

## ACADEMIC CHALLENGES OF SAUDI UNIVERSITY FEMALES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

ÁGNES HAVRIL<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** *The main objective of this study is to introduce the final results of a research project that focused on the components of the intercultural competence of female Saudi university students at the multicultural Jazan University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 2014 to 2017. After discussing the social roles of academic female youth, the paper moves on to a literature review of the theoretical approaches. The study employed a sample of 341 female students in different academic specializations to investigate the components of their intercultural competence and the potential of Saudi female professionalism. Hence, a structured questionnaire was used. Results support the idea that the present generation of Saudi females at university have the desire and ability to become interculturally and globally competent university students, even though women in Saudi Arabia still lag behind in many ways in their gender-separated society. Finally, the study summarizes the four basic pillars of Saudi-specific cultural dimensions.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Saudi-specific cultural dimensions, gender separation, intercultural competence components, higher education, Saudi female professionalism*

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the modernization process of Mohammad bin Salman Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia since 2017, much effort has been put into fostering equality and closing the gender gap at every level of society in the last few months in Saudi Arabia. However, in this article the author focuses

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on the very slow developmental progress of female higher education at Jazan University in Jazan Region in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) from 2014-2017.

During his reign, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (1964-1975) started the first wave of modernization and cautiously introduced social reforms such as free community health care and the right of females to receive an education. This was a period when formerly nomadic Bedouin tribes settled down in cities, and the urbanization process sped up. In a country where the sexes are kept separate, the medical treatment of females in towns became a hot social issue. This is why, following the progressive agenda of his reforms, King Faisal opened up the gates of medical universities to Saudi women. Moreover, in the case that male members of families generally accepted and supported women's ambitions to attend university, Saudi females had the chance and the right to do so (Havril 2015a).

After this development, acceptance of education for women became an important plank of socio-political, socio-cultural and educational policy. Finally, although opposed by religious fundamentalists, education for women was put under the control of a separate administration (late 1960s - early 1970s) that was strictly conducted by conservative clerics as "a compromise to calm public opposition to allowing (not requiring) girls to attend school" (House 2012:152). Since then, education at all levels in the Kingdom has been free for all Saudis, and theoretically and practically, every woman has free access to equal education.

More than three decades later, Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (2006-2015) heavily invested in educating the Saudi workforce for future professional jobs, partly by launching the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP 2005-2020). King Abdullah wanted young Saudis to know the world and for the world to know them so they could pursue their higher education goals and meet the demand for a national labor force while obtaining global experience and an understanding of other cultures.

King Abdullah's educational policy gave impetus to education for Saudi youth in the field of higher education. University scholarship programs have operated in line with the demand of the politics of Saudization, which means that companies that operate in Saudi Arabia are increasingly expected to hire locals instead of relying on an expatriate labor force, especially regarding higher-skilled positions.

KASP has resulted in tremendous changes and unexpectedly fast progress, and it now seems that Saudi women stand to benefit more from the latest university projects than Saudi men. Recent evidence (Saudi Education Ministry 2015) suggests that women constitute 51.8 percent of Saudi university students, while

there were 551,000 women studying for bachelor degrees in 2014 compared to 513,000 men. There were 35,537 Saudi women studying abroad (US, Europe, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the Arab world, East Asia, and South Africa). At that time 3,354 were completing a bachelor's degree, 15,696 were completing a master's degree and 3,206 were completing a PhD in various academic fields, including education, social sciences, arts, business, law, engineering, natural sciences, agriculture, medicine, and the service sector (Saudi Gazette 2015). Even though statistical data show that in recent years Saudi women have tended to be professionally better educated than men, the author admits that the battle to increase female professionalism in Saudi Arabia is ongoing.

There is no doubt that the impact on Saudi society of highly educated, internationally and interculturally experienced women – many of whose grandmothers would not even have gone to school or known how to read and write – is yet to be fully felt. As one Saudi student studying in Washington, D.C. reported, “I think women are more ambitious in our country than the men. We have a *lot* of things to do...We don't have many options, and so we want to open new ones” (Drury 2015).

## **THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT IN THE JAZAN REGION**

After the implementation of industrial projects (2005) and the establishment of Jazan Economic City (2011), Jazan Province – the southern part of Saudi Arabia, bordering Yemen – needed to develop and increase technical, intermediate and higher education services. The need was urgent because Jazan Region has been an underdeveloped area compared to Jeddah or Dammam, is culturally and socially very traditional and religiously conservative Islamic, and has maintained Bedouin traditions in everyday routines, even through the last decade.

A study by the Ministry of Economy and Planning (Education in Saudi Arabia 2007) revealed that illiteracy in the Jazan area was the highest in the KSA (at 23.5 percent). What is more, illiteracy among Jazan males was the highest at 14.8 percent, and the illiteracy of Saudi women was again the highest in this region in national comparison at 31.6 percent. These findings and the long-term goal of fast economic development explain the establishment of Jazan University, which has been attracting numerous male and female students from far-away rural areas of Jazan Region to attend the university on a daily basis.

Jazan University (JU) was established in 2006 and is the only higher educational institute in Jazan Province. University indicators show that tertiary education is one of the sectors which has received huge investment. Consequently, the area

faces an unexpected increase in the number of students who will finally take up jobs and employment opportunities in the future (Jazan Region Economy Report 2014).

The university's top leadership management are all male Saudis who received their academic qualifications abroad (in the USA, UK, or Australia) and who operate internationally accepted and accredited curricula, mostly following the American university system. They are supported by moderately qualified male Saudi admin staff who have communication difficulties with the multicultural community of teachers who speak English, most of who come from the international Muslim community and are of different nationalities.

As is common in Saudi Arabia due to the practice of gender separation in Saudi culture, education at Jazan University is delivered on separate male and female campuses. Accordingly, every department has a male and a female section hosted in buildings located far from each other, and has its own gender-related Saudi management, admin staff, and international teachers. Female campuses have very high stone walls to block anyone looking in and seeing the women's faces. These female-only buildings are strongly protected by male guards located outside, and have female security guards inside. The female teachers, staff and students enter the building in their *abayas* and *hijabs/nikabs* but take them off immediately inside. Throughout the day, educational work goes on without the use of *abayas* in a multicultural environment. Female participants come from different cultures and display their own national identities in visible ways (colorful national female fashions that correspond to the strict Saudi university dress code: long skirts and long sleeves), and non-visible ones (different sense of personal space, different greetings or eating habits, or different university working practices).

The quality of teaching is negatively affected by disparities based on gender separation. The conditions for males are better than for females: there are fewer students in classes; they are situated in nicer buildings with bigger spaces; they have individual seating arrangements and more modern air conditioners in classrooms and, of course, they have no "*shasha*" teaching. "*Shasha*" or "screen teaching" is probably only present in Saudi Arabia, and – the present author dares to say – is an ineffective method of teaching; in many senses not really a 'method'. It is again the result of gender separation, but also due to the lack of academic female professionals at JU. Since males are not permitted to see the faces of women in Saudi Arabia in public, male university lecturers stand behind an open-air screen which divides the classroom into two parts. Female students sit in front of the mirror side of the screen, and listen to the lecturer. To keep control in the classroom and maintain discipline during classes, two female Saudi assistants usually also sit in the classroom during every lesson (Havril 2016).

Under these conditions, the present paper examines some areas of female university education as one of the cultural components of the complex phenomenon of an inevitably visible economic, social and cultural transition in the Jazan Region, based on the author's personal experience as a university professor at Jazan University, where she collected research data concerning the field of higher education. The paper also explores some deeply rooted Saudi-specific socio-cultural features which motivate Jazan women to study more than men and become interculturally open Saudi citizens.

It is a widely held Western belief that gender inequality, and moreover, due to the practice of Wahhabi Islam, gender segregation exists in Saudi Arabia. After living in Jizan (the capital city of the Jazan Region) for the years 2014-2016 while teaching at Jazan University (JU), the present author prefers not to deem it gender segregation and has accepted the related practices as a specific Saudi cultural and social phenomenon, so hereon uses the term 'gender separation' (Havril 2015b).

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In the subsequent section, a literature overview is provided about the theoretical approaches to the interconnectedness of culture, society and socialization. This is followed by an introduction to the theory and the constituents of intercultural competence (ICC) model which is applied in this study.

Different theories exist in the literature regarding culture, as this term is a multidisciplinary one. During the past thirty years, much more information has become available about the topic in many scientific fields, but Geert Hofstede may be the best known anthropologist, social psychologist and sociologist of culture.

In 1986, Hofstede provided an in-depth definition of culture, highlighting the necessity and importance of cultural relativism in the twentieth century, pointing out that culture is "... the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (1986:2). He put emphasis on the notion that culture is shared with people who live or lived in the same society, derives from one's socialization, not from one's genes, and it is learned, not inherited. Culture should be distinguished from both human nature and from individual personality. This perspective definitely contains a significant dichotomy: every human wants to become like all the others in their community, but also someone different from others, and also like no other person during the process of self-realization (Bertelsmann 2006).

In the pyramid model of culture, Hofstede (1986) initiates the idea of cultural pluralism according to which multiple cultural scripts exist side by side which can be learned, while there are no scientific standards for considering one group intrinsically superior or inferior than another. Cultural relativism affirms that one culture possesses no absolute criteria with which to judge the activities of another culture as "low" or "noble". This idea may significantly reduce prejudice, scapegoating and discrimination.

The popular Onion Model of Culture (Hofstede 2011) reflects the manifestations of culture at different depths. This model consists of four key-layers: *symbols* (language, gestures, objects); *heroes* (people alive and dead); *rituals* (collective activities, social and religious ceremonies). These layers can be subsumed under the term *practices*, leading us to the core of culture, the fourth layer: *values*. In Hofstede's study, values are feelings and they have both positive and negative sides (such as evil versus good, dirty versus clean, ugly versus beautiful, etc.). According to the developmental psychologist Erikson (1968), most universal cultural value systems are learned unconsciously during the socialization process during childhood, and it is hard to change them. Because they were acquired so early in life, many values remain hidden to those who hold them. Therefore, they cannot be discussed nor questioned, nor can they be directly observed by outsiders. They can only be inferred from the way people act in various circumstances.

The popular and easy-to-understand concept The Iceberg Concept of Culture (The National Center for Cultural Competence 2004) used in cross-cultural communication studies, specifies and lists factual examples of culture. The model assumes that nine-tenths of an iceberg remains out of sight, so the outside-of-conscious-awareness part of culture is the invisible part of deep culture, while only one-tenth of each culture exists as elements which are clearly visible. This approach suggests that when visiting or living in a different culture it takes time to learn to tolerate cultural ambiguity, to evaluate differences, then to accept and to respect the new cultural environment, and finally, to adapt to most visible and invisible elements of the given culture. Applying our argumentation in the Saudi Arabian context, we can say that the visible elements of culture such as women in *abayas* and *hijab/nikab*, men in *thobes*, gender separation in public, and Saudi Arabian language use and non-verbal interactions such as shaking hands and kissing the cheek among the same gender, are only few components of the complex ideas and deeply-held priorities known as Saudi cultural values. The reality, however, is that these are merely the external manifestation of deeper and broader components of culture.

Turning now to the interdependent and interconnected relationship of culture, society and socialization, with regard to sociological, anthropological and

pedagogical research (Erikson 1968; Csepeli 1997; Nagy 2000; Giddens et al. 2011) we can conclude that individuals become members of society through the process of socialization, which means learning the roles, norms and values of the given culture. During this life-long learning process, one becomes a conscious, reflective agent who is capable of social actions and behaviors in daily interactions. Thus, it obvious to conclude that no culture could exist without society and no society could exist without culture (Giddens et al. 2011), which is the framework of the life-long socialization process of humans. For this reason, from now on the author will consider culture, society and socialization to be interdependent and interconnected components in a complex system of phenomena in a life.

Taken together, all culture-related disciplines indicate that the socialization process individuals go through to adapt to society happens through verbal or non-verbal social interaction. Intercultural studies classify three types of communication as social interactive formations: *intracultural communication* among members of the same culture; *intercultural communication* among persons of different cultures; and *international communication* among nations and governments. All these communicational forms can be learned and taught during the socialization process, and even through education systems based on the conscious improvement of cultural and intercultural competences.

Another significant theoretical component of this paper is the construct of intercultural competence (ICC). Intercultural competence is best viewed as an ongoing process which fosters constructive interaction between members of different cultures that is free from prejudice, and is a key competence to be improved in tertiary education in our communication-driven and culture-convergent world in the twenty-first century.

A number of intercultural studies have postulated (Bertelsmann 2006; Deardorff 2006, 2009) the specific constituent elements of the ICC construct. These include *attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, and skills*, which could be or have to be learned and improved. *Attitudes* are part of the human affective dimension, and involve curiosity, discovery, tolerance to uncertainty, and openness to diversity. *Knowledge and comprehension* belong to the cognitive dimension of humans, and cover deep understanding of culture-specific information, sociolinguistic awareness, comprehensive cultural knowledge, and an ability to manage conflict. *Skills* relate to the communicative dimension and include all the basic skills which help us interact effectively, such as listening, interpreting, analyzing, relating and evaluating. When all these components are activated, they lead us to *internal and external outcomes*. On the level of *Desired Internal Outcomes* one goes through a cognitive process and is willing to select and use appropriate communication styles and behaviors with an ethno-relative

view. Finally, *Desired External Outcomes* bring about constructive interactions in which one can behave and communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations among members of different cultures, while trying to avoid violating cultural rules

Bertelsmann (2006:7) demonstrates the ICC construct using a spiral model and describes the notion of continuous and dynamic upward and downward movement of intercultural competence development in a multidimensional environment. The author draws our attention to understanding that the process of ICC acquisition is not only a positive, linear upward-directed process of development, but can decline or regress downwards in the spiral which reflects the difficulties, drawbacks and failures one encounters in developing ICC. What is more, the spiral framework makes it possible to interpret the speed and the smaller or larger dimensions of ICC-related learning.

All the studies reviewed in this section provide important insight into the intercultural theoretical framework of the present research and support the discovery of the new dimensions of intercultural competence development from the Saudi perspective.

## DATA AND METHOD

In order to understand and explore the distinctive Saudi elements of culture and to measure the ICC of the students, a qualitative empirical research approach was used and a survey analysis of JU female students was carried out in the academic year 2015-2016.

The survey is not representative since the majority of JU academic groups are not taught by Western teachers. It is thus a convenience sample and the researcher selected those groups of different specializations where the students had classes with Western professionals. In conducting this survey, other Western teachers provided help during their own lessons. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to students during classes which they answered anonymously. There were some limitations to the sampling. Some smart students from the groups were absent, others were reluctant to participate, and the English language use of some others was not appropriate for filling in the questionnaire completely or answering properly, so they copied partners' answers. Data analysis proceeded using Microsoft Office Excel (2007). The descriptive statistics summarize the data. In this study, the mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation were determined. The nominal standard deviation (the 'coefficient of variation', or CV) is the standard deviation divided by the mean.



The participants of the survey that is described were all females with both rural and urban backgrounds in Jazan, aged from 19 to 25 years old. They were BA undergraduate university students of Jazan University at the Faculties of Pharmacy, Applied Medical Sciences (Pharmacy, Nursing: Level 8), Arts and Humanities, the Girl's Academic Campus 2, the Department of English (Sociolinguistics, Cultural Dialogue: Level 7 and 8), and at the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education (Linguistics and Education: Level 1 and 2). The total size of the sample was 341 respondents, including 89 medical students (later referred to as MS), Level 8, the last semester before graduation. One hundred and ninety-six students were from the English Department (EDS), Levels 7 and 8, before graduation. Fifty-six students were from the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education (ES) at Levels 1 and 2, a preparatory year when students study only the English language.

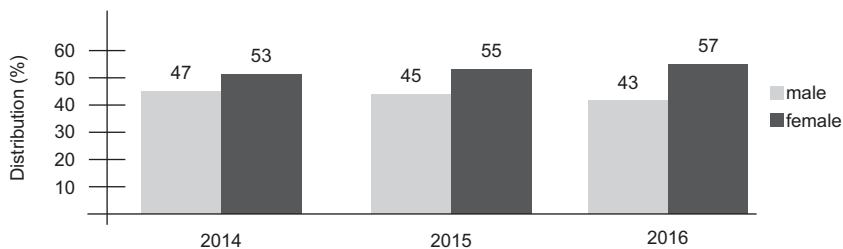
The design of the questionnaire was based on the theoretical approach of the five components of intercultural competence construct and was created to discover how students cope with the challenges encountered in intercultural situations with Western teachers. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into five sections. Section A consisted of questions about *Attitudes* as the affective dimension of the ICC model. Section B focused on the characteristics of the respondents' cognitive dimensions such as *Knowledge*, and Section C on basic communicative *Skills*. Section D centered on intercultural reflections as *Desired Internal Outcomes*, and Section E on the actual interactions of *Desired External Outcomes*.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### *Distribution of students, personal data*

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of male and female students registered between 2014 and 2016 at Jazan University. It is evident that in this period the total number of male students decreased from 47 percent to 43 percent, and that male representation did not reach 50 percent of the total university population. On the other hand, in the given period the registered number of female students was above 50 percent, and in 2016 reached 57 percent. The ratio of male to female students was almost 2:3 (respectively), which corresponds to the gender ratio in Western and global universities. Females from Jazan outnumber their male counterparts, and in the long term these changes definitely forecast a higher number of educated professional women which will create some significant socio-cultural and employment policy changes in the Jazan Region.

**Figure 1** Distribution of males and females at Jazan University (Data issued by the Deanship of Admission and Registration, JU, 2016.03. 31.)



Note:

N	2014		2015		2016	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
N=	21292	24155	21749	26389	24760	32224

Presently, men can get relatively well-paid jobs easily in Jizan City and Jazan Region, earning enough money to sustain a family; consequently, they are not motivated to study hard or finish either their Bachelor or their Master or PhD studies abroad. The situation is just the opposite for female students.

The university is one of the few public social institutions in which (besides wedding and family parties) young females can socialize freely. Moreover, by being a university student women can even delay early marriages and early childbirth, so it is understandable that they try to stay in the system at whatever cost.

The Jazan girls, leaving their culturally very traditional, deeply Islamic families behind, face many challenges during their university years in the “capital city” of Jizan. They meet with many dos and don’ts, the expectations and pressure of educational formalities, the contradictions between past and future dreams, and the chance for self-realization in an academic environment. All come from the (internationally heavily criticized) gender-separated Saudi public middle schools where teaching tends to involve the rote learning of facts and long passages from the Qur’an. Since intellectual curiosity, mostly incompatible with religious dogma, is discouraged, the system does not necessarily foster innovation, creativity, competence development and self-confidence (Education in Saudi Arabia World Education News and Reviews 2011), all of which skills are essential to personal, social and economic development in the twenty-first century. As university students, almost all have difficulties regarding learning strategies and time management, and lack competitive drive and motivation, self-esteem and self-confidence due to the single-gender education system,

in opposition to co-ed schools (Bailey 1992). Some have computer literacy, social and public behavior problems, not to mention English-language learning difficulties with regard to absorbing specific academic knowledge. On the other hand, they all have cell phones and free access to the world of virtual media which provides them with a mix of information about the “rest” of the world.

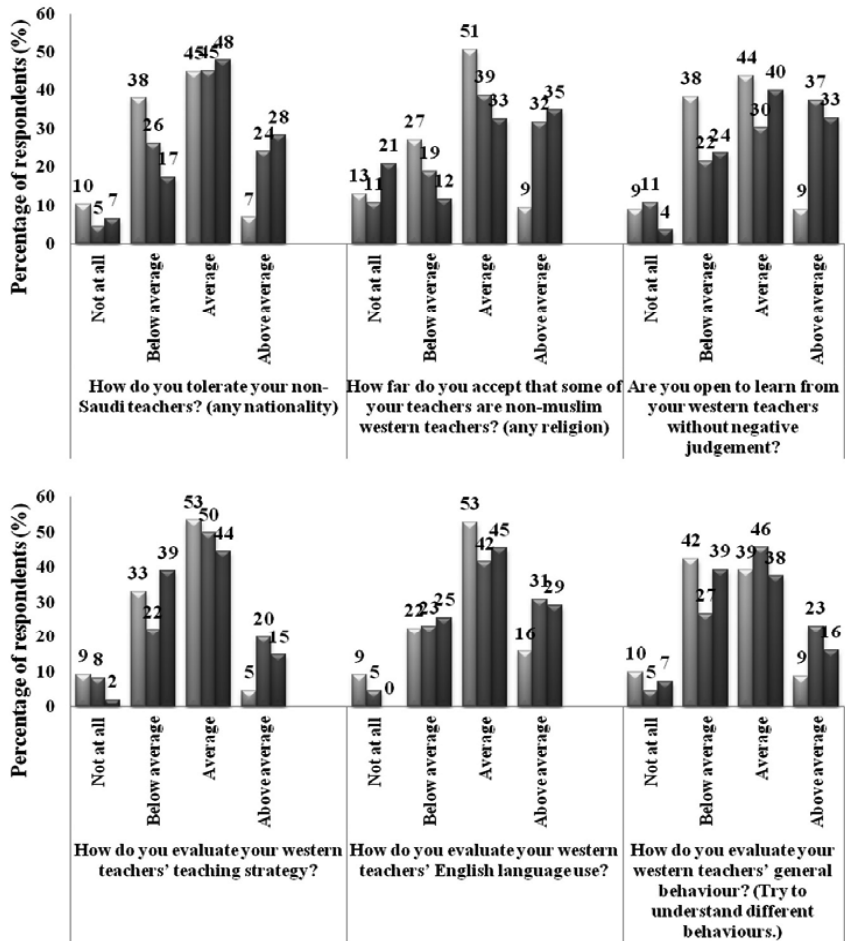
The social role of females is very controversial in Jazan Region. Most commute from distant rural areas; some spend four hours a day travelling. The government pays students a monthly fee (1000 SAR) to attend the university, and also pays their travelling expenses (500 SAR). All the students are aged between 19 and 25, and 60 percent of them are married; the latter are first or second wives, and have none, one to three children. Leaving their families and ‘duties as housewives’ behind, after arriving at university and taking off their *abayas* and *hijab/nikabs*, they are revealed as young Saudi women with bodies and faces uncovered, trying to find their own personal identities as university students. Comparison of their social roles at this stage of life with the role of a typical university student from the West suggests that their lives are not easy. Within a relatively short time (5 to 7 years), they experience and act out the social roles of a young adult, a mature woman, a wife, a mother and a university student, sometimes simultaneously. In most Western countries these stages in a woman’s life course usually follow each other, and last more than 10 to 15 years (Giddens et al. 2011).

Several pieces of the above-mentioned evidence suggest that the Jazan University system accumulates a lot of multicultural, Saudi socio-political, regional socio-cultural, pedagogical and methodological problems, and the educational situation is not easy for students nor teachers. Most participants cannot avoid experiencing culture shock. So, how can a lecturer and a researcher investigate and develop the intercultural competence of the female students at Jazan University, and promote the values of academic achievements in English? Does this require scientific investigation, or just common sense and a feeling of “respect others as you want to be respected”, and putting this theory into practice? The author of this article attempted both strategies.

The first set of survey questions was designed to collect personal data about the respondents. Sixty-six percent of medical students and 80 percent of students of education were not married. Fifty-seven percent of MS had no children, while 46 percent of English Department students and 50 percent of ES had one child. This finding shows that the higher the level of academic studies and the younger the girls, the more the Jazan female students prefer to postpone marriage, have fewer children, and try to escape the burdens of family life during their university years. Although in Jazan there are strong patriarchal roots which inevitably tie the women to Saudi socio-cultural family bonds, the data indicate that male family members accept and support women’s academic studies.

## Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills: Constituents of Intercultural Competence

Figure 2 Attitudes (1): Tolerance, openness and respect for religion and education<sup>2</sup>

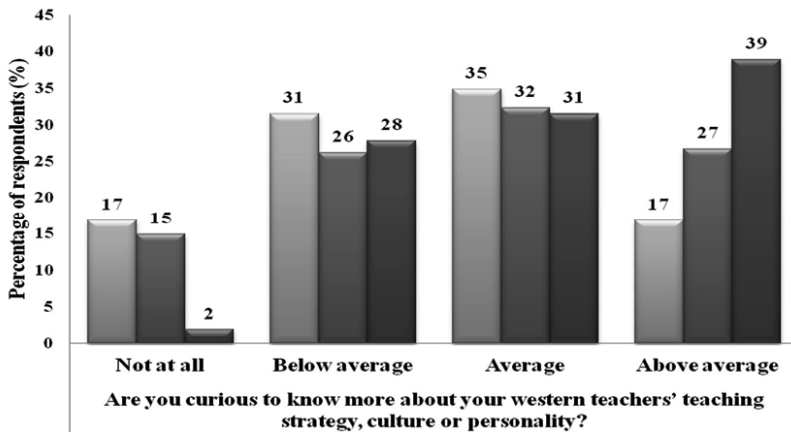


Note: N/Q1=328; N/Q2=324; N/Q3=339; N/Q4=337; N/Q5=339; N/Q6=341

2 All data and graphs in the followings are based on the author's survey unless otherwise mentioned. Further data are available from the author on request.

Beginning with Section A and the Attitude questions of the ICC construct component (Figure 2), almost half of all respondents (45-48 percent) from each specialization answered that they tolerate their non-Saudi teaching staff. In relation to the non-Muslim religious identity of the teachers, MS appear to be more accepting (51 percent on average). Forty-four percent of MS are open to learning from Western teachers without any negative judgement, while 53 percent of them evaluate Westerners' teaching strategies and English language use as good, on average. The highest level of acceptance is found among medical students. Less than 46 percent evaluate Westerners' different overall behavior highly, on average.

**Figure 3** Attitudes (2): Curiosity, interest



Note: N=338

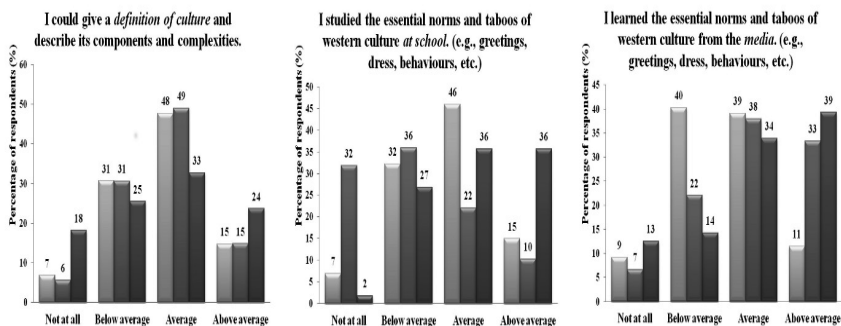
Figure 3 shows that around 30-35 percent of all respondents are curious at an average level to know more about the teaching strategies, the culture and the personalities of Western teachers. The highest proportion of these are found among the youngest ES (39 percent 'above average'). Sixteen percent of students were ready to address real questions to teachers, most of which were culture-specific. Questions about personality were fewest.

The findings displayed in Figures 3 and 4 indicate that most Jazan female students are not yet used to the behavior and academic performance of non-Muslim professionals. What is more, even the local Jizanees were confused about seeing different women in the streets in the last five years wearing *abayas* but not covering their faces, since Christians do not need to do this

in the KSA. With their imperfect learning strategies, most students are quite scared of the different teaching requirements of Western teachers; they have never experienced anything similar during their secondary school studies. This does not mean that they are not willing to increase their attitude level as regards ICC, but as the results show, it takes time for this to happen, and students open up step by step.

In Section B, for the purpose of examining the Knowledge and Comprehension component of intercultural competence, culture-related statements were constructed.

**Figure 4** Knowledge and Comprehension (1): Culture



Note: N/Statement1 = 339; N/Statement2 = 338; N/Statement3 = 338

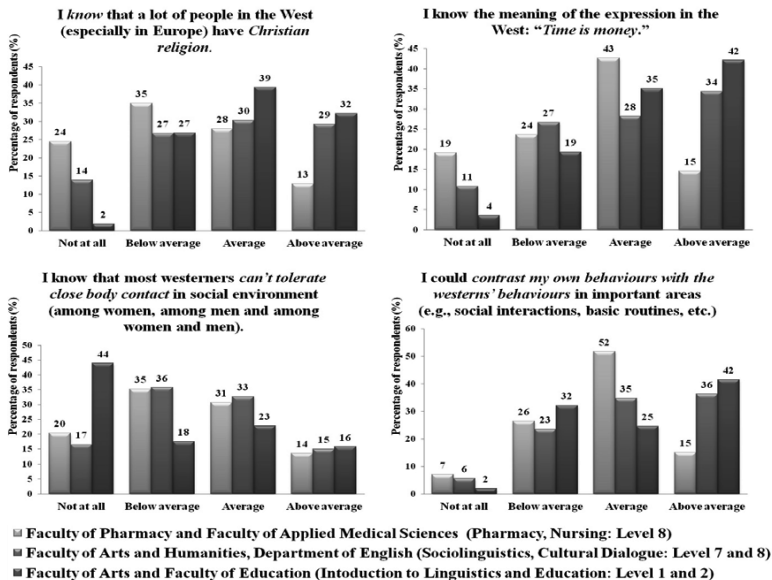
Figure 4 shows how 33-49 percent of respondents on average can define culture and have comprehensive knowledge about its deep complexities. Forty-six percent on average of medical students say that they learned about Western cultural characteristics at school, 34-39 percent on average learned about such Western cultural norms and values from the media, but 39 percent of the young students of education say that they get essential information about Western culture from the media in 'above-average' amounts. In conclusion, we can say that information about the Western world has still mostly been based on bookish education in Jizan over the last five to ten years. But the results of ES seem to suggest that media socialization will definitely quickly influence the young Jazan females' lives in so many social areas and will catch up to the level in the developed regions of the Kingdom.

Although Jazan students' monthly educational support from the government would allow them to have personal computers at home, most females arrive at university with a poor level of computer skills, unfortunately. Based on the author's experiences visiting local families and listening to the stories of

students, in most cases only one laptop is available for use by the whole family. Moreover, sometimes women do not have any access to a computer since men use them for ‘manly’ home entertainment in Jazan multifamilies.

Recently, there has been an increase in the number of smartphones across Saudi Arabia with perfect internet access service available, even in the mountainous areas of Jazan. This is opening up a new world of communication in repressed Saudi society. Communication via smartphones through social media helps with everyday life management for females, including calling taxi drivers since all women have to be transported from one place to another by male drivers due to the lack of any public transport and the ban on female driving in the KSA. The new forms of communication are also weakening the prohibition on personal encounters between males and females. Unfortunately, however, smartphones and the internet cannot be used by teachers and female students for academic purposes within the university building because on entering the college female security guards check that no-one is bringing in a smartphone. This discriminative regulation prevents women from taking photos of their own or others’ faces, and definitely hinders modern access to academic information for educational purposes, especially during classes.

Figure 5 Knowledge and Comprehension (2): Religion, Concept of Time and Space, Gender



Note: N/Statement1= 337; N/Statement2=341; N/Statement3=338; N/Statement4=336

Figure 5 shows that only 39 percent on average of the young students of education know that most people in the West are of the Christian religion, while 52 percent on average of medical students can contrast Saudi and Western culture. It is widely known that the Islamic religion is the fundamental value system behind every Saudi citizen's international, national and personal identity. This deep association occurs through the primary socialization process of each individual and determines their daily routine via their perceptions of everyday life (Hofstede 1986; Erikson 1968). Students acknowledge the existence of other religions in the world, but do not care about them. They feel fine with their beliefs, and since all other religious icons and practices are forbidden in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, they are not very keen on becoming familiar with other religions than the Islamic one. This explains, for example, occasions at which students and Muslim teachers take their praying rugs when *salah* (praying time) is coming and pray whenever and wherever they want, even during class time at the back of classrooms.

As illustrated in Figure 5, 43 percent on average of MS and 42 percent of ES are familiar at an above-average level with the Western expression "Time is money." Concerning chronemics (Hall 1989), the Saudi concept of time significantly differs from Western monochromic ideas. Saudis live in a polychromic culture in which adherence to time is not overly strict and deadlines and punctuality are not as important as in the West. This explains why most students did not understand why they should keep academic deadlines or not be more than 20 minutes late for class. The students I met are usually engaged in several activities in parallel, and keeping in mind academic, familial, and child-related issues caused difficulties for a lot of them, resulting in less than perfect concentration during classes. Their professional, social and private lives are not strictly separated, which may explain why we see a lot of children at the female colleges in Jizan. If Muslim teachers and students cannot find a good alternative, they bring children to university with them, who often play around, sit still, or even sleep under the desks on a praying rug while their mums study. Though this behavior is officially forbidden, most female communities ignore the rule or are just tolerant enough to accept the unspoken collective feelings of a shared sisterhood.

In academic work both Hijri and Gregorian calendars are used, which is rather confusing for a Westerner; for example, when students bring in medical certificates stamped and issued with Hijri dates. The first working day is Sunday, and weekends fall on Friday and Saturday based on Islamic norms, which can also result in a kind of a time confusion for Westerners.

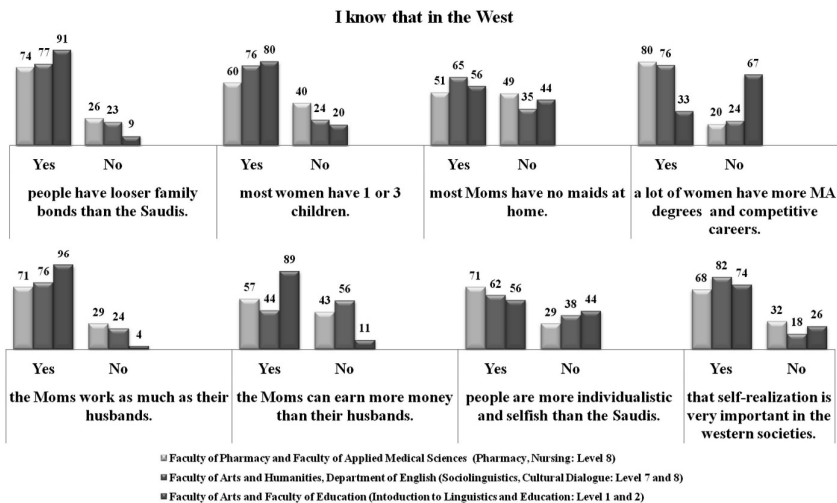
From all respondents, 23-33 percent on average (Figure 5) know that in a social context Westerners do not tolerate close body contact among women,



among men, or between women and men. As a measure of perception of space (proxemics), the Saudis tolerate close proximity, very different from the ‘zones of space’ involved in the daily interactions of Westerners. The closeness/distance individuals maintain from other people has significance and meaning, and provides important information concerning relationships between partners since the usability and reliability of sensory organs are affected in the communication process (Hall 1966). If Jazani girls sit very close, or even in each other’s lap during a class, or walk hand-in-hand during breaks, or kiss each other several times on the cheek whenever they meet, it does not necessarily mean that they are lesbians. Moreover, in face-to-face interactions students come close to the teacher, sometimes even touching the body to call attention to themselves. They certainly cannot wait, or line up to be dealt with; they all want attention immediately, and at the same time. However, they do this in a nice, happy and smiling way.

Such approaches towards physical proximity are due to the social attitudes of the Jazan countryside sisterhood, and come from Bedouin traditions. They are unquestionably one of the responses to the Saudi approach to gender separation.

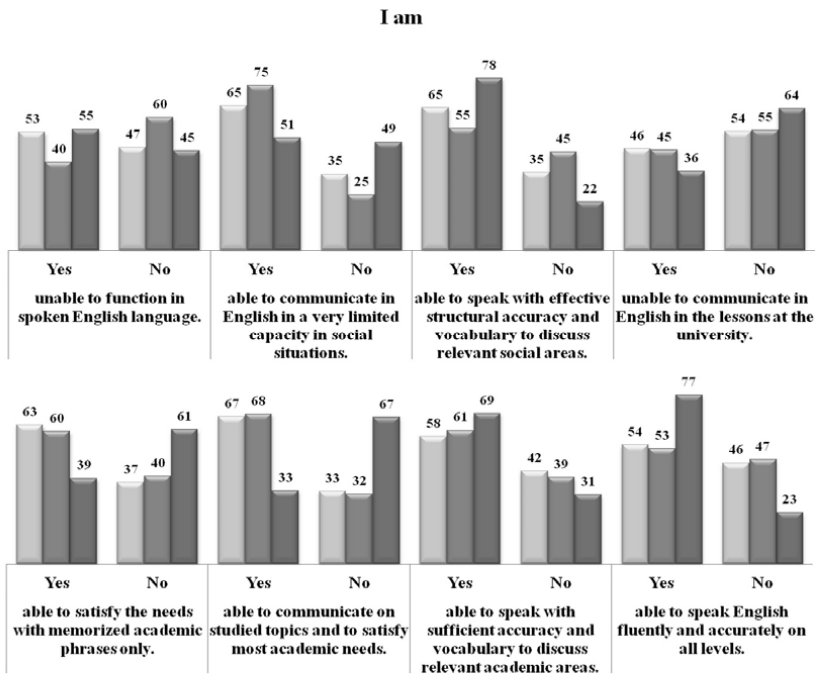
*Figure 6 Knowledge and Comprehension (3): Feminine issues*



Note: N/Statement1=338; N/Statement2=340; N/Statement3=338; N/Statement4=338; N/Statement5= 337; N/Statement6=338; N/Statement7=341; N/Statement8=337

Most female students know a lot about the equal chances of Western women in family, academic and professional life (Figure 6). The highest support for any statements were found for this item in the survey. Sixty-five percent of respondents did not know that most women in the West do not have a maid, since it is crystal clear that every Jizan woman would have a maid (in most cases, trafficked illegally from Somalia or Sudan across the Yemeni border). Nowadays, young female Saudis prefer to employ professional Filipinos as live-in maids who do all the housework and even talk with children in English.

**Figure 7** Communicative skills



Note: N/Statement1= 333; N/Statement2=334; N/Statement3=333; N/Statement4=339; N/Statement5= 334; N/Statement6=334; N/Statement7=328; N/Statement8=337

In relation to Section C, with respect to the Communicative Skills in the ICC construct, Figure 7 shows that 51-75 percent of respondents have limited English language skills for communicating in different social situations. Most measures

show a very low level of English language use in all specifications. Sixty-eight percent of students of the English Department can communicate about studied topics and satisfy most academic needs, while 39-63 percent still memorize academic phrases and tasks to pass exams. Memorization as a strategy occurs least often among the youngest students of education, as 77 percent of them say that they can speak English fluently and accurately at all levels. The author notes that students of education attend preparatory courses only, where the pedagogical aim is to standardize the English language knowledge of students to prepare them for academic courses.

Figure 7 is quite revealing in several ways. It is evident that most JU students have significant difficulties with English language learning and use. One of the reasons for this may be the big differences between the deep linguistic structure of Saudi Arabic and the English language, which cognitive differences have been a hot research topic for psycholinguists for so long. Based on my experience as a linguist, I claim that Arabic speakers commonly misuse English as a result of Arabic language peculiarities. Namely, certain sounds (for example 'b') do not exist in Arabic so it is hard to formulate these sounds. Moreover, issues arise with alphabetical symbols, the Arabic way of writing from right to left, punctuation, stress patterns and intonation. However, this surely does not mean that Saudi students are unable to speak English properly. For the last 15 years in public education in Jazan secondary schools, due to the shortage of local Saudi professionals, language teaching positions were filled using expat teachers from Egypt, Pakistan, and India – all Muslims, speaking Arabic –, most of whom are not highly qualified or familiar with the latest communicative language teaching methods relating to contrastive linguistic approaches. Thus, students who arrive at university are faced with many linguistic deficiencies, handicaps and struggles regarding meeting academic requirements in English.

As there is no placement test to harmonize or differentiate the English language use of students on academic courses, linguistically competent and weaker students sit in the same classes, and all suffer in their studies due to the large class sizes (30 students, sometimes 40). Undoubtedly, these difficult conditions retard the academic development of the smarter female students (approximately 40 percent of the total) who would otherwise have good chances in higher education.

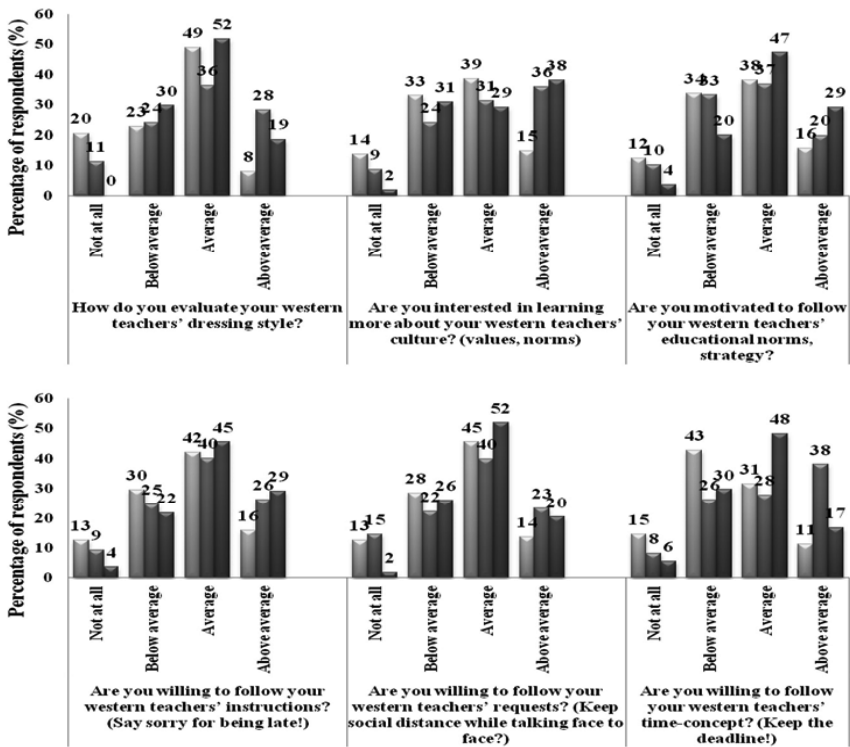
Another reason for the slow linguistic development of the students is that most academic course books are exactly the same ones that professors use worldwide in university environments. The information in the chapters cover Western cultural issues and international knowledge that Jazan females did not study during secondary education. As there is a big gap between the level of the course books and the background knowledge and English language level of the students,

digesting these new academic topics in English makes most students struggle a lot. Based on the author’s teaching experiences, approximately 20 percent of all students do not understand the lecturers, so they memorize or copy for exams.

***Desired Internal and External Outcomes: Constituents of Intercultural Competence***

For estimating *Desired Internal Outcomes* (Section D), questions were asked about the intercultural reflections of the respondents regarding their adaptability, empathy and willingness to do things after they have become familiar with characteristics of Western teaching.

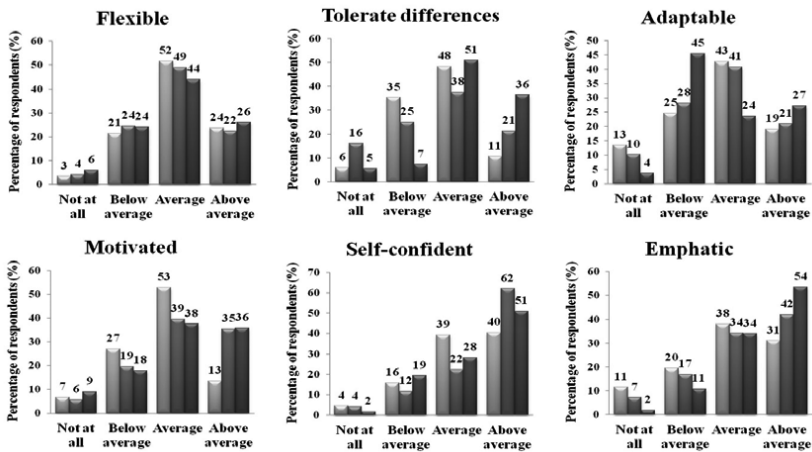
*Figure 8 Desired Internal Outcomes*



Note: N/Q1=337; N/Q2=338; N/Q3=340; N/Q4=338; N/Q5=335; N/Q6=338

Figure 8 shows how 37 - 47 percent of students on average are motivated to follow their Western teachers' teaching strategies. There is a slight increase (40 to 52 percent) in the number of students who are on average willing to adapt to Western social-behavioral skills, space-time relations and communication styles. Again, the most willing students are those studying medicine and education. So we could say that almost half of all respondents have a kind of ethno-relative perspective, together with enough empathy to activate intercultural reflection.

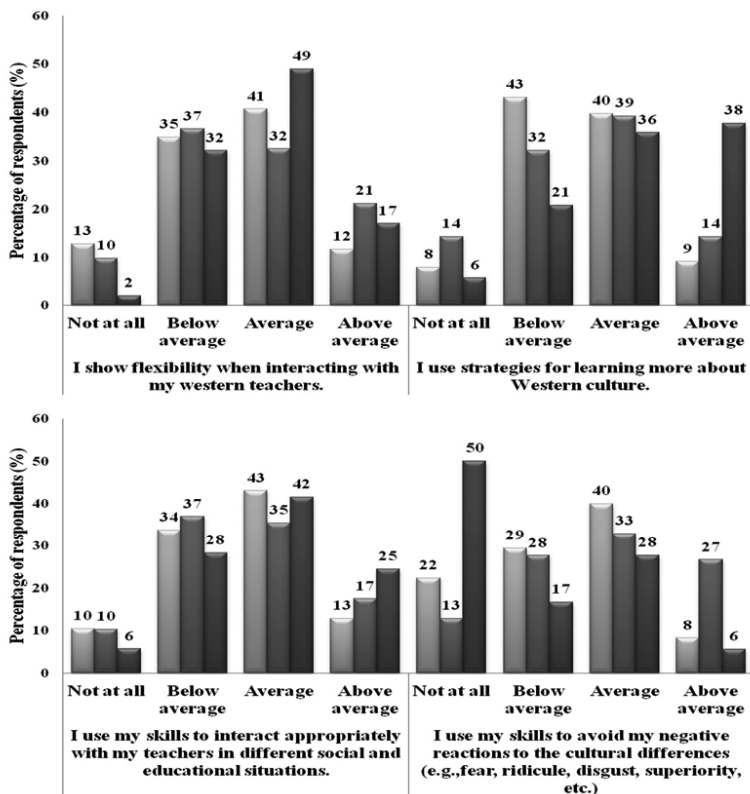
Figure 9 Perception of Self in Your Own Country



Note: N/Statement1= 317; N/Statement2=332; N/Statement3=331; N/Statement4=331; N/Statement5= 341; N/Statement6=339

According to the comparative data analysis, in terms of *Desired Internal Outcomes* the motivation, flexibility, and level of tolerance of respondents toward Western phenomena are 5 to 10 percent lower than for the home country (Figure 9). One possible explanation for this might be, as mentioned before, that Jazan University students have not experienced a lot of Western academic lectures. This is because Jazan Province is a less favored area for Western professionals to work in, on the one hand due to its backwardness and very unique traditional way of life within Saudi Arabia, and on the other, due to its proximity to the Yemeni war zone (60 km).

Figure 10 Desired External Outcomes



Note: N/Statement1= 333; N/Statement2=337; N/Statement3=334; N/Statement4=334

The final part of the survey was concerned with *Desired External Outcomes* (Section E). A number of issues can be identified from Figure 10. In line with the respondents’ willingness to engage in intercultural reflection, almost 50 percent of students use behavioral, social and communication skills and strategies to interact constructively and appropriately with Western teachers to avoid negative reactions to cultural differences. Based on data analysis, 73-93 percent of all respondents deal with emotions and avoid frustration during classes, and 59 percent of EDS encounter culture shock on dealing with Western teachers<sup>3</sup>. The

3 In relation to culture shock, empathy, judgement, respect and the intercultural competence level of the respondents, further data are available from the author on request.

proportion of empathy is highest among the EDS again: 81 percent prefer not to judge. Fifty-one percent of EDS respect Western teachers. To the statement “I want to improve my own level of intercultural competence” 65-82 percent of respondents answered “Yes”. To conclude this section, we can say that in terms of their Desired External Outcomes, students of the English Department perfectly interact in an intercultural sense during classes.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was designed to reflect on the basic features of Saudi-specific cultural dimensions in Jazan Province, and to investigate the components of the intercultural competence construct of female students of Jazan University.

This work provides a framework for the exploration of cultural elements that can enhance our understanding of the deeply traditional cultural value system of Jazan people. The most convincing and more significant findings to emerge from the author’s observations, life experience and research investigation suggest the following about Saudi-specific cultural dimensions: a) With regard to religious and ethnic issues, in Saudi Arabia Islamic values and processes are learned deeply during the socialization process during childhood, and they remain so unconscious that most outsiders are struck by the strength of Saudis’ religious beliefs. These values are underpinned by collective representations, strong emotional ties, and various narratives that tell society what to believe, and which values to hold sacred (Alexander 2006). Thus, Islam and Bedouin feelings create a national and individual identity for every Saudi citizen, and as attitudes of mind Jazan Region inhabitants hold them very strongly, and share them in their everyday life routines. b) Point a) leads to the conclusion that, in opposition to the Western approach of individualism, collectivism and group relationships (brotherhood and sisterhood) characterize the Islamic perceptions of a community-based Saudi society. c) Since the family is the most important social group in Saudi Arabia, and these tend to be self-contained and intergenerational to avoid feelings of insecurity, the extended multifamily model provides the vital and secure context for everyday interactions. d) In relation to gender issues, gender roles do not overlap as in the West, but masculinity is a strong force in society which results in gender separation. e) Considering perceptions of time (chronemics), Saudi Arabia is a polychromic culture; while in terms of the spatial arrangements of interpersonal relationships regarding behavior, communication and social interactions, the Saudis live in a closeness-distance proxemic culture.

The current results regarding the intercultural competence construct components of Jazani female students suggest that, in general, only half of the participants in the present research have been influenced by Western teachers' cultural, social and academic endeavors, but in their constructive interactions more than sixty percent suggest that they want to learn to improve their intercultural competence. Data show that the higher the level of university studies, the more Jazani females try to get rid of early family and gender restrictions pertaining to Saudi culture and try to meet global academic challenges and requirements. Certainly, their media socialization will also help them to catch up to international standards. Findings also reveal that the higher educational achievements of Saudi females is greater than for males. The former are willing to acquire extra information about cultural diversity, and they realize that ICC development is an important factor in their university identity. They have the desire to become "world-minded", globally engaged and interculturally competent students. In the long term, Saudi females will have more freedom to improve their self-esteem and self-confidence and become active participants of global university education and contribute their professionalism to the local labor market within the Kingdom.

The data described herein must be interpreted with caution because the many fast changes brought about by the Saudization process are affecting the present socio-economic, socio-cultural transition of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: one thing that must be admitted is that the Saudis live in a changing society.

Most universities in the KSA are decreasing the number of international staff they employ in preference for mature returning Saudi female professionals who have acquired MAs and PhDs through studies abroad (KASP). Their number is large, and the fact that these highly professional Saudi females, experienced in an intercultural academic environment, open and respectful regarding cultural diversity, will undoubtedly transmit and broaden their students' worldview from a multicultural perspective suggests a positive future, although they will undoubtedly still remain Saudis, anchored by their cultural roots.

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