challenges and experiences of international students including Arab international students in higher education institutions in North America and other countries. The following was covered in this chapter: international students in North America, factors that compelled international students to seek further studies abroad, challenges encountered by international students within the broader North America context, UK and other contexts, including academic difficulties, personal concerns, English language difficulties, health and religious issues, cultural adjustments and difficulties, racism and prejudice, weather challenges, psychological challenges and isolation as documented in the literature. Lastly, the chapter narrows down to challenges experienced by Arab students within Canada as documented in the literature.

2.2 International Students in North America

For the past few decades, international students came to North American universities and colleges for further education. For example, in 2008 and 2009, the number of international students studying in the U.S. post-secondary institutions increased by 8% to 671,000 (Institute of International Education, 2009). Recent data by Witherell and Clayton (2014) revealed that in 2013-2014 the number of international students in American universities and colleges grew to about 862,000 students and accounted for 27 billion USD in economic spending. According to Witherell and Clayton (2014) international students accounted for 4 percent of all students in the United States. The report by the Associate of Colleges and Universities of Canada (2011) also indicated that the number of international students studying in Canadian universities and colleges continued to rise for the 17th straight year. It was revealed that by 2011, full-time international
students’ enrollment increased by 11% to 100,000 students. This was a four-fold increase in the number of international students in Canadian universities since 1995.

In general, universities have embraced the inclusion of international students for a number of reasons. According to Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013), these international students enriched the North American students’ educational experiences by bringing new cultures, languages, and global experiences to their universities and colleges. These students also help improve cultural awareness of North American students, they improve their self-evaluation abilities and skills, and generate additional revenues to the host countries (Gardner, 2013; de Araujo, 2011). As revealed by Roselyn, Kunin and Associates, Inc. (2012), these students generated revenue to the host countries. For instance, Roselyn, Kunin and Associates, Inc. (2012) noted that international students generated about $8 billion to the Canadian economy and created approximately 81,000 jobs in 2011 (Ontario Premier’s Office, 2010; Mullens, 2006; Tamburri; 2008). Despite these benefits to institutions and the economy, international students still face difficulties as they transition to a new location and life.

2.3 Factors compelling international students to seek further studies abroad

There is a stream of research (Mostafa, 2001; Nelson, Nelson & Malone, 2004; Wisker, 2005; National Academies, 2005) that identified factors compelling international students to seek further studies abroad. These factors were categorized into two main ideas: push factors and pull factors. The former refers to the characteristics of the home country environment which are considered unsatisfactory. These includes fewer world-class institutions, restricted economic resources, fewer postdoctoral and doctoral programs, reduced involvement in the international communities and activities, limited access to funding opportunities, inadequate opportunities for specialization, adverse political and social conditions, and poor career progression. The latter
includes features of the destination country that are considered desirable. These factors include better technological and academic facilities, prestige associated with foreign certificates, improved working conditions, increased employment opportunities, increased access to financial support, personal recommendations and social links, living in a diverse culture/society, potential for higher wages and salaries, and employers’ increased willingness to higher qualified foreigners (National Academies, 2005; Mostafa, 2001; Nelson, Nelson & Malone, 2004; Wisker, 2005). Mostafa (2001) identified other benefits, namely cultural enrichment, awareness of political issues, development of competencies in a foreign language and the development of technical skills. However, like other previous studies, challenges experienced by these students were not taken into account.

Humphries, Rauh and McDine (2013) were interested in factors that make Canada to be favored by international students against other North American countries. According to Humphries, Rauh, and McDine (2013), Canada provides a safe environment, and the cost of education is relatively low. They also noted that Canada is considered a multicultural society which allows international students to gain work experience after and during their studies. Humphries, Rauh, and McDine (2013), further emphasized that Canada has a positive international reputation because of its friendly immigration programs. Other prominent previous studies on international students recognized challenges faced by international students in Canada and identified the following lack of social support; difficulty in English language proficiency (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Kwon, 2009), prejudice and discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Constantine et al., 2005), low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Sumer, Poyrazli & Grahame, 2008), homesickness (Tochkov, Levine & Sanaka, 2010; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), and physiological problems (Ye, 2006; Johnson, Batia & Haun, 2008).
2.4  Challenges experienced by international students

As recognized in many studies, international students constitute a unique group of students that face unique challenges. As such, they deserve a close look given that they have unique learning habits, cultures, and attitudes compared to other students (Salvarajah, 2006). According to Salvarajah, (2006), challenges experienced by international students vary depending on their physical appearance and national-cultural background. Marginson and Erlenawati (2011) also stated that experiences and challenges of international students vary based on their physical appearance and national-cultural background. For this reason, Marginson and Erlenawati (2011) suggested that investigation of challenges experienced by these students should reflect their diversities and the host country.

2.4.1  Challenges Encountered by International Students within the Broader North America Context, UK and Other Contexts

A number of studies explored challenges encountered by international students within the broader North America context, UK as well as other contexts (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Aydinol, 2013; Hydon, 2003; Hsieh, 2011; Kukatlapalli, 2016; Thuong Vu, 2013). Common challenges identified in these studies include: cultural differences and adjustments, English language difficulties, student supervision, differences in academic systems, racism and discrimination, cultural differences, and different cultural philosophies and approaches to curricula.

2.4.1.1  English language difficulties.

Studying and adapting to the use of a new language has widely been cited as one of the key difficulties experienced by international students and has been linked to their poor performance in academics. A number of studies recognized language difficulty as one of the key
challenges experienced by international students (Domville-Roach, 2007; Kuo, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010; Cheng & Erben, 2012; Lin & Scherz, 2014). Domville-Roach (2007) identified language as a tool that students utilize to share with others and bring about interaction. However, international students are lacking in the language skills and this makes it difficult for them to share and interact with others. This difficulty often translates to the poor performance in academics (Kuo, 2011).

Li, Chen and Duanmu (2010) acknowledged that language difficulty is a significant barrier to the academic success of the international students. Li et al. (2010) asserted that in an English learning environment, the success of international students is determined by their mastery of English language and that students who are less competent in English language also find it difficult interacting with peers. According to Li et al. (2010) most North American universities and colleges recognize these inadequacies in language skills and insist that international students must be subjected to the English test (IELTS and TOEFL), which is aimed at assessing the international students’ abilities in listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Kuo (2011) also acknowledged that language barrier significantly and negatively affects international students. It is identified as the key obstacle to making friends among international students in North American colleges and universities. Kuo (2011) opined that international students find it challenging to build relationship with the Native Americans due to language difficulties. According to Kuo (2011) native English American students found it difficult to understand international students and often fault them for speaking ungrammatical English. Kuo (2011) indicated that lack of mastery of English language makes international students to experience difficulty in communicating with professors and understanding lecturers. Agreeing with Kuo, Trice (2004) indicated that international students are weak in English language skills and
associates this inadequacy with negative outcomes such as poor academic performance. Trice (2004) opined that international students are poorer in English language and this makes them less adapted to the host country’s culture and less satisfied with their community and social relations. According to Trice (2004), this phenomenon also explained the difficulty experienced by international students in making friends. The weak English skill is also cited as the cause of the difficulty experienced by international students when communicating with native English speakers and other international students. Trice (2004) argued that difficulties in language vary depending on whether it is a productive language or receptive language.

Wisker (2005) suggested that receptive language listening and reading is easier than productive language speaking and writing. Wisker (2005) believed that developing oral communication skills helps international students to participate in discussions and debates and to engage in creative thinking and problem solving. Supporting the view that inadequacy in English language is a problem that affects international students; Yeh and Inose (2003) argued that language barriers affect the academic performance of international students, their discussions with supervisors, interpersonal relationships as well as their everyday life interactions. Yeh and Inose (2003) emphasized that the inadequacies in English language also impact on the ability of international students to adjust socially and build strong social relationships with others and that this impact their academic performance. Yeh and Inose (2003) further noted that students from other geographical regions are more likely to experience acculturative distress compared to European international students. Similarly, Cheng and Erben (2012) indicated that international Chinese students in American universities tend to feel anxious when using English language to read, speak and write in classroom. Cheng and Erben (2012), however, acknowledged that international students who stay longer in North America learn
English and develop competency making it easy to communicate with others and to build friendship with American natives. On the contrary, Abukhattala (2004) negated the assertion that international students who are exposed to English language in their home country should not experience language difficulty while in North American university or college. Examining the cultural and educational adjustment of Arab international students in Canadian university, Abukhattala (2004) concluded that knowledge of English language may not significantly help international students to overcome language barrier challenges. Abukhattala (2004) claimed that this is largely contributed by how English language is treated in Arabic classrooms as “static” rather than as a “living” with emphasis on grammar and vocabulary.

Other studies (Mostafa, 2001; Scheyvens, Wild & Overton, 2003; Adams, & de Wit, 2010) supported the view that language incompetence as a significant problem to international students. Scheyvens, Wild and Overton (2003) emphasized that international students’ English language differs from that of host country in terms of pronunciation, grammar and accent. This makes it difficult for international students to understand the host country’s natives and the converse is also true. Similarly, Adams and de Wit (2010) revealed that international students studying in an Australian college experienced difficulty in oral seminars and presentation due to lack of self-efficacy which may be blamed on the difficulties in English language.

Duru and Poyrazli (2007) identified English language as one of the key challenges experienced by Asian international students studying in an American college and linked it to their low participation in class discussions, small-group discussions, their difficulties when listening and speaking with the Native Americans and participating in formal oral presentations. This is in line with the argument by Lin and Scherz (2014) that language differences made international students shy off and feel anxious while speaking to Americans. This serves to
hamper the desire to share their opinions and thought in the lectures. Lin and Scherz (2014) further noted that Asian international students in particular struggle with language problems. Many of these students find it difficult to understand lecturers from Native American professors. This translates to academic difficulties experienced by students as observed by Wisker (2005). Linking academic difficulties experienced by international students with inadequacies in English language Wisker (2005) acknowledged that studying a second language by international students may obstruct articulation and thinking and ultimately make the thought process complex. It may also cause misinterpretation and affect the supervisory relations, especially in cases where the level of discussion fails to reflect thought process of the parties involved. Wisker (2005) emphasized that language development and support are essential for supervisors as well as the students. Similarly, Burdett and Crossman (2012) indicated that language and academics are closely related as many international students indicated that they struggle even after passing an English language test that allowed them to come to Canada and U.S.

Burdett and Crossman (2012) believed that online students’ language support can help these students to overcome this challenge. In view of Burdett and Crossman (2012) since many international students felt overwhelmed and anxious when talking to their American counterparts, online aids can be used to help international students to receive language support and retain their dignity. Agreeing with others with regard to language difficulty as a cause of other challenges experienced by international students, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) revealed that languages differences contribute to friendships and socializations issues among international students and contribute to other challenges facing international students. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) confirmed that international students who are low proficient in English reported increased rates of discrimination. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) revealed that 50 percent of the international
students reported feeling discriminated against by their American peers. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) further noted that language affects social acceptance as well as discrimination and it can be troublesome in many areas affecting international students. According to Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) there are also diverse emotional issues that international students must deal with that affect their perceptions about the experience abroad. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) further noted that international students with low language skills had experienced high levels of homesickness, and this resulted in more complaints of forgetfulness, anxiety and physical issues. Replicating Poyrazli and Lopez’s (2007) findings, Mitchell, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) revealed that international students were more likely to be distressed than the local students. The study found that international students studying in North America were more likely to experience mental health issues and be hospitalized for the same than local American students. Mitchell, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) believed that this occurs because these students’ social needs are rarely met.

Others (Knon, 2009; Zhang & Zhou, 2010) associated language difficulties experienced by international students with feeling of isolation and understanding course materials, and other challenges including difficulty in creating friendship with natives of the host country and finding group work partners. According to Knon (2009) international students who had poor perceptions towards learning English had problems getting accustomed to English and this lead to them feeling intimidated and isolated. Zhang and Zhou (2010) emphasized that limited language proficiency affect aspects of international student lives, including understanding course materials, creating friendship with natives of the host country, and finding group work partners. Zhang and Zhou (2010) found a significant correlation between international students’ confidence in successfully completing their programs and English language proficiency.
2.4.1.2 Cultural differences and adjustment.

It is widely cited in the literature that culture plays an important and complex role in international communication and relationships (Wisker, 2005). According to Wisker (2005) both supervisors and international graduate students need to be aware of and sensitive to these cultural challenges and this may help minimize awkward moments and misunderstandings. Indeed, cultural differences and adjustment has been identified as one of the key challenges experienced by international students (Wisker, 2005; Arthur, 2004; Li & Gasser, 2005; Aydinol, 2013; Winkelman, 2002; Hydon 2003; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010).

According to Wisker (2005) students who moved to another country from the home country often experienced cultural differences. These differences exacerbate difficulties experienced by these students as they adapt and settle in the new country. A similar claim was proposed by Baier (2005) who revealed through interviews involving 45 international students at Michigan community college that students’ success was impacted by the difficulty in adjusting culturally into U.S. culture. Similarly, Arthur (2004) noted that many international students found it frustrating and adapting and adjusting to western values and customs which differ from those of their home countries. Arthur (2004) suggested that international students should be culturally flexible in order to successfully adapt to cultural shock. Supporting this view, Rienties, Nanclares, Jindal-Snape, and Alcott (2013) asserted that cultural values may impact on how students relate with others, how they engage with instructional content as well as how they learn. According to Rienties et al. (2013) American values and customs may differ significantly from those of the student’s home country and this may cause cultural shock to the students. Rienties et al. (2013) proposed that to overcome cultural shock, universities should facilitate a diverse academic environment that allows international students to interact with domestic students as
well as fellow international students to help ensure they achieve success in academics. Rienties et al. (2013) believed that sharing of ideas and experiences; assigning group work; and engaging in classroom discussions may help international students overcome cultural shock and ultimately help improve their academic performance. Emphasizing the claim that cultural shock is a problem worth addressing, Trice (2004) revealed that these students come to America with their backgrounds and cultural habits; including patterns of etiquette, family relationships, religious beliefs and food restrictions and habits that transitioning from home into a more independent American culture may shock these students.

Students may gain effective academic and personal experience through contact with the host community and involvement in its culture. Trice (2004) indicated that these students gain effective personal and academic experience through their involvement and contact with American community and participating in its culture. Trice (2004) concluded that limited social contact between host nationals and international graduate students can be affected by the perceptions of students towards the degree to which they can fit into or adjust to their new cultural and academic environment. Li and Gasser (2005) also acknowledged that cross-cultural self-efficacy and contact with hosts were related to the success of the international students’ socio-cultural adjustments. Li and Gasser (2005) noted that the students may experience cultural shock depending on the extent of cultural differences. This view is reflected in a study by Aydinol (2013). Aydinol (2013) found that international students from different cultures who go to the U.S. to pursue further education often experience difficulties when it comes to socio-cultural adjustments. According to Aydinol (2013) these students found it challenging adjusting to new culture and language in the host country. Berry (2003) supported others but linked cultural shock to different communication style, lifestyle, food and language. Berry (2003)
believed that this cultural shock challenge can be overcome through acculturation (i.e., go through the acculturation process) in order to adapt to life and culture of the host country. Berry (2003) went ahead and identified what encompasses the acculturation process: Honeymoon stage, Depression stage, Autonomy stage, and Biculturalism. During the Honeymooning stage, students feel like tourists and are generally happy and excited about the experience. During the Depression stage, students are overwhelmed by their own personal inadequacies in host country culture. During the Autonomy stage; students see the bad and good aspect of the new culture and begin to understand the differences and their place in this new culture. Lastly, during Biculturalism; students feel comfortable with the new culture in the host country and begin to overcome some of the challenges they have experienced to that point.

Elsewhere, Winkelman (2002) indicated that cultural shock experienced by international students may manifest physiologically or psychologically due to stress. Winkelman (2002) also emphasized that there is a relationship between cultural adjustment and the level to which the home country and host country cultures differ. Winkelman (2002) argued that international students who originated from cultures that differ remarkably from the host country find it hard adjusting to the new cultures. Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) agreed with others by revealing that international students had trouble adapting to a new culture, experience language problems, problems in forming friendship, financial problems and lack of social support. Aydinol (2013) also identified cultural problems as one of the common challenges related to the social and academic life of international students within the United States context and the general experience of these students. Other common challenges identified included personal growth, the pursuit of success, different learning cultures and social interactions. Homesickness, financial difficulties, social isolation and communication issues with homesickness and isolation being
identified as the greatest challenges. Participants reported that their social interactions were impacted by confusion about American culture, their inadequacies in cultural and social clues; and their inadequacies in American English skills. Kukatlapalli (2016) also emphasized that cross-cultural adjustment issues and cultural shock were key challenges experienced by Indian international students within the New Zealand colleges and universities. In a narrative study, Thuong Vu (2013) explored the experiences of Vietnamese international students in New Zealand colleges and universities and revealed that participant experienced multiple challenges, key among them was cultural shock.

Myles and Cheng (2003) suggested that international students have a different cultural background that make them feel less knowledgeable and more pressured than the host country’s students due to their unfamiliarity with the host country’s teaching styles and education system. Based on this notion, Erving and Huei-Ling (2009) suggested that leaders of higher education should strive to understand the learning styles of international students, and the cultures, values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs that identify them and distinguish them from other students. Similarly, Li et al. (2010) proposed that leaders should also guide the learning rates and align them with the learning styles of the international students by improving academic performance and enhancing leaning. Li et al. (2010) emphasized the need to increase awareness among students about cultural diversity in universities and other institutions of higher learning in order to support learning experiences of international students and enable them gain competitiveness globally. They encourage students’ awareness of culture variety and to understand their own learning behavior. Supporting this view, Lin and Scherz (2014) suggested that institutions of higher learning should use cultural strategies to minimize academic challenges faced by international students from Arabic countries and Asia. Lin and Scherz (2014) believed that this
can be achieved by promoting students’ interaction with others from different cultural backgrounds and encouraging collaboration among students of different cultural backgrounds. Commenting on the same issue, Yan and Berliner (2013) noted that international students from different cultural backgrounds may have a different perception towards a learning environment. For instance, students from Asia can be affected negatively by a teacher to create close physical proximity with students while teaching. Yan and Berliner (2013) noted that Chinese international students without knowledge of the culture of the host country may amplify their deficiency in languages because of not understanding the dialogue. Yan and Berliner (2013) established that psychological distress and cultural distance are robustly related in cross-cultural transition.

2.4.1.3 Academic Difficulties.

Studies have indicated that language and cultural shock pose a challenge to international students’ academic performance. These challenges include: lacking access to important support services, failing to meet expectations of the academic advisor, understanding of the North American education system, and negotiating English language proficiency (Shaw, 2010; Ying, 2005; Duru & Poyazli; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Gong & Fan, 2006). In a 2-year prospective study involving 216 Taiwanese graduate students studying in U.S. universities, Ying (2005) identified academic challenges namely mastery of English and poor performance in academics as the most difficult challenges. In a study aimed at understand challenges experienced by international Asian students studying in the U.S. Sato and Hodge (2009) identified academic challenges notably experiencing difficulty in English language and failing to meet the research expectations of an academic advisor as prominent. Similarly, Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010) revealed that academic culture shock is related to the learning environment of an institution. According to Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010) international students in the U.S. universities got accustomed to
different teaching styles with unique interactions between them and their professors. This may be contrary to the teaching styles in their home country. For example, students from Saudi Arabia are taken through the education system that segregates male and female students at different levels of education and places emphasis on the Islam religion.

2.4.1.4 Differences in Academic Systems.

A number of studies have identified differences in academic systems as one of the challenges experienced by international students (Wisker, 2005; Abukhattala, 2004; Mostafa, 2004; Epstien, Boden & Kenway, 2005). Wisker (2005) indicated that international students come from countries that have different academic systems, which are culturally influenced by unique strategies of conducting research. According to Wisker (2005) these students’ construction of knowledge was influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Wisker (2005) further noted that changing the academic culture of these students is a challenging and a multidimensional experience as it involves transitioning between two academic systems and languages. This notion was further demonstrated by Arab Muslim international students studying in a Canadian university who indicated that one of their greatest challenges was to overcome the problems caused by educational and cultural differences between their host country and their home country (Abukhattala, 2004).

When identifying differences in academic systems between the foreign country and home country with regards to graduate students, Bullen and Kenway (2003) observed that the role played by the supervisor differs between host country’s education system and home country’s education system and that this makes it difficult for international students to adjust. According to Bullen and Kenway (2003) in some educational systems where international students come from, the supervisor is a symbol of infallibility and the key source of knowledge. Such systems make
students to expect much support, participation and guidance from the supervisor. Students
cultured in this system tend to assume that the supervisor is an expert and they tend to adopt
everything the supervisor provides to them. Their input is limited to following the supervisors’
set of instructions (Bullen & Kenway, 2003). These students often find it challenging to adjust to
a new education system that identifies the supervisor as a facilitator and the student as the key
researcher. As a result, international students have been found to show dissatisfaction with the
quality of instructions provided by their supervisors, the overall academic program, the course
availability, class size, and instructions offered by the instructors regarding the course objectives
and requirements (Bullen & Kenway, 2003).

Bullen & Kenway (2003) found that international students expressed dissatisfaction with
all academic experience varies. Similarly, a study by Eland (2001) involving 14 international
graduate students in an American university reported differences in the education system
between the students’ home countries and the U.S. as the key challenge reported by the students.
Students acknowledged that there were remarkable differences between the U.S education
system and their home country’s education system, the U.S education system emphasizes
conceptualizing knowledge as logical, rational and objective. The students also indicated that the
U.S. educational system places emphasis on independent learning and that interaction in the
classroom is considered a learning method. Students also observed that unlike the home
country’ education system, the U.S system also emphasizes informality of relationship between
instructors and students.

In another study, Mostafa (2004) argued that the difficulty experienced by supervisors
who supervise international students is largely contributed by the dissimilarity between academic
cultures of the student and the supervisor. According to Mostafa (2004) the supervisory-student
relationship should be a two-way relationship. However, the cultural and academic differences between the supervisor and the international students make it necessary for the supervisor to play a key role in ensuring the relationship works for the benefit of the student. These cultural and academic differences warrant extra effort on the part of the supervisor. This supervisor-student relationship is influenced by the expectations of the students towards the supervisor. Some cultures, for example in the Arab world, require students to show respect to the supervisor and those in authority. Students from these cultures require guidance to enable them to overcome assumptions with regard to the informality of student-supervisory relationship. For example, the issue of authority and age in Middle Eastern culture and Asian cultures is of particular importance when it comes to creating interpersonal relationships. It has been found to cause social awkwardness in supervisor-student relationship (Epstien, Boden & Kenway, 2005).

According to Epstien, Boden and Kenway (2005) supervisors of international students should also understand that these students may resist or avoid engaging in theoretical debates, may be over-ambitious and enthusiastic, and show naivety in understanding their proposed areas of research. Epstien, Boden and Kenway (2005) believed that these students may create insufficiently focused or ambiguous research questions and topics. According to Habib, Johannesen, and Ogrim (2014) international students found it challenging to adapt to the American education system and in particular the use of online technology. According to Habib, Johannesen, and Ogrim (2014) online learning modules and courses were not intuitive to many international students. These students find it difficult logging into the online portal to engage in students’ activities. Yang, Noels and Saumure (2006) examined adjustment and adaption issues encountered by international students in North American universities and colleges and how they

2.4.1.5 Racism.

Racism has featured in a number of studies as one of the challenges experienced by international students in North American universities and colleges. Crosby (2010) confirmed that racism still persists in North American post-secondary institutions. According to Crosby (2010) some of the incidences of racism were swept away under the carpet, while others received public attention. According to Crosby (2010) incidences of racial discrimination included those at York University in Toronto, at Ryerson University, at the University of British Columbia and at Sir George Williams University. Other racial discrimination incidences were identified by Stewart (2009) and they included those that occurred at the universities of Dalhousie, Saskatchewan, Halifax, and Manitoba. Emphasizing that racism existed in Canadian universities and colleges, the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2009) identified specific incidences of racial discrimination facing international students in Canadian universities and colleges, including verbal assaults, graffiti, and police violence. As confirmed by Constantine et al. (2005) these incidences of racial discrimination by locals against international students played a significant role in the processes of cultural adjustment of international students in the U.S and compound cultural adjustment difficulties of these international students.

2.4.1.6 Personal Concerns.

Personal concerns are among the key challenges affecting international students. These include loneliness, racial discrimination, social support networks, homesickness, living arrangements, interpersonal relationships, financial issues, immigration regulations have been
widely cited as challenges affecting international students (Wan, 2001; Rai, 2002; Liang & Fassinger, 2008; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Liang and Fassinger (2008) found the level of homesickness as the greatest challenge facing international students and noted that it predicted their poor adjustment abroad. In a study involving a large sample size of 282 international students and American students, Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) noted that international students felt lonelier and were less content than their American counterparts. In another study involving Asian international students, Wan (2001) revealed that international students held the view that American students were often discriminating; marginalizing and unfriendly to them. Rai (2002) negatively correlated social support with acculturative stress among international students studying in Canadian universities. In another empirical investigation Moores and Popadiuck (2001) found that international students in the U.S were confronted with personal issues including separation reactions, accommodation difficulties, financial stress, dietary adjustments, loneliness and misunderstandings. Emphasizing personal concern as one of the challenges experienced by international students, Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010) stressed that international students experience problems such as social support and friendship; and financial problems.

On a similar note, Grayson (2008) observed that the apparent difference between international students and U.S domestic students in universities and colleges in the emotional and mental issues faced by international students. Grayson (2008) argued that the emotional and mental issues faced by international students in U.S colleges and universities are contributed by adjustment to new surroundings. Citing first generation international doctorate students and first-year international students in American universities and colleges, Grayson (2008) argued that international students reported feeling separation and alienation as they attempted to adjust to
new surroundings. Gardner (2013) and Burdett and Crossman (2012) shared similar views that alienation and separation made international students in American universities develop emotional and mental issues. Studies also supported the assertion that unlike American students; international students in American institutions of higher learning deal with emotional issues, namely depression and anxiety (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009; Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007). In another study, Hwang, Bennett and Beauchemin (2014) revealed that the most prolific concern for international students with regard to mental health was the issue of relationship with supervisors and faculty. Indeed, data on social interaction and counselling confirm that unlike American domestic students, international students in American universities have a problem with social experiences (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009; Curtin, Stewart, & Ostrove, 2013).

Curtin et al (2013) also noted that international students in American universities had relationship issues with professors and advisors and advisor support. According to Burdett and Crossman (2012) the novelty of a new country and unfamiliar university could create a sense of alienation and make the experience overwhelming. Sherry et al. (2010) and Zhao, Kuh and Carini (2005) supported this view suggesting that many international students feel left out and prefer creating friendship with students from their nationality or those from similar backgrounds. Grayson (2008) indicated that the need to create friendships and reduce loneliness compel international students to actively participate in school clubs and groups. According to Grayson (2008) these groups and clubs were organized based on students’ ethnic and religious background and are therefore, the best places for socialization among international students. International students find students and groups with similar backgrounds, beliefs and interests. Grayson (2008) also revealed that international students also find it difficult to getting academic help from peers. Curtin’s (2013) findings showed that the difficulty in getting academic help
among international students may be contributed by these students placing emphasis on professional development and research than the domestic American students. Curtin (2013) suggested that demographic groups available to international students may hamper them from creating social connections.

2.4.1.7 Health issues.

Another challenge faced by international students studying in North American universities and widely identified in the literature is the issue of health. Studies have identified health issues including sleep problems, psychological distress, physical well-being, sickness, headaches and depression (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Rahman & Rollock, 2004). Rahman and Rollock (2004) examined challenges experienced by international students from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh in the U.S. and identified depressive symptoms which were contributed by prejudices by the American students against international students. Similarly, Ghaffarian (2009) used a sample of 107 Iranian international students studying in an American university and revealed that students experienced depression symptoms due to the inability to acculturate to Western culture. Similarly, Wang and Mallinckrondt (2006) found high avoidance and high attachment anxiety among international Asian students. According to Wang and Mallinckrondt (2006) high attachment anxiety and high avoidance among international students predicted sleep disturbances; gastrointestinal problems; headaches; and ulcers as well as sociocultural adjustment and psychological distress.

2.5 Challenges Experienced by International Students within Canadian Context.

Few studies have examined challenges experienced by international students within Canadian context and in specific colleges and universities (Humphries et al. 2013; Chirkov, Safdar, Guzman, & Playford, 2008). Still, these studies did not capture unique challenges
experienced by Arab students in specific universities in Canada. However, worth noting is that there are challenges common to all international students and those unique to Canadian international students (Weber, 2011; Cameron, 2006; Grayson, 2008). In Weber’s (2011) study involving international students studying in Canadian universities, common themes from the domestic and international students’ accounts of experiences at Canadian universities were academic performance and pressure, education and marketization, intercultural barriers and connections, language barrier, and cultural hybridity. However, contrary to findings of other studies, only education and marketization were identified as challenges unique to international students studying in Canadian universities. The uniqueness of challenges experienced by international students in specific Canadian universities was further emphasized by Cameron (2006). Cameron (2006) noted that factors such as students’ individual personalities, national-linguistic backgrounds, practices and policies of students’ host institutions, their length of stay, their program of study, provision and federal government policies, the social context and international political developments either enhanced or inhibited international student integration into St. Francis Xavier University. Clearly, challenges identified in Cameron (2006) did not mirror those identified by Weber (2011). This may suggest that these challenges may be unique to specific universities in Canada though their uniqueness to the Canadian context in general cannot be ruled out. It is also important to note that while, participants used in Weber’s (2011) study were obtained from several Canadian universities, participants used in Cameron (2006) were obtained from only one: St. Francis Xavier University in Atlantic Canada. More revealing is that while results found by Weber (2011) could be generalized to the wider Canadian universities, Cameron’s (2006) findings could not be generalized. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that none of the challenges identified in these two studies (Weber, 2011; Cameron, 2006)
featured among challenges experienced by international students in North American universities in general. An important insight may be that the challenges not only reflect the context of a specific country, but also of a specific university or college. This is, however, inconclusive as results of other studies suggest otherwise. For example, in a study by Grayson (2008) the issues of receiving less academic support and difficulties in making friends featured as common challenges experienced by international students in Canada. These two themes featured as common challenges experienced by international students in general. However, one may argue that the identification of these common themes by Grayson (2008) was limited by the assessment of the experiences given that the assessment was based on six dimensions: event involvement, out-of-class contacts, classroom experiences, friendships, academic involvement and social support, and that it may be wrong to use these to disapprove the assertion that challenges are unique to specific university and country in general. The findings by Chirkov et al. (2007) validated the findings of Grayson’s (2008) work.

Chirkov et al. (2007) identified lack of employment as a problem faced by international students who capitalize on the Canadian Experience Class Program (CECP) to transition into Permanent Resident (PR) into Canadian Citizens and this enabled them to further their studies in Canada. According to Chirkov et al. (2007) those students who failed to meet the requirement for Canadian work experience faced the challenge of joblessness. Chirkov et al. (2007) further noted that international students also came to Canada as visitors and failed to access settlement services provided provincially and federally to immigrants who are granted Permanent Resident Status. Chirkov et al. (2007) also indicated that international students were often seen as visitors and were not provided with funding to enable them to develop language skills, or dedicated support services or career guidance services to help them adapt. Often, inadequately funded and
equipped post-secondary student services and international offices become the ultimate de facto settlement areas for these international students (Chirkov et al., 2007). On the contrary, other studies within the Canadian context have reported challenges that reflect those identified by international students in general suggesting that international students in Canadian universities are subject to challenges encountered by other international students elsewhere. Common problems identified in these studies include students becoming disappointed as a result of the difficulty in integrating with the host country’s students, cultural adaptation, unavailability of specialized support designed for international students, poor academic performance and language difficulties (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006; Grayson, 2008; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Andrade, 2006). Clearly, as acknowledged by Andrade (2006) even after factoring in social economic levels, backgrounds of parents, engaging in educational and social activities and years of formal language education, there are still great differences between international students and other students in levels of success.

2.6 Challenges Experienced by Arab Students in Canadian Context.

Few notable studies have recognized the challenges faced by Arab students in Canada; and factors influencing their application experience (Alzahrani, 2016; Ahmed, 2016; Abukhattala, 2013; Altamimi, 2014; Abukhattala, 2004). Not surprisingly, as demonstrated in these studies, there are challenges identified as affecting international students notably language difficulties; cultural adjustments and others that seem to affect Arab international students in Canada. Investigating challenges faced by Saudi students and factors predicting their success while studying English in Canada through the lens of progressive education theory, informal and formal learning modalities, and gatekeeping scholarship, Alzahrani (2016) affirmed that language proficiency also affected Saudi students in Canada. Other common challenges
identified by Ahmed (2016) as affecting Saudi women studying in Canadian universities were experiencing and adjusting to a new lifestyle and culture, learning English with a view to become proficient, adjusting to living away from their families and in isolation, studying for long hours, and learning difficulties. The last two challenges seem common to all international students. However, Altamimi (2014) identified challenges unique to Saudi female students as they transitioned through the Canadian pre-academic ESL as lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and shyness, which were a result of their cultural background. These challenges impacted on their academic performance and success. This notion is supported Abukhattala (2013) involving participants from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. However, unlike Altamimi (2014), Abukhattala (2013) identified teaching and learning foreign languages and examinations; student-teacher relationship; and teaching methodological as three themes related to educational challenges unique to international Arab students in Canada. It was noted that differences in language, educational systems, social systems and culture between the countries of these students and Canada are the key sources of negative and positive experiences. Elsewhere, Abukhattala (2004) indicated that Arab Muslim international students tend to experience educational differences in teaching methodology, student-teacher relationship, learning and teaching foreign language, democratic dialogue in classroom, interactions in classroom, research and library facilities, and examinations. Arab Muslim international students were also reported to experience cultural issues with regard to sex-segregated relationships and perceptions of Canadians towards the Muslim women’s dress code such as the hijab.

### 2.7 Synthesis of the Literature review

As revealed in the literature review, all international students face common challenges namely cultural differences and adjustments, English language difficulties, student supervision,
differences in academic systems, racism and discrimination, cultural differences, and different cultural philosophies and approaches to curricula. It revealed that Arab students face similar challenges. However, as demonstrated in the above studies, most of these studies focused on challenges experienced by international students in the larger context of North America, other countries and in Canada. Only few studies focused on Arab students; however, these studies increasingly focused on Saudi Arabia, (Alzahrani, 2016; Ahmed, 2016; Altamimi, 2014). Only one study included participants from other Arab countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya (Abukhattala, 2013). More revealing is that none of these studies explored experiences and challenges of Arab Students studying at Vancouver Island University. However, these studies confirmed that international students in Canada face multiple, cultural social and academic challenges and that some challenges are common and cut across different universities while others are unique to specific universities and unique to students from certain regions and countries. This suggests that like other international students, Arab students at Vancouver Island University may be experiencing unique challenges that are unique to their institution.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology adopted in this research study. It describes the research design, research approach, and instrument used to collect data while detailing the shortcomings of the selected methodology. It also discusses how data was analyzed.

3.2 Research Approach: Qualitative Approach

As indicated by Creswell (2003) this inquiry-based approach was useful as it helped the researcher to understand the experiences of international Arab students, which is a human or social problem. Through it, the researcher was able to construct a holistic and complex picture formed with words and report views or opinions of international Arab students with regard to their challenges and experiences while at the Vancouver Island University. As suggested by Creswell (2007), this study began with a worldview, assumptions, and a research problem to inquire into the meaning that international Arab students ascribe to this social problem, which was that international Arab students at VIU experience unique challenges. Accordingly, the qualitative research approach enabled the researcher in the present study to gain insight into international Arab students’ experiences and challenges. Patton (2002) acknowledged that through qualitative inquiry, a researcher can find out what participants do, think, feel and know by interviewing, observing and analyzing data collected within a natural setting. Emphasizing the value and significance of qualitative research approach, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) contended that this approach enables researchers to view the socially constructed reality and conceptualize how social experience can be created and interpreted. Hamilton and Shang (1999) also saw qualitative approaches to inquiry as the best approach to exploring student matters as it enabled the researcher to understand the meaning given by students in relation to their experiences. In
line with this view, the researcher interviewed current students at VIU to better understand their experiences at VIU. Supporting this view, Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) discouraged the use of quantitative approach to explore student matters by arguing that quantifying textual data may make it impossible to understand a phenomenon from the participants’ point of view and the particular institutional and social context. Kaplan and Maxwell (1994) also affirmed that qualitative approach is germane in achieving the aims and purpose of the present study. Patton (2002) solidified the rationale for using qualitative approach by indicating that qualitative approach allows for in-depth examination of the small samples. Furthermore, VIU has a relatively small number of Arab students. As such, it makes sense to capture their stories and look at the phenomenon in depth. The argument advanced by these proponents of qualitative approach provided a strong basis and innumerable reasons to use the qualitative research approach in the present study.

3.3 Research Design

Accordingly, the phenomenological and narrative approaches were used in this study to derive meaning and in-depth detail of the challenges experienced by international Arab students. Narrative inquiry captures human dimensions and personal experience over time while taking into account relationship between cultural context and individual experience (Ellis, & Bochner, 2000). It allowed the researcher to systematically collect, analyze and represent international Arab students’ problems reported as stories by them. By narrating their experiences as a story, participants were able to negotiate their subjective sense of identity and self and meaning as they tell their stories. Again, narrative knowledge constructed and created via stories of participants’ lived experiences and meanings helped the researcher to make sense of the complexity and ambiguity of human lives (Turner, 2010). Patton (2002) also affirmed that individual meaning
and in-depth detail of the issue under investigation can be achieved through an inquiry research. Participant stories provide in-depth information with regard to viewpoints and experiences of participants of the topic under study. As suggested by Etherington (2000), narrative inquiry was useful in conveying and deriving experiential knowledge, as well as in presenting the actors’ experiences and enabled the researcher to get the experience of studying and understanding the participants’ experiences. Again, experiential descriptions, assertions and narratives presented in narrative inquiry by participant were easily put into use and memory. The narrative inquiry approach has been used in similar studies to explore experiences of international students in Canada and other countries (Hernadez-Ramdwar, 2009; Hamilton & Shang, 1999). Hernadez-Ramdwar (2009) and Hamilton & Shang (1999) used interviews to collect data on experiences of Black and/or Caribbean international students in Canadian Universities.

3.4 Recruitment of Participants

This study was conducted at Vancouver Island University and it involved Arab international post-graduate, graduate and undergraduate students studying at this University. As such, international Arab students were the population of interest. These students constitute the minority group in the university because of the physical appearance, geographical origin, and small enrollment numbers.

Studies that explored acculturation process, identified time spent in a foreign country as an important factor (Sodowsky & Plake, 1991; Mittal & Weiling, 2006). For this reason, students were selected if they had studied at Vancouver Island University a period not less than two years. The eligible students must have been Arab international students; had been in Canada at the time of this study, met the definition of Arab international student, and have volunteered to participate in the study. The selected students had also to demonstrate that they understood whether they
were meeting their goals of joining Vancouver Island University or not and be able to reflect on their experience with acculturation process.

In following the protocol for recruiting this study participant, the researcher solicited the help of the Presidents of the Arab Students’ Association and Muslim Students’ Association on Campus. The researcher also consulted the respective representatives of International Students on Campus. It was envisaged that the representatives would forward the advert inviting International Arab students to take part in the study. These two organizations were suitable areas for drawing the study sample because of the Arab Students’ membership. The researcher subsequently followed the protocol for locating sites to locate the advert on the university’s main campus. The advert included email address that will be utilized by participants in responding to the inquiry.

3.5 Delimitations

Only Arab international students that enrolled in full-time academic program at Vancouver Island University were included. Students accompanying family members or had family members in Nanaimo were not considered for inclusion in this study as they had additional support and other advantages that may have helped them overcome challenges or issues experienced by those without family members close by. International Arab students who completed high school in a Canadian school prior to attending Vancouver Island University were also omitted from the study to ensure the experience of all participants was consistent. Arab international students aged 18 or below (minors) were not allowed to participate in this study for two reasons. First, the researcher avoided the complexities involved in obtaining permission from their parents and guardians who could not have had the ability to speak English or could be
out of the country. Secondly, the researcher was keen not to violate the ethical issues of dealing with participants who were considered as minors.

3.6 Sampling Method

Taking into account the relatively small number of international Arab students currently studying at the Vancouver Island University, it was difficult for the researcher to use random sampling to identify participants to be interviewed. The researcher included six participants identified from the university. The non-random/non-probability sampling was used to identify interviewees as this could allow for the recruitment of volunteers interviewed. These students provided the researcher with a convenient sample. This made it easy to access the study participants (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) considered convenience sampling to be the technique that is the least desirable, yet most common purposeful sampling technique that allows the researcher to save money, time and effort. Given the time constraints of this thesis, and relatively small Arab population, convenience sampling is an appropriate sampling method for this study. Although not considered the most desirable sampling technique by Cohen and Morrison (2007), convenient sampling strategy allowed the researcher to pick information-rich cases that were suitable for in-depth analysis (Patton, 2002). This study looked at cross-cultural challenges and experiences of a small sample of Arab international students that the researcher was interested in. The use of convenient sampling technique as a strategy to obtain a sample ensured data collection was achieved and ultimately the achievement of the purpose and aim of the study.

3.7 Interview

Data was collected using open-ended interviews method involving 6 international Arab students studying at Vancouver Island University. Participants were invited to take part in this study via personal contacts. The initial interview lasted 60 minutes depending on the extent and
pattern of each participant’s responses to the interview questions posed by the researcher. A second, follow-up interview was also conducted and interviewees were given the opportunity to view and edit transcripts prior to the researcher including them in the study. Overall, interviews and follow-up interview took place over a 3 week period in October.

During the period of data collection, the researcher conducted a one-on-one semi-structured interview with participants. The timeline to conduct the first interviews took one week. As such, the six participants were interviewed in a period of one week. A follow-up interview with each participant was conducted during the second week. Participants were allowed to choose the venue they deemed most conducive for the interview. This ensured they felt comfortable in order to be open in sharing their experiences. This also allowed participants to easily access to the venue; the researcher allowed them to use English, combined English and Arabic or pure Arabic in order to enable participants to better express themselves (Yin, 2009).

At the start of the interview, the researcher introduced himself to participants. Next, he administered the Letter of Information and granted participants the opportunity to read and ask questions and let the researcher clarify any issues or doubts. Next the Consent Form was presented to participants and allowed time to read, sign and submit back. Upon consenting to the Consent Form, participants were presented with a list of pseudonyms to select from. These pseudonyms served the purpose of concealing the identity of students through the interview and the study. Participants’ responses were audio-recorded to allow for convenient documentation of data. These responses were referred for accuracy and clarification. Audio-taping also allowed the researcher to focus on the interview. This way, the researcher did not waste time or be distracted from the process (Yin, 2009).
The researcher was guided by the prescribed protocol for conducting a formal interview. In line with the interview protocols, each student was asked same set of open-ended questions in order to provoke them to expressively respond to the phenomena under investigation. In line with the suggestion by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) the use of open-ended questions during the interview provoked students to provide in-depth responses. The open-ended questions also allowed students to speak openly regarding their experiences, respond to the interview questions from personalized perspectives, and share their unreserved concerns with regard to the Arab international students’ experiences learning in a Canadian university. Conclusively, open-ended questions added meaning and detail to the participants’ commentaries enabling the readers and the researcher to understand and experience participants’ experiences first hand (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The choice of interview as an instrument for collecting data was informed by the following reasons. First, the research was qualitative as it was aimed at gaining an understanding of the experiences and specific challenges faced by international Arab students at Vancouver Island University and how these challenges impacted on their ability to achieve their academic success. Secondly, previous studies exploring experiences of international students in North American universities used interviews to collect data from participants. Third, it captured accurately distinct experiences of Arab international students at Vancouver Island University. It also permitted the researcher to take into account students’ varied views while ensuring they understood the relevant issues that formed the discussion. Yin (2009) also recognized the interview as an essential source of information for research. Yin (2009) further indicated that other people’s perspective is meaningful and that interviews can enable the researcher to obtain direct quotations from participants about their feelings, experiences, knowledge and opinions.
This statement underscores the flexibility and power of using the interview method to collect data and its ability to allow the generation of valuable data that can be used to respond to the present study’s research questions. The interview method is also considered superlative for use to collect data from a relatively small sample (Morse, 2000).

According to Morse (2000), interviews allow the collection of data in an easy way. It requires less number of participants and this makes it possible for the researcher to obtain a large volume of usable data from participants. Again, as indicated by Patton (2002) the qualitative researcher is tasked with providing a framework within which participants can provide answers that accurately represents their point of view. For this reason, the use of one-on-one interviews allowed international Arab students at Vancouver Island University to voice their experiences. It also allowed participants to provide specific types of answers that addressed the study research questions. In line with suggestions by Hamilton, and Shang (1999), the interview allowed the researcher and the interviewee to have a “conversation with purpose” opportunity and afford the researcher the opportunity to “capture respondents on their terms”. It also allowed the researcher to probe the participants more deeply in order to obtain additional data. It also afforded the researcher the opportunity of rephrasing questions in cases where participants found it difficult to understand. In addition, the responses from the first interview formed the basis of the second interview as the interviewer constructed the questions used in the second interview based on responses found from the first interview. This way, the interviewer used responses provided by participants during the first interview as a guide to new and follow-up questions. The second interview also gave participants a chance to look over their responses provided in the first interview.
3.8 Situating the Researcher

As a researcher and an international Arab student, it was a good opportunity for me to interview other international Arab students in this study. This approach is the strength of qualitative study as recognized by Shrigrey (2009) in that it helps the researcher to maintain a link with participants. According to Shrigrey (2009) qualitative research provides an opportunity for participants to speak as experts. It also balances the power between participants and the researcher (Shrigrey, 2009). As anticipated, being one of their own, international Arab students identified with me and therefore, provided more information about their experiences than I actually required from them. It as had been envisaged, I related to anecdotes offered by my fellow international Arab students at Vancouver Island University given my personal experience at the university. Being a post-graduate student at the university and having experienced unique challenges while in Canada and in the university, I connected easily with the perceptions of the interviewees. This familiarity was greatly useful in generating understanding, providing validation of stories provided by the participants during the interview sessions and was the basis for interpreting precisely and accurately the implications of participants’ views and comments. As indicated by McCracken (1988), in interviews and other qualitative work, the researcher often becomes part of study design. Therefore, the researcher has an obligation to allow readers to understand and learn something from him as a person conducting the research and what motivated him to engage in it in the first place (Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Walcott, 1990; Samuel, 2005). Echoing Samuel’s (2005) sentiments, I disagree with the assertion that detachment rather than close involvement is best approach to conducting research. It is important for readers of the present study to understand how the study was approached by the researcher and my feeling while I was conducting research (Perry, 1998). As reiterated by Strauss and Corbin (1990)
theoretical sensitivity is derived from personal experience, professional experience, analytical research process and the existing literature among other factors. Strauss and Corbin (1990) saw theoretical sensitivity as involving the researcher’s personal quality that determined by one’s ability to interpret and give meaning to data. During the interview, it deemed important for me to reflect on my personal experiences with a clear understanding of participants’ perceived expressions and look for differences and similarities.

I have personal experience as an “insider” researcher as well as an understanding of participants’ perceived expressions given my personal experiences as an international student in a Canadian university. Strauss and Corbin (1990) asserted that personal experience is derived from the researcher’s background. The researcher comes with this background to the research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) further contended that this implicit knowledge is important as it helps the researcher to understand actions, words and events. My awareness of Arabic dialect and position as an international Arab student facilitated my easy understanding of oral expressions of participants since we could communicate in local Arabic language with those participants who could not speak “standard English” during the interview. Delgado-Bermal (1998) argued for the making use of personal experience when conducting a study by noting that minority researchers have unique viewpoints which are informed by cultural intuitions and shared cultural understandings and that this enables them to have insight and perspective into lived experiences of participants. My “outsider-insider” role was indispensable in this study. My outsider-insider position undeniably rendered some insights valuable and beneficial in achieving the study purpose and aims.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study in relation to experiences of Arab students in Canada and VIU. It is a response to the research question highlighted in chapter 1. A detailed discussion of challenges and experiences recalled by Arab international students in interview 1 and the follow-up interview was presented. The last section of this chapter explores the connections between the students’ reported experiences and expectations. Like in chapter 3, this chapter synthesizes the findings into a holistic case.

For convenience and continuity, the findings were grouped under the key themes identified in the literature review section and other emerging themes. These themes are in relation to challenges experienced by students while in Canada and VIU and included: homesickness, loneliness, cultural shock, alienation, unfamiliar learning styles, academic difficulties, and language difficulties.

The components of friendships and friendliness and racism featured in international Arab students’ discussion of experiences. The component of friendship and friendliness, was expanded to: accommodation and first impressions on arrival in Canada. It was not surprising that the theme of racism, maintained it place in the perceptions of international Arab students albeit through disconfirming and confirming experiences.

As conceptualized by Hatch (2002), data analysis involves searching for ways of processing of collected data and searching for meaning and it is aimed at communicating what has been learned. In line with this definition, data collected through interviews was analyzed by grouping them according to procedure suggested by Patton (2014). This process was aimed at allowing for emergent themes. The researchers’ professional experience and results of the
literature review enabled him to develop a priori codes. Statistical analysis and computer software programs were not used in this study considering that the convenience of making use of descriptive data in a research that based on the small sample size used in this study. Patton (2002) advised against using statistical analysis in case studies design by arguing that statistical data offers a parsimonious and succinct summary of patterns; however, narrative inquiry provides detailed, individual and in-depth meaning. Accordingly, the audio recordings from the interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher and transcripts shared with participants with a view to ensuring precision and accuracy of data.

As observed by Patton (2002) in narrative inquiry, data analysis is aimed at facilitating the search for themes and patterns and in doing so data is transformed into findings. In line with this view, the researcher read the transcripts several times and searched for the participants’ narratives for themes and patterns emerging from responses given to questions during interviews. As suggested by Creswell (2003) it was envisaged that each sub-theme or theme would contain a piece of information or one idea. These ideas or sub-themes were labeled using “codes.” As conceptualized by Patton (2002) this approach involved labeling data and creating from it a data index. Through this approach, the researcher established relationships among participants’ experiences and derive meaning. As observed by Patton (2002) where the challenge lies in the qualitative analysis is in interpreting and making sense of large volumes of data. Nevertheless, by using qualitative content analysis, the researcher managed the large volume of data obtained from the interviews and overcame the challenge.

Patton (2002) described content analysis as an effort aimed at reducing large volumes of qualitative data, making sense of it and identifying core meanings and consistencies. Through it, the primary patterns within the data can be identified, coded, categorized, classified and labeled
(Patton, 2002). Contextually, the emphasis of content analysis was the integrated view of the text/speech along with the specific contexts. Through it, the researcher understood subjectively and scientifically the social reality and experiences of the participants (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) saw qualitative content analysis as an alternative to the traditional quantitative content analysis and one that is appropriate for use when working a research that require interpretive paradigms. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) qualitative data analysis is aimed at identifying important categories or themes from content and generating a description of social reality established by those categories or themes as they are experienced in a given setting. If prepared, and interpreted in a careful manner, the outcome of qualitative content analysis can be used to support the creation of new models and theories as well as validate existing new models and theories and yield thick descriptions of a particular phenomena or settings (Patton, 2002).

During content analysis, the coding and categorization of responses were based on differences and similarities identified in perceptions of students. The issues raised by participants were organized into categories of sub-themes and themes. After categorizing, describing and interpreting narratives of students, an explication process was applied to data. Next, reports were written in order to offer qualitative interpretations and representations of the study findings and explicitly report on how international Arab students perceived their challenges and experiences at Vancouver Island University.

Accordingly, the researcher carefully extracted and used suitable quotations from students’ narratives, which served as evidence to support the findings and themes. This was useful in the presentation of study findings. Emphasizing the importance and relevance of direct quotations, Patton (2002) indicated that in qualitative inquiry, direct quotations serve as the
source of raw data revealing participants’ depth of emotions, based on the way their world and thoughts have been organized and about what is taking place, their basic perceptions and their experiences. Accordingly, some participants’ information including events, places and names were changed in order to assure participants of anonymity.

4.2 First impressions

Unsurprisingly, the themes identified with regard to participants’ experiences and expectations upon arrival in Canada were reflected in their response regarding their experience during their arrival and their first year of study at VIU. All of the 6 participants travelled and arrived alone in Canada. Participant F (an international student from Qatar), recounted her first experience in Canada. Her recount contradicted the expectation of the caring, and friendliness of Canadians that the students expected:

_When I came to Canada, the first impression was created upon my arrival at the Airport. I arrived to Nanaimo and I stayed in a hotel while all my bags and things were in the truck that I hired, which was in front of the hotel. When I wake up the following morning I found out all the bags and staff in the truck was stolen. I called the police and reported the incident, the insurance company compensated me for the things I lost. I stayed for one week in a hotel before I found an apartment to stay in. I felt relieved when the insurance company compensated me._

This student did not expect this to occur as she had much respect for Canadians and thought that nothing like this could ever happen in an industrialized and civilized country like Canada. She trusted the truck owners and believed in them. However, she was disappointed upon learning that her luggage had been stolen. She was, however, happy when the police responded and the insurance company compensated her. This was a highly negative experience contradicted by another positive experienced from the police for student F.
4.3 Accommodation

International Arab students narrated their experiences in their living arrangement in Canada and in particular in the City of Nanaimo. Some Arab international students indicated positive experiences at the areas of accommodation. Participant A (a student from Saudi Arabia) said that:

*During my first three months in Canada, I put up at a Canadian family who were very friendly and accommodating to me. They like understood my taste and served me with halal food [“halal” food describes the food eaten by Muslims as provided in the Muslim scripture: Quran]. My stay with this family was really enjoyable. Another thing is that this family helped me to learn English and I strongly believe my staying with the Canadian family contributed to my learning English.*

Participant C’s (a student from Palestine) experience was on one hand positive and on the other hand negative. This was revealed in his long narration as follows:

*When I got an admission to study at VIU, before going to Nanaimo, I tried to look for a place to live on-line in Nanaimo, after trying for many days, I found one room on line and I spoke to the landlord. He told me over the phone the room is at 5-minute walk from the university and we agreed on the rent. I sent him money for the room rent and also for a damage deposit through Western Union. Few days later, I flew to Vancouver airport and then to Nanaimo airport and I arrived at 10 am. I found my landlord waiting for me in Nanaimo airport to pick me up to his house. He drove me all the way from the airport to his house. While we were going home from the airport I asked him to show me the university which he hesitantly did. I realized the university is very far from my house and his house is very dirty. There were 15 students occupying few rooms of his house. They were from India, Nepal and Canadian students. Some of these students used to take drugs and get drunk almost every night. They used to shout, yell and scream all night long. They used to fight with our neighbors. Our neighbors called the Police many times because of the noise these students make. As a result, some of these students stayed in the jail for few days. My landlord used to love me so much because I don't drink and very quiet. He invited me many times to go with him to the night club or to drink with him but I used to tell him No. I am Muslim and this is Haram and not allowed in our religion. My landlord was so nice that he used to take me by his car to see different places in Nanaimo. Finally I could not cope up with these noisy students and I moved to another house. After finishing the first semester I went back home and stayed for one month with my family. Again when the second semester about to start, I found a room to stay with a Canadian family on line. I arrived Nanaimo, and the landlady’s son took me from Nanaimo Airport to his house. The house was clean and my land lady was so nice. She took me to the only Mosque (masjid) in Nanaimo so I could do my prayers. The only problem I faced in her house was there were 3 dogs in her house. As a Muslim student, I believe dogs are dirty and not allowed to touch them, and I could not pray if these dogs...*
touched me. I talked to my landlady about the dogs. My landlady was so cooperative and understanding that she let these dogs stay in the house basement and not near my room. I believe this understanding was based on the fact that my landlady had previously worked as a nurse in Saudi Arabia and as an English teacher in Egypt for more than 20 years. She spoke Arabic quiet well. She was fond of Arabic language, culture and religion as well. She used to take me by her car to Walmart and Superstore to do my shopping whenever I needed so. I still have her phone number and every now and then I call her just to say hello.

Similarly, Participant D (a student from Egypt) reported a positive experience with Canadians:

After arriving to Vancouver in the evening I took the ferry to Nanaimo. An old Canadian lady sat beside me and she knew I was new to Canada. When we arrived Nanaimo, she took me to the VIU hostel late night and she came the following morning and gave me a pillow and a blanket.

Another international Arab student had negative and unsatisfying experiences with the first family they encountered on their first while seeking accommodation. These readily recalled episodes of uncooperativeness and unfriendliness displayed by their hosts towards them, defined the negative experience for this student. Participant E (a student from Kuwait) narrated his ordeal as follows:

When I found my new place to live, my landlord gave me an apartment. However, I did not see him again or speak with him again. I thought I could find him so that he could direct me on where to catch a bus and other issues relating to how to move around. That help was not available at all. I expected the landlord to help me given that I was living in his house. I also expected him to understand that I was new and unfamiliar with everything in Canada including location of the market and where to obtain food. I felt uncertain and anxious in this unfamiliar environment.

Participant E regarded this experience as distressing and emphasized that it matched low expectations for him as it demonstrated the unfriendliness and uncaring nature of Canadians. His emotional reaction could be described as cultural shock as it made him uncertain and feel unfamiliar in unfamiliar environment. He was surprised to encounter unfriendly behavior and it was disappointing for him since he had known Canadians as friendly and caring people.
As such, participant E’s expectations were disconfirmed while expectations of participants C, D and A experiences were confirmed.

On the balance of bad and good experiences by Arab international students, the general agreement is that Canadians are helpful and friendly. Most Arab international students expressed these sentiments throughout the interviews.

4.4 Missing life back home

Participants reported missing their culture and life activities in their home countries. They indicated feeling isolated and homesickness. This feeling was intense for participant A. it affected participant A’s mood and made him depressed and he considered going back home:

I found it so tough that I thought of giving up and going back home during my first four weeks. I considered going back home on a serious note. I encountered challenges ranging from entertainment and food alternatives. With regard to food alternatives, I relied a lot on fast food and was not sure where to go and find the food I was used to eat, I became depressed. I missed my family and home a lot and I maintained contact with them on a daily basis. The greatest challenge was finding a solution to this isolation. I hated everything in Canada and VIU and wanted to return home as soon as I could. I believed the only thing that could save me from this isolation was returning home to see my family.

Participants E says that his mood was affected by simple life issues. For example, he mentions:

I was unfamiliar with everything. I did not know that restaurants and malls often close early. While malls and restaurants back home close at about midnight, here most of them close between 8 and 9 pm.

Similarly, participant B (a student from United Arab Emirates) was struck by this mundane and daily life. Participant B felt isolated living in Canada where food and daily activities starkly differed from those she was used to in her home country.

Even while I am with other international students from Arab countries, I feel like we are isolated from the society or we do not belong to this society. What makes me feel isolated in particular is that activities I engaged in, while in my home country were quite different from activities in this country and university. The food offered in this campus are not as diverse as those provided at home and do not reflect our diversity. This caused me to visit restaurants that are known globally namely McDonalds and DQ.
This association of home food and activities was evident in participant C’s account of first experience in a Canadian university, as he recalls here:

*It takes some time for one to adapt to cultural differences here at VIU. During my first stay here, I wanted my cultural food and I did not want to explore other options. However, I was forced to try other food varieties since I did not have alternatives.*

4.5 Learning Environment

The learning environment at VIU dominated the international Arab students’ responses in relation to experiences. It was a crucible upon which difficulties experienced by students were made evident. It was the prime source of students’ cultural shock and was largely due to their unfamiliarity with role-playing skills and cognitive aspects. The predominant concern was language difficulties and its impact of having limited English skills on academic progress. This deficiency impacted on the interactions of students with lecturers and in particular where students experienced difficulties in conceptualizing what lecturers said while in class. Participants aligned language with academic success. The component of time-frame orientation or simply time was one of the recalled experiences of international Arab students. It was mentioned in relation to students’ learning environment. Group work featured strongly as new experience to international Arab students with many indicating negative and positive outcomes regarding group work.

4.5.1 Interactions with lecturers

Participants reported that though they were confused about deciding for themselves how to prepare for assessment and tutorials and what to read, they were comfortable with the university lecturers. They noted that assessment strategies in the university differed from those of their home countries. As with direction regarding reading, they needed and expected clear instructions about the items for assessment.
For example, participant C, noted that he expected a lot from the lecturer, and for “the lecturer to provide detailed directions”.

Virtually, all study participants reported experiencing difficulty with this issue with a few students not being impressed with some tutors and lecturers. Participant D reported the following:

*There is this one subject in my second semester where the tutor did really nothing. By saying nothing, I mean the tutor came to class and only spend 3 to 4 hours speaking in a way that only few students could understand. The students did not feel the livelihood of the class and we did not feel like participating by making comments or posing questions. I ended up contracting a private tutor to help me in understanding this subject. This poor effort from the tutor resulted in my failure to pass the subject. It was disappointing to me because I had never failed in any subject before.*

These concerns were reflected by other students. In particular, participant A reported that:

*Lecturers differ. Some lecturers are friendly to students which is the case for most lecturers in VIU. However, there are few lecturers who are quite student-unfriendly during normal classes. They are very serious during assessment but lash harsh words to students and especially those who do not do their assignments.*

During the interview, participant F recalled the professor who made a comment about students failing in his subject, something that made her to feel reduced and low. She found the experience concerning because of its far-reaching implications:

*In one of units at the University, the professor at the beginning of the year indicated that students fail themselves and that he does not fail them. I interpreted him that some students must fail and concluded that as Arab students, we would fail because we were foreign students and have difficulty in adapting to a new culture. I had no doubt the lecture was good. However, my worries were drawn to what he said and was worried that I will fail.*

This simple misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the lecturer’s words had an impact on the Arab international students in class and others. The deep-seated enculturation prevented students from seeking clarification from the professor with regard to the statement. There are those who agreed to talk to the tutor about the grade or getting help and opted not to. Though
they felt like the lecturer was approachable, the comment made them seem that they would be
inconvenienced that they should proceed and not do so. Participant B explained that:

*I am in love with the teaching style embraced by lecturers at VIU and I always find it
very supportive and very good. At the same time, I am proud to be studying in this
university. However, I do not like going and talking to tutors as this is not my style of
doing things. I do not fancy going for consultations privately about any academic
problem I may be experiencing. I know I will have confidence in getting the necessary
help from the teachers or the support staff if I was the type. Lectures always appear
friendly and welcoming and I never feel like there will be anything going wrong if I
sought help from them.*

Participant F and B alike had unpleasant experiences with professors when making
attempts to get the lecturers to review grades. They had decided to approach the lecturers, but the
outcome seemed disappointing to them:

*I had an experience with the tutor who was helping in preparing my assignment. When I
visited him so we talk about it, he highlighted what I needed to fix in order to get a better
mark. I did so and submitted the work. The mark I received needed to be improved and I
did improve it accordingly and re-submitted it. However, my second submission did not
help as I scored a low mark and I could not understand what happened. From this I was
unsure about what I need to do in the university to improve on my marks as it seems not
normal for students to ask tutors about improving the marks. In the case of my home
country, it is not possible to have the marks changed. Though I was accustomed to t
this
culture, here in the Canadian university, tutors permit it and say it is possible to improve
on the assignment to improve on your grade. I am thus unsure if it is the organization’s
culture or simply the decision of an individual lecturer. However, I am less confident
about asking the lecturer about improving on my assignment in order to score better
marks.*

Student E had a disappointing experience that seemed similar to that of student B and F
and D. It was about a remark of the assignment. The tutor had send the paper for student E to
another campus for remarking by a colleague in the same discipline. Unfortunately, the outcome
was a failed grade. The student reported that:

*I was not given any information and this made me upset when I realized that I failed the
subject. However, what upset me more was not receiving the correct information and this
made me to think that it may have been the university culture that lead to this happening.
I thought it was the act of lecturers protecting each other and failing to provide the
required information to students. I concluded that it may be the culture of Canadian
universities not to overturn the outcome of a marked paper from a staff member or not to help a student.

From these comments, it appears that some Arab international students are concerned about the subculture or culture existing in VIU.

4.5.2 Group Work and Group Dynamics

For many international Arab students interviewed in this study, group work and the unfamiliarity with Canadian university learning environment was one of the major concern. They did not experience group work in their home countries. For instance, participant D indicated that group work done for assessment reasons was not common in his home country. He did not anticipate group work in the Canadian education system. For this reason, he found the experience of group work quite overwhelming. However, like other students, he enjoyed group work and found it helpful academically. This is an excerpt of his narration:

In our country, we studied together in groups and we talked about the approach we might take to an assessment. We like to help each other understand what is required for assessments. So, in summary, I do enjoy group work. I think it’s very useful and it makes me feel happy to share ideas and to know what other students are thinking and helping each other to prepare for assessments and also just the social aspect of talking with other students about the different things that come up regarding being international students.

On the contrary, participant C, made an attempt to mix with others from other cultures while working in group work but recounted an awful experience as he explains:

I have had some awful experiences working in groups here in VIU. I thought before coming here that working in a group would be a good thing, that there would be a lot of sharing and collaboration and getting close to each other but I found this is not the case. There are some big student cohorts at this campus. Prominent are the Indian and South East Asian cohorts. They are very traditional and have a long history and have certain ways of looking at things so when I am working with these students from these countries with long histories it feels like to me that I’m not working with an individual but rather I am working with a country. Consequently, when I’m working in a group with them, I find they don’t want to extend themselves beyond the way they normally communicate and deal with people from other countries. I found it very difficult to communicate and to want to spend more time with other group members even though I knew it was important
and useful to completing group assignments. I see that many students from other countries didn’t want to have a lot of meetings and to communicate openly with me.

Other study participants made positive comments concerning their attitudes and experiences with groups. There were strong sentiments expressed concerning psychological aspects of group membership as well as functional aspects relating to sharing workloads. Participant A explained that, at VIU:

We do a lot of group activity with other students particularly my friends from Saudi Arabia. We studied together in groups and we talked about the approach we might take to an assessment. We like to help each other understand what is required for assessments. So, in summary, I do enjoy group work. I think it’s very useful and it makes me feel happy to share ideas and to know what other students are thinking and helping each other to prepare for assessments and also just the social aspect of talking with other students about the different things that come up regarding being international students.

On the balance of these reported experiences, students in the study willing and happy to work in groups and preferred working with other Arab students if they were able to focus and remain functional. Other students were unhappy about group work and found the experience awful especially when working with students from other nationalities considering the difficulties they encountered.

4.6 Academic Experiences of Studying at VIU

4.6.1 Language Barrier

Language barrier emerged as the first theme relating to academic experiences and challenges. It was highlighted as the biggest challenge experienced by participants during their studies at VIU. All the six participants expressed that they faced and still face the challenge of English language proficiency at the academic as well as personal level. Participant A illustrated the difficulty in learning and adapting to a new language and narrated how the challenges he faced during his initial phases of learning and adapting to English language emphasizing the difference between English and Arabic:
English differs from Arabic and this made me to experience challenges. I had to start getting used to writing from right to left of the page (the English style) unlike in Arabic where I was used to writing from right to left of the page. This problem was exacerbated during my taking of the placement test in ESL. I interpreted the pictures on the placement test from right to left rather than from left to right. This way, I totally misunderstood the test. This was a tough processing the difference between English and Arabic and adapting to the new style of processing language.

For participant E, the biggest challenge was learning English:

Before coming to Canada, I thought I was smart at speaking English. However, upon my arrival, I discovered that my English was way below the required standard of English having listened to the natives. I had to start everything from scratch and learn English.

All the six participants indicated that they had problems with communicating in English while interacting with Canadian local students. Participant C highlighted two issues that made it difficult for him to interact with local students:

The speed at which native spoke and their extensive use of slang made it difficult for me to interact with the locals. I always interrupted them to request them to repeat what they said. I kept saying “pardon me” or “sorry please repeat”. I also kept informing them that I am a novice in English language.

Participant C further reported that his language skills as “poor and noted that even after four semesters at the university, he understood less than 50 percent of spoken English.” This student bemoaned this issue insisting that it resulted in difficulties he experienced while listening to tutors and lecturers and not getting the meaning of the words as pronounced.

Similarly, participant B complained of the speed of teaching and speaking by professors in the university reporting that they spoke “too fast” making it difficult for her to follow. She indicated that she did not have a chance to keep up with the pace and that this made her to prefer “shutting down” while in class as she waited for the class to end.

Other participants reported about the difficulty in paying attention during lectures due to the difficulties with English with some indicating that the professors did not provide an allowance for language difficulties affecting the non-natives.
For participant D, maintaining a conversation with locals was challenging, as he narrates here:

> When I spoke with local students, I would start by understanding them. However, once our discussion deepened, I started to understand less and less of what was said solely because of the speed at which words were pronounced and the use of slang. At a certain point, I could not understand what was said. At this point, I would resort to pretending that I understood what was being said when in reality I could only understand one or two words.

Participant A also described his struggles when interacting with the locals indicating that it was difficult for him to understand local sayings and terms:

> I still have difficulty with English. In particular, I experience linguistic difficulties with metaphors and phrases used. I find it difficult understanding slang and local language. I live in Canada for more than three years yet I still experience difficult comprehending some things.

Participant F narrated how hard it was to understand certain English phrases:

> I have encountered certain situations such as one in which a local approached me at a bus stop and attempted to strike a conversation with me. He said to me “what are you up to”. In this meeting, I was aware of the words and what they meant when separated. However, I did not have a clue of what this local meant. My inability to know what to reply or say left me in an embarrassing situation. I told him that I was an international Arab student and that I was still new to English.

As the goal of academic English language institutions is to prepare students for academic purposes, all participants indicated that they speak in a different way with locals versus other domestic students on campus since terms used in academic and other formal environments differ from slang. They find it difficult to change the way they speak in classes and out of classes as they depend mainly on the language they learned at their language centers. Participant C presented his experience as follows:

> I discovered that I needed to learn and understand the language spoken by the locals and academic language. I found it difficult distinguishing the two even till now, even though it may appear easy picking up or understanding the general context. I also have difficulty using academic language while speaking with local students because even though these phrases and words are used in a technically correct way, they are rarely used when using slang. We were taught at the ESL level the academic language but not local slang. This made it difficult for me to understand the local slang because the academic language learned was not used by locals during our encounter. In certain instances, I realized that
the terms I used were misused by the locals even though they seemed academically correct.

Participant B explained the restriction of some terms to formal settings emphasizing that they are rare in daily conversations:

*The example is the word “tolerance”. The word tolerance as used in the academic atmosphere serves to outline boundaries or limits. However, the phrase, “I don’t accept this matter’ or ‘don’t agree’ is used in the local language rather than use the phrase “I would not tolerate it”.*

This issue was also raised by participant A who said that “it was difficult for him to comprehend local language and sayings while learning English and to avoid mixing the two.”

All the six participants expressed that their limited communication and proficiency skills affected their daily interactions and activities while at VIU, including their interactions and engagement in classroom conversations, presentations and discussions with professors and classmates. They narrated how limited communication skills limited their interactions making them to feel inadequate in their interaction with local students. Participant A narrated his struggles with language as follows:

*For me, the biggest challenge is language itself even when I have the understanding and knowledge. This is because with the correct terminology, I can have the confidence to speak knowing that others can understand the idea I am putting across. Where I am seen to have a high skill of English skills and communications but not prepared for class or lack the knowledge, I opt to beat around the bush in an attempt to try and understand the content. This makes it easier for me to participate. I have realized that even in formal setting, it still a challenge to communicate and talk to local students because they rely much on slang more than they do rely on academic language. In addition, synonyms play an important and significant role and make communication difficult especially when used in an interchangeable manner. However, there are certain circumstances where the use of synonyms may obscure the context. This communication difficulties may create barriers making me somewhat hesitant in encountering locals and interacting in group discussions.*

Participant E also felt hesitant in engaging in group discussion largely due to the limited communication and language skills and that this made him feel inferior to other students. He narrated:
In classes with lots of group work, discussions and participation, I always look for people to accompany other than locals. I try as much as possible to avoid local students. I do this because I feel my communication skills are inferior to those of the local students. I often feel like I will end up wasting valuable time for other group members. I always have to think and rethink what I say and elaborate on it several times in order for my point to be understood and conceptualized by local students.

Participant F reflected on her experience with classroom discussion in the following passage:

Honestly, I do not like classroom discussion because of their confrontational nature. In this discussion, someone has to stand in front of me which requires me to maintain eye contact something I hate. Another thing that is challenging to me is understanding English. This is my biggest barrier: linguistic barrier. I always find it difficult to understand certain English terms and phrases. This makes me quite uncomfortable when interacting with local students because these students like using difficult phrases and terms. Many times, I find myself asking them to excuse me for my bad English.

Participant D compared his current experience and his experience in group discussions and classroom activities when he was learning language. He takes note of how easy it was for him to participate in classroom activities when surrounded with other students but not classmates whose English was their native language.

In English as a second language classrooms, I did not find it to be an issue because most of us had inadequacies. Therefore, I did not feel ashamed or scared at all. However, I would get ashamed and scared when I was with local students at the university. I was scared of making mistakes so I would prefer to be as brief as possible. It was even more challenging when talking to native students. I try as much as possible to avoid being laughed at by others. This I ensured I was to the point and very concise when speaking to first language speakers. This was primarily my biggest challenge.

All the six participants expressed that linguistic challenges made it difficult for them to make friendship and mingle with local students. These experiences were addressed by three participants. Student E narrated about how his fears in committing mistakes acted as a hindrance to his engaging and relating with other students:

My greatest challenge today is making linguistic mistakes when talking to native speakers of English. I struggle passing a point across and to understand what the natives of English say. I knew I was not fluent in English. For this reason, I tried my best to avoid awkward encounters with these students who tend to be keen when listening to me talking.
Participant A indicated that the interests and topics held by local students differ from his and that these students tend to use slang. This makes him to feel inferior, uneasy and out of place because of not understanding everything said. He illustrated his linguistic challenges as follows:

*My challenges relate to linguistic difficulty. For example, I remember an incident where jokes were told in an event I had volunteered in a university. I did not understand anything. To avoid feeling left out, I had to fake a laughter.*

A similar experience was shared by participant B:

*I feel bad when I understand only a fraction of what local students say. I am meant to pretend that I understand what it is being said. Sometimes, I choose to ask these students to repeat what they say. In non-academic settings, it is always challenging and sound weird as well as ill-mannered to repeatedly request a person to repeat what he/she says. It is worse when what is being said is a joke. It creates an impression that I am stupid. It becomes difficult for me to differentiate funny jokes from non-funny ones. This embarrasses me.*

For many students in this study, the comprehension of English language within the academic setting was a source of cultural shock. This is aligned to the description of cultural shock described by Christofi and Charles (2007) as the uncertainty and disorientation felt when an individual functions within an unknown and different culture. This disparity between the perceived capacity of students to express themselves and understand English language and the reality of difficulties experienced disconfirmed their expectations.

### 4.7 Cross-Culture and Cultural Identity

All the six participants indicated that their experience of living and adjusting to Canadian life was mediated by their culture. The most salient data within this theme can be categorized into three: (1) experiencing stereotypes and prejudice; (2) gender roles; and (3) religious and cultural differences.
Religious and cultural differences

Participants shared that sometimes their religious and cultural boundaries made them struggle with the issue of participating in some activities and gathering while in VIU. All participants indicated that they found it difficult negotiating their cultural and religious values with the Canadian culture. They expressed that they appreciated and wanted to maintain their cultures and values. However, these values and cultures conflicted with their desire to make new friendships in this new culture and to engage in activities on campus. The difference between their host culture and values, the home country values and culture and those of other international students, Arab students struggle to find a balance. The challenge faced by these students largely revolves around interacting with friends who requested them to join them in night clubs and bars where alcoholic drinks are offered. This act is prohibited by Islamic religion.

Participant C reported struggling with the decision to refuse or accept the offer to meet friends in bars and clubs where alcohol is served. On one hand, he feels uncomfortable and out of place when he opts to join them in these places. On the other hand, he feels his refusal to join them in such places would make them see him as closed-minded and stereotyped. His sentiments capture those expressed by the other five participants with regard to this issue:

*The challenge I faced while in Canada largely revolved around activities. Lots of activities and fun that students engage in while in this university involve alcohol. Back home, the approach to activities and gathering is quite different. Many local students here request me to join them in hanging out with on a drinking spree. I find this ridiculous. You know this is not embraced by our culture. In cases where I tried to join them so I do not appear closed-up, I still felt uncomfortable and out of place.*

Participant D described a similar experience:

*I felt like there was always a sort of constraint and barrier that makes me feel somewhat reluctant to encounter and relate freely with locals. Maybe the locals would consider me as a foreigner and do what is normal but does not suit my culture and religion, such as inviting me for a drink in a bar. The Muslim religion prohibits me from*
engaging in any alcohol-related activity. It is, therefore, difficult for me to mingle with ease with local students. It kind of create a barrier between me and them. I understand that my culture differs from that of the locals, and I always taking into account this while interacting with them.

Participant E’s encounters with friends revolved around academic matters and are restricted to VIU.

*I restrict my friendship to academics. This is because of the understanding that we are culturally as earlier mentioned, I do not engage in any alcohol related activities yet many of my friends in the university do. This makes our encounter awkward especially whenever we are in any party. Again, the interests and topics of local fairly differ from mine while off campus.*

Similarly, participant A indicated that he feels happy meeting friends in gathering places he considers right and appropriate:

*I have very few Canadian local friends. I do not always participate in drinking whenever we gathered or hanged out with friends. This was basically for religious and cultural reasons. I would gladly mingle and interact with others whenever we met at a restaurant or café.*

4.7.2 Gender Roles

Gender roles is another important theme that emerged from this study. Specifically, two participants (participants A and E) indicated that it was a new experience for them to intermingle freely with the opposite gender, as their culture does not allow the constant interaction of people of opposite genders unless the participants are family members. In the following passage, participant A narrates his experience and the challenge presented to him:

*I found something different when it came to gender roles here. I found it strange to see constant interaction between different sexes here at VIU. For example, I found it uncomfortable to relate with female students in my group. I was hesitant to talk to them. I also found it difficult to accommodate the dress code of the girls here. Now I have adapted to this style and life.*
While the constant interaction between different sexes was common to students at VIU, participant E emphasized that he avoids mingling with female students unless it is in the academic circle:

> As for the gender role, it is different here. Back home males and females are always separate. For myself, I don’t engage in any activities with women off campus and outside of academic needs. I’m not against women, because they also don’t mingle with men outside of their families in our culture. It is just a religious concern.

Participant B also mediated this cultural difference by employing this strategy, as she explains here:

> I found gender role a new experience for me. Back home, we do not interact with those of the other sex except those within our families. On the contrary, it is a norm in Canada for males to interact with females. I am somewhat used to here after I appreciated cultural differences between Canada and my home country. However, I still limit my interaction with females to academics and ensure they remain respectful and formal.

4.8 Experiencing Stereotypes and Prejudice

Participants indicated that though they did not experience direct discrimination or attack, while at VIU, they felt that prejudice and stereotype against Arab students exists. They noted that there are few cases where they experienced stereotypes and prejudice due to their being Arab international students.

Participant A explained that the shift in fellow students’ interaction with him whenever they discover that he is from an Arab country makes him find it challenging to create new friendships in VIU.

> It was difficult creating new friends at the university. The locals who identified me as of Arabic origin avoided me or asked me questions about my culture. However, they maintain a professional and formal relationship with me. I was stereotyped too. However, on my part, I avoided these stereotypes.

On this subject, participant C shared a story illustrating the false notion held by local students about students from Arabic countries.
A local student once confronted me and asked me about a gun I own back home. Honestly, I was shocked and offended with it. I did not know how to react or respond to this yet the student wanted an answer from me. I decided to respond that I did not own one. The student insisted that we all carry guns along with us while at home in our country and insisted that we are by nature nomadic. I insisted that was false. He wanted to know why we are brought out in the main stream media as extremists. I informed him that I am as frightened as him when I hear of the extremist groups.

For student E, discrimination concerns getting a treatment that differs from others in certain situations. He recalled witnessing cases where individuals were scoffing at him and talking ill about his culture:

*I have not encountered direct discrimination. However, I have always felt that I tend to get a different treatment from local students and others. For instance, I feel the landlord does not treat me the same way he treats other tenants. Similarly, some people talk ill about my religion and culture without minding that I am of that culture. This makes me to feel uncomfortable and to believe that I am a lesser person.*

Participant D narrated that the image held by people about people from Arabic countries is unauthentic, and that he has had to explain himself in several ways to these people about the reality.

*I discovered that local students see students from Arabic countries as nomads. For this reason, on many occasions, I had to explain that it was not true rather a stereotype and would offer to explain in detail how we live and our culture and religion.*

Participant F also confirmed that though she has not encountered direct discrimination, she had witnessed abuses towards her religion and culture. The following story reflects what she shared:

*I have not been physically or verbally harassed or attacked by anyone. However, there was this poster that focused on the issue of Islamophobia. A researcher was giving a speech about Islamophobia. On this poster, words had been written that I found disrespectful of Islamic religion. This offended me. I felt it was improper for someone to create a graffiti directed at my religion. These kind of messages often created negative atmosphere in the university and made me to feel uncomfortable.*
Three participants narrated that the media is dominated by distorted images about Muslims and Arabs and that has impacted on their reputation making them vulnerable and easy targets for racism. Participant E share the following experience:

*I have always held the view that local students perceive me as closed-minded and a sort of an extremist person. I feel like they stereotype me relating me to those groups that seen in the media. I recall an instance when locals verbally abused me following the occurrence of a global issue that appeared in the mainstream media. Somebody passing by me cussed me and verbally abused me. They saw me walking on the street and faced me and stereotyped me. I just walked way and remained quiet. On the social media, there are discussions that involved people attacking the Islamic religion and culture. It was scary for me.*

Similarly, participant C share his views regarding racism as fueled by social media:

*I have not encountered a personal attack or experienced a case where someone calls me an extremist or terrorist. However, the media creates a perception that we Arabs are all extremists or terrorists and this scares me. They add pressure on us Muslims and display a wrong picture about us and our culture. This affects our lives and minds in general create a totally wrong impression about us.*

Participants also narrated their experience with regard to racial discrimination. Three out of six Arab international students in the present study indicated that they experienced racial discrimination and abuse during their first year of Canada. As conceptualized in this study, racial discrimination and abuse involves any spiteful and derogatory actions and comment directed to a person based on religion or race. Participant B narrated as follows:

*There are few incidences where Canadians were unkind to me in their speech. I was attacked once verbally and racially at the campus. Some drunken young Canadians told me that I should leave this country and wanted to fight me. This frightened me and I wondered if this could recur. On the overall, I was upset and unhappy about this incident.*

Participant C was sanguine about the racial experience. He noted that:

*Fortunately, this experience only occurred to me once where the violence against me was based on my coming from another country that is foreign country. I believe this is a sort of thing that may happen anywhere, including in my own country. For this reason, I did not attribute it or limit it to Canadian experience.*
Similarly, participant A, reported his experience with regard to abuse and racial discrimination in Canada and at VIU though the experience reflected racial discrimination though on an infrequent basis:

*The worst experience I had as an Arab international student in Canada, was when certain people who were drunk spoke to me in a rude way telling me to vacate their country and go to my country and that I ought not to be here. I was upset with this experience and I thought about it for a while. Luckily, I got over it. This experience did upset me and I thought about it afterwards for a while, but not too long, and I was able to get over it. I was a little bit surprised about any racism in this country.*

Participant E also reported experiencing people talking rudely to him asking him why he came to VIU and that he should go back to his home country. Though, the frequency of these incidences were minimal, participants were concerned with how they were addressed by strangers in racially discriminating monologue. Participant D narrated the following:

*It appeared to me that these people were suggesting that I should leave Canada and go home only because we appear to belong to a different culture, and different religion and of a different color skin. However, these were only a handful of individuals not all Canadians. I therefore, feel it is wrong to generalize.*

One of the participants (participant F) narrated about her feelings towards the racially charged comments made by a friend towards her in the class. Having her hair covered but not her face, she was in the company of friends along the street of the university close to its entrance when the abuses were lashed at her. She noted her ordeal:

*I have experienced some challenges since I came to Canada. On the overall, I feel safe though there are comments made by some people in the university and on the street when they see me in traditional headdress that are demeaning. I am not sure whether these individuals are Canadians. Some may be from other nations. However, it does not happen occasionally rather on some occasions.*

On her part, participant B commented about racially experiences directed to her by international students and local students as well as members of staff. This student had worn in western clothing with her face and hair not covered. This is her story:
I have encountered and experienced bullying and racism here in the university from the staff, people in authority and international students. There were several occasions when people spoke about me rudely and generated a perception in me that this may have been because I came from a foreign country and in particular Middle-East. I was hurt by these comments. I have also been stereotyped because of my race with other people appearing to look down on me because of my country of origin and culture. I am not aware where this had to happen. Perhaps they think I am a savage and the media plays a big role in portraying people from certain countries and religion in a certain way influencing people to stereotype them.

For each student who experienced episodes of disappointment, sadness and racism, there seems to be commonalities. It was shocking to learn that discrimination along the racial lines also occurred in government institutions and universities. And some students associated people withholding friendly responses to people from other races and being told they should go back to their home countries.

4.9 Challenges Posed by Experiences

This theme addresses results of challenges (i.e., cultural shock, loneliness, homesickness and alienation) faced by students while at VIU and in Canada. The key challenge identified by students was stress. Most of the “normal” stress reported by participants identified by in this current study was associated with pressure due to academic work. Students reported that these feelings might have been exacerbated by unfamiliar learning environment and stressors of language.

Participant C shared that, “I feel stressed sometimes relating to studying. There was just so much to do and particularly when I have assignments due and I was sick. It was a heavy burden at the time.” Student E similarly offered that “I feel very much stressed in class just thinking about whether I can pass this particular subject and was worried about this all the time.” Student F admitted, in Interview 1, to having a difficult time in the early parts of her first year in VIU with regards to her studies. She explained that:
I have experienced loneliness, homesickness and alienation. I experience stress sometimes maybe just like any other student does about the subjects and about study, to try to get it all done with all the assignments and preparing for the exams.

Participant D, shared his experiences concerning stress, homesickness and loneliness. In Interview 1, he acknowledged he was not a very trusting person due to the negative experiences he had with people in his home country as well as in Canada. His first stressor was associated with assessment. In a direct reference to his interaction with his lecturers, he explained that:

I did experience some stress and major anxiety as I approached my first final exam period at the university as I had no real idea what to expect even though the lecturers gave examples of what test questions might appear like. I still did not have a clear picture in my mind what to expect and I was terrified leading up to that first exam period. I tend not to trust people so I didn’t necessarily trust examples that were given by the lecturers about what the test questions may appear like.

Participant A was candid in describing the homesickness and loneliness he felt when he was first in VIU. It was clear from his response that, as one of the majority of students who had travelled and arrived alone, he was depressed and not coping with his situation. He explained that:

When I first came to Canada, I felt homesick and lonely and it made me feel sad for a period of time. I felt so low I stayed in bed in those early months of coming to VIU.

But, to her credit, participant B developed her own solution. It can only be conjectured if she gained this confidence by having had previous experience as an international student. She shared that:

The only way I was able to overcome this [depression] was by joining a gym. The results of this action created a better social life as I had people to talk with at the gym who had things in common with me such as health and exercise. I benefited greatly from that new social network created by joining the gym when I was experiencing that low time, even a bit of depression. Despite the loneliness and homesickness I had experienced, it did not have a detrimental effect upon my studies because when I experienced those things I remembered the reason why I was here; to study and to make a better life for myself. When I was feeling down I just put my effort into studying and I was able to focus on my studies even though I was feeling down before joining the gym.
Interestingly, participant B realized that she needed support but did not make use of support with the added advantage of advice from someone who was also wrestling with a new environment.

In conclusion, the following were identified by participants as challenges facing international Arab students studying at VIU: accommodation challenges, unfriendliness and uncaringness of local students and Canadians, missing life at home, loneliness and isolation, unfamiliarity with Canada, learning environment, cultural shock, limited English skills, difficult adapting to new learning system and group work, interactions with lectures and unpleasant experiences with lecturers, adapting to new assessment strategies, unfamiliarity with Canadian university learning environment, language barrier, challenge learning English, stereotypes and prejudice, adjusting to new gender roles religious and cultural differences. These challenges led to stress.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Cultural and religious adjustment and differences

This study identified cultural adjustment and differences as one of the key challenges experienced by Arab international students. Participants expressed difficulty adapting to the Canadian cultural and in participating in certain conversations. They identified the nature of relationships outside and inside the VIU and in the Canadian society as differing from their home country. It was revealed that while participants appreciated their own religious values and culture, they wanted to be given help so they could adjust and adapt to the Canadian culture and be made to feel engaged, included and accommodated in the culture of the host country.

These results corroborate those found by others (Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997; Selvadurai, 1992). Alreshoud and Koeske (1997) identified dissimilarity between western and Canadian cultures and Arabic and Islamic culture as the cause of challenges experienced by international Arab students. Similarly, Selvadurai (1992) indicated that Canadian culture is multinational, however, it differs from Arabic and Islamic culture and requires international students to make adjustments and adapt accordingly. Acknowledging cultural differences between Canada and Arabic countries, Eland (2001) asserted that Arabic culture does not permit the free discussion of certain topics, particularly sexuality-related topics and those touching on religious beliefs. This explains why Arabic international students in this study indicated finding it difficult to participate in certain religious and sexuality related conversations. This finding is also in line with that of Hamad (2012) on Saudi Arabian students studying in Canadian universities. Hamad (2012) revealed that it is cultural differences between Canada and participants’ home countries made it difficult for participants to adjust and fit into the Canadian culture. These findings are
also replicated in other studies investigated with Saudi Arabian students studying in Canadian universities (Razek & Coyner, 2013; Hofer, 2009; Al Musaiteer, 2015; Rabia, 2016). Similarly, Abdel (2012) identified religious and cultural differences between United States and Saudi Arabia as a challenge to Saudi Arabian students studying in the U.S. universities. Abdel (2012) further observed that these cultural and religious differences acted as barriers to Saudi Arabian students to participate in social events while in American universities. Supporting this view, Hofer (2009) observed that cultural differences between America and Saudi Arabia made it difficult for Saudi Arabian international students studying in American universities to create friendship with Americans. Hofer (2009) observed that Saudi students differ from domestic students in the way they socialize: their culture prohibits them from taking alcohol and frequenting nightclubs, which is similar to the experiences of the students in this study.

When considering that Arab international students come from Arabic countries that subscribe to Islam, the finding of this study make sense especially considering the massive cultural transition experienced by each participant. Similarly, the extant literature on experiences of international students confirm that culture determines students’ socialization and adjustment to host country’s culture (Liang, 2003; Jackson & Heggins, 2003; Gebhard, 2012; Kuo & Roysircar, 2006).

As was revealed in this study, religious and cultural differences have an effect on international students. Participants shared that sometimes their religious and cultural boundaries made them to struggle with the issue of participating in some activities and gathering while in VIU. All participants indicated that they found it difficult negotiating their cultural and religious values with the Canadian culture. This corroborates the finding by Zhou & Zhang (2014). Zhou & Zhang (2014) revealed that religious and cultural differences impact international students in
various ways, including communicating and socializing with students from the host country and from other cultures. Zhou and Zhang (2014) agreed that international students are raised in different cultures and this makes them to have different sense of humor, ways of communication, personal interests, perceptions on different things and daily life practices, which together impact on their attempt and desire to create friends with local students and those from other cultures.

Another issue related to cross-cultural experiences as identified by participants was gender roles. Participants found it to be a new experience for both genders to constantly interact freely with opposite sex in the Canadian culture. Collectively, they indicated that their culture prohibits this kind of interaction unless participants are family members. It is logical for international students to find the new experience challenging especially considering that they come from segregated education system and environment (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010). These results replicate those found by others (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010; Rabia, 2016; Al Musaiteer, 2015; Abdel Rezak, 2012). In particular, Alhazmi & Nyland (2010) indicated that Saudi Arabian international students studying in Australian universities reported feeling unease to function in a mixed gender environment. The study revealed that the students reported feeling unease because of the new experience.

5.2 Personal Experiences

International Arab students in Canada and studying in VIU noted that they experience personal experiences related to isolation, loneliness and homesickness. Participants indicated that they felt alienated and isolated upon arrival in Canada. This is in line with Long’s (2005) argument that the feeling of isolated and homesickness emanate from the lack of social support in Canada and being away from family and home. This result make sense especially when considering that Arabic international students come from collectivist cultures. These results are
consistent with those found by other studies (Mostafa, 2001; Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997). Mostafa (2001) believed that these alienation and isolation feelings experienced by international Arab students are normal and contributed to them leaving their families and moving to new environments. Hodge (2002) confirmed that these feelings of alienation and isolation by Arab international students occurs on arrival in Canada, but persists over time and that they are alleviated by these students preferring to limit their interaction with other Muslim students and country mates having similar habitual and cultural principles. This view is further supported by results from Hamad (2012) that students from Saudi Arabia studying in a Canadian university tend to feel homesick and isolated from local Canadian students whether off campus or on-campus. This feeling is contributed by Canadian life which differs significantly from that of Saudi Arabia. Other studies on Arab international students investigated within the context of the United States and in other context have confirmed the feeling of loneliness and homesickness among these students (Hofer, 2009; Heyn, 2013; Shabeeb, 1996; Zhou, 2014; King-Irani, 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Al-nusair, 2000; McLachlan & Justice, 2009). For instance, Shaw (2010) noted that the feeling of loneliness and homesickness among international students in Australia.

5.3 Experiencing stereotypes and prejudice

Participants recognized prejudice and stereotypes in the VIU and Canadian society indicating that people hold inaccurate perceptions of Arab students and students from Arab countries. Though, none experienced a direct discrimination or attack, participants reported being in situations in which they experienced stereotypes and discrimination. There are situations in which these Arab international students were forced to engage in discussions with those who stereotyped them in an attempt to correct these stereotypes about Islamic religion and Arabic
culture. They blamed the media being behind the stereotypes about Muslims and Arabic countries in general. This finding is consistent with other studies that examined challenges facing Saudi and other Arab international students in Canada (Shaw, 2010; Al Musaiteer, 2015; Abdel Rezak, 2012; Hofer, 2009; Heyn, 2013). This view was also captured by Abdel Rezak (2012) in which participants expressed that the faulty perceptions created about Muslims and Arabic culture is largely done by the media. In this study, participants complained of how these wrong perceptions about their culture and religion spread by the media offend them.

Similarly, Heyn (2013) reported that Saudi Arabia international students studying in the United Stated were stereotyped on the basis of their religion and culture and that they are always forced to engage in discussion solely to fix wrong perceptions created by the media about them. This view is further reflected in studies that examined challenges experienced by Muslim and Arab students in foreign countries (Poynting & Noble, 2004; Husom, 2009; Hanassab, 2006; Nagra, 2011; Eid & Karim, 2011; Mansouri & Trembath, 2005). For example, Eid and Karim (2011) acknowledged that there has been an increasing trend to depict Arabs and Muslims in general as terrorists and that this has increasingly made terrorism and Islam to be considered synonymous. Eid and Karim (2011) added that Islam has been linked to terrorism and that this has been accepted as within the terrorism and security discourse. Eid and Karim (2011) supported by Caidi and MacDonald (2008) argued that this view promotes the stereotyping of Muslim and Arab students and add more burden and pressure on them leading to harder experiences felt by international Arab students. This validates the participants reports that the international Arab students at VIU and in Canada experience stereotypes and discriminations as they are depicted as terrorists.
5.4 Academic Challenges/Experiences

Participants reported experiencing a host of challenges categorized under the broad theme: academic challenges. The two key academic challenges identified by participants in this study were language barriers and other challenges related to writing and reading.

Regarding language barrier, it was revealed that English language proficiency was one of the key challenges experienced by Arab international students studying at VIU. Participants expressed that language barrier affected them at an academically. It also affected them in different ways, including in making friends and mingling with local students, understanding local language and slang as well when engaging in group work, class discussions, and oral presentations. This finding is in line with other studies that addressed challenges experienced by international students from Arab countries (Shaw, 2010; Razek & Coyner, 2013; Heyn, 2013; Rabia, 2016; Hofer, 2009; Al Musaiteer, 2015). English language proficiency emerged as one of the key challenges across these studies. This seems logical considering the difference existing between English and Arabic.

English language proficiency also features in the literature on international students in the United States and other countries (Wei, Yeoh & Terry, 2013; Smith & Demjanenko, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Lee and Rice (2007) also emphasized that English proficiency is a significant challenge to international students from countries where English language is a secondary language. Lee and Rice (2007) added that international students from these countries find it hard understanding and using language. Supporting the view that language proficiency is a challenge to international students, Zwiers (2008) opined that the knowledge that professors have and their use of complex language makes them to skip over important information needed by students.
Zwiers (2008) added that this makes it difficult for international students to find it difficult to understand new terms and concepts. Zwiers (2008) argued that these issues could be avoided by instructors being aware of such issues. For this reason, Zwiers (2008) proposed the use of explicit and simple language in classrooms.

It was also revealed in this study that limited English language proficiency is not only a challenge to international Arab students at VIU, but also affects their lives academically and socially, including finding group workmates, understanding the course materials, as well as developing friends with local students who are native English speakers. This corroborates the findings by Zhang and Zhou (2010) on challenges experienced by international students with a focus on limited language proficiency. According to Zhang and Zhou (2010) the difficulty in finding group workmates, understanding the course materials, as well as developing friends with local students who are native English speakers make international students to engage in triple learning process, which as defined by Palmer (2015) involved three stages of language usage. In agreement with what was reported in this study, Zhang and Zhou (2010) observed that international students often come to Canadian universities believing that the language they learned while in their country is sufficient. These students often come in Canadian universities with language and cultures that have been influenced and shaped by their thinking and ways of learning. However, upon arrival, they realize that the local language of Canadians and the academic language used in a Canadian university differs from what they are used to in their home country and that local language and slang dominates Canadian language. Again, in line with what was reported by participants in the present study, Zhang and Zhou (2010) noted that international students often realize that the language used at the academic institution differs from that used in normal conversations and that this makes them to experience difficulty in
conceptualizing the complex academic language, which involves complex ideas, terms and phrases. This is where Palmer's (2015) triple learning process occurs.

Other academic challenges identified by participants are related to writing and reading. With regards to reading, participants indicated that their limited English proficiency limits them when it comes to reading and writing. Specifically, participants lamented of mastering different types of academic tasks and formats, as well as spelling issues. This seems logical given the different academic cultures from which these students come from. This finding was also reflected in studies on challenges experienced by Arab and Saudi international students (Rabia, 2016; Heyn, 2013; Hall, 2013; Al-Zubaidi, 2012). Al-Zubaidi (2012) argued that Arab international students tend to have different habits of mind because of emanating of different cultures. This finding is reflected in the differences exhibited in their classroom oral and writing activities. Surprisingly, the current English academic courses do not take in account different academic literacy backgrounds of Arabic international students. Al-Zubaidi (2012) recognized that Arab international students should be assisted in adjusting to ethic of academic writing and new academic requirements to help them overcome issues relating to different linguistic changes.

5.5 Overcoming challenges

After exploring the challenges and difficulties encountered by participants, the next thing was to explore strategies employed in order to overcome these challenges. These strategies were categorized into five: (1) hiring tutors, (2) time and effort, (3) seeking support from tutors/professors and taking advantage of resources provided at the university, (4) helping each other within the circle of Arab students, and (5) seeking help through religion. This is in conformity with the practice of Islam believers of seeking the intervention of their Supreme
Being. As such, the provision of rooms designated for prayers by the university indicates that it recognizes the significance of religion in these cohorts of students.

With regards to the issue of making use of campus resources, participants reported that the university provided them with support. The services utilized by participants, included libraries, prayer room, learning center, ESL help center, Student Union Centre, and Writing Help Centre. This support is in line with findings of other studies that examined successful strategies used by international students in Canadian universities, U.S. universities and others (Shaw, 2010; Abdel Razek, 2012; Hofer, 2009; Heyn, 2013). For example, coping strategies reported by Saudi Arabian international students in Shaw (2010) included, studying hard, managing time, and seeking help from learning centres, tutors, and professors. Heyn (2013) also confirmed that Saudi Arabian international students studying in the United States reported receiving support from other Arab international students, professors, and learning centers. Again, like in the present study, participants in Heyn (2013) identified religion as a form of support relied upon while studying abroad. Similarly, in Hofer’s (2009) study, international Arab students studying in universities in the United States used different strategies to overcome academic and personal challenges identified above. These included, academic advisors, international students’ advisors, friends from home country, professors and other services offered by the university. However, in this study, participants frequently cited friends from home country and religion as the key strategy used in resolving their problems. This finding is also in agreement with findings of other studies cited in international students’ literature on strategies for managing challenges and difficulties of studying abroad. These strategies include study groups, support services, friends, study skills, tutors, and time management (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Abel, 2002; Stoynoff, 1996).
Clearly, the challenges identified by participants in this study namely cultural and religious adjustment, academic challenges, stereotype and prejudice, and personal challenges appear common among international Arab students studying in Canada and other countries.
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

International Arab students have unique requirements and therefore, represent a unique group of students at VIU due to their Arabic culture and the nature of their religion. This uniqueness makes them to experience unique challenges identified in this study. These challenges include isolation and homesickness, religion and cultural shock, racism, prejudice and stereotype, language barrier, difficulty in adjusting to new education system, supervisor-student relationship, and group work. Although, VIU has many strategies and programs to assist international students to cope and learn, Arab international students require specific strategies which are tailored to assist these students in adjusting and accepting the Canadian culture and society. It is worth emphasizing that the presence of this group of students at VIU enhance the features of Canadian society in general, cultural diversity, and specifically at part of the student community at VIU.

The findings of this study enable students’ affairs practitioners, Arab international graduate students and supervisors at VIU to help better understand educational and cultural backgrounds of students from Arab countries. By understanding the unique challenges experienced by international Arab students identified in this study, the university identify programs that facilitate cultural and social adjustments as it was identified as one of the problems facing international Arab students at VIU and in other Canadian universities. One way to achieve this is by embracing multiculturalism by ensuring these students are intercultural competent and coping up with programs that diminish challenges relating to limited English language proficiency.

Although slight differences exist between Arabic educational systems and Canadian educational system, yielding differences in participants’ educational and cultural backgrounds, students appreciate unique experiences presented by VIU that encourage thinking critically and
studying practically. In addition, the presence of international Arab students at VIU enables students to interact both socially and academically with other students. This way, the distorted image and misconceptions held by Canadians and others towards Arabic culture and Islam in general may be corrected. To enrich cultural experiences as well as the learning experiences of international Arab students at VIU, the following are recommended:

The university should enhance international student orientation by including topics related to international Arab students at Canada and the introduction to Canadian mainstream culture. Topics related to international Arab students may cover issues ranging from Mosques, halal (Islamic acceptable drinks and foods), Arabic and Islamic organizations in Canada and Islamic social events such as the holy month of Ramadan and Eids festivals.

The university should urge students both international and domestic to understand, appreciate and accept each other’s culture, habits and beliefs by understanding and appreciating the cultural diversity of the Canadian society and the VIU, in particular.

The university should identify strategies aimed at increasing English language proficiency among international Arab students by urging students to take part in classes and seminars, introducing English for academic purpose programs, and exposing students to both slang and academic language to enable them differentiate the two.

Supervisors are the main and primary contact and source of student support at the VIU. For this reason, those supervising international Arab students should understand the nature of Arabic and Islamic culture and take into account its impact on students’ behaviors and especially when supervising students of opposite genders.
The university should enrich experiences of international Arab students through social and academic events that encourage open discussions and conversations amongst students and professors. This will help create a culturally diverse academic environment in the university.
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