

Academic and Social Adjustments of Arab Fulbright Students in American Universities: A Case Study

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Abstract

Education is the main engine for human beings and the backbone of their progress and development. People are prepared to cross boundaries to get sound education wherever it may be. Being a very desirable higher education provider, the United States of America is a destination that attracts many students worldwide. William Fulbright made such a dream come true through his scholarship. However, moving from one culture to another makes the experience a bit challenging. Although Arab students prefer the US for higher education where they expect promises of lucrative employment, these students face many problems of adjustment in the strange environment due to cultural differences, low-level English language proficiency, lack of social interaction, and absence of student counselling in the universities/colleges, difference in pedagogy. This study was an effort to find out the various adjustment problems confronted by Arab students in America. The results were discussed and recommendations were presented.

Keywords: Culture, Pedagogy, counseling, international students, social, academic, adjustment.

I. Introduction

Despite all the differences in terms of knowledge, social codes and taboos, structural differentiation, differences in terms of language, religion, culture as a whole (that includes rituals, rites, folkways, mores, practices, etc.), economic system, political system, ideologies, trade and commerce, students in diverse institutions are living in peace and harmony in the global human community (with international understanding and co-operation), and resolving contentious issues at common platforms.

Literature is replete with instances rather uncomfortable revelations that majority of the foreign students that arrive at educational institutions in America for the sake of getting higher education in the United States go back to their respective countries carrying unpleasant rather negative experiences in regard to their adjustment in the US universities or colleges. Those 'never to remember' experiences relate to personal, social, and academic life and mainly on account of cultural differences. The female students faced more adjustment problems as they were brought up in an atmosphere of exclusiveness, even within their families, and were never allowed to face, talk or interact with men outside the family. Female Arab students in the US found an atmosphere of complete freedom in regard to dress, social intercourse, and many tendencies and practices which the female Arab students called them 'taboos' in their own culture. Male students, accompanied by their spouses, also could not comfortably adjust to the utterly free atmosphere; they confined to their houses. It is found that there was very little research on these qualitative aspects of students' adjustments in the United States by collecting views and suggestions of international students.

With mooring in the conservative upbringing and educated up to tertiary level (Matriculation or plus two levels), the Arab students find the social milieu of America at first sight a shocking experience. Added to it is the absence of structured or formal organisation to help assimilate the American culture for smooth transition, at least to the extent required for receiving academic instruction.

The Arab students take time to adapt to the American pedagogy, use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), use of Video-conferencing involving other schools/colleges and distantly located subject experts, case-based and project-based teaching/learning, Power-Point Presentations of Project Reports. Group discussions are frequent and interaction with faculty is the regular feature of educational system. There is credit-based and grade-based evaluation. A student is judged not only on the basis of syllabus but also on the basis of other personality features and traits. Education is occupation/profession-oriented for the most part at the university/college stage. The Arab students have to solve all these problems by themselves for adjustment fit in the new social set-up. They are pre-conditioned though in their culture – religion for the most part – and they can not bid good bye to the Islamic fundamental tenets (Islamic culture).

A few studies conducted in the universities and colleges in the United States are reproduced below to get at the idea how much adjustment problems the international Arab students confronted during their education/stay in America:

II. Literature Review

Al-Mubarak (2000) conducted a study in respect of international students attending a large Pennsylvania University with the objective to determine the adjustment problems, coping methods, and choice of helpers. It also proposed to determine when these problems are encountered and what facilities and services the students suggest the university should consider providing. The study utilized a questionnaire, International Student Problems Checklist (ISPC), revised and developed by the researcher to collect the data. ISPC was derived from the Yeung (1980) and Wong (1991) questionnaire, Foreign Student Problems Checklist. Of the total sample, 261 students (64.60%) responded: 100 females and 161 males. This study answered six research questions and tested ten null hypotheses. The results indicated that most international students encounter adjustment problems in these areas: communication and language, social and cultural, psychological and personal, health, housing and food. There were significant differences among international students from different geographical regions based on the number of reported problems. Africa reported the highest number of problems in the following areas: academic, social and cultural, financial, and housing and food. Asia reported the highest number in the psychological and personal problem area. Students from Latin American reported more problems than students from other regions did in regard to communication and language.

Another study conducted by Andrews (2000) to find out the role of training, culture distance, and personality in the adjustment, performance and social ability of international students in the United States. These objectives were achieved by conducting the study in two phases. The first phase, fifty-one new international students were selected to participate in the experimental training sessions. Two training methods in combination were used viz. Behavior modeling Method and Documentary/Informational Training Method. The combination of these proved more effective than using the documentary/informational method alone for the purpose of building culture knowledge. In the second phase, fifty-five new international students (32 of whom were out of those in the phase one) completed an initial survey; that assessed culture distance and some aspects of personality. Along with it, a five-month follow-up survey was conducted to assess adjustment, performance, and social ability. Culture distance and personality were found to predict the adjustment and the social ability of foreign students in the U.S. after 5 months.

The relationship of exposure of Libyan nationals to American culture on the attitude of the former (Libyan Students) towards the role of women in the workforce were studied by Abdalla & Gibson (1984). In that study, data was gathered by using the tool of questionnaire. It was administered to 53 male and 47 female Libyan students who were studying at US universities; some of them were married to the Libyan students. It was found that the female-respondents endorsed more significantly that women should play 'modern' role and not traditional role (producing children, nurturing and protecting them and looking after household). On the contrary, the male-respondents seemed more inclined to support and suggest traditional role for women. The study revealed that there was positive relation between level of education of students and percentage of endorsement of 'modern' role for women. However, the study did not reveal any relationship between period/length of stay in the US and students' attitudes. The result of this study reflected two things: (a) rejection of American attitudes and values; (b) the strength of the traditional values of Arab culture. The study has suggested that more modern values of educated Arab women may result in conflicts between men and women on the one hand and between more educated and less educated women.

Abadi (2000) examined the extent to which international students from sample (selected) countries got satisfactory experiences in areas like academic, social, personal, and financial at Oklahoma State University (OSU) where they pursued different courses. Views were collected on the basis of six research questions developed for the purpose. The study covered qualitative enquiries and, as such, the sample contained only 35 international students that belonged to ten different countries. Data/information was gathered by using conducting face-to-face semi-structured interview. The analysis revealed that: (a) 64% students expressed most satisfaction regarding their academic experience. (b) 52% of the participants expressed general satisfaction in the matter of their financial situation; (c) 42% of the students-respondents seemed overall satisfied in their expression in regard to their personal experience; (d) 36% of the respondents appeared satisfied in regard to their overall social life.

When these four areas of concern in this study were combined, the response worked out to nearly 51% of the participants that stated their satisfaction; 29% confirmed their mixed feelings, or remained undecided in their responses (feelings); and 20% participants said that they got some level of dissatisfaction in their overall academic experience. Further, 60% of participants said that their satisfaction increased with passage of time.

Al-Mubarak & Adamchak (1994) investigated the relationship between fertility attitudes, behaviour and background characteristics of 279 sampled male Saudi Arabian university students that had got enrolled in US institutions for various courses of study. It came out in specific terms that fertility attitudes and behaviour had correlation with age, religiosity, education, income, length of stay in the US, and wife's age and education. Results of the study showed that religiosity had highly significant and most effect for being the positive determinant of fertility attitudes. It was noticed that wife's education acted as the major determinant of fertility behaviour, the number of children respondents had, and it was negatively related with family size.

Arab Students' attitudes towards and amount of social contact with Americans: A causal process analysis of cross-sectional data was searched by Alreshoud & Koeske (1997). The study attempted to assess the plausibility of two causal orderings for creating the expected positive relationship with the Americans: (i) attitudes towards Americans affect the amount of social contact Arab students have with Americans and (ii) the greater the amount of social contact with the Americans, the more are the favourable attitudes of Arab students towards Americans. The sample consisted of Saudi Arabian male students (aged 18 – 42) who were attending an American university. Causal process analysis and path analysis showed a desire for contact that significantly mediated the relationship between attitude and contact. It came to light that understanding of the host country did not significantly mediate the relationship between attitude and contact.

Kamal & Maruyama (1990) explored Cross-cultural contact and attitudes of Qatari students in the United States. The study contained a sample of 223 students from the State of Qatar. It examined their attitudes toward their education in the US and the American society. The findings of the study are consistent with contact theory hypotheses. Those students who opened up and thereby experienced greater promotive contacts could display more favourable attitudes toward education and the US society. It was noticed that measures of positive cultural contact were significantly related to attitudes about (i) academic progress, (ii) adjustment, and (iii) the American people. The other aspect noticed was that measures of positive cultural contact were not significantly related to attitudes about (i) the American government or (ii) traditional views about the roles of women.

It was in the above background that this study was carried out as a qualitative investigation into the social and academic experiences of Arab students in the United States. The study was sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the factors associated with the social and academic adjustment of Arab Fulbright students in American universities?
2. How satisfied are these Arab Fulbright students with their study in America?
3. What was the academic experience of the Arab students in the universities/colleges in the USA?
4. What was the overall social experience of the Arab students during their stay in the USA?

III. Methods

The data and information from those of the Arab international students who were awarded Fulbright scholarship to study master's degree in the United States and returned to their home country after having received University or College education there in the past five years, thus making it descriptive, and to a limited extent also analytical. In this humble effort, the authors have dependence heavily upon other studies, made earlier over a period of about a decade which though are not many conducted in this area and concerning particularly the Arab students so far.

The purpose of this research was to determine factors associated with a positive adjustment to studying in the U.S and identify the satisfaction of Arab Fulbright students with their study in the U.S.

A cross-sectional study using survey with the purpose of description and explanation was designed to collect data on the social and academic adjustments of Arab Fulbright alumni who finished their master's degrees in the United States of America in the past five years. The indicators of social and academic adjustments are as follows:

Indicators of Social Adjustments:

- Participating in social activities organized by the office of international programs.
- Participating in cultural events/ team sports/ students organizations.
- Use university sports and recreational facilities.
- Making friends.
- Sharing their culture with others.
- Using the counseling services.
- Students' satisfaction of their social life.

Indicators of Academic Adjustments:

- Goal of studying in American universities.
- Satisfaction of academic skills (e.g., language skills, class participation, reading and library research, managing a research project).
- Attending the academic preparation program.
- Meeting a tutor.
- Understanding the lectures.
- Where they seek help when having problems.
- Adjustment strategies helped them in their academic adjustment.

The data of this study were collected via an online questionnaire survey of 101 Fulbright international students from the Middle East and North Africa studying in the US. Students were from Bahrain (4 participants), Egypt (7 participants), Gaza (8 participants), Jordan (17 participants), Lebanon (5 participants), Morocco (10 participants), Oman (8 participants), Syria (5 participants), Tunisia (5 participants), the West Bank (12 participants), and Yemen (8 participants). The questionnaire survey instrument was designed with reference to the conceptualization and was reviewed by two experts. A message was sent to the Fulbright program Headquarter in Washington seeking their help to send out the survey to the current Fulbright grantees through their listserv. They showed no objection and were so cooperative in sending out the survey and the reminders.

IV. Results

This paper is a quantitative cross-sectional research design to attain the study goal. All of the participants in the study were full-time graduate students. The participants reported that they approach their professors or friends regarding their academic issues. Most of those international students do not seem to use the International Students Services in their universities. They better contact their fellow friends. Most of these students in this group claimed they are not aware of the availability of sport facilities in their universities.

Most of the students experienced significant adjustment to the social and academic life in the U.S., and this can be attributed to the following factors:

1. Attending the orientation session organized by the Fulbright program upon their arrival to the U.S.
2. Having a culturally diverse student body in their universities.
3. The location of their universities was a major factor for most of the students in their adjustment to study in the U.S.
4. Understanding and following their program requirements.
5. Keeping up with the required readings and assignments.
6. Participating in class discussions.
7. Maintaining a good balance between study and recreational activities.
8. Using English in their previous workplaces before coming to America.

It came to light that 76% students were most satisfied with their experience in academic pursuits; 69% of the total students surveyed (student- participants) were generally satisfied in regard to their financial condition; 58% of the student-respondents were satisfied in the matter of their personal experience; 55% respondents were generally in their overall social life. On combining these four broad but specific areas, the response worked out to nearly 51% of these the students were satisfied; 29% expressed their mixed feelings, or remained undecided in their responses (feelings); and 20% participants (respondents) said that they got some level of dissatisfaction in their overall academic experience. Further, 60% of participants said that their satisfaction increased with passage of time. The female students, as compared to the male students, were more emotional and also said that they were more financially secure than the males were.

The respondents gave many suggestions. Based on those suggestions, the study gave some recommendations as: (a) There is need in each department to have an adviser to guide and help international students in all matters. (b) such appointed adviser needs to be available for increased number hours in his office; he should develop closer relationships with the international students; (c) The University colleges should increase student-centred activities to develop better and more congenial rather supportive climate of international awareness and humane understanding between the American and international students; specific programmes may include home visits and family acting host programs; (d) More international students should be included by International Student Service office (ISS); that office should adopt approach to readjust format of the orientation program to make it more participative and supportive; (e) International students may be asked to evaluate satisfaction level, not only to increase that satisfaction level but also make campus stay a rewarding experience to boost international goodwill and human understanding; (f) The respondents pointed out need to update Library and improve computer labs.

The study brought out that the students from the Middle East said that they encountered great problems; they reported the highest number of problems in the area of international student advising. It came to light that 90% of the International students faced adjustment problems in the first year. Variables like gender, age, language of instruction in high school (English/not English), and having/not having children were not significant for the students in the matter of adjusting to the U.S. Most adjustment problems related to: (i) studying at master's level; (ii) living in the U.S. for two years or less; (iii) married. In this respect, it was noticed that most students had to seek help, in order of preference, from a friend, school/office or classmate, teacher/instructor/professor/faculty member, family/family member, or advisor on occasions when they experienced adjustment problems. The study made practical recommendations for services as well as for further research studies.

The study revealed the following adjustment difficulties or problems. The responses were based on their own experiences and those of their friends when they were together in America:

There were great cultural differences between the Americans and the Arab students. The American male and female students mixed with each other freely, without any inhibition. They even got into live-in relationships. Kissing and embracing/hugging between both sexes is open and accepted as normal behavior whereas the Arab students did not follow this behavior and even rejected such behavior as being opposed to public policy by Islamic standards.

The American students did not spontaneously mix with the Arab students; such friendship was very limited and casual; there was no intensity of emotions and feelings. This behavior betrays a kind of discrimination against the Arab students. This accounted for lack of opportunity to establish social relations in the United States. The Arab students remained confined to a limited group of non-American students (mostly Asian Muslim students). Despite this being so, the Arab students felt neglected on social plane. It was after about six months that a little social interaction was established.

As far as the four broad areas are concerned viz. academic, financial, personal and social, the respondents underwent great adjustment problems. Some of them adjusted satisfactorily and in less time; some underwent nightmarish experiences and adjustment took long time; some faced more difficulties compared with others and nearly broke down. The plausible reasons why the Arab students confronted adjustment problems in America were: (i) Poor English speaking; (ii). Cultural differences; (iii) Different pedagogical approaches (use of ICT and Video-based teaching as well as through group discussions and Project handling; (iv) Difference in living habits and living standards; (v) Female Arab students suffered more in adjustment; and (vi) Free life style of the Americans not acceptable to the Arab students, hence social life terribly restricted.

The Arab students who were back from the United States suggested that their country should make suitable and satisfactory arrangements to receive and settle their country-citizen students in the American social milieu. There should be an International Students Cell to solve the adjustment problems of the foreign students. Before proceeding to the USA or any other country for education, the Arab students must improve their English language so that they are soon well adjusted in academic atmosphere of the universities/colleges in the US.

V. Conclusion

Arab students go to the United States basically in search of green pastures. Getting benefit of good education in professional courses there is the stepping stone proposition. They believe that American system of education is ultra-modern and job-oriented. They also believe that the students are taught professionalism through modern methods of teaching like use of cases, project formulation and implementation as group work. Videos, cassettes and video-conferencing are the methods used in all universities and colleges in the United States. Interactions are supplemented by Power point presentations. Theories are taught through cases and those are made as real life situations. Evaluations are most objective.

In addition to the academic facilities Arab students get in American classroom, international students can be benefited more if college administrators and student services personnel establish policies that help these students. Policies regarding international student adjustments, other requirements such as financial assistance, and curriculum offered to international students are important considerations (Ewing, 1992). Student needs can be assessed by conducting surveys, talking informally with international students, attending professional conferences that focus on international students, including international students on policy-making bodies, and consulting with other institutions regarding policy arrangements (Gomez, 1987; Mewhorter, et al., 1992).

One of the most essential tasks of student services professionals regarding international students, yet often one of the most difficult, is finding ways to integrate international students with domestic students and the community at large. Programs should be designed that encourage domestic students to connect with international students so that cultural learning can take place on both ends (Segal, 1994). Another consideration for student services personnel should be providing cultural awareness or sensitivity workshops on campus. The "additional training of campus personnel to sensitize them to cultural differences and to any special needs of a particular national group" creates a more welcoming environment for international students (Tillman, 1990, p. 93).

There are also many ways to get international students involved with the community. Host families can provide a link between students and the community, and help familiarize students with American customs and culture (Hochhauser, 1990). Student services professionals can also plan programs that get international students involved in the community through volunteer work.

VI. Suggestions and Future Research

This study involved Arab Fulbright students in America. Another study could enlarge the student base and explore some of the issues touched on in more depth. Students from non-Arab countries could be studied to determine whether or not they experience similar adjustment issues. The Offices of International Students Service could be studied to examine the service available and how they are delivered. Professors and administrators could be surveyed for their perspectives on international students as could American students and American people in the community. Finally, follow-up studies of international student graduates could be conducted to determine if their expectations of their American educational experience were ultimately realized.

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