Understanding the academic expectations
of students from Oman in Australian universities:
traditional family values in the modern educational context

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Gulf States have been identified as a market of significant potential for the recruitment of international students to Australian universities. However, recent experiences of enrolling Gulf students have not proven as successful as those of other international students. Academic underperformance and unrealistic expectations on the part of Gulf students have been cited as the main reasons why a number of Australian universities are hesitant to commit to ongoing market development in the region.

This thesis focuses on students from the Sultanate of Oman in order to test a hypothesis as to why students from the Gulf States experience Australian tertiary education so differently from other international students. Preliminary scoping undertaken for this study using academic and support staff recollections of the experiences of an early cohort of sponsored students from Kuwait indicates staff in Australian universities have tended to refer to established paradigms for international student transition. They have explained Gulf students' problems in terms of: difficulties learning in English; gaps in academic background; adjustment to new modes of teaching and learning; and unrealistic expectations of their own academic performance and of the institution’s capacity to support them through the transition. The fieldwork, comprising intensive interviews with a cohort of sponsored undergraduate students from Oman, attests that these students carry similar assumptions about their own academic abilities, and efficacy of personal relationships with staff in overcoming difficulties in transition to the Australian educational setting.

In this thesis it is argued that far from revealing the reasons why Omani students exhibit behaviour and attitudes outside the norm, these explanations simply disguise the very particular causes as common to international students in general and consequently do not help staff working in Australian universities to understand the failure of academic and pastoral care programs to address the apparent underperformance, low motivation and dissatisfaction of students from the Gulf States.

This study draws together research on international students, literature on Middle Eastern culture, and studies on Gulf economies to provide an explanation for the unique academic expectations of students from Oman. In particular, the educational and employment priorities set by the Omani Government are highlighted as problematic in the context of traditional family values that have proven resilient in promoting tribal interests over broader societal needs. These notions are based on traditional means of utilising family connections to overcome difficulties in Gulf societies, known as wasta. Data elicited through the fieldwork confirm that Omani students’ over-reliance on personal assistance available from academic and support staff is representative of their assumption that personal relationships provide the key to overcoming academic difficulties. The students (and their sponsors) are therefore likely
to attribute dissatisfaction with their experience and poor academic performance to limited support provided by the institution. This finding gives rise to a series of recommendations for Australian universities to consider when recruiting students from the Gulf States and devising academic and pastoral care programs to address their particular transition needs and assist them in adjusting their expectations.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the DEd;
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Katerina Gauntlett
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ..................................................................................................................................ii
Declaration ............................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................v
Table of contents...................................................................................................................vi

INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 1
A new understanding of Gulf students’ experiences............................................................. 1
Why investigate the experiences of international students from the Gulf States?............. 2
Aim and scope of this study ................................................................................................. 5
Structure of this thesis........................................................................................................... 6

CHAPTER 1 PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION OF THE ISSUES: A SCOPING STUDY........ 9
Purpose ................................................................................................................................. 9
Nature of the scoping study ................................................................................................. 9
Background ......................................................................................................................... 10
Issues identified by the scoping study: 1. Poor English language standards ..................... 12
Issues identified by the scoping study: 2. Academic background....................................... 15
Issues identified by the scoping study: 3. Low motivation and its implications .................. 17
Contemporary relevance of the Kuwaiti experience ........................................................... 19
The significance of “face” in Gulf communities ................................................................. 21

CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH DESIGN ................................................................................ 23
Forming the hypothesis ........................................................................................................ 23
Ascertaining Gulf students’ expectations ........................................................................... 23
Correlating the findings of the review of bibliography with the characteristics of Omani
students in Melbourne ......................................................................................................... 23
Fieldwork sample selection ............................................................................................... 23
Instrument design ............................................................................................................... 27
Scope .................................................................................................................................. 29
Identifiers ............................................................................................................................. 30
Data analysis ....................................................................................................................... 30
Testing the hypothesis ......................................................................................................... 31

CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................... 32
Understanding the differences between students from the Gulf States and other
international students. ......................................................................................................... 32
PART I The Middle East ...................................................................................................... 33
  1. Economic and social policy ....................................................................................... 33
    1. a). Oil revenue and the welfare state ..................................................................... 33
    1. b). Pace and scale of social and economic change ............................................... 34
    1. c). Background to the Nationalisation agenda of the Gulf States ...................... 38
2. Education policy and how it shapes employment expectations................................. 41
   2. a). Relationship between education and employment ........................................... 41
   2. b). International reviews of education in the Middle East ...................................... 42
   2. c). How secondary education shapes expectations................................................ 44
   2. d). Employment choices of secondary school students.......................................... 48
3. Cultural values in the Middle East ........................................................................ 51
   3. a). Family values and management style.............................................................. 51
   3. b). Employment preferences as an extension of cultural norms ............................. 53
   3. c). Wasta and building face .................................................................................. 54
4. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions .............................................................................. 62
   4. a). Individualism and Collectivism ....................................................................... 62
   4. b). Different types of Individualism and Collectivism ............................................. 65
   4. c). Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance ..................................................... 67
PART II Students .......................................................................................................... 70
1. Students from the Gulf States ................................................................................. 71
   1. a). Market Overviews and Market Updates from Australian Education International .................................................................................................................. 71
   1. b). International students from the Gulf States in Australia, the United States and
        the United Kingdom .............................................................................................. 74
   1. c). Gulf students in their home countries, as observed by foreign teachers ............ 83
2. International students in general ............................................................................. 85
   2. a). Student choice and expectations ..................................................................... 85
   2. b). Academic adjustment required by international students in Australia ............. 90
   2. c). Muslim international students of non-Arab origin: similarities with and
        differences from Gulf students ............................................................................ 96
3. Language difficulties faced by international students ............................................. 101
   3. a). Difficulties faced by Arabic speakers learning English .................................... 101
       3. a). i. Diglossia .................................................................................................... 102
       3. a). ii. Writing and discourse organisation .......................................................... 103
       3. a). iii. Handwriting .......................................................................................... 106
       3. a). iv. Reading .................................................................................................. 106
       3. a). v. Speaking .................................................................................................. 108
       3. a). vi. Students’ aspirations and motivation ....................................................... 108
PART III Summary of literature review and statement of hypothesis ........................... 112
CHAPTER 4 FIELDWORK FINDINGS ............................................................................. 114
Students’ perceptions of the issues ............................................................................. 114
   Adjustment to living and studying in Australia: anticipated and actual challenges...... 114
   Anticipated challenges: Class size and format ....................................................... 114
   Anticipated challenges: Maintaining motivation in absence of authority figures ...... 116
   Actual challenges: Assessment ............................................................................... 117
Actual challenges: Being in the minority................................................................. 118
Actual challenges: Finding compatriots to support motivation .......................... 121
Additional pressure: Being an Arab in Australia .................................................. 125
Learning and studying in English: anticipated and actual challenges ................. 126
Anticipated challenges: Vocabulary...................................................................... 127
Actual challenges: Australian academic conventions......................................... 130
Actual challenges: Overcoming pedagogical background and gaps in assumed
knowledge.................................................................................................................. 134
Overview of student expectations and methods of negotiating difficulties.......... 140

HYPOTHESIS TESTED: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..................... 148

How does wasta shed light on Gulf students’ expectations of Australian universities?.... 148
Towards a richer understanding of the academic difficulties attributed to Gulf students in
Australia...................................................................................................................... 148
Understanding “work ethic”......................................................................................... 151
The resilience of traditional values such as wasta.................................................... 153
In summary.................................................................................................................. 155
Recommendations for Australian universities......................................................... 156

BIBLIOGRAPHY.......................................................................................................... 159
INTRODUCTION

A new understanding of Omani students’ experiences

This thesis examines how a sample of Gulf students¹ seek to overcome the difficulties which they face during their studies in Australia through reliance on personal relationships with academic support staff. It shows that the students’ responses are predicated on their assumptions about their own roles and responsibilities in relation to their studies, as well as those of support staff. These assumptions are at variance with the staff and institution’s requirements of students.

This thesis further illustrates how students’ assumptions derive from cultural norms widely attested in the literature about the Gulf States², which require reciprocity between those requiring assistance and those in a position to bestow it. Although these cultural values have been attributed to a range of traditional cultures in the Middle East (e.g. Sharabi 1998), Europe (e.g. Campbell 1964) and China (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993), they are seen to operate still to significant effect in modes of advancement currently in use in the contemporary Gulf States. They prevail despite the socio-cultural flux caused by growing awareness that local oil resources are finite, by population growth, and by a lessening capacity of the States to dispense welfare in the form of guaranteed employment. It is significant that Gulf students are sponsored to obtain qualifications overseas as a direct result of Gulf government policies aimed at reducing reliance on imported expertise and at preventing unemployment and poverty among underqualified nationals³ of the Gulf States. These students are further expected to exploit the opportunity, not available in local tertiary institutions, to become apprised of “the realities of the workplace in a modern, competitive global economy” (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004, p.160). However, the reality of the students’ experience suggests that such modern graduate attributes are in conflict with traditional values and family aspirations. Gulf State sponsors and Australian educational providers would do well to take account of such disjunctures in framing their expectations and in designing support services.

¹ Gulf students, for the purpose of this thesis, are the elite of the high school graduating cohort in the Gulf States who have been selected for overseas study opportunities as part of the nationalisation campaign.
² Gulf States are the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Gulf States share the Arabic language, monarchical forms of governance and Islamic religion, and geographical location on the Persian Gulf. They are also rentier economies in that they are almost exclusively reliant on rents generated by oil and gas reserves. However, each of the Gulf States has a unique culture and history, making broad generalisations about the region unwise.
³ Nationals is the accepted term for those who hold citizenship in the Gulf States. Citizens of the Gulf will usually identify themselves as Arabs. However, this term can also be used to describe other groups living in the Gulf States who are not entitled to citizenship. Citizenship is usually patrilineal and naturalisation is extremely rare. Citizenship ensures entitlement to a range of benefits including free education, free health care, housing subsidies and tax free subsidies.
Why investigate the experiences of international students from the Gulf States?

Students coming from the Gulf States to study in Australia are demonstrably uncharacteristic of international students and for the most part do not appear to have a positive experience of Australian universities. Many of these students do not achieve the educational goals which have been set for them by their sponsoring home governments in accordance with the entry requirements stipulated Australian institutions for students to progress from English language studies to pathway programs⁴ and then to degree programs. Identifying the issues and finding solutions is not only important for the sake of the students, but also their sponsors⁵, who appear increasingly enthusiastic about developing educational ties with Australia. It is also critical for Australian universities, whose interests in optimising these links are greater than ever. This thesis contributes to the process of identifying the issues and finding solutions.

Regardless of their academic performance (which in some cases is satisfactory), virtually all the Omani students encountered during this study reported dissatisfaction with their educational experience in Australia, complaining in particular about what they perceive to be unfair treatment and of discrimination in their assessments. They tend to attribute their academic troubles to their limited competence in English, particularly to inadequate vocabulary. However, the fieldwork suggests that these students have more significant difficulty in utilising academic support services to overcome a variety of problems with their studies.

The provision of academic support services geared to the particular needs of international students reflects the importance attached by Australian universities to an increasingly vital source of funding and of the nation’s revenue from overseas. It also surely reflects a worldwide appreciation of the numerous other benefits flowing from the global mobility of students. However, the spectacular growth of international education has been controversial in Australia.

In particular, the extent of Australia’s reliance on international student fees has regularly been the subject of debate in the media. Recent commentary claiming a dangerous over-reliance on international student enrolments estimated the revenue at $12.5 billion annually (Das 2008, July 26b). This makes international education Australia’s third-largest export, after coal

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⁴ Pathways are usually foundation studies or diploma programs functioning as academic bridging programs to undergraduate courses. These are a compulsory course of study for graduates of the national secondary curriculum in each of the Gulf States, as the National Office for Overseas Skills Recognition [NOOSR] in Australia does not deem this qualification the equivalent to an Australian matriculation program.

⁵ Sponsoring body is usually the Ministry of Higher Education [MoHE] pursuing Gulf Governments’ nationalisation policies, which aim to reduce reliance on the expertise of foreign expatriates and address the growing youth unemployment problem. Students are sponsored in that all (or some) of their tuition fees and living expenses are paid. Most Omani students in Australia are sponsored, although this may change as oil resources are depleted and families are called upon to subsidise their children’s education (Chapman, Al-Barwani & Ameen 2009).
and iron, and Australia the world’s largest recipient of international student enrolments per capita. One article indicated that 65% of all international students were from Asia and enrolled in business programs in Melbourne and Sydney (Das 2008, July 26b). It enumerated the negative aspects of this situation, commencing with the problems caused for international students by the escalating cost of living and the stronger Australian dollar; by exploitative employers of student labour; by safety and security risks; and by limited opportunity for interaction with local students and the broader Australian community. The universities were also suffering negative consequences including compromised academic integrity; redirection of scarce resources away from research and innovation; and potential economic vulnerability due to excessive reliance on a small number of revenue streams.

Entering a debate which had generated headlines such as “Fees drive the cultural divide that splits our universities” (Winch 2008, July 25) and “Expert warns of campus ghettos” (Das 2008, July 26a), the Chief Executive of Australian Education International agreed that recent emphasis on growth had compromised future sustainability. However, she argued that endeavours to attract students from newer markets such as the Middle East and Latin America would “future-proof” the sector from economic downturn (Das 2008, July 26b). Indeed, it would appear that the Gulf States have largely been “insulated” from the Global Financial Crisis, despite significant drops in oil prices (Jolly 2008, October 27; Wheeler 2008, October 9). The recent “credit crisis” in Dubai has raised questions about the way that investments have been handled in the emirate, and the opaque relationship between the royal family and private enterprise (Worth, R. F., Timmons, H., and Thomas Jr, L. 2009, November 30). However, it is unlikely that this will adversely affect Government spending on key areas such as education. Growing numbers of international students coming to Australia from the Gulf States may balance the predicted downturn of students from traditional source countries (Healy & Klan 2009, January 19).

The Middle East was also identified by a previous Federal Minister for Education as an education market with excellent recruitment potential (Nelson 2003). Shortly thereafter, individual State Premiers and Education Ministers travelled through the region on profiling missions. Engagement with the region has included the opening of two Australian university campuses and one Victorian secondary school in the United Arab Emirates. Competition between Australian education providers to recruit students from the Gulf region is currently

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6 The Middle East has conventionally referred to some 20 countries representing a considerable degree of geographic, demographic, economic and social diversity: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2002, p.11). In some cases, Turkey, Iran and Israel are argued to belong to the Middle East due to their geographical location, although they are not Arab countries (Pounds & Kingsbury 1966, p.2). More recently, Comoros and Somalia have been included in surveys as they are member states of the 22 nation Arab League (United Nations Development Programme 2004; 2003; 2002).

7 Education provider refers to Australian tertiary education institutions. This includes their affiliated English language centres and pathway programs.
intensive and continues to grow. Enrolments from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, in particular, increase significantly from year to year (Australian Education International 2008).

However, a scoping study for this thesis reported in Chapter 1 below, the wide-ranging literature review reported in Chapter 3 below, and fieldwork findings reported in Chapter 4 below all suggest that the sustainability of Gulf States as a source of international enrolments may be placed in jeopardy if the reasons for the students’ dissatisfaction with their experience are not investigated and addressed. Failure to do so will in turn undermine the sustainability strategy proposed by Australian Education International, as well as limiting opportunities for further market development in the Middle East and North Africa.

Two Australian universities have joined the growing number of international education providers setting up campuses in the Gulf States. A recent survey by The Times Higher Education Supplement outlined the risks inherent in these ventures, including: the difficulty of attracting academic staff who are “at the peak of their game” to stay beyond a couple of years to support the fledgling research culture; limitations placed on taught curriculum for cultural, religious and political reasons; and the poor academic preparedness of undergraduate students who have graduated from Government schools (Gill 2008, August 21). In addition, the survey alludes to the unreasonably high expectations of the students enrolled in these institutions with regard to their assessment grades, their expectation of guaranteed employment and their alleged laziness.

One lecturer, formerly based in the United Arab Emirates, observes:

    Students have a lot of power because they are nationals of the country, and if they go en masse to the provost they can cause problems for a member of faculty. Every time I taught a new class, the first thing I would do was look at the list of students and, because I knew the country well, I knew pretty much who was who. I was looking to see which big families I had in that class and how they interacted with each other. That was fine for me, but it must have been an absolute minefield for someone fresh off the plane [...].

In a sense, the academic support staff at Australian universities are comparable to “someone fresh off the plane” with respect to their understanding of who their Gulf students are and why this is relevant to their expectations and behaviour. There is currently no conveniently available resource that explains why Gulf students experience Australian tertiary studies so differently from other international students. The literature directly focused on Gulf students is limited to unpublished minor theses usually only available for consultation in situ at overseas universities. There is a substantial body of literature relating to the academic support staff at Australian universities who are responsible for assisting students with their studies. These are usually administrative staff although in some cases lecturers and tutors may fulfil this role. The subject of advice ranges from admission issues and enrolment processes to assistance with course planning, subject selection and timetable management, language and learning skills support, further study or careers.

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8 Academic support staff are employees of universities and other education providers who are responsible for assisting students with their studies. These are usually administrative staff although in some cases lecturers and tutors may fulfil this role. The subject of advice ranges from admission issues and enrolment processes to assistance with course planning, subject selection and timetable management, language and learning skills support, further study or careers.
adjustment of international students in Australia, but it usually relates to students from Confucian Heritage Cultures. Literature on student expectations is largely market driven and tends to be generic, ignoring cultural differences between cohorts. A vast amount of literature is available on directly or indirectly related topics such as: the specific challenges faced by Arabic speakers learning English; education in the Arab world; management practices in the Middle East; and implications of oil revenue for social reform in the Gulf States. However, the depth and breadth of these sources, as well as their often tangential relevance to higher education and international education, render them impractical as resources for beleaguered academic support staff in Australian universities. As a result, universities tend to rely on corporate knowledge of Gulf students, in the form of market information available from Australian Government representatives and recruitment agents in the field, and “institutional memory” in the form of staff recollections of experiences with students from the Gulf States. It is demonstrated that these sources offer limited explanation for Gulf students' unique behaviour and tend to undermine the confidence of staff attempting to offer academic support and pastoral care programs.

Aim and scope of this study
This study: identifies a range of problems faced by Omani students sponsored to study at Australian universities; reports the ways in which a sample of Omani students attempted to overcome these difficulties; and elaborates a hypothesis as to why Omani students' endeavours are mostly unsuccessful.

More specifically, the hypothesis derived from the relevant literature is that Omani students’ expectations of Australian tertiary education are formed and develop on the basis of traditional mechanisms for overcoming difficulties in the Gulf region. The hypothesis tests the corporate knowledge on which Australian universities base their assumptions about Gulf students by correlating the main issues identified with data from a series of intensive fieldwork interviews with a group of students from the region. The fieldwork was limited to one cohort of undergraduate students from the Sultanate of Oman studying in Victoria. Both male and female students were interviewed, but gender did not prove to be a significant variable in the data gathered. However, it is acknowledged that opportunities for women to participate actively in the workforce are limited in the Gulf States and that this has implications for their attitudes towards, and experience of, tertiary education overseas (Looney 1994, p.19; Al-Misnad 1984, pp.442-476; Ibrahim 1982, pp.95-97).

The following limitations to the scope of this study and the applicability of its findings must be noted at the outset. First, Oman cannot be said to be fully representative of all the Gulf States: there are geographical and historical differences between the seven member states of the Gulf Cooperation group. Similarly, while there may be some commonality between students from the Gulf States and those from the Middle East more broadly, such as
language and religion, the unique situation of GCC countries as rentier economies nevertheless limits the scope for generalisation about students from the entire “Middle East” or “Arab” regions. However, there are sufficient linguistic, cultural and economic similarities between Gulf Cooperation Countries (defined in Footnote 2) that broad conclusions about students from the region – particularly in comparison to international students from other parts of the world – may be drawn. This study is limited to students from a Gulf Cooperation Country because the Gulf States are the most significant and sustained source of international student enrolments for Australia in that region.

It is beyond the scope this thesis to evaluate the educational systems of the Gulf States. It suffices to acknowledge that several authoritative reports have highlighted the need for educational reform in the broader Middle Eastern region (The World Bank 2008; United Nations Development Programme 2004; 2003; 2002) and their recommendations are cogently argued.

However, in arguing that specific aspects of the students’ cultural and educational background are significant determinants of their subsequent experience in Australia, this thesis identifies issues of likely interest to education authorities and providers in both the Gulf States and Australia.

**Structure of this thesis**
Chapter 1 comprises a preliminary scoping study which outlines the academic difficulties faced by Gulf students in Australia. It explores staff recollections of the range of problems faced by one of the earliest groups of Gulf students to study in Australia. Problems identified were poor English language standards; significant gaps in secondary syllabus prior to foundation studies; dissatisfaction with lower academic achievement than expected; and low motivation resulting in problematic behaviour and truancy. The broader occurrence and significance of these problems is discussed at length in the literature review. The preliminary scoping revealed that staff perceived “unrealistic expectations” to be the most significant point of differentiation between students from Gulf States and other international students. These concerns are explored in the literature review and form the basis of the fieldwork.

In Chapter 2, the research design is presented and justified. This includes a fieldwork instrument with which to test the literature-based hypothesis that is developed over the chapters that follow. The limitations of this method are also considered.

Chapter 3 comprises a complex literature review, exploring the available research on issues identified by the scoping study outlined in Chapter 1. The review is divided into two parts: the first establishes the Middle Eastern context in terms of: oil revenue and economic development; investigations into regional and national education systems; employment
policies and management practices; and scholarly research into cultural values. The second part focuses on experience of students from the Gulf States and international students more broadly, including: studies of Gulf students overseas and in their home countries; definitions of student expectations; the specific challenges faced by Arabic speakers; and challenges for education institutions.

The research into cultural values reveals the prevailing norms in the home communities of Gulf students. These norms are demonstrably consonant with issues identified by the scoping study and literature on Gulf students. Importantly, Chapter 3 outlines the central importance of was
ta and “building face” for Gulf students, as distinct from understandings of “face” traditionally held by students from Confucian Heritage Cultures, who make up the majority of the international student cohort in Australia.

Chapters 2 and 3 therefore yield a hypothesis for understanding how and why Omani students exhibit unique behaviour, constructed on the basis of differences in cultural values between Gulf students, other key international student cohorts and Australian students/staff. The hypothesis is that Omani students’ expectations of academic support have been formed by their traditional modes of family advancement, despite operating in the larger context of the modern economy for whose benefit they are also being trained.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from intensive interviews with the 2004 cohort of sponsored undergraduates from the Sultanate of Oman studying in Melbourne. Ultimately, the students interviewed report greatest dissatisfaction with the academic support mechanisms available to them. Their dissatisfaction centres on a perceived inability to form satisfactory personal relationships with people able to assist them, and their perceptions of the range of assistance available. Findings support the hypothesis that Omani students’ capacity to utilise academic support effectively is limited by their unrealistic expectations of personal relationships with staff.

The Conclusions and Recommendations section sums up the nature of such relationships in the Gulf societies – a phenomenon known as was
ta – and the implications for current thinking on international students in Australia. The definition of was
ta outlined in Chapter 3 is related to contemporary studies of Omani society and demonstrates how socio-economic and cultural change in the Gulf region are critical factors in shaping the student expectations. The fieldwork data outlined in Chapter 4 confirms that these expectations have consequences for Omani students’ attitudes and behaviour in Australia.

The Conclusions and Recommendations set out in the final section indicate that Australian providers and Gulf sponsors need to refine their recruitment policies and support services for Gulf sponsored students. It should be recognised that the students’ ambitions do not
currently match their sponsors’ workforce requirements or their home governments’ modernising economic goals, but stem from and perpetuate traditional cultural values and ways of solving problems. The students’ assumption that these traditional structures and mechanisms can be replicated by academic support services provided by Australian institutions is the main reason for their dissatisfaction which, in turn, undermines their ability to succeed in their studies in Australia.
CHAPTER 1 PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION OF THE ISSUES: A SCOPING STUDY

Purpose
This Chapter describes the range of problems faced by Gulf students at Australian universities as identified by academic and support staff who worked intensively with one of the earliest groups of Gulf students to study in Australia: the 1997 sponsored cohort from Kuwait, enrolled in a pre-university program for international students. This case study comprised informal interviews with academic and support staff, and reference to documents relating to their enrolment. This chapter distils the main concerns of staff into the following key issues: poor English language standards; academic background; and low motivation. These are explored in the literature review in Chapter 3 and tested in the fieldwork discussed in Chapter 4. Staff felt that their efforts to address these issues was impeded by the students’ unrealistic expectations in terms of staff responsibility to rectify such problems.

It was evident that the early experiences with the Kuwaiti students continued to inform staff approaches to subsequent cohorts of Gulf students.

By all accounts, the experience of the first Kuwaiti cohort was disastrous and placed future enrolments from the region in serious jeopardy. Problems can be attributed to the institution’s and sponsor’s limited awareness of both the lack of academic preparedness and the inappropriate expectations of the Kuwaiti students. The students were not successful in passing the program or gaining admission to undergraduate studies. Kuwaiti authorities subsequently declined opportunities to sponsor students to study in Australia for many years following. Staff at the pre-university program recall the Kuwaiti students’ frustration and anxiety, and continue to express reluctance to teach future groups of sponsored students from the region. The magnitude of these consequences commended the incident to the attention of the researcher for scoping purposes. Anecdotal evidence available to the researcher, in the form of informal discussions with representatives from a range of English language centres, pre-university programs and universities, indicate that experiences described in this scoping study were not unique to the institution in question and that a number of Australian education providers remain hesitant to embark on wholesale recruitment in the region.

Nature of the scoping study
In order to provide a preliminary understanding of the difficulties experienced by Gulf students in Australia, informal exploratory questions were posed to teaching and support staff at a foundation program for international students affiliated to an Australian university. In addition, staff at two accommodation providers were approached for their recollections. Staff were asked to reflect on their experiences with the first students from Kuwait and nominate the
behaviours that indicated that these students were different from other international students. Teaching staff were asked questions such as:

- What was your impression of the Kuwaiti students' academic preparedness for your subject?
- How did they interact with other students in class?
- How did they seek to overcome any gaps in their academic knowledge?
- What were the main areas of difficulty that you observed?
- What were the students' explanations for these difficulties?
- Why do you think they experienced these difficulties?

Staff who had worked with the Kuwaiti group were able to identify areas of academic difficulty, as well as social transition issues, that the students had faced. They highlighted that unrealistic beliefs in their own ability, combined with excessive reliance on assistance from staff, exacerbated the difficulties faced. However, when asked to consider why these students had responded to their difficulties in ways not representative of the majority of the foundation program students, they were unable to explain their behaviour. By and large, staff described the Kuwaiti students as having "attitude problems", possibly stemming from their status as sponsored students, family wealth or cultural background.

The behaviours of the Kuwaiti cohort appeared to be the benchmark against which all subsequent students from the Gulf were judged. In addition, residual feelings of dissatisfaction with the experience seemed to cause apprehension among staff at the prospect of increased enrolments from the region. In particular, staff expressed concern than they did not have the knowledge, time or resources to support larger groups of Gulf students more effectively.

It is acknowledged that data collected may be considered unreliable on the basis that accounts were subjective and some recollections of dates, names and incidents occasionally conflicted with (or were not substantiated by) the memories of others. In addition, the voices of the students themselves are largely absent. However, it is significant that the time lapse between staff experiences with the Kuwaiti students and their discussion of these with the researcher did not appear to diminish the poignancy and sensitivity of their recollections. This reflects the seriousness of the issues raised by the experience for the institution and casts doubt on the ability of staff to support students from the Gulf States without extensive, specifically targeted preparation.

**Background**

In February 1997, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Higher Education sponsored 16 male students to undertake one year of foundation studies at an institution affiliated to an Australian university,
with a view to enrolling in Medicine and Dentistry. In February 1998, a further five commenced foundation studies, with the aim of enrolling in Medicine. At around the same time, a smaller (unconfirmed) number was sent to a foundation program based in another Australian state, also with the aim of enrolling in Medicine.

The Gulf States had been identified in the mid 1990s as a potential source of international students for Australian universities (Verma 2000). The region was observed to be unique as the unique social composition of nationals and expatriates created multiple opportunities for student recruitment. On the one hand, universities negotiated deals with Gulf Governments to enrol nationals sponsored to undertake undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in areas of specific need such as engineering, accounting, and medicine. On the other hand, education fairs also afforded the opportunity to attract children or expatriate residents in the region – mainly Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan nationals – denied entry to local institutions. For some universities, numbers of expatriates recruited from the Gulf were as high as those directly applying from the Subcontinent, although this is difficult to prove as enrolments were usually measured on the basis of student visa information provided by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, indicating commencements on the basis of citizenship (rather than country of last education).

In absence of data about Kuwaiti national enrolments in Australia, snapshot data provided by Australian Education International indicates the recruitment context in which the Kuwaiti students commenced their studies. The figures for Oman and the United Arab Emirates below indicate nationals only, whereas the numbers of Indian students include those who live on the Subcontinent, as well as the Diaspora.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1998</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>5,690</td>
<td>8,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Time series of Overseas Student Numbers by Country 1994 to 2000*
Australian Education International 2000

From its inception in the late 1980s, the Australian foundation program had attracted small, sporadic enrolments from the Subcontinent, and Middle East in general. Ten years later, the total cohort of commencing students for the February program in which the second cohort of Kuwaiti students commenced was around 440, including three students holding citizenship from the Subcontinent, three from the Middle East (plus five from Kuwait) and seven from Africa. Apart from these small groupings, the rest of the students were from North and South East Asia. Although numerically modest, students from areas such as the Middle East and Africa were considered valuable contributors to the program’s community, particularly in terms of cultural diversity.
Although the Kuwaiti cohort was not the first to arrive in Australia, it was one of the largest of any sponsored cohort to enrol in a single institution in Australia. Staff at the Australian foundation program were generally of the opinion that the outcome of the sponsorship deal was unsatisfactory: the students failed the program and returned home without having successfully gained admission to the competitive programs to which they aspired. The Kuwaiti students’ unhappiness – and the displeasure of the Ministry of Higher Education [MoHE] – affected staff and fellow students profoundly. In recalling the experience, academic and support staff conveyed feelings of powerlessness to assist the Kuwaiti students. Although it was evident that the students were experiencing difficulty, staff felt that the measures available to assist other [international] students in the program should have been effective in addressing this cohort’s particular learning difficulties.

As a consequence, staff expressed reluctance to work with large groups of sponsored students from the Gulf States. They cited lack of confidence and resources to meet their specific academic and social needs. No sponsored undergraduate students have been sent from Kuwait to Australia since this incident, indicating the MoHE’s lack of confidence in Australian universities to support their students in achieving their goals.

**Issues identified by the scoping study: 1. Poor English language standards**

Prior to the arrival of the first Kuwaiti students in February 1997, provision for the 16 sponsored students had been discussed over the course of a number of years. It is not clear how initial contact was made although it was suggested that it may have been through personal contact facilitated by staff from the Health Sciences faculty at the affiliated university. Senior staff travelled to Kuwait to meet the relevant authorities and took the opportunity to review the Year 12 national curriculum completed by the students, so as to develop an understanding of their academic background. They also met the students, who were in Kuwait preparing for the International English Language Testing System [IELTS] exams run by the British Council in Kuwait.

At the present time, the IELTS requirement for entry to the foundation program is a score of 6.0 overall with 6.0 in Reading and 6.0 in Writing. Applicants may use equivalent TOEFL results or performance in the institution’s diagnostic test as evidence of English language ability. Students from countries such as Singapore and Malaysia are not required to take additional testing provided they achieve minimum scores in English as a Second Language subjects in secondary school. It is noteworthy that English language requirements for the foundation program are comparatively high (foundation programs usually require IELTS 5.5 overall) due to the academic rigour of its affiliated university. The prestige of the latter may have been a significant factor in the Kuwaiti MoHE’s choice of that particular university and, by extension, the foundation program.
However, two weeks before the students' arrival, the selected students' IELTS results indicated that between 20 and 60 weeks of intensive English language tuition would be required before the students would be at the level of proficiency required to undertake the foundation program.

Upon arrival at the foundation program, students were required to sit a diagnostic test in order to ascertain which of the four “streams” of English they would undertake. More advanced streams of study had been designed for students whose prior education had been predominantly in English (for example, students from Singapore), so that they could focus on more advanced topics relevant to Australian university study. Other streams, however, were available for students who have never learnt in an English language environment, even though they may have undertaken prior studies in English language centres in their home country.

There was a small number of English teachers employed by the foundation program who were familiar with the specific language needs of Arabic speakers learning English, on the basis of their experiences teaching adult English classes to newly arrived Arab migrants in the 1970s and 1980s. These needs are described briefly below and outlined in more detail in the literature review that follows this chapter. For the most part, however, staff found the language needs of the Kuwaiti cohort difficult to address in the streamed structure of English classes. This was particularly the case due to the small numbers of Kuwaiti students compared to the larger cohort of international students who did not share these characteristics. In addition, the late 1990s were the “boom” period for international student enrolments in Australia (Australian Education International 2000) and the foundation program was no exception. Later staff were given to reflect that the relative inexperience of significant numbers of new staff employed to manage mushrooming enrolments may have undermined their confidence in dealing with a new and challenging cohort.

To begin with, the Kuwaiti students conveyed confidence that they would be best placed in the highest stream of English classes. Despite their IELTS and diagnostic tests indicating that their writing ability was not at a level compatible with other students in the highest stream, the Kuwaitis were adamant that their sophisticated vocabularies and talent for speaking in class set them apart from other students. In some cases, their requirement to be in the top stream appeared to be based on perceived negative connotations of being placed in lower streams. The students’ status as elite sponsored students was evidently cited by the students themselves as evidence of this. However, their poor IELTS and diagnostic test scores indicated that intensive remedial work would be required, negating the possibility for enrolment in higher streams of English.
The students’ misapprehensions about their own abilities were noted to cause difficulties in two particular areas: domination of classroom discussion; and unsatisfactory performance in written assessments. Both appeared to cause anxiety in the students, manifest in verbal aggression towards teachers and truancy.

Upon commencement of English language classes, the Kuwaiti students’ dissatisfaction with placement in lower streams of English was exacerbated by their international student peers’ limited confidence in expressing themselves verbally in class. Staff advised that the latter behaviour was common in lower English streams where students had difficulty with pronunciation. Their shyness to speak in class was also associated with their Confucian Heritage inasmuch as they may have been reluctant to risk losing face by making mistakes in front of their teachers and peers.

Accordingly, the eagerness of Kuwaiti students to respond to questions and initiate discussion was initially as welcome as it was atypical. Some staff described particular Kuwaiti students as “charming” and “inquisitive”. On the whole, however, staff noted that Kuwaiti students were likely to evince impatience towards their shy, reluctant peers, sometimes expressing negative views about students from Asian backgrounds. One staff member recounted the Kuwaiti students’ excitement at the prospect of working on “tongue twister” poems during one lesson. He observed their eagerness to demonstrate their linguistic superiority to the rest of the class, recalling their conviction that Arabic was significantly more complex than languages such as Vietnamese, Thai and Cantonese. In general, staff were given to speculate that Kuwaiti students’ attitudes towards other students were based the extent to which different ethnicities were permitted to undertake particular occupations in Gulf States.

With respect to written assessments, English teachers recounted the students’ shock at receiving results incommensurate with their speaking abilities. They also expressed surprise at achieving results lower than the peers whom they had observed to possess limited confidence in oral expression. They reported that students were apt to compare results achieved in Australia compared to back home in Kuwait, where they had achieved high academic averages with relatively little effort. On the basis of these interactions, staff had formed the impression that the Kuwaiti students had felt “entitled” to high results. They reflected that this assumption was unrealistic given the amount of work that would have been required to overcome their low reading and writing ability. In this sense, they felt that the students’ consistent unwillingness to incorporate new writing practices into their assessments was particularly problematic. In some cases, this was interpreted as laziness, as in the case of a student who had been required to write an essay on Aristotle and turned in a paper that was a word-for-word copy of an internet article on Aristotle Onassis.
After a few weeks, most of the Kuwaiti students ceased attending English classes. The small number of students who continued to attend reported that their friends had felt unchallenged by classroom activities and grown tired of being the only ones to contribute to class discussion. They also reported feeling demoralised by lack of improvement in assessments.

Staff recalled that the logistics of remedial measures undermined their effectiveness. Foundation students’ timetables continue to be determined by their English stream, then the elective subjects they are undertaking in preparation for undergraduate studies. All 16 students were in the lowest English stream and were all taking chemistry, mathematics and physics in anticipation of pursuing health sciences at university. They were therefore scheduled to attend all classes together, which appeared to compound their isolation. Staff noted that there had been much debate within the institution about the merits and drawbacks of this situation, as a “herd mentality” had appeared to emerge among the Kuwaiti students who were always being seen together. In addition one or two of the students took on the role of spokespersons for the group.

**Issues identified by the scoping study: 2. Academic background**

The foundation program sets its own academic entry requirements in terms of performance in secondary studies, with moderation from its affiliated university’s Academic Board. The students were selected by the MoHE for scholarships prior to being offered places in the foundation program. It would appear that the foundation program did not necessarily have input into the decision as to whether to admit them. This may have been because they had been selected for sponsorship by the MoHE on the basis of elite academic performance in secondary school. In cultivating a relationship with the Kuwaiti Government, the foundation program may have wished to err on the side of trusting the judgement of MoHE officials. As this was the first cohort, foundation program staff would have had no reason to assume that these students were anything other than the “best and brightest”. Their Year 12 results indicated that they had consistently achieved over 90% for all Year 12 subjects. In some cases, their results were in the high 90s or perfect scores.

Upon reviewing the Year 12 curriculum in Kuwait, senior staff observed that the Physics curriculum more closely resembled a car mechanics course than the equivalent of Year 11 Victorian Certificate of Education [VCE] or Singapore “O” Level Physics – the benchmarks for assumed knowledge for the foundation program. In addition, the students’ Year 12 results indicated that of the large number of subjects undertaken at matriculation level, a significant number relating to religious studies, moral education and national history. Some had also undertaken electronics, woodwork, pottery, art and French. Discussions with the students confirmed that their secondary school experience had been characterised by large class sizes, rote learning, private tuition and predictable examinations.
However, this educational background is not unique to Kuwaiti, Gulf or Middle Eastern students in Australia. Students who undertake secondary studies in Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, have a similar level of exposure to Islamic values in the curriculum. These students – particularly Sino Malaysians and Indonesians – make up a significant proportion of undergraduate international students in Australia and, by and large, make a successful transition to Australian tertiary education.

There is evidence that Kuwait’s education system places its citizens in a particularly disadvantageous position when they pursue tertiary studies overseas. For example, Kuwait was the only Gulf State to participate in the international Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS] survey in 1994/1995. The survey of over half a million students in 45 countries included several tests comprising multiple choice and open-ended questions. The compilation of results was designed to indicate the extent to which Seventh and Eighth Grade students were familiar with particular concepts and had been equipped with the skills required to tackle various problems. Kuwait was ranked third from the bottom in terms of average achievement in both Mathematics and Science for Eighth Grade students.9 As a consequence, the Assistant Under-Secretary for Student Affairs at the Ministry of Education in Kuwait commented that society would be justified in blaming the school system for “failing them” in terms of nation-building (Hussein 1992, p.463).

However, students from the two countries that were consistently ranked lower on the TIMSS scale – Colombia and South Africa – had also enrolled in the Australian foundation program and rarely experienced the same degree of difficulty in completing their studies as their Kuwaiti peers. Poor academic preparation was evidently an important issue for the Kuwaiti students but it was not clear to staff why the various “transition” or “bridging” programs – or remedial measures – did not ameliorate the situation for the Kuwaiti students, whereas they had successfully addressed the needs of other groups. Data from the most recent TIMSS study indicates that Kuwait’s position has not improved, despite significant investment in educational reform. In 2007, Kuwait ranks higher than only Tunisia, Morocco, Qatar, and Yemen in the Science study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 2008b) and, Qatar and Yemen in the Mathematics study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 2008a).

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9 Australia was ranked 16 (out of 41) for Eighth Grade Mathematics, 17 (out of 39) for Seventh Grade Mathematics, 11 (out of 41) for Eighth Grade Science and 13 (out of 39) for Seventh Grade Science. Of the top four source countries of international students in undergraduate programs in Australia: Singapore ranked 1 for all categories; Hong Kong was ranked 4 for Eighth Grade Mathematics, 4 for Seventh Grade Mathematics, 24 for Eighth Grade Science and 16 for Seventh Grade Science. Indonesia and Malaysia did not participate. (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 1999)
Issues identified by the scoping study: 3. Low motivation and its implications

By late May, two of the cohort – ostensibly representing all 16 Kuwaiti students – approached senior staff with an “exciting” idea: they wished to recommence the program in July. Although the Kuwaiti students were permitted to recommence their studies, “excuses” and misplaced “hope” were recurring themes in staff recollections of the remainder of the experience. Truancy continued to be a major problem, although it was noted that the students were likely to continue attendance if they enjoyed the class. The more discouraged they appeared by continuing poor performance in assessments – particularly in mathematics and science classes – the less likely they were to attend. One student did not attend a single class after the first week of his new enrolment and, along with another student, did not return to Australia after the 1997 Christmas break. At the time, Australian student visa regulations did not include the requirement that a minimum number of classes be attended. The 2001 amendments to the Education Services for Overseas Students [ESOS] Act could have led to cancellation of truant students’ visas and a requirement that they leave Australia.

When asked by a member of pastoral care staff during an open discussion forum about the reasons for their absenteeism, the students alleged that time management was the main difficulty they faced. All but two of the Kuwaiti students had lived in a boarding house near to the foundation program campus: this was their own choice of lodging. However, boarding staff management recalled the students as untidy and inconsiderate. They recounted numerous instances of the group of Kuwaitis gathering in communal spaces, talking loudly and smoking *shisha* until the early hours of the morning. They refused to share communal spaces with other student residents and did not leave these spaces tidy for others. This led to confrontations with other student residents. In one incident, a reproached Kuwaiti student responded by shouting, gesticulating and throwing furniture. Another punched his fist through the wall. The rest of the group shouted protests in their defence.

Not long afterwards, the entire group moved to serviced apartments based in a hotel in the Central Business District. Although this obviated the need for the cleaning required in the boarding house, the Kuwaiti students complained that the responsibility for paying bills and keeping track of other domestic arrangements undermined their ability to concentrate on study commitments. Hotel representatives recalled an incident where one student put towels in a microwave which caused a fire and set off the sprinkler system. The resulting damage to the hotel reportedly required such extensive consultation with the concierge that the entire cohort missed three weeks of classes.

In addition to absenteeism, the students’ feelings that they were unfairly treated were also evident in their interactions with staff outside class. In particular, it was noted that they rarely made appointments or visited staff during designated consultation times. When appointment
times were insisted upon, the students either turned up late and demanded to be seen, regardless of whether the staff member was committed to another student appointment or activity, or defaulted altogether. When consultations did occur, the students appeared unwilling to revise submitted work for the purpose of identifying areas of difficulty. They requested that staff explain the subject area “from scratch”, so that they could listen and absorb information rather than identify and work through problem areas.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, the Kuwaiti students continued to express confidence that they would be permitted entry to undergraduate medicine and dentistry programs. Staff recall their dismay at the students’ unwarranted confidence in their prospects of gaining admission to these competitive, rigorous programs. The students were also apparently confident that they would be able to continue their studies in the United States or United Kingdom, so that their disappointments with their Australian experience did not seem to dent unduly their attitude towards future studies. Teaching staff assumed that the Kuwatis were attracted to medical professions because of their prestige and earning potential. However, the extent to which these students understood the demands of such professions is unknown.

The next cohort of five Kuwaiti students enrolled in the Australian foundation program in February 1998, by which time, the original 16 were halfway through the repeated program. There is little extant documentation about the performance of the second cohort. However, it is generally held that the five new students appeared to be more motivated, and consequently performed much better, than the original 16. Staff have speculated that the second cohort arrived with negative assumptions based on feedback from the original group. It is possible that they encountered a more positive situation than anticipated. It is also possible that the MoHE used different selection criteria for next group of scholarship students. In an case, staff observed that the gap between the first group’s negative experiences and the comparatively positive outlook of the new arrivals, caused a palpable degree of shame and consternation among members of the original group.

As a consequence, teaching and support staff became aware of the blame that the first cohort placed upon them. It transpired that a number of complaints had been lodged by students with senior management at the foundation program, as well as the Kuwaiti authorities in Canberra. Staff recalled that ill feeling escalated to a point where both staff and students were visibly affected.

By July, two students claiming to represent the entire cohort informed foundation studies management that all Kuwaiti students would be withdrawing from the program in order to complete their studies elsewhere. Four days later, all had left the country with the exception of two students from the second cohort who requested permission to stay. Despite a number of
representations on their behalf by the Director of the foundation program, their request was
denied and the last two duly departed Australia a few days later.

Two of the original 16 Kuwaiti students actually passed the program, albeit with low averages.
One was made an offer for a Science degree by the foundation program’s affiliated university,
which he declined. Another student was granted a conceded pass on the basis that he had
made the effort to attend a number of classes and achieved a result only slightly lower than
the pass mark. Anecdotally, it was known that most of the original group went to Ireland in
order to undertake health science programs.

It was generally held that the experience had proven negative for both the Kuwaiti students
and staff at the foundation program. However, the students’ tendency to work and socialise in
a group may have obscured some individual positive experiences. Despite staff observations
of the Kuwaitis’ reluctance to interact with people from other backgrounds, one teacher – who
happened to be ethnic Chinese – reported that two of the 1997 group still kept in touch with
her via email. Evidently their relationship was cordial and in their discussions about future
study options they did not appear to preclude their return to Australia for postgraduate
studies. However, the Ministry of Higher Education in Kuwait did not send another sponsored
student to Australia for a number of years.

Contemporary relevance of the Kuwaiti experience
In late May 2008, the Kuwaiti MoHE commenced discussions with Australian Education
International as to the feasibility of sending 300 students overseas in 2008 and 500 in 2009.
AEI requested that Australian institutions consider applications of the sponsored students.
However, they also advised that “caution” be exercised when offering places, on the basis of
past experience. In particular, AEI highlighted:

[…] the need to clearly communicate the provisional nature of any enrolment
under the program. It would be prudent to ensure both the student and the
Kuwaiti MoHE understand that admission into the academic programs is based
on student performance in Foundation/English, if they do not achieve direct entry
upon application.

Australian Education International 2008, June 17

At the time the scoping study reported above was undertaken in 2003, the future intentions of
the Kuwaiti MoHE were not known. However, there is sufficient evidence that had the Kuwaiti
cohort arrived for the first time in 2008, circumstances may have been somewhat different.
For example, revisions to the Educational Services for Overseas Students Act in 2002 and
2007 have mandated reporting on international students to the Department of Immigration
and Citizenship. In the case of the Kuwaiti students, this would have decreased the possibility
for absenteeism, with mediation required upon first incidence and the threat of reporting and
student visa cancellation aimed at deterring further transgression.
With regard to sponsors’ expectations, greater activity in the Gulf States by Australian universities and other education providers would suggest that clearer understandings have been developed by governments and the prospective student community. Increased opportunities for interaction with Australian education providers have been enabled by: three Australian university campuses in Dubai (the University of Wollongong, The University of Southern Queensland, and Murdoch University) and the Australian International School in Sharjah; consolidation of Australian Education International in Dubai; appointment of education counsellors in Austrade departments in Dubai and Tehran; establishment of a Department of Immigration and Citizenship visa processing office in Abu Dhabi; and increasing numbers of education agents representing Australian institutions. Ongoing presence of staff representing the Australian education industry in the Gulf has supported: greater interaction with peak sponsoring bodies including Gulf Government departments and peak industry bodies; Memoranda between various levels of Gulf and Australian government, establishing links and agreements; high level delegations from Australian universities; and training programs for education agents. This has been complemented by concerted interaction with prospective students and their families by way of education fairs and predeparture briefings. Efforts to inform prospective students have been complemented by ongoing programs for enrolled students by way of: dedicated publications and websites; designated clubs and societies; peer mentoring; and student-at-risk programs at various institutions.

Such activities have possibly enhanced the confidence of staff in Australian universities working with Gulf students. Given the plateau of international student enrolments since the mid 2000s (Australian Education International 2007b), it may be extrapolated that fewer institutions would be expanding their international program staff as rapidly as was necessitated by the enrolment boom of the late 1990s. This being the case, it can be assumed that less inexperienced or otherwise under-prepared staff are being appointed to deal with international students. This observation is supported by the proliferation of dedicated sessions on Middle Eastern students at conferences and professional development programs run by Australian education industry bodies and individual institutions (several of which the researcher has addressed by invitation).

Given the disastrous experience of the Australian foundation program with Kuwaiti students of the late 1990s, AEI’s emphasis on the clarity of hurdle requirements for Australian universities would appear prudent. Greater vigilance regarding English language requirements for Gulf students prior to arrival would most certainly have averted the crisis experienced by the foundation program when low language proficiency was discovered. However, the recommendation does not address the greater issue of expectations on the part of students or sponsors with respect to academic preparedness for overseas study. For example, the
Market Update does not indicate the MoHE’s willingness to negotiate extended periods of English language study or bridging or remedial programs to address deficits in assumed knowledge. It is also not explicit as to the MoHE’s or students’ intentions in respect of courses such as medicine and dentistry from which, to date, no Gulf sponsored student has graduated. In addition, the Market Update does not forewarn providers of the expectations of “special treatment” commonly attributed to sponsored students, despite the limited capacity of universities to provide intensive individual support to international students.

Staff at the Australian foundation program reported in the scoping study were of the opinion that students from Kuwait had inflated estimation of their own abilities and unreasonable expectations of entitlement to high levels of support. Furthermore, there was residual anxiety among staff that all Gulf students might be prone to behave like the notorious Kuwaiti group to some extent. In the absence of relevant literature and targeted professional development, staff continued working on the assumption that Gulf students’ attitudes were derived from their status as sponsored students, family wealth or cultural background.

The significance of “face” in Gulf communities

The scoping study indicated that staff who have worked with the students from the Gulf States believe that unrealistic expectations are key to their underperformance and low motivation. In the case of the first group of Kuwaiti students, staff in the Australian foundation program identified the following areas where this was particularly evident: their underdeveloped abilities in English; the disadvantage at which their academic background had placed them; the results they would achieve in Australia; and the amount of work required to achieve results required to gain entry to medicine or dentistry. Staff advised that these areas were exacerbated by the students’ apparent refusal to take responsibility for the reality of their situation. Instead, staff felt that the students expected special treatment due to their status as Kuwaiti nationals who had received scholarships, despite evidence that their academic performance was lower than that of other students in the program. As a result, staff felt that the students (and, eventually, their sponsors) blamed them for their failure and “loss of face”.

All staff interviewed were familiar with notions of “face” in Confucian Heritage Cultures and were able to articulate ways in which classroom practices had been designed cognisant of student comfort levels. However, their efforts did not appear to mitigate the unhappiness of the Kuwaiti cohort. Furthermore, their efforts to develop a more accurate understanding of the students’ needs appeared to result in greater confusion.

The Kuwaiti students’ concerns about the perceptions of their families and other members of the Kuwaiti community were noted by the Student Counsellor, who described the students’ feelings of burden and responsibility. The students relayed their concern that future sponsored students would look to the experiences of the first cohorts to make decisions

21
about their own future studies, and that their “perceived failure” would hold negative consequences for their own employment and social opportunities upon their return home.

There is evidence that many international students are concerned about perceptions that their families hold as to their ability to succeed and diligence when studying overseas. This is particularly highlighted by Hofstede’s research into the individual and collectivist orientations of different cultural groups, which is discussed in Chapter 3 below. From this perspective, the similarities between Kuwaiti/Gulf and other groups of international students are discerned. However, obligation towards future students coming from their home country – particularly those representing a Government scholarship scheme – is a responsibility that sets Gulf students apart from other international students. Gulf students therefore bring a unique set of concerns and commitments to the Australian education setting.

In order to develop a clearer picture of the unique concerns of Gulf students, the literature review that follows provides an overview of contemporary social and economic issues in the Gulf States in order to set out the scope and relevance of Gulf students’ expectations. Research identifies a mismatch between local education output and labour market needs in several emirates\(^{10}\). For example, Kuwaiti and Saudi nationals’ preference for studies and professions outside the countries’ major industries suggests that other modes of employment have attractions not apparent in statistical analysis. The fieldwork explores the reasons for this by focusing on the aspirations and expectations of a group of students from Oman. Similarities between responses from the Omani respondents and attitudes of the Kuwaiti students (as described by staff) suggest that Gulf nationals consider the benefits of educational opportunities more broadly than the relationship to employment outcomes. The hypothesis is formed that Omani students tend to view the development of personal relationships as prerequisite for academic success. The reasons for this are explored in the fieldwork and tested in the fieldwork chapter that follows.

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\(^{10}\) **Emirates** are monarchies whose leaders are sometimes referred to as **Emirs**, derived from the Arabic *amir* meaning commander. As such, individual Gulf States are sometimes referred to as **emirates**. This is distinct from the United Arab Emirates [UAE], one of the Gulf States consisting of an affiliation of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujayrah, Ras Al Khaymah, Sharjah, and Umm Al Qaywayn.
CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Forming the hypothesis

Ascertaining Omani students’ expectations
This Chapter establishes an appropriate instrument with which to test the hypothesis derived from the literature review and scoping survey, that Omani students’ expectations of academic support have been formed by traditional modes of personal and family advancement and that this becomes problematic in the context of Australian education.

This chapter therefore identifies the reasons for choosing the 2004 cohort of sponsored undergraduates from the Sultanate of Oman studying in Melbourne as a representative sample. The interview schedule is set out and the use of Hofstede’s IBM surveys as a basis for fieldwork questions is explained. The limitations of this method are also considered. A detailed discussion of findings generated by this approach follows in Chapter 4.

Correlating the hypothesis formed from the review of bibliography with the characteristics of Omani students in Melbourne
The relevant bibliography suggests that society in the Gulf States is underpinned by a very specific set of values stemming from tribal origins. It is argued that these values, in particular the primacy of the family unit, have proven resilient when challenged by modern ideas and attitudes attendant upon the rapid economic development of the Gulf States since the discovery of oil.

The fieldwork used to test the hypothesis took the form of a qualitative case study conducted between 2004 and 2006 with a sample of sponsored undergraduates from the Sultanate of Oman studying in Melbourne. The students were interviewed over 18 months with a view to documenting their evolving aspirations; their perceptions of educational sponsorship; their career expectations; and their experiences of utilising the academic support services provided by Australian institutions.

Fieldwork sample selection
The 2004 undergraduate cohort from the Sultanate of Oman was identified as an appropriate sample for this study for the following four reasons.

The Ministry of Education in Oman is very familiar with requirements and conditions of overseas education. Ministry officials are also cognisant of the specific prerequisites of Australian universities as well as obligations to the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, who issue student visas. Broadening education opportunities have been a distinguishing feature of the rule of The Omani Sultan, Qaboos bin Said, since his accession in 1970. Scholarships for Omani students
to study in the United States and United Kingdom have been available since the early 1970s. Sponsored students from Oman have been consistently enrolling in Australian universities and their pathway programs, as well as English language courses, since the late 1990s (Allen 2006, p.5). Enrolments in Australian institutions increased after 11 September 2001, when student visas to the USA and UK became more difficult for Arab students\textsuperscript{11} to obtain. By the mid-1990s, Omani students were enrolled in a range of Australian institutions at a variety of levels – including English language courses, primary and secondary schools, undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and vocational education and training – and in several cities across the country. Unlike students in other Gulf sponsorship programs, no Omanis are enrolled in Australia with the official intention to study Medicine. Although there is a strong need for Omani (as opposed to expatriate) Doctors in Oman, the competitive requirements for entry into undergraduate and graduate medical programs in Australia have thus far proven prohibitive for Gulf nationals. This suggests that the Ministry of Higher Education has more realistic expectations of Omani students’ capacity to succeed in rigorous, competitive programs than the sponsors of some other Gulf students in Australia.

The scholarship allocation process in Oman is one of the most transparent and meritocratic in the Gulf. Enrolling institutions may be confident that they are receiving the “best and brightest” sponsored graduates from the Omani secondary schools. \textit{Thanawiya Amma} [Government moderated matriculation] results required to obtain full and partial scholarships for undergraduate studies overseas are open to the public at large and strictly administered. Enrolment destinations are decided in terms of graduate outcome, qualification, institutional availability and country (in that order), on the basis of projected human resource requirements submitted to the Omani Ministry of Education by other Ministries.

For the purposes of the fieldwork, working with the Omani cohort offers a unique opportunity to ascertain whether gender is a determinant of expectations in Oman, particularly when negotiating academic issues with female support staff in Australia. The sponsored Omani cohort has consistently comprised equal proportions of male and female students. Ensuring educational opportunities for women has been a central pillar of Sultan Qaboos bin Said’s economic and educational reform since the 1970s, with the result that the current Minister of Education is a woman, and several key cabinet posts are held by women (Al Shmeli 2009, July 2-3; McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004; United Nations Development Programme, 2002). This is not a representative state of affairs, as it has been argued that limited opportunities for many Gulf women to study in overseas universities – forcing their enrolment in local institutions – has limited study areas to humanities and social sciences, thus preventing their participation in the productive workforce (Benard 2006; al-Talei 2005, October 14; United Nations Development Programme 2004; Al-Misnad 1984).

\textsuperscript{11} To avoid excessive generalisation, \textit{Gulf students} will not be referred to as “Arab students” or “Muslim students”, while acknowledging that these two definitions could indeed be broadly applied. \textit{Arab students} in Australia may be international students from any Arab League country, but also Australian Citizens or Permanent Residents with family background from these nations. These students are likely to be, but not always, Muslim. However, Muslim students may also hail from any country in the world.
Oman’s status as the least wealthy of the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries also makes it an ideal setting for the fieldwork. Omani citizens are less affluent than their Gulf neighbours, and it has therefore been argued that the correlation between wealth and “work ethic” is less evident among Omani nationals. Oman’s income from oil and gas exports is one of the lowest per citizen in the region, thus reliance on expatriates in the workforce is among the lowest in the Gulf (Birks & Sinclair 1980, pp.23-24). Omanis do not enjoy the same level of “coddling” by the state as their more affluent GCC neighbours – they are required to work to earn a living (Rodenbeck 2002, p.17). A case in point is that between 1995 and 1996 one third of Omani students pursuing tertiary studies overseas financed their own studies, whereas all Kuwaiti students were supported by the state (Sanyal 1998, p.17). However, Omanisation remains critical, as less than 17 years of oil reserves remain in 2009 if present rates of production are maintained. Despite recent successes in Omanising the national workforce in various key industries, the challenges associated with building a skilled national workforce are as evident in Oman as they are throughout the GCC (Chapman et. Al. 2009; McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004; Rodenbeck 2002). This has been attributed to population growth and the massive youth population – some 43% of Oman’s population is under the age of 15 – signalling the volume of secondary school graduates who will require additional qualifications to meet workforce requirements (Chapman et. al. 2009). Significant successes in Omanising the national workforce are discussed below in the Economic and Social Policy section of the literature review that follows in Chapter 3. However, the problem of Omanis holding aspirations “typical of a highly wealthy oil sheikhdom”, despite small oil reserves and falling revenues, is also attested (Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.60).

These four factors suggest that Oman is a viable source of students from the Gulf States for Australian universities. Given the level of familiarity with overseas education requirements, the academic qualification of students, ostensible attitudes towards work, and lesser restrictions on interaction between genders, it might be assumed that Omani students would adjust more readily to the Australian education setting. However, early literature on oil production and employment in the Gulf States predicts that Omani nationals will reject opportunities to work in the private sector due to lack of skills, disdain for working with “foreigners” and unrealistic aspirations due to the wealth of their GCC neighbours (Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.64).

Scoping undertaken prior to the fieldwork suggests that Omani students were as unlikely to utilise academic support effectively as other cohorts of Gulf students for whom variables such as the above are not in evidence.

Selection of a sample to interview was influenced in the first instance by the scholarship allocation process. In 2004, as in previous years, a total of 30 full scholarships comprising tuition fees plus

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12 Although Bahrain’s oil and gas reserves are even lower than Oman’s, its status as the banking and investment capital of the Gulf has ensured economic diversity and stability despite some 64% of the workforce being expatriates (Rodenbeck 2002, pp.7-8).
stipend were awarded to students for the purpose of pursuing undergraduate qualifications in Australia. A further (undisclosed) number of partial scholarships comprising payment of tuition fees only was also awarded. Students allocated to Victorian institutions were selected to participate in fieldwork interviews on the basis of their proximity, and accessibility, to the researcher. Twelve of the total cohort of students were allocated to Victorian institutions, of whom two were partially sponsored. Half of the students were required to undertake English language studies upon arrival in Australia. All were required to take a pathway program prior to commencement of their undergraduate studies. By 2004, some 118 Omani students were enrolled in pathway programs in Australia (Australian Education International 2007, September). Thus although twelve students was a small sample, it effectively comprised 30% of the fully sponsored commencing cohort and 10% of total Omani enrolments in the Australian pre-university sector in 2004.

The students in Victorian institutions were initially spread in groups of six across five universities in metropolitan Melbourne with which the Omani Ministry of Higher Education [MoHE] had negotiated an agreement. The institutions had been selected on the basis of their course offerings, as well as their willingness to offer fee remission for one fully sponsored student in six: in effect, giving the Ministry a “six-for-five deal”. Allocation of individual students to specific degrees and institutions was the prerogative of the Ministry, guided by institutional advice regarding prerequisites and entry requirements. Determination of pathways including length of English language study required were the responsibility of the enrolling institution, subject to MoHE restrictions regarding funding availability for extended language study.

Interviewees had been allocated to four different institutions. Five would be undertaking English language studies. Of those taking pathway studies, three students would enrol in practical diploma certificates, the remainder were scheduled to enrol in foundation programs. Respondents were aiming to gain entry to the following undergraduate degrees: Actuarial Studies, Biomedical Engineering, Business Law, Industrial Engineering and Management, Investment and Finance, Mechatronics Engineering, Podiatry and Telecommunications Engineering.

Interviews with the twelve Omani students allocated to Victorian universities were conducted in Muscat immediately after the announcement of scholarship allocations in August 2004. The second round of interviews was held when participants had settled in to their English language or pathway studies in Victoria in late 2004 and early 2005. By the time the third round was held in late 2005 and early 2006, students pursuing English language studies had achieved the required proficiency to progress to their pathway studies. Those undertaking pathway programs were approaching completion of their foundation studies or diploma program and applying for undergraduate studies.
Between the initial scholarship allocation and arrival of the selected students in Victoria, two students were lost to the fieldwork sample. The first student was removed from the Australian cohort and sent to the UK, after re-evaluation of his application by the Australian university. The second student revised his own selection of institution and successfully negotiated with the MoHE to have his scholarship re-allocated to another university. A further two declined invitations to participate in further interviews after arriving in Australia. The final sample therefore comprised eight students. Qualitative studies of Gulf students in overseas universities tend to be characterised by small sample sizes (e.g. Alazzi & Chiodo 2006; Douglas 2005), mainly due to low enrolment numbers but also possibly owing to the sensitivity of interview questions about issues such as academic performance and motivation.

Instrument design
Several issues informed instrument design. The small sample size required interview questions to be drafted so as to enable preliminary generalisations about Omani students to be made and provide direction for future quantitative studies. The limited language ability of half the interviewed cohort necessitated development of simple open-ended questions that could be easily articulated during the interview. Questions were also designed to afford flexibility in relation to the student’s progress through their studies: that is, they were relevant to each phase of the student’s studies and could therefore be repeated during each phase. The repetition engendered familiarity, which encouraged as rich and detailed discussion as possible given language constraints. It also enabled comparison in responses between each round of interviews.

In addition, the interviewees’ familiarity with interview questions enabled them to feel relaxed and unthreatened by the process. Cultural sensitivities about personal relationships required that trust be built with individual interviewees, so that they would feel comfortable sharing their aspirations and experiences with the researcher. Questions were posed to interviewees in a friendly, relaxed, conversational manner, usually in a public social environment or the student’s home, consistent with Omani preferences for relationship-building (Dew & Shoult 2002). Plain language statements and consent forms were all translated into Arabic, as were plain language statements distinguishing the researcher’s role from that of admission staff from Australian universities visiting the region at the time.

Interview questions were based on issues identified in the scoping study, as well as the instrument used by Hofstede (2001) to survey IBM employees. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 below, Hofstede’s surveys elicited employee preferences in relation to their working environment. By using the same question in a range of countries, he was able to draw comparisons between attitudes towards various management practices in order to draw inferences about cultural values. As is further discussed in Chapter 3, his findings continue to be influential among scholarly researchers and professional practitioners seeking to understand the experiences of international students in Australian universities, despite criticism of the way in which his cultural dimensions have been
constructed and applied. Hofstede’s study identified Arab employees of IBM as manifesting high Power Distance, high Uncertainty Avoidance, and strong Collectivist orientation. High Uncertainty Avoidance, in particular, differentiated the Arab cohort from cultural backgrounds representing the majority of the international undergraduate students in Australia. This was consonant with the relevant bibliography which indicated that Gulf students were more likely to leverage personal relationships to overcome difficulties. It also echoed the recollections of staff described in the scoping study outlined in Chapter 1, that Gulf students held unrealistic expectations of the level of academic support and pastoral care they would be able to provide.

Interviews for this study therefore started from the premise that Omani students would seek to minimise uncertainty in relation to hurdle requirements for progressing through their studies, and that this would reveal the importance they would place on their relationships with academic and support staff. Questions were designed to elicit participants’ understanding of the challenges they would face – anticipated and actual – and their opinions as to extent to which experiencing and overcoming such challenges would generate useful skills for their future employment in the private sector. On the basis of the scoping undertaken for this study, the interviewee’s concerns were expected to reflect the current stage of the enrolment procedure: thus prior to departure, interviewees would be likely to express concern about the new teaching and learning environment, learning in English and finding accommodation. However, upon commencement of their studies, responses were likely to focus on assessment issues. Closer to the end of their pathway studies, a clearer picture would emerge as to the extent that students were able to utilise academic support services.

The interviews were based on the following questions:

What type of work do you want to do when you finish your studies?
What sorts of activities and responsibilities do you think this will include?
What is it about this type of work that appeals to you?
Is there a particular area of specialisation you would like to follow?
How many years do you think you will stay in this type of work?
Where (in which country or countries) would you like to work?

What do you think you will need to learn at university in order to do this kind of work?
How do you think you will need to learn at university in order to do this kind of work?
That is, what kinds of skills do you think will need to be developed?
Have you studied using these skills before? If not, how easy do you think they will be to learn?

In what ways do you think studying in Australia will be different from secondary school in Oman?
What sorts of skills do you think will be most highly valued?
How confident are you of doing well?
How will studying in Australia help you to work in your chosen area?

Participants were encouraged during all three interviews to reflect on the skills required to succeed in their chosen field. Open-ended questions were designed to allow for students to elaborate on the extent to which they felt they already possessed key attributes and the challenges they anticipated in the process of their acquisition. This approach was successful in revealing participants’ assumptions about their role in, and responsibility for, overcoming difficulties faced, compared to those of academic and support staff.

However, direct questioning on personal relationships was avoided during the three phases of interviews. Cultural sensitivities about the overt discussion of wasṭa required indirect questioning to ensure that discussions could evolve over time as trust was built between the researcher and participants (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). In addition, the researcher did not wish to appear to pre-empt difficulties that the students might face. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews on related issues allowed discussion to evolve freely, as students were encouraged to reflect on their present experiences in the context of aspirations for the future. This also ensured that the researcher was not seen by the interviewees to be underestimating the difficulties they faced, or influencing the ways in which they might seek assistance.

Scope
The series of three interviews per student over a period of 18 months afforded a unique opportunity to gather rich and substantial data about the individual experiences of Omani students. Additional data were recorded including the students’ gender, schooling (private or public) and geographical location (metropolitan or rural). Moreover, some students volunteered information about levels of family education and academic performance in terms of IELTS scores, subject results and whether they achieved entry into their designated undergraduate program.

It is acknowledged that the small sample size limits the potential to yield definitive conclusions about Omani students, or Gulf students more broadly. In addition, small sample size and qualitative data make triangulation with quantitative research undertaken on larger cohorts of international students somewhat impractical. Future studies should also attempt to capture more detailed information about students’ socio-economic status, if cultural sensitivities permit, to investigate the relevance of this variable.

In terms of the data collected, various factors may conceivably have impeded students’ ability or willingness to disclose information about their experiences. Although this was not evident to the researcher, cultural sensitivities about personal relationships and perceived proximity to authority (such as the University of Melbourne, the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman or the Australian
Department of Immigration and Citizenship) may have limited – or intensified – the way in which difficulties were described (Gillespie & Riddle 2004, p.150).

**Identifiers**

Students participated in the study on the proviso that they would not be identified. Thus, the data are attributed to participants by means of the following aliases: Aziza, Hamid, Jabbar, Jalil, Karim, Latifa, Majida, Nura, Rahim, Samad, Wahid, and Zahir. Although the names are reasonably common in the Middle Eastern and Muslim world, they bear no resemblance to those of actual participants.

To preserve anonymity in a small sample, the names of English language centres, pathway programs and universities are not mentioned in relation to participant aliases. The undergraduate degrees they aimed to pursue are occasionally revealed when relevant to the data. Likewise, private school graduates are not distinguished from government school graduates, although occasional mention of secondary school background is made where relevant. Where the family name of a significant Omani clan is mentioned, aliases have been removed to avoid identification.

**Data analysis**

Fieldwork data were initially grouped into major themes relevant to the stage of their studies during which students were interviewed i.e. prior to departure for Australia; soon after arrival and commencement of English language or pathway studies; and close to completion of pre-university studies. Despite the students’ staggered arrival and commencement times – largely determined by whether English language study was required – consistent themes emerged that indicated clear discrepancies between the challenges that students anticipated experiencing (academic or otherwise) and those which presented significant ongoing difficulty for their transition to studying in Australia. The data are therefore presented thematically, in terms of anticipated and actual challenges, in order for mismatched expectations to be clearly identified.

For the most part, challenges are consistent with those identified in literature cataloguing adjustment difficulties of international students e.g. limited understanding of course and career outcomes; difficulties with independent time management; and reluctance to adopt new study strategies. In addition, English as a Foreign language is confirmed as an area of difficulty for some students. However, the ongoing discrepancy between the anticipated and actual challenge of utilising academic support services to overcome academic difficulty faced is highlighted as particularly problematic. This issue is consistent with the concerns conveyed by staff in the scoping study and highlights how the expectations of students interviewed impede their effective transition to the Australian university setting.
Testing the hypothesis

The factors which distinguish Gulf students among international students at Australian universities begin with the reasons why they are pursuing Australian undergraduate degree programs. The implications of the fact that Gulf students have been selected and directed into courses of study by sponsors pursuing a workforce-nationalisation agenda are recognised and readily reported by academic support staff at Australian institutions, despite the fact that they do not sufficiently explain how or why the students are dissatisfied with their experiences in Australian institutions, as will be argued below.

Staff understanding of the behaviour of Gulf students is described in the preliminary scoping study described in Chapter 1 where academic and support staff in an Australian pathway program discussed their impressions of an early group of sponsored students from the Gulf. The main explanations for these students’ unique behaviour to emerge were low English language standards, inadequate academic preparation, and poor work ethic. These themes are further explored in the literature review in Chapter 3, with particular focus on research into difficulties faced by Arabic speakers learning English, surveys of education and training in the Middle Eastern region, and the unique configuration of employment in relation to the rentier economy in the Gulf region. Staff participating in the scoping study felt that these issues were exacerbated by the students’ unrealistic expectations of the assistance that they would be able to provide. Therefore, the relationship between education, employment and motivation is a key point of discussion in the literature review. It is related to the critical importance of personal relationships in reducing uncertainty in a competitive marketplace. This hypothesis is then tested in the fieldwork, outlined in Chapter 4, and evaluated in the Conclusions and Recommendation section that follows.
CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the differences between students from the Gulf States and other international students

This chapter outlines the thinking that has informed the fieldwork and reveals the shortcomings in the available literature’s capacity to explain why Gulf students experience Australian education so differently from other international students. The relevant literature is investigated on the basis of issues identified during the scoping study outlined in Chapter 1, namely: unrealistic expectations; difficulty in improving English language skills, particularly writing; inadequate academic preparation for overseas study; low motivation and poor work ethic.

The available literature is of disparate quality and varying relevance. It is also dispersed, and the difficulty of accessing certain items is a further hindrance to any staff in Australian universities interested in improving their knowledge of the specific needs of the Gulf cohort.

The review is divided into two sections. The first focuses on research that assists the development of a clearer understanding of the issues outlined above in the context of Middle Eastern culture and economic development, including: analysis of Middle Eastern education systems; studies of employment policies and management practices; and scholarly research into cultural values. The second section comprises an equally relevant body of literature falling into the following broad areas: investigations of the experience of Gulf students studying overseas; research on international students, including definitions of student expectations and accounts of their capacity for learning in English, with particular reference to Arabic speakers.

These resources enable construction of a hypothesis on the basis of differences in cultural values between Gulf students, other significant cohorts of international students and Australian students/staff. The hypothesis uses some of the cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (2001) to highlight Gulf citizens’ concern to minimise risk associated with future employment opportunities through the consolidation of personal relationships. This will connect with a tendency on the part of Gulf students to place responsibility for their learning on the teaching and support staff assigned to them. It also accounts for the dissatisfaction with the level of support they perceive that they are receiving, to which they attribute their poor academic performance, as seen in the scoping study in Chapter 1. The connection is tested in the fieldwork reported in Chapter 4.
PART I THE MIDDLE EAST

In order to provide a context for understanding the expectations of Gulf students with respect to education, this section of the literature review takes a closer look at the relationship between two key areas of Gulf society: economic and social policy, and cultural values. The first section outlines the growth of employment opportunities and welfare benefits enabled by oil discovery in the region, and highlights key aspects of Gulf policy relating to employment of nationals in the face of declining resources and population growth. This is followed by a précis of international reviews and local research into the implications of employment policies for education systems in the region, with a focus on student expectations. The second section is concerned with family expectations as revealed by literature on family values. Family attitudes towards employment are argued to stem from deep-seated cultural values that are concerned with “building face”.

These two sections are followed by a discussion of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, which provide a framework for understanding how attitudes and expectations relating to education and employment differentiate students from the Gulf States from other groups of international students in the Australian educational setting. An analysis of literature relating specifically to Gulf students and international students in Australia follows.

1. Economic and social policy

1. a). Oil revenue and the welfare state

Relevant to this study is research on the economic impact of oil discovery in the capital-rich Gulf States; literature on employment preferences; and studies of the outcomes of secondary schooling. A number of these sources are directly relevant to issues identified in preliminary scoping undertaken for this study. However, no single source or area of literature meets the needs of academic support staff in understanding the reasons behind Gulf students’ behaviour beyond what is already known or assumed about rentier economies.

In considering the relationship between motivation and academic achievement, it is evident that the extensive Kuwaiti welfare system has significant implications for development of the country’s education system:

The Kuwaiti student is provided for by the government from kindergarten to the end of his postgraduate work at the university. Much of his failure is tolerated and he is given every opportunity for success. Although such a policy looks wise at first sight, it is creating some dangerous side-effects. It is engendering too much dependence on the government, reducing the feeling of responsibility, and having an adverse effect on incentive for hard work.

Kharma 1977, pp.80-81
A significant body of data on the economic output of the Gulf States supports this hypothesis. In particular, the extensive work undertaken on oil revenue, migration trends and employment data has led to speculation as to the reasons why Gulf citizens are so reliant on their governments. Therefore, literature on the region’s oil industry and the scale of expatriate labour required provides some illumination as to the attitudes of Gulf citizens towards education and employment.

1. b). Pace and scale of social and economic change
An illuminating statement from Ahmed bin Byat, Chief Executive of Dubai’s Internet City, highlights the main contemporary socio-economic issues faced by Gulf governments:

“I grew up with camels,” says [...] bin Byat, flicking back the folds of his crisp white headdress to sip his cappuccino in a glass-walled conference room. “My generation’s been through a time machine that’s left our parents in the old world and put our children in the new one.” The pace has been exciting, he says, but also stressful: “You constantly have to make decisions that will have an impact far into the future. You have to choose what to take with you and what to leave behind, because you can’t take everything.”

Rodenbeck 2002, pp.3-4

Time travel is a recurring theme in Rodenbeck’s commentary for The Economist, in which bin Byat’s statement was quoted, as he outlines the scale and pace of changes in the Gulf States since the exploitation of oil reserves in the 1940s. He lauds Gulf governments for implementing measures to effect genuine improvement in their citizens’ lives, for example, trebling literacy levels, adding 20 years to life expectancy, and creating world-class infrastructure.

The impact of these achievements on individual citizens is difficult to confirm. However, in the case of Kuwait, the extensive demographic records kept by the Government provide a clearer picture of the socio-economic situation at the macro and micro levels and reveals the rise of modern day Kuwait from its origins as a small economy dependent on activities such as hunting and pearl diving, and on trade (Ghabra 2002). Oil was discovered in Kuwait in the 1930s and its first exploitation in 1946 generated an income of $760,000 US. By 1971, oil revenue had risen to $963 million US and exceeded $8.9 billion by 1977. This makes the Kingdom of Kuwait one of the wealthiest Gulf States. It has continued to enjoy the highest GNP per head – from $15,840 US in 1974 to $17,123 US in 2002 – in the region (Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.128, Table 1). Kuwait’s oil reserves are currently estimated to produce 2.15 million barrels a day of crude oil. At the current rate of production, this was estimated in 2002 to last for another 126 years (Rodenbeck 2002, p.17). The Sultanate of Oman, a Gulf State of similar population size, produces 0.96 million barrels per day, at which rate, reserves are estimated to last another 11 years. Due to the size and predicted longevity of its oil reserves, Kuwait has not felt the imperative to diversify its economy as urgently as emirates such as Oman.
However, Kuwait’s undue reliance on expatriate labour is regarded as a point of vulnerability. Between 1946 and 1977, the number of Kuwaiti citizens tripled to 470,123: this figure doubled by 1999. The number of non-Kuwaiti nationals working in the country reached 1.5 million in 1999, with the result that nationals made up only slightly over 30% of the population (Birks & Sinclair 1980, pp.106-107). Expatriates living in Kuwait include 35% other Arab nationals (mostly Palestinians), 9% South Asians (mostly Philippino and Indonesian), 7% Asians from the Sub Continent (Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi), and 4% Iranians. The invasion by Iraq during the first Gulf War saw a mass exodus of non-nationals, weakening the country’s capacity to function and defend itself. Subsequent civic and economic rebuilding was placed under significant strain by the absence of foreign expertise and labour. Although the Kuwaiti Government had announced plans to reduce reliance on non-nationals in the private sector, the status quo of 55% expatriates – all of whom were employed in the private sector – resumed shortly after the War (Longva 1997, p.243).

While Gulf governments are keenly aware of the severity of this imbalance in their workforce and its implications, the absence of “urgent action” has exacerbated the problem (Rodenbeck 2002, p.4). In particular, rising youth unemployment has become problematic in the context of regional security since September 11 2001. A range of data confirms the validity of these concerns. For example, in 2002 alone some 10,000 graduates from secondary school, university and other education institutions have entered the Kuwaiti job market annually (Ghabra 2002, pp.107-108). Given that more than 60% of Kuwaiti nationals were under the age of 19 in 1985, increasing competition for jobs seems certain together with frustration on the part of new graduates unable to secure the employment to which previous generations had become accustomed. The Kuwaiti public sector’s reliance on income generated from oil revenue will become more problematic given the limited extent of reserves remaining and the present rate of production (Rodenbeck 2002, p.17). It has also been predicted that limited economic diversification across the region will see “cradle-to-grave welfare systems […] come apart” (Rodenbeck 2002, p.4). In addition, limited water supplies and the inability of desalination plants to meet the needs of all citizens are creating additional tensions within communities and between emirates (Foley 2002).

It is likewise argued that the increasing volatility of oil prices has had a significant impact on the United Arab Emirates’ capacity for economic growth and diversification (Foley 2002). The UAE is particularly vulnerable due to its reliance on the growth of an entrepreneurial culture among nationals, which assumes government support and subsidy. Emirati nationals continue to seek employment in the public sector by first preference: saturation precludes the automatic appointment of the 2,000 Emirati nationals who join the job market each year, and some 20,000 UAE nationals were unemployed by the end of 1999 (Foley 2002, p.63).
In light of the above, the assumption that Gulf citizens are extremely wealthy is easily refuted. Although education and health care are universal and free to nationals throughout the region, and generous subsidies for housing, weddings, families and business propositions are available, significant wealth is the preserve of royal and established merchant families. Despite its massive oil reserves, the size of its population renders the per capita income of Saudi Arabia the lowest of all Gulf States and, in fact, little more than that of Mexico (Peterson 2009, p.4; Rodenbeck 2002, p.4). Likewise, most families in the United Arab Emirates “just get by” notwithstanding their entitlement to subsidised housing and interest-free loans (Krause 2008, p.29).

Likewise, the benefits of state provisions for educational opportunities for individual citizens are less positive than might first appear. By 1990-1991, some 26,000 female students and 24,000 male students were enrolled in Kuwaiti secondary schools (Ghabra, pp.107-108). Students enrolled in institutions of higher learning grew from 400 in 1946 to 16,000 in 1995 and 18,000 in 1998. However, UNESCO data indicate that in the late 1990s 31% of Kuwaiti university students were enrolled in teacher training; 34% in law and social sciences; and 23% in natural sciences, engineering and agriculture (United Nations Development Programme 2002, p.155, Table 19). Kuwait’s national economy may be heavily reliant on oil production but few of its nationals were undertaking tertiary studies with a view to pursuing careers in this industry.

Detailed employment data attest that in the mid 1980s, 21% of the Kuwaiti workforce were employed in “professional and technical” roles; 27.6% in clerical work; and 32.9% in “services” (Longva 1997, p.63, Table 3.4). By 1988 well over half of Kuwait’s citizens were directly employed by the state (Gause 1994). Where some 42% of working citizens indicated that they were in the employ of the public service (the “services” indicated by Longva), an additional number worked for the central bank, Kuwait Airways, Kuwait Petroleum Company, government-sponsored research agencies and government-owned corporations, and the military (Gause 1994, pp.58-59). In other data, military roles are included in public sector figures (Abdelkarim 2001, p.19). Elsewhere, it is contended that “services” entail employment in the government sector (Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.68). This is mirrored by data for Oman indicating that 60% of Omani nationals are engaged in “community services” in 1990 to public sector employment (Gause 1994, p.59). The United Nations Development Programme report into Arab Human Development points out that the public service is often the only employment avenue for women in the Gulf States (2002, p.92). However, in Saudi Arabian data the 27% of nationals undertaking “community and personal services” in 1974 are designated as engaged in business negotiations to ensure royal patronage and family support (Ibrahim 1982, p.95). This is argued to include a significant proportion of work undertaken by nationals to fulfil the kaffil or silent partner role required for foreign business enterprise or labour importation. In the absence of more specific information, is it presumed that women would not fulfil the role of
*kafil*, particularly in emirates such as Saudi Arabia, due to the nature of work required i.e. private business meetings with men.

Despite the extensive data made available by the Kuwaiti Government on employment and social composition, there is occasionally a discrepancy in the figures quoted. For example, Birks and Sinclair observe in 1980 that 74% of employees are Kuwaiti nationals, accounting for 38.5% of “Kuwaitis’ share of all employment” (p.68). However, Rodenbeck put the percentage at 93 in 2002 (p.7). This suggests that either the proportion has grown exponentially in the space of 12 years or the data can be interpreted differently, depending on which industries are considered to be government-run. Additional doubt has been cast on data that lack: distinction between adults available for work and young people below school-leaving age; consideration of restrictions placed on work for women in the region; and acknowledgement of the high proportion of *Bedouin* nomads in the population who may or may not be included in the data (Ibrahim 1982, pp.95-97). It has also been pointed out that the high rate of illiteracy in the local population should also be taken into account (Looney 1994, p.34).

Despite different interpretations of the data, a consistent imbalance between workforce needs and national employment is evident in the region. An undue reliance on expatriates in the manufacturing and construction industries is evident in Kuwait: these sectors account for 19% of all employment but attract only 9% and 6% of the Kuwaiti workforce respectively. By contrast, agriculture and fisheries account for 53% of national employment but make a comparatively small contribution to the GNP (Birks & Sinclair, p.152, Table 38). In Saudi Arabia, analysis of 1974 Census data reveals that 90% of Saudi revenue was generated by the oil industry and yet as few as 1.5% of Saudi nationals were employed in this sector. By contrast, 52% of the national workforce nominated their professional area as “agricultural” whereas this sector only accounted for 5% of GNP (Ibrahim 1982, p.95).

Such data have led to the conclusion that “[…] most of the Saudi workforce is irrelevant to the Saudi national economy” (Ibrahim 1982, p.95). Furthermore, Gulf nationals’ tendency to use Government employment as “indirect subsidised welfare” is not evident in official figures, which also do not detail the direct and indirect financial benefits and subsidies distributed to nationals (ibid.). The resilience of this situation has been blamed on lack of incentives provided by the Saudi Government for nationals to skill themselves in anticipation of modern workforce participation (ibid.). This, in turn, has had serious consequences for the Saudi work ethic:
Becoming instant millionaires in Saudi Arabia is still the fortune of a minority, but there has been enough such individuals for the others to see. This is not the familiar American “rags to riches” mythology, which still emphasises individual hard work. In the Saudi context, it is rather from “rich to richer” with little or no work and with the shortest route possible.

Ibrahim 1982, p.112

In Oman, however, it is not uncommon for Omani nationals to undertake blue collar employment (Robson 2007, May 4). This has enabled a number of key sectors to replace expatriate workers with Omanis. For example, the banking sector is now 95% Omanised (despite the policy not always being “welcomed” by employers) and levels in industries such as telecommunications, oil, gas, electricity and water are as high as 63% (Hancock 2008, September 19). However, traditional fishing and farming industries continue to account for a third of the national workforce (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004, p.39; Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.60). These industries are being maintained through significant Government subsidy. Despite the proliferation of higher education opportunities in Oman, the number of secondary school graduates continues to exceed employment opportunities (Chapman et. al. 2009; Hancock 2008, September 19; Robson 2007, May 4). In addition, falling oil revenues may require nationals to subsidise their own education through family contribution or student loans – a very new concept in the Gulf region – which may diminish the numbers of students in a position to obtain qualifications without a scholarship (Chapman et. al. 2009). This being the case, the national unskilled labour force will continue to grow, despite recent successes in Omanisation. The “unrealistic expectations and ambitions” observed of some Omani nationals, and attributed to the rentier economy, may continue to undermine employer confidence in Omanisation efforts as the unskilled labour force grows (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004, p.125).

1. c). Background to the Nationalisation agenda of the Gulf States

In capital-rich States around the Gulf (namely, the oil producing Gulf Cooperation Council countries plus the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya), the initial priorities after oil discovery were the provision of fresh water and electricity (Birks & Sinclair 1980). Improvements to roads, airports, telecommunications, hospitals, and schools followed shortly thereafter. Importantly, this enabled the ruling family’s role to evolve organically from protector to employer: where allegiance had always been sworn to sheikhs and emirs in times of difficulty, now these rulers functioned as government and distributed welfare benefits, public sector employment and modern amenities (Birks & Sinclair 1980, pp.17-18). Conversely, the growth of infrastructure necessitated the growth of imported labour both skilled and unskilled, for building and commerce, as well as domestic support for the growing and increasingly affluent population.

In terms of participation of nationals in the labour market, the capital-rich states attributed low participation rates to the large proportion of the population under the age of 15 and the limited participation of women in the workforce. However, it has also been observed that rentier societies provide income for their citizens without requiring them to “work” (Krause
2008, p.20). For example, non-nationals wishing to start a business in the Gulf States must establish their company under the name of a national, who is then entitled to a proportion of any profits without having contributed to any of the business activity in question (ibid.). As a result, it has been argued that the Gulf States have burdened themselves with two contemporaneous imperatives: increasing the participation of nationals in the workforce and ensuring that oil wealth and benefits are transmitted to nationals alone (Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.21). Distribution of highly paid employment in the public sector exclusively to nationals has been the most successful and popular means of meeting these aims. However, the following consequences have been observed: “underemployment” of nationals in government jobs (i.e. highly paid employees with few actual tasks or responsibilities); limited labour market for the private sector; and low motivation to pursue more arduous employment (ibid.). The reality that many nationals use government employment as a retainer while pursuing private business opportunities – such as the silent partner role described above – has also been noted (ibid.).

The “demographic change” evident in the Gulf States and, in particular, the imbalance between the employment of nationals and that of non-nationals has been described as the “sleeping lion of Gulf studies” (Birks 1998, p.131). The conundrum posed by growth in national population – particularly youth population – and urban migration in the context of diminishing oil supplies is of particular relevance. The difficulty of reducing reliance on foreign labour has been forecast, given continuing population growth and need for infrastructure and services. Reluctance on the part of private sector employers to reduce numbers of foreign workers in favour of less motivated nationals who expect higher levels of payment is also anticipated (ibid.).

The sheer scale of the expatriate labour force poses a significant obstacle for Gulf government nationalisation policies (Seccombe 1988). In the early days of oil production, reliance on foreign labour was described by GCC officials as a “temporary expedient” to support growth of the oil industry (Seccombe 1988, p.185). However, the assumption that nationals’ work preferences could be changed has been described as “unrealistic” (ibid.). The limited progress towards achievement of this goal was originally attributed to the failure of Gulf Governments to formulate and implement nationalisation policies, although in the late 1980s government employment was largely limited to local government departments. Lack of policy implementation being the case, the priority given to Arab non-nationals (e.g. Palestinians, Jordanians, Sudanese and Tunisians) tended to be viewed as the best alternative to employing non-Arab foreigners. However, this did little to address the real problem of national employment and has also had consequences in terms of political radicalisation of the population (Seccombe 1988, pp.186-187).

At the present time, all Gulf States have nationalisation policies. Although educational sponsorship has been problematic from the Australian university perspective, other aspects
of policy implementation have been held to be successful. For example, Sultan Qaboos’ series of five year plans in Oman are gradually stimulating private enterprise and encouraging foreign investment (Niblock & Murphy 1993, pp.261-263). In addition, an Omani stock market has been established. Significant Government investment in growing the Sultanate’s liquefied natural gas [LNG] exports has been an important and successful aspect of economic diversification (Peterson 2009, pp.14-15; Hancock 2008, September 19). Preservation of traditional crafts, archaeological artefacts and geological attractions, have also contributed to significant growth in tourism, which along with the transport and travel sectors now boasts 50% Omani employment (Hancock 2008, September 19; Lancaster 2003 April). More recent policies are focusing on developing a knowledge economy through increased support for research and development, international linkages and substantial rewards for patenting and commercialisation of research innovations (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004). The necessity of apprising young Omani citizens of the “realities of the workplace in a modern, competitive global economy” by sending them overseas to study is nominated as a significant goal in achieving economic diversification (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004, p.160).

TANMIA, the National Human Resource Development and Employment Authority in the United Arab Emirates, conducts regular reviews to ascertain the effectiveness of Emiratisation policy implementation. The report available in 2001 reveals that 86.7% of the active national labour force are employed by the Federal of Local Government, and in public or mixed sector jobs (Abdelkarim 2001, p.9, Table 6). The occupations employing the highest proportion of nationals are: military roles (77%); followed by Legislators and Managers (20%); Clerical and Related workers (16%); and Specialists and Professionals (12%). Production worker and Machine operator (3%) and Agricultural and related workers (2%) represent the lowest proportion of Emirati nationals (Abdelkarim 2001, p.10, Table 7). A survey of private sector employers indicates the following attitudinal barriers to employing nationals: nationals want high wages (42%); nationals want prestigious positions (25%); nationals do not want to perform difficult or serious tasks (17%) (Abdelkarim 2001, p.35, Table 22). Recommendations to address the workforce imbalance include: provide higher incentives to nationals such as salary scales, promotions and salary increases; enhance training for nationals; provide incentives such as rewards, bonuses and after-service gratuities; and scientific and professional skill development (Abdelkarim 2001, p.24, Table 17). The report concludes that directing nationals into specialised roles should be a main policy priority, supported by career counselling that assists secondary students in making more relevant choices in terms of university qualifications. It does not indicate how or why the private sector should fund increased salary for nationals, given indications that output does not match that of expatriates employed in the same roles (Rodenbeck 2002, p.4).

In summary, the literature on Gulf States economic and social policy reveals that Gulf economies face significant challenges in diversifying their economies. The imperative to
diversify is largely driven by diminishing oil reserves, but also rising youth unemployment and
general underemployment of nationals. The task is daunting given the sheer number of
 citizens requiring training in order to replace expatriate workers. However, citizens’
expectations of the benefits provided by the rentier state have been undermining
Governments' considerable efforts to address the situation. This is attributed to the rentier
work ethic, as indicated by nationals choosing employment outside the main areas of
economic activity.

2. Education policy and how it shapes employment expectations

2. a). Relationship between education and employment
The Gulf States have had limited success in improving employment outcomes for nationals
(Bahgat 1999, pp.128-129). This is arguably surprising, given the profitability of the oil
industry: it has been pointed out that, by contrast, developing countries endeavour to develop
their local workforce but are usually hindered by limited funds for investment in training.

It has been proposed that literacy be used as the benchmark for considering the extent to
which Arab nations are considered “developed”, given the limited usefulness of Gross
National Product for this purpose and the variations in population size and geographical
spread (Birks & Sinclair 1980). From 1968 to 1975, the Gulf States had the following literacy
rates: Kuwait 55%; Bahrain 47%; Saudi Arabia 33%; Qatar 33%; Oman 20%; and the United
Arab Emirates 14% (Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.131, Table 5). More recent data available from
UNESCO in 1999 estimate literacy rates for men [M] and women [F] as follows: Bahrain M
91% F 82%; Kuwait M 84% F 79%; Oman M 79% F 59%; Qatar M 80% F 82%; Saudi Arabia
M 82% F 65%; and the United Arab Emirates M 74% F 78% (Birks & Sinclair 1980, pp.17-
34).

The earlier data were used to define the Arab world – including the capital-rich Gulf States –
as “underdeveloped” or “developing” due to limited capacity of nationals to participate in the
main industries contributing to economic productivity. Although literacy rates have risen
significantly following increased expenditure on education, limited participation of Gulf
citizens in their national economies continues to the present day. Therefore this distinction is
not necessarily relevant for the purposes of this study. More relevant than literacy is the
resilience of “domestic culture and values”, despite heavy investment in education, which is
paradoxically is seen to have undermined development policies (Bahgat 1999, pp.128-129).

The shortcomings of Gulf and Middle Eastern education systems have been catalogued
extensively, particularly those of the secondary and tertiary sectors. However, it is argued
that while employment choices of Gulf nationals may be supported or encouraged by the
education system, families exert greater influence on career decisions. This is discussed in greater detail in Section 2. Cultural Values in the Middle East below.

2. b). International reviews of Education in the Middle East

The series of Arab Human Development Reports published by the United Nations Development Programme provides a critical audit of the status of education in relation to the region’s development goals. The 2002 report entitled Creating Opportunities for Future Generations creates a framework for analysing the merits and shortcomings of education in the region and consequences for participation of citizens in the economy. Although the report includes all 22 countries in the Arab league – and much of its discussion focuses initially on poor literacy rates, which is no longer a major issue in the Gulf – there are many significant implications for policy-makers in the Gulf States. In particular, the report draws attention to the limited capacity of present education systems for preparing citizens of the Arab world for labour force needs in the 21st Century. This is particularly the case when considering the extent and pace of developments in information and communication technology, and the proliferation of research and development in the sciences.

The UNDP 2002 report highlights that government spending on education is not the problem, lauding the fact that expenditure on education per capita is among the highest of any developing region in the world (United Nations Development Programme 2002, pp.6-7). However, it also argues that greater accountability is required in order to ensure that underrepresented groups receive assistance and that tertiary level studies – particularly research and development – may be given the opportunity to make a stronger contribution to building knowledge societies. The biggest challenges to these policy priorities are posed by “graft” and “cronyism”: distortions that undermine development by discouraging initiative and “denying merit its appropriate reward” (p.4).

The 2003 report on Building a Knowledge Society focused on the requirements for fostering innovation in science and technology, as well as the arts and social sciences. In rentier economies, the report points out, local knowledge capabilities have been significantly undermined by reliance on foreign expertise (United Nations Development Programme 2003, p.134). The report indicates that for competitiveness and initiative to thrive, a critical mass of entrepreneurs is required. However, it concedes that this would require a major culture shift to occur as value systems and education models in the region promote aversion to risk. The practice of rewarding connections or power over talent and ideas has also resulted in significant “brain drain” of talented Arab scholars to other parts of the world (p.143). It estimated that one in four Arab university graduates emigrates to Europe or the United States of America (Schenk 2008, December 9). A recent survey affirmed that only a small number of Gulf national pursue research higher degrees in their own country (Krieger 2007, September 14). The survey revealed graduates’ perceptions of bureaucratic and financial restrictions in
universities, limited links with industry, and opportunities for promotion predicated on personal connections (ibid.). Significant investment in establishing education precincts and technology parks in the Gulf States aims to "attract back" talented Arab scholars, as well as an international scholarly elite, although this has had limited effectiveness to date (Schenk 2008, December 9; Al-Shobakky 2007, October 3).

The 2004 report *Towards Freedom in the Arab World* focuses more specifically on religious freedoms, individual liberties and constitutional rights, and recommends various political reform mechanisms (United Nations Development Programme 2004).

In 2008 The World Bank published its development report entitled *The Road Not Travelled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*. Echoing recommendations in the UNDP reports, The World Bank argues that educational reform will not succeed if a labour market imbalances are not addressed. It notes that vast expenditure on education has not been matched by qualitative improvements evinced in poverty reduction and economic growth. For example, its Knowledge Economy Index indicates that the Gulf States provide among the highest economic incentives for knowledge development in the region, invest significantly in education, and are developing information infrastructures to support innovation and reform (The World Bank 2008, p.85). However, their achievements remain significantly lower than those of OECD countries and other developing economies. Furthermore, the report outlines how limited participation of citizens has prevented countries in the region from participating in global economies, particularly those built on knowledge capital.

The report offers many recommendations for total reform that range from the pedagogical (such as the introduction of student-centred and competency-based learning); to the structural (offering lifelong learning opportunities); financial (sourcing a more diverse range of funding); and managerial (moving to decentralised and coordinatory models) (The World Bank 2008, p.297). The framework for recommendations considers the "engineering" required to update physical resources, curriculum and teaching, and administration; followed by introduction of incentives to facilitate monitoring and evaluation; to secure public accountability at the local, national and international levels (The World Bank 2008, pp.117-123). Much of the report's analysis is based on the Middle East and North African [MENA] region as a whole, or focused on key countries Tunisia, Jordan, Iran and Egypt. Although the theoretical frameworks are broadly relevant, the breadth of socio-economic circumstances represented in the MENA region limit the applicability of some recommendations for the Gulf States. In particular, the capacity of oil-producing capital rich states to fund educational reform and address fundamental issues such as literacy are greater than those who do not enjoy rents generated by oil and gas production. Studies of education reform in relation to graduates’ capacity to economic development and civic values – i.e. whether they are able to find a job and “develop an identity as a productive citizen” – are of greater relevance to the
Gulf States than reviews of literacy and numeracy (Benard 2006, p.29). Although primary education and adult literacy rates remain an important concern, it is suggested that Middle Eastern Governments’ may have cause to question their investment in education given poor returns in the short to medium term (Benard 2006, p.30).

One of the report’s most useful conclusions for this study concentrates on post-compulsory education. It argues that educational reform and labour market participation will be greatly enhanced by more flexible pathways to career outcomes. It thus recommends: diversification of course offerings; greater possibility for transfer and articulation; multiple entry points to enhance access for all categories of potential entrants; greater availability of professional development for people already working; and greater interaction between institutions of higher learning and productive sectors of the economy (The World Bank 2008, p.90). This would also remove some of the stigma attached to vocational modes of learning and encourage more effective career guidance for students and those already working.

2. c). How secondary education shapes expectations

Creation of knowledge economies is argued to be a significant priority in the Middle Eastern region (United Nations Development Programme 2003). In the Gulf States, investment in human resource and research development is a key motivator behind significant investment in all levels of education. Investment in infrastructure to attract foreign and private education providers is seen as a viable mechanism to offset outmoded and irrelevant public education systems in existence (Al Karam & Ashencaen 2006, pp.12-13).

Public education in the Arab region has grown from a small number of Qur’anic schools to an extensive primary and secondary curriculum based on Egyptian models that have a literary bias (Wiseman & Alromi 2007, pp.96-97; Al-Misnad 1984, p. 105; Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.16). Egyptian-derived values are also seen to be connected with aspirations to university study and a disdain of technical or vocational studies resulting from an aversion to manual labour (Wiseman & Alromi 2007, pp.96-97; Birks & Sinclair 1980, p.16). This, in turn, has resulted in citizens of capital-rich States pursuing university studies that prepare them for administrative work, on the assumption that they will be absorbed into the comfortable public sector. Although the capital-rich States have demonstrated “energetic” efforts to improve the quality and output of education, these have proved unsuccessful “not only because of the demands on teachers but also because pupils have acquired aims and aspirations that reflect those of the existing system” (ibid.). The existing system is argued elsewhere to have resulted from the close association between Gulf monarchies/governments and institutions of higher learning (Bahgat 1999, p.130). In the case of Saudi Arabia, the strong influence of Wahhabi clerics has also seen a strong religious component to primary, secondary and most tertiary curricula (Wiseman, Sadaawi & Alromi 2008; Krieger 2007; Prokop 2003). A recent study revealed that Saudi Arabian secondary school students were confident that curriculum
devoted to Islamic studies had prepared them for the working work to a greater extent than their mathematics or science studies (Wiseman & Alrom 2007, pp.104-105).

The following characteristics of the Egyptian model have been identified as prevalent in Gulf education systems: centralised government control over textbooks and syllabus; teaching through memorisation of limited number of textbooks; and the significant portion of the curriculum taken up by the study of Islam (Rugh 2002a, p.50). In addition, the cultural norms that require hierarchical relations between students and teachers, limiting student-teacher and student-student interaction, have also been highlighted (Massialas & Jarrar 1991). This is partially attributed to limitations in secondary teacher training such as: the availability of teaching degrees in a small number of individual subject areas; limited discussion of theories of pedagogy; rare opportunities for practicum; and extremely high turnover and resignation of local teachers (p.39). Recent innovations in teacher training instigated by Australian academics in a select number of Emirati teacher training colleges suggest a willingness to engage in more reflective and student-centred practice by education students (Harold 2005). However, the extent to which new graduates are able to implement new approaches under the auspices of the existing curriculum is not known.

Detailed information about teacher employment and training is scarce, however, it has been identified as a key issue (Chapman & Miric 2009). Until recently, reliance on non-national teachers was perceived to be the most significant problem. Between 1980 and 1981 in the Gulf region, 55% of teachers were Arab non-nationals, mainly from Egypt. In the UAE, this percentage was as high as 90 (Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.40). It was argued that teachers from capital-poor countries such as Egypt were not necessarily cognisant of the workforce needs of students in capital-rich teaching locations such as the Gulf. Their limited knowledge of technological innovations in teaching, for example, was argued to hinder the modernisation of Gulf education systems (ibid.). In addition, their unfamiliarity with the local culture and students' home and social environments limited their effectiveness in engaging students in the classroom and providing effective pastoral care (Badri 1998, p.130). There have been some successes in training and hiring Gulf nationals in primary and secondary schools: for example, in Oman almost 100% of academic, administrative and support staff are now Omani nationals (Al Shmeli 2009, July 2-3, p.22). However, teacher education and pedagogical practices have emerged as significant areas of concern, despite more reasonable student:teacher ratios, reduction of class sizes, and improved employment conditions for teachers (Chapman & Miric 2009, p.313-314). In addition, tertiary education institutions in the region continue to rely heavily on expatriate academic expertise (Al Shmeli 2009, July 2-3, p.22).

Expenditure on education in the region is high. For example, Saudi Arabia spent 23% of its budget and 7.5% of Gross National Product on all levels of education in 2001 (Rugh 2002a,
In 2007, this increased to $27 billion US out of a national budget of $120 billion US (Australian Education International 2008, February 5). Education was also the largest item in the UAE Federal budget, comprising an allocation of $1.157 billion US. In 2003, Dubai Knowledge Village was launched to support the largest cluster of international universities and training centres in the region (Al Karam & Ashencaen 2006, p.12). Knowledge Village was also established with the aim of providing professional development and skill-enhancement programs, as well as encouraging joint research and patents (Al Karam & Ashencaen 2006, p.14). This was followed by a similar development in Qatar which has managed to attract institutions such as the University of Leeds; Virginia Commonwealth School of Arts; Weill Cornell Medical College; Texas A & M; Carnegie Mellon; and Georgetown University School of Foreign Service (Australian Education International 2006, January 17). The United Arab Emirates now boasts 58 universities, although there is a suggestion that some campuses may close if the downward trend of enrolments due to the Global Financial Crisis continues (Austrade 2009, October 19). While the proliferation of tertiary institutions has increased opportunities for Gulf nationals, they have not succeeded in attracting international students from their locally-based expatriate population, or overseas.

Both the UAE and Qatar have launched reviews of K-12 public education – including, in some cases, the importation of international curricula – to ensure that students are adequately prepared for new international opportunities on their doorsteps (Al Karam & Ashencaen 2006; Robelen 2003). Kuwait participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS] comparison in 1994/5. Pre-empting its low performance, the Assistant Under-Secretary for Student Affairs at the Ministry of Education in Kuwait acknowledged that Kuwaiti citizens were prone to blame undue reliance on an expatriate workforce on shortcomings in education available to nationals (Hussein 1992, p.463). The World Bank report on educational reform in the Middle East and North Africa took the view that performance by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in TIMSS and the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] in 2003 be considered in light of their Gross Domestic Product (The World Bank 2008, pp.18-20). Raw scores for the three Gulf States were not that dissimilar from other Middle Eastern and North African countries, though they were significantly lower than their South East Asian peers. However, extremely high GDP per capita placed students from the Gulf States in the lowest percentile, leading researchers to conclude that the academic level of secondary schooling will “remain low” despite a number of years of high income from oil rents (The World Bank 2008, p.20). This prediction was borne out by the 2007 TIMSS study, where the Gulf States and several other Arab nations were consistently ranked lowest among participating countries for educational achievement (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 2008a and 2008b).

An early commentator observed that education in the Gulf might be considered one of the best funded “modern and comprehensive” systems in the world, judging by the sustained
levels of government interest and expenditure (Crystal 1992, p.57). Other studies have argued that expenditure on new school buildings, provision of free textbooks and tuition, clothes for students and sporting equipment, free transport and medical care, and the availability of boarding for rural students and increased participation have precipitated changes in the attitudes of less educated older generations (Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.118). This was said to be evident in the encouragement of parents to send their daughters to school.

Recent surveys, however, indicate that the significant investment noted nearly 20 years ago has not been matched by qualitative improvement of curriculum and outcomes (The World Bank 2008; United Nations Development Programme 2002). In the late 1990s Kuwaiti secondary schools were reportedly characterised by “poor quality of teaching and the low academic standards of school leavers” which were said to be “in inverse proportion to the excellence of the school buildings and equipment” (Joyce 1998, p.135). This has also encouraged the growth of a lucrative private tutoring industry, which has, in turn, been observed to undermine improvements to curriculum and pedagogical practice (Chapman & Miric 2009 pp.329-330). While the efficacy of private tutoring has been questioned, with several reports indicating that those who receive tutoring do not perform significantly better than those who do not have tutors (Chapman & Miric 2009 pp.330), parents’ confidence in their efficacy appears undiminished.

Some scepticism about the impact of education reform has been observed in Gulf communities, due to the apparent “vagueness” of stated objectives and the fact that change would be imposed from the “top down”, which might result in measures being resisted or ignored (Peterson 2009, p.2; Mograby 1999, p.300). It has also been suggested that high levels of expenditure on education is mainly limited to salaries (Jarrar 2002, p.4).

The apportioning of blame for the perceived failures of expensive education systems has led to stalemate in Saudi Arabia, for example, where government authorities blame teachers for “failing to achieve the goal of teaching critical thinking” while teachers are blaming administrators for inflexible curriculum requirements and are resentful of students for their reluctance to explore any area that would not contribute to test results (Chapman & Miric 2009, p.332; Al-Qahtani 1995, p.159). Throughout the region, it has been noted that school systems have been built on the assumption that students will go on to higher education, so that they allow little flexibility for different learning styles or pursuit of vocational studies (Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.18). It was also anticipated that that “hasty over-spending” on the tertiary sector would increase prestigious opportunities to obtain higher qualifications in-country and overseas, at the expense of sustained investment in the improvement of primary, secondary and technical curricula (Looney 1994, p.45). Student choice has determined that Gulf universities are limited to the preparation students for jobs in the public sector or “luxury
Improving the relationship between education and employment choices requires a more strategic and comprehensive response than the upgrading of school infrastructure and off-the-shelf purchase of international curriculum and overseas teachers. This was foreshadowed when a state-of-the-art technical college was opened by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Higher Education, as a means of encouraging its citizens to learn "useful" trades in the early 1950s. By 1961, the student to teacher ratio at the college was three to one. By contrast the number of taxis on the roads in Kuwait had risen to 10,000. In this instance, the researcher was perplexed as to why taxi driving was considered a “perfectly acceptable occupation” where other trades were not (Joyce 1998, p.82). Low return rates for education have recently been acknowledged as a “peculiarity of the region” requiring further study, given that poor progress in the Middle East is not reflective of improvements made across the developing world (Benard 2006, p.32). High levels of unemployment among educated citizens is cited as an example of this (Arab Labor Organization 2008 p.14; Benard 2006, p.32). It would appear that efforts to build knowledge capability in local universities remains limited, and the establishment of foreign university campuses in the Gulf region has not yet directly benefited Gulf nationals (Krieger 2007, September 14.). This does not bode well for Gulf universities in terms of the roles they are expected to fulfil in building knowledge economies (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004, p.10), as well as “social engineering” (Kreiger 2007, September 14). Likewise, the establishment of technology parks across the region has been criticised for their focus on “real estate development” at the expense of research and development (Al-Shobakky 2007, October 3). Debate has ensued as to whether technology parks – heralded as the panacea for the knowledge economy – should limit the scope of the companies they attract, or whether the purpose of each precinct will develop over time (ibid.). In any case, their success in terms of patents and companies listed on international stock exchanges has been limited to date. In addition, the Arab Labor Organization has questioned why no research and development centre has focused on bringing international expertise in vocational and technical education to the region, given the pressing needs of the national workforce in this regard (Arab Labor Organization 2008, p.13).

2. d). Employment choices of secondary school students
A small number of successes in terms of reducing reliance on expatriate expertise in the Gulf have been acknowledged, for example, the increase of Omani workers in key sectors (Hancock 2008, September 19). However, international economic indices suggest that “low levels of education and technological readiness” continue to hamper Oman’s efforts to participate in the global marketplace (World Economic Forum 2007). Limited business
sophistication and “low capacity for innovation” are highlighted as key areas of concern. A recent report issued by an Omani Government official blamed the rote learning practices and strong examination focus of the national secondary school curriculum for students’ underdeveloped critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Al Shmeli 2009, July 2-3 p.21). The report also claims that this is the reason for poor higher education outcomes and limited growth in private enterprise (ibid.).

However, it would appear that the reasons for this are more complex and contentious than just the allegedly outmoded curriculum and pedagogical practices. Despite allocation of a significant proportion of its annual budget to education (including curriculum reform), it would appear the Omani Government’s ambitions for a knowledge economy may be hampered by local cultural conditions which, in effect, form the “hidden curriculum” of schooling in the Gulf States (Jarrar 2002; Massialas & Jarrar 1991, pp.138-145). In a number of cases, commentators blame lack of career guidance and strong family influence on poor choices by secondary school graduates. They argue that family predisposition towards certain modes of employment perpetuates preferences for public sector employment and an imbalanced national workforce.

For example, Rodenbeck argues that it is a work ethic “weakened” by the rentier economy that has prevented more systemic change (2002, p.8). Whereas Saudisation policies have succeeded in increasing national employment in the banking sector by 5% per year, most Saudi nationals still express aversion to “taking orders or work they see as demeaning” (Rodenbeck 2006, p.6; 2002, p.7). Saudi nationals, particularly those of “well known tribal origin”, disdain jobs that were once performed by “slaves” (Ibrahim 1982, p.102). Prior to oil discovery, manual labour was traditionally relegated to khaddiris (those who did not belong to strong or prominent tribes or whose origin was unknown) (Attiyah 1996, p.38). As in Oman, high expenditure on education has not resulted in significant shifts in attitude towards employment and entrepreneurship. Indeed, the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report points out that Saudi Arabia is the seventh highest spender in the world on education, yet the quality of its curriculum and participation rates remain seriously low (World Economic Forum 2009). The Report blames the rigidity of Saudi Arabia’s labour market and limited confidence in its financial sector on inadequate preparation of secondary and tertiary graduates, and argues that poor educational outcomes continue to undermine its participation in the global marketplace.

Particular disdain among parents of female students for vocational education and associated career outcomes has also been noted (Nelson 2004, p.7; Al-Misnad 1984, pp.263-266). Discouragement of women’s pursuing technical studies and careers also continues, and in many cases this has extended to reluctance to pursue scientific studies although the latter trend appeared to be decreasing (Al-Misnad 1984, p.157). Indeed, women now represent half
of the Saudi Arabian university cohort (Prokop 2003, p.88), although gender segregation, lack of public transport and the prohibition on women driving severely restrict their employment options (ibid). Gender segregation in the workforce will remain a significant challenge to education planners and policy makers attempting to encourage the national workforce to enter previously eschewed professions and address the underutilisation of women in the labour marker (Al-Misnad 1984, p.220). While the Wahhabi ulama continue to hold power in Saudi Arabia, it is unlikely that the latter problem will improve significantly (Prokop 2003).

The limited employment prospects of Saudi Arabian women (Nelson 2004, p.11), might be expected to affect their motivation to succeed in the classroom. However, in Saudi Arabia, as in other Gulf States, female students are outperforming their male peers to the extent that examination results are no longer listed publicly and positive discrimination in favour of male students (in terms of scaling results and university admissions) have been implemented (Benard 2006, p. 41). Across the Gulf States, the proportion of women enrolled in local universities and subsequently employed in the health and education sectors, and in clerical jobs, is growing and in some cases exceeds the number of males (Benard 2006, pp.41-42; Nelson 2004, p.8). The number of women from the Gulf States studying overseas is also growing. Young women in the region clearly regard education as the best means of advancing their personal ambitions beyond traditional roles. This also suggests a shift in family attitudes towards women’s opportunities, and a gradual loosening of limitations placed on their daughters’ mobility for reasons of reputation and family honour.

Regardless of their gender, Saudi secondary students have been identified as more likely to select professions and employment opportunities on the basis of proximity to their family – particularly employment by a family member – and opportunities for “contentment”, rather than “success” (Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.162). Similar patterns are noted among Saudi university students in Massialas and Jarrar’s interview sample. Remarkably, most of their interviewees did not expect to pursue employment in the disciplines in which they were enrolled at university. These preferences are attributed to low motivation and the “consumption” rather than “production” attitudes and behaviour of Saudi youth (Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.163). A clear relationship between the priority assigned to advancing their family’s status and negative work values was noted.

A recent study based on Saudi Arabia’s participation in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS] draws a direct correlation between level of parental education and achievement in secondary level mathematics and science (Wiseman, Sadaawi, Alromi 2008). The report suggests that parental education levels were indicative of socio-economic status, and therefore strong predictors of a student’s academic success.
More broadly, a mismatch is identified between national educational goals and the ability of individual schools and teachers to meet them (Wiseman & Alromi 2007, p.94).

However, family aspirations also play a pivotal role in determining educational outcomes, including enrolment in particular schools, encouragement to pursue particular tertiary education options, and the hiring of private tutors. An early study foreshadowed that parental attitude towards the value of education in relation to employment – based on their own education level and employment status – would not only be the most significant determinant of academic success, but also of course choice (Al-Misnad 1984, p.485). Later commentators confirmed that Saudi university students expressed a strong reliance on parents to plan their university and course destinations (Wiseman & Alromi 2007, p.107; Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.165). The absence of appropriately targeted careers information is also significant as there appear to be few mechanisms to counter misinformation or inaccurate perceptions, particularly in relation to vocational studies and service-related jobs. School counsellors are ranked in these studies as yielding the least influence on student choice, although it is also pointed out careers counselling is a fledgling profession in the Gulf States and many schools do not have this facility at all (Wiseman & Alromi 2007, p.107; Massialas & Jarrar 1991, p.165). This is an area highlighted for remediation in Oman, with the planned introduction of a careers counselling centre for Omani secondary school students (Al Shmeli 2009, July 2-3, p.7; McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004, p.160).

In summary, literature on education in the Gulf States indicates that Gulf Governments have been spending considerable sums on improving education opportunities for citizens, with a view to meeting economic diversification goals. A number of significant improvements have been noted in terms of adult literacy and educational achievement. The following priorities have also been identified: secondary school curriculum review; an overhaul of teacher training; and increased in-country tertiary opportunities. A contemporaneous aim is to encourage research and innovation conducive to the flourishing of a knowledge economy. Critics warn that lofty and ambitious goals do not always match Gulf manpower needs. Limited investment in vocational education and training is cited as an example of this. However, family expectations (including preference for particular modes of work and disdain for others) are argued to influence student education and employment choices more than improved schooling and Government expenditure.

3. Cultural values in the Middle East

3. a). Family values and management style
Literature on organisational management in the Middle East confirms that family values prevail when Gulf nationals graduate from secondary school and gain employment. This is particularly evident in research comparing preferred management styles of Saudi Arabian
managers and their American peers in joint venture companies. For example, it is argued that differences between Saudi Arabian and American employers reside mainly in the paternalistic management practices of the former (At-Twaijri 1989, p.60). These are argued to stem from “the Arab heritage of close family relationships”.

This hypothesis was tested through a survey of 191 top-level managers in joint American-Saudi Arabian ventures based in Saudi Arabia (At-Twaijri 1989). Findings revealed Saudi Arabians to be more likely to indicate dissatisfaction with pay scales and opportunities for advancement than their American counterparts (At-Twaijri 1989, p.65). They are also more likely to be unhappy with their physical surroundings, such as office location and equipment, and concerned about the extent to which a “friendly atmosphere” prevails. In terms of roles and responsibilities, the Saudi Arabian managers express a greater need than their American peers to concern themselves with the welfare of their employees and their families (At-Twaijri 1989, p.68). However, both American and Saudi Arabian employees agree with the principle that productivity is more important than employee security. For example, they are equally likely to move an employee to another location despite inconvenience to their families. This is seen to reflect a change in Saudi Arabian management values from lifetime employment guarantees to a stronger focus on productivity.

Change in managerial values is also evident in differences between data collected in 1982 and 1986, and attributed to cultural and economic developments in the region (Ali & Al-Shakhis 1991). These longitudinal studies of Saudi Arabian managers test the extent to which tribalistic, conformist, sociocentric, egocentric, manipulative and existential values are reflected in their responses to questions about management preferences (pp.87-88). They find that values considered tribalistic (submission to authority and tradition), conformist (requiring structure, rules and unambiguousness) and sociocentric (high need for affiliation) remain dominant in the later sample, but not to the same extent as in the earlier survey. Whereas conformist values dominated Saudi Arabian managerial values in 1982, it is observed that existential values (e.g. tolerance of those who have different values) are more prevalent in 1986. This is argued to be indicative of greater performance-orientation reflecting the influence of American staff on development of the oil industry. However, the small samples used in the studies and the small differences between responses (in percentage terms) limit the extent to which such generalisations about value systems in Saudi Arabia can be made.

Traditional values of Saudi Arabian managers have also been attributed to their Islamic and nomadic heritage (Hunt & At-Twaijri 1996). In this sense, the opposite of the longitudinal study outlined above is argued, in that Saudi Arabian managers are seen to prioritise personal relationships and employees’ family needs over organisational productivity (Hunt & At-Twaijri 1996, p.48). Deviations from these values are attributed to variables such as past
experience of overseas study, marital status, age and professional experience of Saudi Arabian managers. The survey of 144 Saudi Arabian managers indicates that marital status is the most significant factor in determining the extent to which organisational goals are prioritised over personal ones. This is related to the primacy of family values in the Arab world, implying that marriage requires a more collectivist outlook, and that appreciation of the importance of stability and security extends to the married manager’s working life (Hunt & At-Twaijri 1996, pp.52-53).

These studies on Saudi Arabian management values contain themes consistent with literature about work preferences in the Gulf States. However, generalisations on the basis of this literature about management values across the Gulf States are limited given differences between Saudi Arabia’s population size, religious and political constituency, and the magnitude of its oil revenue. In addition, the unique relationships with the United States companies through partnerships, such as Saudi Aramco and Chevron, entail opportunities for intercultural cooperation not necessarily available in other Gulf States (Saudi Arabian Oil Company 2008).

3. b). Employment preferences as an extension of cultural norms

An element of disdain for particular types of employment has been identified among Kuwaiti nationals, consistent with attitudes observed among secondary school students and literature on Saudi management preferences (Longva 1997). Kuwaitis are reported to be reluctant to concede that their own high standard of living causes reliance on so many foreign workers as does their unwillingness to undertake low-prestige work (Longva 1997, p.124). A tendency for Gulf nationals to blame expatriates for erosion of their cultural identity and increased crime rates has also been noted (Attiyah 1996, p.40). However, the preponderance of “strangers” undertaking menial and domestic work in Kuwaiti homes has not appeared to free Kuwaiti nationals to undertake more productive labour (Looney 1994, p.98). Nevertheless, the argument that Kuwaiti nationals have taken advantage of the availability of expatriate labour to enjoy greater amounts of “leisure” time, as argued by Looney (1994, p.98), is debatable. There is evidence that a significant amount of a Kuwaiti’s day is devoted to kafala (the Kuwaiti version of the kafil or silent partner, usually translated as “sponsorship”) activity such as collecting commission and housing rents from incoming foreign workers (Longva 1997, p.231; p.244). Either way, hostile attitudes towards expatriates in the Gulf indicate a reluctance to attribute poor productivity to values that pre-date the discovery of oil. Critics of the concept of a rentier society point out that the Gulf States have emerged from years of extreme poverty (Krause 2008, p.20). The patriarchal authoritarianism that steered Gulf tribes through times of scarcity and conflict continues to be a powerful distribution channel for wealth and social advancement (ibid.).
In terms of family and tribal commitments, it has been argued that some Gulf nationals' choices of modern occupation reflect an extension of family normative systems (Ibrahim 1982, pp.7-8). For example, it has been noted that families of Bedouin origin in Saudi Arabia have demonstrated preference for their young men to become pilots in the Saudi National Guard. Such roles enable young Saudis to capitalise on their strengths, developed over years of subsistence living in harsh conditions including resourcefulness, loyalty and bravery (ibid.). Other examples include preferences for roles involving trade, sub-contracting and project management, which require strong interpersonal skills and networking capabilities that are important competencies for Gulf families seeking to improve their status. Thus for most young Gulf nationals, this would be a skill set they could be confident drawing upon.

This may also be part of the reason why taxi driving is considered a desirable occupation in the region, apart from the limited skill requirements and low establishment costs. In the absence of public transport in the Gulf, taxis and private cars enjoy continuous business and high returns, particularly as tourism grows in the region. Profitability can be enhanced by skills already attributed to young Gulf nationals: enjoyment of conversation; enthusiasm for luxury cars; pride in national heritage; and eagerness to show visitors around their home town (Dupree 2003, p.2). However, there are other aspects of taxi driving that may be appealing to Gulf nationals, such as the autonomy and flexibility to manage personal and family affairs at the same time as managing a lucrative business. For a Gulf national eager to improve their material and social status, it is critical that their lifestyle be flexible enough to accommodate the time and effort required to cultivate personal relationships. Kennedy attests to the patience required for foreigners to cultivate business relationships in Kuwait (1997, p.440): locals must invest equally significant effort in ensuring that their connections are productive and robust enough to survive in a competitive marketplace.

Gulf nationals therefore require employment that enables them to concurrently conduct personal business as sub-contractors for Government projects, as well as act as mandatory local partners in international ventures starting up in-country and sponsors for foreign nationals seeking employment opportunities in the Gulf. The prevalent assumption of commentators is that modes of employment such as taxi driving are a substitute for participation in the modern economy (e.g. Joyce 1998; Attiyah 1996; Looney 1994). By contrast, it is argued here that such occupations are an extension of traditional means of extending a national's business network and optimising opportunities for upward advancement. This may help to explain the preference for certain modes of work over others, and why specific attitudes prevail.

3. c). Wasta and building face
The original definition of wasta is based on the steering of “conflicting parties towards a middle point, or compromise” (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993, p.1). Wasta can be used to
describe the action or the agent of it. There is also a distinction between *wasta* used for mediation to assist negotiations for marriage (for example) or to resolve conflict, and that used for intercession or advocacy for the purpose of gaining access to benefits otherwise inaccessible to the supplicant. *Wasta* stems from traditional cultural values and practices that place family loyalty at the heart of every social interaction.

Before oil was discovered in the region, scarcity of resources required strong leadership to ensure the ongoing security of the tribe. As early as the 14th Century A.D., Ibn Khaldun (1958) documented the requirements of a patriarch, with particular emphasis on the critical importance of his demonstrated success as a mediator for the prestige and prominence of his tribe. According to Ibn Khaldun’s view of Arab society, honour and good reputation functioned as a kind of “unit of exchange”. His observations also indicate that although laziness and neglecting social obligations were held in low esteem, particular modes of work associated with lower ranking families – or families of ill repute – were legitimately avoided. Ibn Khaldun argued that more important and noble pursuits were those that built security and esteem for one’s family and clients. This could only be achieved through the cultivation of personal contacts, building good will, and demonstrating loyalty in times of need.

However, Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994) contend that this aspect of *wasta* has been diminished in recent years since material goods have become more widely available in the region:

> The traditional tribal *wasta*, the sheikh, was a man of honour, whose word was his bond, which would assume responsibility for his acts. Today’s *wasta* is too often a middle-man, seeking fame and fortune by doing favours. Penalties for misrepresentation do not exist.

Cunningham & Sarayrah 1994, p.35

Despite this, there is evidence that *wasta* is no less important or effective in the contemporary Middle East. *Wasta* continues to advance tribal interests through affiliation to a patriarch (Sharabi 1988). In this sense *wasta*’s resilience can be considered paradoxical, given its antithesis to the norms of modernity. Furthermore, *wasta* has been argued to impede economic development and weaken civil society (Krause 2008).

Patriarchy in the Middle East has evolved in a distinct fashion due to its geographical, climatic and demographic cohesion, as well as difference and isolation from other parts of the world (Sharabi 1988, pp.15-16). The intersection between traditional social systems such as patriarchy and modernisation is therefore defined as “an indigenous phenomenon resulting from contact with European modernity in the imperial age” (Sharabi 1988, p.22, italics

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13 Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1332 and his ruminations on all aspects of society, called *Al Muqaddimah* (“The Introduction to History”) remain highly influential. Several schools and learning institutions in the Arab region are named in his honour.
Contact with modernity may influence everything from dress, food, schools, transport, communications, literature, philosophy, and science. Sharabi outlines the differences between modernity and patriarchy thus (Sharabi 1988, p.18):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Modernity</th>
<th>Patriarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Thought/reason</td>
<td>Myth/belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Scientific/ironic</td>
<td>Religious/allegorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Democratic/socialist</td>
<td>Neopatriarchal sultanate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>Horizontal</td>
<td>Vertical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social stratification</td>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Family/clan/sect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the case of the Middle East, and particularly capital-rich countries such as the Gulf States, Sharabi argues that encounters with modernity have done little to disrupt the status quo. This is due to society’s being so dependent on and subordinate to the patriarch, that access to modern concepts, values and commodities further underscores the distance between those in positions of power and those at the lower echelons of society (Sharabi 1988, p.22). This created an opportunity for leading families to rein in the power of other important tribes and ensure that tribal structures performed subsidiary roles in their political systems (Gause 1994, p.11). It also resulted in an increased proportion of the population jostling to ensure connections, influence and benefits: arguably the majority of the population who are not members of the royal family or established merchant elites are the aspirational class, the petite bourgeoisie. Rather than challenging traditional outlooks, Sharabi (1988) reveals that modernity has served to consolidate them. That is to say, families in the Gulf States are responding to modernisation in the same way they have always responded to new opportunities and threats: they are banding together to ensure that, as a united cause, they stand greater chance of accessing privileges reserved for the elite and resisting changes that would challenge their security and reputation. This has served to consolidate the division between nationals and non-nationals, whose lives intersect very little in political, economic and social arenas. It has also ensured that the status quo has been maintained for women in the region with respect to political power and economic independence, despite increasing numbers of young women taking advantage of educational and employment opportunities (al-Talei 2008; Benard 2006; Moghadam 2004). For example, two female candidates in the 2007 Omani elections for the Majlis al Shura or Advisory Council complained to the media that the tendency for citizens to vote for “family, friends, relatives and tribes” prevented their election, and women’s participation more broadly (Vaidya 2007, October 26).

A significant part of the problem is that the pace and scale of social change in the Gulf has necessitated the dominance of foreign labour such that an urban working class has not had the opportunity to develop. Following Marx and Weber, Sharabi argues that this has retarded formation of class-based ideology and social reform in the region (1988, p.74). It has also been noted that the absence of an industrialised middle class continues to form a major obstacle to national development (Odeh 1993). Although Sharabi does not discuss the
phenomenon of the welfare state in the Gulf context, the distribution of welfare via the state – which is, in effect, the nation’s largest employer – is argued to mirror benefits traditionally distributed through the patronage network (1988, p.60). For example, Gulf citizens’ direct access to wealth is cited as evidence that Gulf societies are not “linear” or class-based in their social stratification (Ibrahim 1982). It is further argued that the coexistence of tribal, communal, feudalist and quasisocialist structures – and the exclusion of expatriate populations – make rentier states a vastly different proposition (Ibrahim 1982, pp.140-154). The situation has been described most succinctly thus:

In the Middle East […] the concept of social class is of limited utility, in all probability leading to confusion rather than to clarification of social reality. This underlying social reality consisted of a pervasive pluralism of groups, each jealously guarding its separate and distinct existence. Instead of horizontal classes stretching across the societies, there were parallel vertical groups maintaining their distance from each other, except for their tendency to converge at the top around a common core of cultural-religious beliefs and in a ruling power elite comprised of the higher elites of the various societal groups.

Magnus 1980, p.378

Sharabi argues that modern Arab countries have continued to evolve into neopatriarchal societies that ensure the continuing dominance of the head or patriarch, “the center around which the national as well as natural family are organized” (1988 pp.7-8). This is supported by the literature on oil production and economic reform which indicates that social change is being instigated from the “top down” i.e. by ruling families rather than as a result of political campaigning on the part of citizens (e.g. Peterson 2009; Rodenbeck 2002; Hall 1979). Consistent with literature on collectivist and individualist societies, Sharabi (1988) points out that for all strata of society, personal commitments to family take priority over the communal, despite public appearances to the contrary. The resources required to establish, protect and maintain personal aspirations leave little time and energy for servicing public needs. This is particularly the case for the petite bourgeoisie, who stand to gain and lose the most, but contribute to society the least, being a “nonproductive class” (Sharabi 1988, pp.126-132).

The prevalence of wasta in the daily lives of members of the petite bourgeoisie in the Middle East is illustrated by stories about various members of the Sarayrah tribe in Jordan used by Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993). Although they argue that wasta is considered “undiscussable” in many quarters of Arab society, they also point out that sensitivities about the topic are complex: whereas many families will publicly deplore the practice, they will revert to it themselves in private when the need arises (1993, p.4; p.26). As a general rule, they point out, that resisting participation in wasta is lauded in principle but condemned if it compromises the needs or requirements of a specific family member. This supposition is confirmed by results of a pioneering opinion poll conducted by the Arab Archives Institute which revealed that 87% of respondents felt that wasta should be eradicated although 90%
also believed they would most likely use it at some point in their lives (Hutchings and Weir 2006c, p.281).

Not all acts of *wasta* occur for the purpose of self-interest: some may be for the benefit of those less fortunate without anticipation of a favour returned (Krause 2008, p.149). However, distinguishing between positive acts of *wasta* and those that have negative impact on social harmony and economic development is difficult and subjective. This has particular implications for school students, who are:

> [...] told to strive for excellence, that rewards are based on performance according to objective standards. At home, children learn to differentiate the significant from the insignificant families, those who are related to their families and those that do not have such links.

Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993, p.16

The resulting conflict in loyalties mirrors the *diglossia* that students experience with respect to formal styles of Arabic used as the medium of instruction and colloquial forms used at home (discussed below in the section on *Language Challenges for International Students* in the second Section of the literature review). Middle Eastern students must therefore learn to navigate the lacuna between official policy and accepted practice: a situation that Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993) argue reinforces the importance of family solidarity and networks of influence.

With respect to education, Cunningham and Sarayrah outline several examples of students’ and their families’ using *wasta* to side-step admissions requirements, despite poor results, and to transfer from course to course. They demonstrate how assumptions about the efficacy of personal contacts may undermine a university's endeavours to uphold academic integrity and foster a culture of achievement. In doing so, they identify the conundrum for teaching staff who may be seen as "unworthy of trust" and academically questionable if they bow to *wasta* pressures from family or colleagues, and inflexible or arrogant if they do not (1993, p.127).

The prevalence of *wasta* in Arab work culture has also been linked to limited participation of women in the workplace, on the basis that women have limited spheres in which to develop networks of influence (Krause 2008; Whiteoak, Crawford & Mapstone 2006). This has further been seen as undermining efforts to introduce equity in employment policies in the region.

Critics of *wasta* highlight the way it encourages inequity in hiring processes, inefficiency and poor performance, and economic decline (Mohamed & Hamdy 2008). A 2008 survey of undergraduate students at the University of Cairo affirms that although unqualified job applicants using *wasta* may be equally likely to be offered employment as qualified applicants without *wasta*. However, it also suggests that individuals who gained employment using
wasta are likely to be considered “less moral” (Mohamed & Hamdy 2008, pp.5-6). Whether the presence of wasta is considered by those who know of its presence to damage the reputation of companies and organisations is not discussed. However, the persistently low rating of Middle East and North African nations in the Corruption Perceptions Index indicates that this is certainly the case in terms of outside perceptions of countries where wasta is present (Transparency International 2008). The Index was compiled from surveys of international business people and reflected their perceptions rather than evidence-based research. The Gulf States were among the least corrupt of the 18 participating MENA countries, with Qatar the highest ranking emirate at 28 out of 180. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were among the 13 participating MENA countries whose Corruption Perceptions Index score was below 5, indicating outside perceptions of serious corruption problems. It has also been suggested that gender inequality in the region contributes to high levels of corruption in the bureaucracy (Benard 2006, p.40).

Contrary to Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993), Mohamed and Hamdy (2008) note that young UAE citizens are more likely to argue for the efficacy and importance of wasta than their older compatriots. They attribute these attitudes of young Emiratis to the reality that senior Government employment is dominated by royal families concerned to ensure their power and influence. Rising youth unemployment in the Gulf region and the forecast decline of resources funded by oil wealth, they argue, has resulted in greater reliance on traditional methods of gaining employment and promotion. Mohamed and Hamdy (2008, p.3) disagree with Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993) that the spread of wasta is entirely due to oil discovery and that it has reduced need “for hard work” among nationals. However, Mohamed and Hamdy’s (2008) argument that wasta is equally prevalent in capital-poor countries such as Jordan and Egypt overlooks the fact that these two countries supply significant human resources to the Gulf States. The Gulf States also provide substantial financial aid to these less wealthy neighbours. High numbers of Jordanians and Egyptians working in the Gulf enjoy higher salaries than they can command in their home countries, and they also send significant remittances home. Given the shared language, religion and culture of Arab non-nationals and their host Gulf nations – and the size of expatriate communities established there – there is no reason to assume that these groups do not employ wasta to their advantage in their new setting. After all, it has also been argued that Western companies wishing to enter the Arab market can cultivate wasta through intermediaries, and they should be prepared to invest time building relationships, establishing trust and acquiring tacit knowledge about local cultural mores (Hutchings & Weir 2006c, p.283).

While the negative aspects of wasta are documented extensively, there are other considerations that are relevant to this study. For example, it has been argued that Arab cultures are highly “contexted”, meaning that they require substantial amounts of information about a person or proposition before they feel comfortable enough to act upon it (Hall 1979).
This is why relationships take time to develop and business discussions only take place after pleasantries and friendly conversation takes place (Hall 1979, p.47). Hall points out that effort expended to get to know people and build trust are well rewarded by the security that comes from loyalty and understanding. A 2002 study affirms that citizens of countries such as Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and Turkey are more “tolerant of uncertainties” as they are confident in the security provided by family and other extended networks (Kabasakal & Bodur 2002 p.49). Another study of Gulf societies affirms that social interactions are “context-restricted” such that the mark of a “true Middle Eastern sophisticate” is someone who is able to interact with a broad range of people in a variety of situations (Fischer 1980, p.527). This is argued to originate in the region’s tribal origins, where appropriate manners and conversational style serve a vital function in developing honour and maintaining good relations with ruling elites.

Hall (1979, p.53) adds that Middle Eastern cultures lack a formal intermediary between the top and bottom echelons of society: just as Islam forbids intermediaries between man and Allah, there are few formal administrative barriers between citizens and their sheikh. This is consistent with dewania culture that gives citizens the opportunity for a hearing by the emir (McBrierty & Al Zubair 2004; Meleis 1982), and is not as contradictory to wasita as it may first appear. Middle Eastern societies accept that decisions are made at the top level. In absence of meritocracy and achievement-based hierarchy, individual members of society also accept that they will not rise to become top-level decision-makers themselves. However, through personal connections, they may have the opportunity to cultivate relationships to try and ensure that decisions made are to their benefit. Intercession is not usually the result of political lobbying, formal petitions, or organised social movements. By contrast, wasita affords discreet, low-risk opportunities for trust to be developed without fear of adversarial or competitive relations that risk loss of face for either party.

In his handbook for business travellers, Doing Business with Kuwait, Kennedy (1997) affirms that a young Kuwaiti male is concerned with building and losing face on a daily basis. This is a result of family pressures that have an intensity and pervasiveness incomprehensible to an outsider, and determine the extent to which the young Kuwaiti is perceived as capable of serving and protecting his family’s interest:

A Kuwaiti spends his life building face. [...] As he gets older, the notion that face belongs not just to the individual but also to the group begins to take hold, and a youth is considered mature once he views his own success as being synonymous with the success of his family.

Kennedy 1997, p.438

Kennedy points out, however, that such attitudes pre-date oil discovery in Kuwait. This is consistent with Cunningham and Sarayrah’s (1993) argument that the primacy of the family can be traced back to the region’s tribal origins, where competition for scarce resources required strong and strategic leadership from leading male family members. Kennedy (1997)
observes that contemporary Kuwait continues to be a highly stratified and therefore intensely competitive environment for young men seeking to improve the situation of their clan. *Wasta* is therefore critical to any business enterprise and requires a two-way flow of favours in order to be effective. Kennedy (1997, p.445) notes the importance of the figure known as the *mandoub* in Kuwaiti firms: he is responsible for ensuring that requests and reports can make their way through the bureaucracy to the right person in the most efficient amount of time. Kennedy argues that *wasta* should be positively cultivated to ensure that individuals are perceived as capable of effective and compassionate leadership (ibid.). This is confirmed by a 2002 study where Arab citizens ranked “team-orientation” and “charisma” as the most desirable qualities in a leader (Kabasakal & Bodur 2002, p.49).

Much research has been undertaken on the significance of building, and the risk of losing, face in a range of cultures (e.g. Hofstede 2001). It has furthermore been argued that there are many similarities between Arab and Chinese concepts of face (Hutchings and Weir 2006a; 2006b; 2006c). A comparative analysis of *wasta* and *guanxi* respectively indicates that each stems from the central importance of the family and both carry significant implications for the global economy. However, whereas support for, and influence of, *guanxi* has noticeably declined, Hutchings and Weir (2006a) argue that *wasta* remains prevalent.

The significance of face in South East and North East Asia has been extensively catalogued (Irwin 1996). In Confucian Heritage Cultures, the accepted definition of face was formulated by Ho in 1976 as follows:

> Face is the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to a person by others is a function of the degree of congruence between judgements of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him.  
> Quoted in Barker 1997, p.113

Hutchings and Weir (2006a, pp.149-150) argue that the greatest divergence between *wasta* and *guanxi* are evident in the realm of finance. However, in support of this argument, they contrast the strong traditional Chinese work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, against Islamic laws which prohibit banks from generating interest on a loan. This is something of a missed opportunity, given the vast socio-economic and cultural differences that differentiate the People’s Republic of China and the Middle East. It is also an inquiry that would reveal important issues for the consideration of Australian universities, for whom students from China – and ethnic Chinese students from throughout the Asian region – form the majority of the international student intake. An analysis of difference would indicate where academic support services for international students from Confucian Heritage Cultures might not necessarily meet the needs of students from the Middle East.
In summary, literature on cultural values in the Middle East help explain employment choices of Gulf nationals. In particular, preferences for flexible, family-friendly employment are seen in light of traditional ways of building relationships in order to cultivate influence and leverage contacts. Thus Gulf nationals are keen to pursue careers that reflect attributes traditionally prized in tribal leaders i.e. mediation and networking skills, trustworthiness, and courage. This approach is seen to minimise the risks inherent in entering the modern competitive employment market.

4. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions

4. a). Individualism and Collectivism
One of the most useful and influential pieces of research for understanding cultural difference is Hofstede’s (2001) seminal study of organisational culture *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*. The first edition (1980) of Hofstede’s work has been used as a basis for a significant amount of literature relevant to this study. For example, Martin (2006) utilises Hofstede's concept of “cultural dimensions” to anticipate Emirati university students’ resistance to independent online work. Barker (1997) focuses on the Individualism and Collectivism paradigms in considering international students’ motivations when choosing to pursue tertiary studies in the United Kingdom, and the consequences for staff-student relationships. Al-Harthi (1997) also demonstrates how Individualism and Collectivism can be used to differentiate international students' perspectives from those of their host community. Pearson and Beasley (1996) use Hofstede’s “cultural dimensions” as a framework for considering the range of transition issues faced by international students arriving in Australia.

There have been numerous criticisms of the way in which Hofstede synthesised and applied his cultural dimensions. For example, his polar opposition of values in each dimension has been argued to undermine their validity (McSweeney 2002); the hierarchy of positions within each of his dimensions has been criticised as colonialist (Fougère & Moulettes 2006); and the stability of the country profiles over time has been questioned (Triandis 1982). However, the resilience of Hofstede’s generalisations about national cultures is not only evident in ubiquitous citations of his work in studies of organisational culture (Chapman 1996-1997), but also his prominence in literature relating to international students, as mentioned above. Indeed, the researcher has attended several professional development programs for academic, support and marketing staff working with international students, organised by Australian universities, peak industry bodies and membership organisations, where Hofstede’s study has formed the basis for seminars, workshops and literature. For the purposes of this study, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, despite their acknowledged limitations,
provide a commonly understood platform for considering the ways in which the experiences of Omani students differ from those of other international students.

Hofstede's study is based on a survey of IBM employees around the world and makes broad observations about differing cultural values between country branches. He identifies five dimensions to these generalisations – **Power Distance**, **Uncertainty Avoidance**, **Individualism** (as opposed to **Collectivism**), **Masculinity** (as opposed to **Femininity**), and **Long-term** (as opposed to **Short-term** **Orientation** – and ranks countries according to the degree to which their average survey-response leans towards diametrically opposed values. Hofstede also compiles an "index" of countries for each cultural dimension, assigning a rank and ordinal number to each country or group of countries listed for each index, indicating the relative importance of the five cultural dimensions in each country or region.

For the purposes of this study the **Power Distance**, **Uncertainty Avoidance** and **Individualism** dimensions are considered, as these relate most specifically to Gulf students’ behaviour as identified in scoping and their work preferences as indicated by the literature. In one sense, Hofstede’s research represents the converse of this study, in that he investigates the ways in which one company’s organisational values are interpreted in a diverse range of countries. By contrast, this study considers what happens when a diverse range of people come together in an organisation located in a single place. Critics of Hofstede argue that where his cultural dimensions indicate how people are likely to interact in their home country, they are not necessarily a good predictor of how they will behave towards “foreign visitors” (Fougère & Moulettes 2006, p.3). However, this study is less concerned with how international students react to each other than the ways in their behaviours differ in the same cultural setting.

The responses attributed in Hofstede’s study to employees from countries grouped into an **Arabic speaking region** (namely, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) are the closest representation, linguistically and geographically culturally, of the Omani students in this study. In many of Hofstede’s rankings, Australia and the Arabic speaking countries are often in polar opposition. However, more useful results emerge from comparison of Australia and Arabic speaking countries against key dimensions for the top four source-countries for undergraduate international students in Australia at the time of the fieldwork: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Hong Kong (Australian Education International 2000).

The dimension where the similarities between Arabic speaking countries and the top four source countries is most apparent is Individualism and Collectivism. The Individualism principle refers to the relationship between society and the individual, and the ways in which this determines how people live together. In terms of organizational culture, Hofstede (2001, p.226) argues that countries which do not rank highly in the Individualism Index [IDV]
demonstrate an inclination towards Collectivism by way of privileging personal relationships over allocated tasks and company loyalty, working in in-groups, avoiding “losing face” or shame, and choosing “duty, expertness and prestige” as Management goals. In terms of education, it is noted that Collectivist cultures view schooling as an exercise in learning how to “do”, as opposed to learning how to learn (2001, p.244).

Of the 53 countries surveyed, Australia is ranked 2 in terms of Individualism, behind the United States. Arabic speaking countries are ranked 26/27 (with Brazil), Malaysia 36, Hong Kong 37 and Singapore 39/40, and Indonesia 47/48. Although the Arabic speaking countries are slightly more Individualistic according to Hofstede’s ranking, they clearly share Collectivist characteristics with the top four international student cohorts.

Likewise, Arabic speaking countries are not differentiated to any great extent from other relevant source countries \(^{14}\) in the Power Distance \([PD]\) principle. The Power Distance Index \([PDI]\) measures the extent to which different cultural groups accept that power is distributed unequally. In this Index Malaysia is ranked 1, Arabic speaking countries 2, Indonesia 8, Hong Kong 15, as compared to Australia which ranks 41 out of 53 (Hofstede 2001, p.107).

The distinction between Australia and all five other groups is further evident when PDI is plotted visually against IDV below where AUL = Australia, Sin = Singapore, HOK = Hong Kong, IND = Indonesia, MAL = Malaysia, and ARA = Arab countries. Australia’s low score on the PDI, and an extremely high score on the IDV places it in one quadrant, where the Arabic speaking countries and all four source Asian countries sit diametrically opposite Australia in the low IDV and high PDI quadrant. The Power Distance Index \([PDI]\) measures the extent to which different cultural groups accept that power is distributed unequally. In this Index, Arabic speaking countries are not differentiated to any great extent from other source countries: Malaysia is ranked 1, Arabic speaking countries 2, Indonesia 8, Hong Kong 15, as compared to Australia which ranks 41 out of 53 (Hofstede 2001, p.107).

\(^{14}\) Source country is the industry’s standard term for country of origin of a group of international students.
However, despite clustering, it is apparent that the distance between the Arabic speaking countries and Australia is only significantly less than the difference between the Arabic speaking countries and Indonesia. This suggests that students from the Arab region may configure individualism somewhat differently from some other groups of international students, and somewhat more similarly to Australian students and staff.

4. b). Different types of Individualism and Collectivism

Hofstede's generalisations are naturally open to dispute as impressionistic or insufficiently nuanced in various ways. Thus Oyserman (1993) compares attitudes indicative of individualism and collectivism of Arab and Jewish Israelis and suggests that attribution of cultural dimensions to particular groups is more complex than Hofstede’s analysis allows. Responses to the survey from Israeli university students indicate that Arab respondents are more likely to endorse both a more individualist view and a more collectivist perspective than their Jewish peers (Oyserman 1993, p.999). However, a similar study conducted in a teachers’ college, where students are “normally considered to be less sophisticated” than their university peers, revealed less difference between Arab and Jewish responses (Oyserman 1993, p.1002). Although it is noted that gender is not a significant variable in responses, the socio-economic status of students and their urban or rural origins are not
recorded. The correlations of high academic achievement with higher levels of both
collectivism and individualism are significant. This suggests that students who obtained higher
results in secondary school, and gained university entrance as a consequence, may be more
likely to perceive themselves as important individuals within a collective. This is consistent
with Ibn Khaldun’s (1958) observations about expectations of the superior qualities of a family
patriarch in representing the group’s interests. Oyserman’s (1993) study indicates that men
and women perceive themselves as equally capable of contributing to their family’s
advancement in the contemporary setting.

Triandis (1995) argues that four kinds of self-identification are at work in the
individualist/collectivist paradigm: independent, interdependent, same, and different. He
therefore contends that those identifying themselves as individualist may do so horizontally
(i.e. through acknowledging other people who have a similar level of independence) or
vertically (i.e. they operate independently of everyone else, because they are different).
Likewise, those who identify as collectivist may do so horizontally (i.e. by acknowledging their
interdependence on those who hold the same values) or vertically (i.e. through maintaining
difference from those on whom they are interdependent) (Triandis 1995, p.44). Regarding
vertical collectivism, Triandis argues for inclusion of the Authority Ranking and Communal
Sharing mechanisms used to determine how resources are distributed (1995, pp.48-50). He
demonstrates that resources such as food, land, remuneration, even “attention” from the
media or other individuals are dispensed according to level of authority and family need. Thus
although those who command higher respect and deference may be offered the most
significant share of resources and will be offered them before all others, it is also incumbent
on these authority figures to ensure that none of their family, clients or subjects are left
wanting.

The characteristics of vertical collectivists are consistent with attitudes, preferences and
behaviours described in preliminary scoping, research on Gulf students and the fieldwork
findings discussed in Chapter 4 below.

The scoping exercise revealed that Gulf students in Australia may perceive themselves as
outstanding, on the basis of the high results (or personal connections) required to obtain a
scholarship to study overseas, and special in that they are likely to obtain qualifications
unavailable in their home country and be the first to work in that area upon their return. This is
affirmed by studies of Gulf students discussed below in Section 1. b). International students
from the Gulf States in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom in the literature
review. However, literature on wasata indicates that the advantages of being outstanding and
special are only relevant in the context of their home community and the benefit it will bring
their family in terms of prestige and financial stability (e.g. Gause 1994; Cunningham &
Sarayrah 1993; Ibrahim 1982). Therefore, although the students are eager to stand out and
be recognised as different from their peers, this is due to the importance of their family obligations. This reveals an intersection between apparently conflicting needs, and highlights the students’ dependence on others for personal success.

Therefore, Hofstede’s Individualism Index, modified in the light of variations observed by Oyserman (1993) and Triandis (1995), is a useful indicator of the cultural characteristics of Gulf students. It confirms that primacy of the family observed by Ibn Khaldun in the 14th Century has remained resilient, as well as the research of scholars such as Longva (1997), Ibrahim (1982), and Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994; 1993) based on this position. It also suggests a complex identity in the case of high-achieving students who need to present themselves as powerful individuals, but also be attentive to the needs of a strong collective.

Similarities in responses to Power Distance and Individualism by Arab participants and those from the top four source countries of international students represented in Hofstede’s study suggest that Gulf students may share many attitudes with their international student peers. In this sense, it can be reasonably argued that Gulf students may experience similar adjustment issues to many international students in Australian universities. For example, they may find the new independent learning style to be a challenge after more traditional pedagogical practices experience in secondary school. However, it is known from preliminary scoping and other research (e.g. Douglas 2005) that Gulf students do behave differently from other international students. This is particularly evident when circumstances do not appear conducive to achieving the results to which they had become accustomed in secondary school. The students’ alleged over-reliance on academic support staff is consonant with social structures in the Middle East which require authority figures to protect those seeking assistance. This cultural norm is more accurately represented by Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance dimension, which reveals the greatest divergence between Hostede’s respondents from the Gulf States and nationals of other source countries for international students included by Hostede.

4. c). Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance

Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance [UA] principle refers to ways in which societies respond to fear of the unknown. In terms of organizational culture, Hofstede argues that countries which rank highly in the Uncertainty Avoidance Index [UAI] demonstrate an inclination towards specialist positions over management positions, preference for working in larger organizations, tendency to avoid competition between employees for promotional opportunities and preference for consultative modes of decision-making, dislike of working for a foreign manager, resistance to change, and a pessimistic outlook on company motives (despite a commitment to company loyalty) (Hofstede 2001, p.153).
Of the 53 countries surveyed, Arabic speaking countries are ranked 27 in terms of high Uncertainty Avoidance above Australia at 37, Indonesia 41, Malaysia 46 and Singapore 53. Despite some clustering at the top and bottom levels of the ranking, Australia is roughly equidistant (but in opposite directions) from Arabic speaking countries on the one hand and Malaysia and Singapore on the other. This suggests that Australians demonstrate tendencies midway between two very different groupings of cultural values. To judge by the following assessment, education could be a contributory factor in uncertainty avoidance among Arabic speakers: “The dominant value of educational systems in Arab countries remain largely risk-averse” (United Nations Development Programme 2003, p.101).

The similarity between the characteristics of Hofstede’s high UA countries and the desire of Gulf students for job security attested in the literature, is quite conspicuous. The preference for specialisation is particularly revealing as it is arguably indicative of a lower motivation to “work up the ranks” through promotion to management positions. Promotion in the Gulf States takes a long time and is increasingly difficult as the public sector becomes saturated with graduates from previous generations (Mohamed & Hamdy 2008, p.3). Preliminary scoping suggested that Gulf students may perceive sponsorship as an opportunity to gain qualification in a unique field which would, in effect, “fast-track” their career outside the usual modes for advancement. This theory was confirmed by Douglas’ (2005) descriptions of Kuwaiti students’ preferences for particular study disciplines (e.g. health sciences, engineering and commerce) on the basis of superficial understandings of prestige associated with particular professions, and their confidence that they will meet their own expectations of academic success as elite sponsored students. Hofstede’s attribution of the desire to work in a larger organisation, avoidance of competition with colleagues and the preference for less authoritative and more consultative modes of management to high UA cultures are also resonant with management literature based in the Gulf (e.g. Ali & Al-Shakhs 1991; At-Twaijri 1989).

Hofstede’s inclusion of a “pessimistic outlook” in the Uncertainty Avoidance dimension may then seem contradictory when compared to his statements about the influence and negotiation for the benefit of the collective. Pessimism is explained in an example of a petition for a specific governmental change conducted in Belgium, a country which scored highly on the UAI. Respondents either denied the problem highlighted in the petition, refused to sign or signed though convinced that it “wouldn’t help”. This is arguably evidence of the alienation from the “systems that affect their lives” often experienced by individuals living in high UAI countries (Hofstede 2001, p.171). Preliminary scoping revealed that Gulf students tend to be confident of their own ability to succeed but frustrated with bureaucracy that governs their lives as sponsored students. They can also allegedly be particularly vocal about their despondency that they are not achieving the academic success that they expected. Scoping further reveals that students are likely to resist consulting with Ministry officials regarding the status of their enrolment – or with lecturers or tutors to address specific difficulties they are
experiencing in their studies – on the grounds that it “wouldn’t help”. In some cases, students refused to spend time identifying and analysing their own learning difficulties, apparently preferring that their tutors assume they know absolutely nothing than take responsibility for their own learning (and accept the consequent/inevitable academic failure).

If behaviours such as those outlined above are representative of Uncertainty Avoidance, then Gulf students’ assumptions about the responsibilities of those holding positions of authority can be represented by Power Distance. The two dimensions can plotted against each other visually, in order to provide a conceptual representation of where differences lie. In the diagram below: AUL = Australia, Sin = Singapore, HOK = Hong Kong, IND = Indonesia, MAL = Malaysia, and ARA = Arab countries. Australia’s low score on the PDI, and “middle range” score on the UAI placed it in one quadrant, whereas the four source Asian countries grouped in low UAI and high PDI were placed in another, with the Arabic speaking countries sitting almost diametrically opposite Australia in the high UAI and high PDI quadrant.

Hofstede 2001, p.152, Exhibit 4.2 A UAI x PDI Plot for 50 Countries and Three Regions
From this visual representation, a hypothesis is proposed whereby Gulf students’ shared perceptions of Power Distance with other international students diverge when attempting to minimise any risk associated with their studies in Australia. This is evident in the way the Kuwaiti students are alleged to have interacted with academic support staff at Australian universities in the scoping exercise.

The pink line in the graph above represents the trajectory along which academic support services for international students have been developed in Australian universities. It is argued that these services assume low prevalence of Uncertainty Avoidance, which is shared to some extent by Australian culture and that of its top four source countries for international undergraduate students.

In summary, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions provide a useful foundation on which to build research into Omani students’ experience. The power distance dimension highlights attitudes that Middle Eastern students in common with other international students in Australia, particularly towards authority figures such as teachers. The collectivism dimension likewise indicates that Middle Eastern and other international students share beliefs about the critical importance of cultivating and protecting of “face”. The uncertainty avoidance dimension, by contrast, suggests divergence between Middle Eastern student behaviours and those of other international students. In particular, the Middle Eastern respondents in Hofstede’s research demonstrate higher degrees of concern to minimise uncertainty in relation to employment outcomes than other ethnic groups interviewed. This attribute becomes particularly pronounced in situations where power is distributed unevenly and not in favour of the respondent. This situation is consistent with literature on Middle Eastern attitudes towards employment, which argues that family connections are of paramount importance in ensuring favourable outcomes for the individual.

Of particular relevance are the assumptions held by students with high UA tendencies that: truth is absolute; structured learning situations and seeking the “right” answers is preferable; achievements are credited to effort, context and luck; and that teachers are seen as an extension of the family and community (Hofstede 2001, p.169). All of these characteristics were displayed by the Omani sample interviewed for this study. The last point about teachers is of critical importance and exacerbates impact of other factors such as failure to cope with unstructured learning situations, or with tasks where there is no single "right answer“ or where marks are not allocated for effort alone. In Oman, the students’ teachers were part of their community and therefore not exempt from wasṭa obligations. This ensured that any difficulties encountered in learning situations could be overcome by negotiation. However, this is not the case in Australia. Literature on international student expectations and experiences will be discussed in the next section in order to provide a context for Gulf students’ inappropriate expectations.
PART II: STUDENTS

This section of the literature review builds on the setting established in Part I on Gulf society, namely, the economic and social policy providing impetus for educational sponsorship, and cultural values such as *wasta*. The focus on *wasta* elucidated the characteristic way in which Middle Eastern students seek to cultivate personal relationships to ensure employment outcomes. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions provided a context for considering the implications of these aspects of Gulf society, in particular the ways attitudes towards uncertainty differentiate the behaviours of Gulf students from those of other international students.

Part II of the literature review focuses on the small amount of literature available on students from the Gulf States, and their attitudes and behaviours when studying overseas, as well as in their home countries. This research is then situated within the extensive studies of international students in Australia, as well as student expectations generally. Common experiences of adjusting to studying overseas are identified and one of the most contentious issues – namely English language ability – is explored in greater detail, with specific reference to the unique difficulties experienced by native Arabic speakers. This leads to a statement of the hypothesis to be explored in the fieldwork, testing the relative importance of academic preparedness, English language skills and the ability to forge personal relationships with compatriot students and university staff.

1. Students from the Gulf States

1. a). Market Overviews and Market Updates from Australian Education International

Australian Education International [AEI] is the education arm of Australian Diplomatic missions overseas.\textsuperscript{15} AEI is the primary source of information for staff who actively engage with international students in management, recruitment, student support, and other administrative roles. Information provided by way of Market Overviews on the AEI subscriber website includes enrolment trends, information about the national education system and private providers, and relevant cultural mores (for example Allen’s 2006 *Market Overview* for Oman). Documents such as these, combined with enrolment numbers and international partnerships, tend to form the basis of marketing plans, recruitment strategies and international student support programs for individual institutions.

\textsuperscript{15} In general, AEI’s priorities are to raise the profile of Australian education though identifying opportunities for strategic alliance and partnerships to meet local needs using Australian expertise. AEI representatives conduct a range of activities to support these objectives, including: facilitating introductions between colleagues from Australian education providers and local education, government and industry representatives; and producing publications for prospective students and their families, including local language websites, flyers and films.

AEI offices are not engaged in recruiting international fee-paying students for Australian institutions. However, their activities are intended to complement recruitment activities undertaken by individual institutions and provide the an overarching, consistent “Study in Australia” presence in country. AEI staff are also responsible for providing enrolment trends, market updates and briefing materials, as well as competitor intelligence.
Although AEI is one of the most influential sources of authoritative advice, locally engaged staff are not always in a position to offer constructive advice when difficulties arise with international students in Australia. The edition of *Market Update* emailed to subscribers in June 2006 included an article entitled “Local Survey in UAE finds Students Not Interested in Studying in Western Universities” (Australian Education International 2006, June 27). It highlighted results of research conducted by the local Sheikh government which revealed a “lack of enthusiasm” of students who had recently completed their final year of secondary school for pursuing Western-style education offshore. Some 99% of students surveyed indicated that Western institutions would impose conditions described as “tough and can hardly be met”; 49% felt that it would be a challenge to adapt to Western life and culture; and 26% conveyed their concern that it would be difficult to study in a foreign language. A quarter of students surveyed were concerned that the current international political situation was inimical to Arabs studying at Western universities. In addition, 49% preferred to pursue tertiary studies closer to the family home.

In extrapolating from these data, AEI affirmed that Emirati students “basically fear” studying in English. However, it was also pointed out that enrolments of United Arab Emirates nationals in Australian universities, pathway programs and English language centres had increased by 212% between 2001 and 2005. This being the case, the Consul (Education, Science & Training) based at the Australian Consulate-General in Dubai recommended that institutions recruiting students from the UAE be cognisant of “pastoral care issues” for UAE nationals, warning that their expectations would be hard to meet.

Several significant aspects of the survey were not addressed by way of qualification to this advice. First, the basis for the students’ answers are not revealed. The fact that the survey was limited to students living in the Emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah is not insignificant in this respect. Ras Al-Khaima is a municipality of the United Arab Emirates that has not, to date, sponsored secondary school graduates to study offshore. Given that Ras Al-Khaimah is one of the smaller, more conservative Emirates, with the fewest expatriates in residence and limited private tertiary education on offer, it would be reasonable to conclude that the proportion of the area’s population with direct experience of Western education would be minimal. Most institutions of higher learning within the Ras Al-Khaimah are technical colleges for men and women. It would also be reasonable to assume that students pursuing higher qualifications would be required to commute daily to another Emirate or relocate for the duration of their studies. Reluctance to allow females to study at offshore coeducational institutions may also be reflected in the 49% response that their families would “never let them join Western universities”.

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16 The population was approximately 250,000 in 2007 – almost one fifth the size of the United Arab Emirates capital Abu Dhabi (Ras Al-Khaimah Investment Authority 2008).
Moreover, AEI overlooks its own statement that 60% of respondents indicated a preference for working in the UAE Government over private sector employment. Ras Al-Khaimah has the lowest proportion of nationals participating in the workforce of all the United Arab Emirates (Nelson 2004, P. 4). The fact that overseas qualifications are prerequisite for private sector jobs is not mentioned in the AEI article. Nor is the consequent connection made between the students' preference for government sector positions or their reluctance to undertake roles in private enterprise and the need to pursue qualifications in another Emirate or another country. Of greater interest is the unaddressed question of why the 40% who do not necessarily hold a preference for public over private employment should be reluctant to undertake studies in a Western institution.

In March 2007, AEI held a series of Industry Seminars throughout Australia to provide updates to stakeholders in institutions. The Middle East and North African Seminar focused predominantly on emerging private markets such as Iran, despite the fact that enrolments of sponsored students from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia continued to increase exponentially (Australian Education International 2008). The Consul (Education, Science & Training) presenting on behalf of AEI acknowledged the difficulties faced by Gulf students in Australia in a perfunctory way, preferring instead to draw attention to future recruitment opportunities.

At the same time as the Seminar series, a delegation of senior Government and school representatives from the Gulf States were visiting Australian institutions to appraise facilities and discuss course requirements. This signalled an increased number of scholarship agreements in the near future, particularly under the auspices of the Saudi Arabian King Abdullah Scholarship Program (Australian Education International 2007, September; 2007, January 10; 2007, February 28; Edwards 2007).

There is a stark contrast between the ostensible indifference to Gulf students' educational experience in Australia and the range and depth of research conducted into other international students' experiences in Australia, notably the learning needs of students from Confucian Heritage Cultures. The latter suggests that Australian universities are capable of investing significant resources in student support services beyond what is mandated and regulated by the ESOS Act and National Code with a view to ensuring successful educational outcomes for international students. The old axiom that word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool suggests that education providers also support current students with an eye firmly on future enrolments.

This being the case, AEI's recommendation that providing just pastoral care is the answer to meeting Gulf students' expectations is insufficient. It does not seek to explain why Gulf
students’ needs should be harder to meet than those of other international students. The recommendation does not suggest why extensive and well-tested mechanisms for student support have failed to meet the needs of cohorts such as the Kuwaitis in the late 1990s. Nor does it indicate what could be improved or modified to meet Gulf students’ particular needs.

1. b). International students from the Gulf States in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom

Scholarly research into the experiences of Gulf students in an Australian educational setting is virtually non-existent and difficult to obtain. The one unpublished doctoral thesis available at the time of writing this study focused on students from the United Arab Emirates pursuing engineering studies taught by Western academics in the UAE (Thurogood 2006). Several aspects of this research are relevant to this study. Thurogood considers the difficulties experienced by Emirati nationals studying mathematics and science subjects at Western universities. He attributes them to the students’ learning preferences which he defines on the basis of the learning styles expounded in publications over the last fifteen years by Felder.

Felder’s perspective is that of a psychologist and not dissimilar to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. He considers how engineering students exhibit preferences for various learning styles, for example: sensory or intuitive; visual or verbal; active or reflective; and inductive or deductive (Felder & Spurlin 2005; Felder & Soloman 1999a; Felder & Soloman 1999b; Felder 1993). Felder’s learning styles were not specifically developed for the purpose of identifying differences in learning styles between local and international students. However, his studies have subsequently been used for this purpose, including discussions of English language teaching (Felder & Brent 2005; De Vita 2001; Felder & Henriques 1995).

By surveying Emirati engineering students as to their preferred learning styles, Thurogood develops the hypothesis that Emirati nationals prefer “visual” rather than “verbal” demonstrations, and “sensory” rather than “intuitive” learning. He recommends that Western teaching staff incorporate lectures and workshops devoted to these learning styles into their professional development programs, to ensure more effective teaching practice. Although his study begins from the premise that Emirati students find mathematics and science studies challenging, he does not investigate the systemic reasons behind the learning preferences he has identified. Thurogood (2006, p.132) does, however, note that “money and career aspirations” may determine the extent to which Emirati students are motivated to succeed in their studies and recommends this as an area for future research. He also attributes “discrepancies between expectation and achievement” to the students’ limited English language skills (2006, p.110).

Attribution of poor academic performance to poor English skills was also a central tenet of Douglas’s (2005) PhD thesis Still in transition: An ethnographic case study of the academic
and cultural adjustment experiences of Kuwaiti students enrolled in a formal agreement partnership between an American university and the state of Kuwait. Douglas’s interview sample comprises eight Kuwaiti students enrolled in a combined arts and dentistry degree at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, one Kuwaiti alumnus from the same program prior to his return home, as well as four members of the academic staff and two professional staff members with dedicated roles in international student support.

All eight students and the alumnus interviewed were adamant that poor English language skills pose the biggest challenge of adjustment to studying in the Unites States. Given the opportunity to reflect on their secondary schooling, all note the limitations of the English classes they had undertaken with Egyptian teachers. Some expressed approval of the Kuwaiti government’s decision to introduce English classes at primary level. At the same time, however, they tended to protest at the requirement that they undertake a year of English language classes prior to their dental studies.

The Kuwaiti students were observed to have good conversational ability but poor written skills. The students themselves complained of limited vocabulary and being slow readers. Douglas (2005, p.191) loosely related this to research on *diglossia* in Arabic, according to which writing requires highly formal language as opposed to the local, informal dialects used in everyday oral communication.

Truancy was identified as a major problem, with professional staff recounting their resort to threats that they would fail the students and require them to repeat classes, thereby placing their student visas in jeopardy. The alumnus acknowledged that English language staff provided significant assistance to him in adjusting to academic requirements in the United States, although he had not been initially receptive to this possibility: “I did not understand how much we needed this class until later. I thought why does a dentist need to learn all this English when all we are doing is pulling out teeth in Kuwait?” (Douglas 2005, p.148). He proceeded to state that the most valuable assistance he had received during his first year of studies had been from other Kuwaiti students, who helped him find satisfactory living arrangements and provided a social network.

Douglas was confident at the outset that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder would be a significant factor in impeding the students’ adjustment from Kuwait, given that the Iraqi invasion and the first Gulf War had occurred while the students were in senior secondary studies. All students relayed stories of family tragedy and personal hardship (including missing a year of schooling) around the time of the Gulf War, however, none felt that this had significant impact on their adjustment to studies in America.
By contrast, members of the dental faculty at the University of Missouri-Kansas City observed the Kuwaiti students’ serious academic difficulties in addition to their underdeveloped skills in English language. These included “academic underachievement, lack of motivation to study, poor attendance in class and failure to complete assignments” and led staff to speculate as to whether students were selected for participation on the basis of family connections to Kuwaiti Ministry of Education officials (Douglas 2005, pp.163-164). Douglas also observed that the one million dollar revenue stream generated by Kuwaiti Government funding appeared to place additional pressure on faculty staff implementing regulations regarding discipline and probation requirements (ibid.).

Academic staff suggested that limited socialisation with other international students as well as American students may have exacerbated the situation and limited the Kuwaiti students’ capacity to improve their English skills. Douglas also noted that the students’ enrolment in dentistry appeared to be on the basis of arbitrary selection from a small number of career choices prescribed by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Higher Education. He further related the students’ lack of commitment to their studies to their perceptions of the poor quality and low social standing of dentists in Kuwait (2005, p.204). This was confirmed by a prediction from the interviewed alumnus that the cohort would probably not practise as dentists beyond the three year obligatory period required by their scholarship.

Although wasṭa was identified as an unanticipated area of interest, Douglas did not connect it with the Kuwaiti students’ experience beyond its dubious role in determining selection for scholarships. His extensive literature review did not include any research on Kuwait as a modern nation state, the social repercussions of oil production or the nationalisation imperative. Observations by academic staff recorded by Douglas are reminiscent of those noted in the scoping undertaken for this study:

They always have some type of excuse... I often wonder if some of them want to be in my classroom or if they really want to be dentists? Some just appear to lack the motivation to study the course materials at times. I know it’s not an easy class but I believe they can do better if they want to...

Douglas 2005, p.170

However, they provide little insight into the reasons behind the negativity of the Kuwaiti student experience in the USA.

Two theses written on experiences of Arab students in the United Kingdom are highlighted in the International Students in UK Universities and Colleges: Broadening our Horizons report commissioned in 2004 by UKCOSA. The UKCOSA survey included data on the satisfaction

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17 UKCOSA: The Council for International Education is a registered charity that functions as the national advisory body serving the interests of international students in the UK. Its responsibilities include: research and publications; the training of student advisers; dedicated telephone advice lines for
of international students across the full range of education providers, courses and country backgrounds in the UK. The full report included a review of published research as well as an annotated bibliography of unpublished research by Leonard, Pelletier and Morley (2003). The theses are of particular interest as they were written by Arab international students on the experiences of their compatriots.

Al-Mahri’s (1996) unpublished MA dissertation on Arab postgraduate students comprises interviews with 21 out of the 64 Arab students enrolled at Aberdeen University, as well as 10 Cultural Attachés representing the students’ sponsors. Countries represented were: Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan. Al-Mahri’s sample consisted entirely of postgraduates, 75% of whom were enrolled at Doctoral level and 57% of whom are engaged in scientific research. Their observations focused mostly on relations with supervisors as well as the challenges of moving their spouses and children to a new country. Regarding their studies, the students reported that their greatest difficulty was in adjusting to studying in English, particularly learning a new alphabet and reading from right to left (Al Mahri 1996, p.73). Reference to such basic adjustments as continuing issues at such an advanced level of study is somewhat incongruous and raises questions about the soundness of the judgement which has placed these students in this course.

The Cultural Attachés interviewed, on the other hand, identified the main academic challenge as reconciling different education systems, as evinced by the divergent expectations of the role of tutors and “the lack of expertise of students in self-motivated study” (Al Mahri 1996, p.20). They acknowledged that their selection of appropriate candidates was critical to the success of the sponsorship program: “When suitable students are chosen from the beginning, they can continue without difficulty” (Al Mahri 1996, p.33). The Cultural Attachés did not discuss their selection methods with the interviewer. Choice of university, they advised, was determined by the strength of the relationship between themselves and the institution. They shared their concern that not all supervisors demonstrated an awareness of the particular “needs” of Arab students, and had not managed to “undertake their role effectively, causing the student unnecessary delay” (Al Mahri 1996, p.35). However, the Cultural Attachés expressed confidence that familiarity with Western culture and longstanding relationships with universities in the United Kingdom would enable smooth transition for Arab postgraduate students to overseas study. Accordingly they did not anticipate that their students will experience any “cultural difficulties” in adjusting to their studies in the United Kingdom. This suggested that the aforementioned “needs” are more likely to be academic than cultural and that responsibility for this is seen to lie with the supervisor.

Al-Mahri’s study reveals some discrepancy between student and sponsor perceptions. The students were of the opinion that language difficulties pose the greatest impediment, whereas their
sponsors observed that limitations in academic supervision is the main issue. Al-Mahri’s conclusions included recommendations that pre-departure orientations and university handbooks translated into Arabic be made available (1996, p.72). Peer mentoring is discouraged as it was felt that reports from other students would be “coloured” by their peculiar experiences. His final recommendation was that universities enrolling Arab students tailor research projects to “accompany the needs of the funding country”. The greater the relevance of students’ research projects, Al-Mahri contended, the greater likelihood of students’ focusing on the main purpose of their overseas studies, namely to “improve their career status and improve their knowledge” (1996, p.74). Again, Al-Mahri’s recommendations indicated a reluctance to acknowledge transitional difficulties beyond language and inappropriate course choice, and a tendency to avoid placing the onus for overcoming academic difficulties on the students themselves.

Al-Harthi’s (1997) unpublished MA dissertation titled Overseas students’ reaction to interculturality: a study of the experience of Omani students in England detailed the findings of his survey of 48 Omani students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the United Kingdom. Al-Harthi situated his research in literature on globalisation and sought to ascertain the extent to which international students were influenced by the culture of their host community. He was particularly interested in Omani students, as he argued their society continued to be shaped by geographical isolation, Islamic values and the tribal system, despite modernisation of the economy and infrastructure since the discovery of oil and accession of Sultan Qaboos in the 1970s. Al-Harthi also tested the importance of variables such as gender, age, marital status and urban or rural location – all of which he argued are significant determinants of cultural values in Oman.

The main areas of difficulty faced by Al-Harthi’s respondents were: feeling safe and secure (44%); living in “a Western style of moral issues”, for example having pre-marital sexual relations or dressing in revealing clothes (43%); financial problems (41%); and discrimination (34%) (1997, pp.73-74). As such, Al-Harthi’s study revealed greater difficulties in social and cultural adjustment than the Cultural Attachés interviewed by Al-Mahri were inclined to acknowledge. The implications of these issues for motivation and academic success were not discussed although it is worthy of note that respondents nominated “communicating and language use” as being the least important difficulty faced in settling in to their overseas study environment (6%).

Al Harthi’s (1997) survey yielded some variation between responses from male and female participants; as a general rule, he noted that female students tend to describe English social life more positively than their male peers. He also demonstrated that students over the age of 24 years were more likely to participate in social activities that include local students and, possibly as a consequence, more apt to describe English social life as “easy to live in” and “well organised” (Al-Harthi 1997, pp.82-83). His hypothesis that length of stay is also a significant factor influencing attitudes towards the host culture was also borne out by the considerable difference between difficulties faced by students who had been in the United Kingdom for less than one year, and
those who had been there for longer. Where the former struggled with adjustment issues relating to food, religious observance, health and culture shock, the latter were more likely to complain of discrimination and poor living conditions.

In general, Al-Harthi’s (1997, pp.59-60) sample perceived the social life of their host culture to be: individualistic (96%); materialistic (87%); well organised (79%) and “rubbish” (79%). They also indicated that, for the most part, they were not shocked, surprised or puzzled by any aspects of English culture. That said, qualitative data gathered through follow-up interviews indicated that the Omani students did not think highly of their English peers, describing them as “uptight”, “big-headed” and interested only in “sex, money and pubs” (Al-Harthi 1997, pp.66-70). These reasons were nominated as the main impediments to forging friendships with the local community. Al-Harthi attributed these issues to differences in cultural values, particularly focusing on Individualistic and Collectivistic cultures also defined by Hofstede (2001). In particular, Al-Harthi (1997, pp.93-94) argued that members of collectivist cultures were not likely to consider individualism a positive attribute. In support of this, he noted that the Omani students were likely to think less of their host culture having had the opportunity to observe individuals in action, as is evident in statements such as “I no longer believe in that Western culture and life is better than ours” and “I no longer believe that English people are so brilliant than Arabs, no way” (Al-Harthi 1997, pp.75-76, italics original). Al-Harthi concluded that Omani students were likely to reject their host culture when studying overseas and experience nostalgia for their home customs and cultural norms.

Postgraduate research on Arab postgraduate students provides useful insight into the experiences of students and other stakeholders interviewed. However, the conclusions of the three studies obtained offer limited practical guidance to academic and support staff working closely with Gulf students in Australia.

A small number of academic studies published in education journals consider the unique experience of students from the Middle East studying in the United States of America. They raise points consistent with issues sighted in the preliminary scoping and unpublished theses, but add a practitioner’s perspective to meeting this cohort’s particular needs.

For example, an early piece predicts areas of difficulty faced by Middle Eastern students enrolled in American universities (Shana’a 1978). Shana’a proposes, for instance, that the inordinate emphasis on final examinations in schools and universities in countries such as Saudi Arabia may result in students’ not taking poor marks and attendance requirements seriously during the semester, on the assumption that their success rests on performance in final examinations. She warns that existing orientation programs for new students were not likely to correct such assumptions. In fact, she predicts that they would “completely miss the mark” (Shana’a 1978, p.244). However, she attributes Middle Eastern students’ inability to ask pertinent questions relative to their own situation to difficulties with English pronunciation.
Shana’a does not offer suggestions as to how to make orientation programs more useful for Middle Eastern students. She does indicate, however, that the role of student adviser may be misconstrued by students who completed their secondary and tertiary studies in countries such as Kuwait and who have, for example, never had to choose electives. She recommends that students’ requests that student advisers select subjects on their behalf be understood in this light and dealt with patiently.

Shana’a’s (1978) observations appear to be based largely on vignettes of personal experience of living in the region. For example, she draws attention to the critical importance of friendships and assisting others in Middle Eastern students’ home countries. She hypothesises that this may result in behaviours detrimental to the students and their friends, citing the example of a high-achieving Turkish student who does not feel she can cover her examination script to prevent her friends copying her answers (Shana’a 1978, p.245). Although this connection may appear tenuous and somewhat overstated – and Shana’a does not advocate exempting Middle Eastern students from penalties for cheating – the relevance of social networks for academic success is borne out by the fieldwork for this study.

Another treatise on Arab students emphasises the *dewania* culture of countries such as Kuwait whereby men gather for social and political discussion on a daily basis (Meleis 1982). Meleis (1982, p.441) describes the critical importance of family networks in solving problems, providing support and celebrating successes, and stresses the Arab tendency to rely on others for “advice and guidance in a crisis”. Advice and guidance, however, will only be effectively received from people with whom strong relationships have been built on trust. Meleis (1982) stresses the importance of the spoken word in developing personal relationships, as well as the interpretation of visual cues such as body language and eye contact. Arab culture, he argues, is “highly contextual” therefore Arab students are likely to rely heavily on student advisers to interpret the vast quantities of written material that are usually distributed to new students in relation to university policy and procedures.

In observing differences between Arab and American education systems, Meleis (1982) affirms that Arab students traditionally undertake a highly structured secondary school program which affords little opportunity for choice. However, he also points out that decision-making is interpreted by students through the lens of traditions such as *dewania*, where assistance is seen as a function of a more qualified person’s duty of care for the student. “It is supposed that the decision is not made for them because the person in charge does not want to be accountable for the consequences; that, the student reasons, is why the advisor or faculty member wants the student to make a decision for which there is inadequate information.” (Meleis 1982, p.443). However, Meleis attributes the apparent passivity of Arab students in requesting further information to past experiences with figures of authority in the education setting rather than deficiencies in oral expression in English.
Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) build on Meleis’ (1982) study in order to ascertain the extent to which particular adjustment issues were prevalent among this cohort and the coping methods they used to improve their situation. Their interviews with eight Jordanian students in postgraduate programs reveal the nature of relationships with student advisers (rendered in quoted American English as “advisors”, usually a member of academic staff who is not the supervisor of their research project) and professors (the academic supervisor or supervisors of their research project). Results are considered in light of Lysgaard’s u-curve hypothesis (1955) whereby initial difficulties in adjusting to new education environments are overcome over time.

The Jordanian students in Alazzi and Chiodo’s sample were aware of cultural differences between themselves and their host communities, and did miss particular things (such as food and clothing) available at home, but did not feel that they had experienced culture shock. They preferred to socialise with compatriots in order to avoid embarrassment arising from social preferences and norms. With respect to academic issues, one student was of the opinion that “most Middle Eastern students” would prefer to consult their adviser before their professor. This is consistent with Shana’a (1978) and Meleis’ (1982) observations on the importance of the social network for support. However, it appears that students in Alazzi and Chiodo’s sample were greatly concerned with the implications of loss of face:

My professors are everything in my career future. I feel my future is in their hands; therefore I try to work hard to prove to my professor I am the student they are looking for and will not allow to my professor to place any negative note on my study. If I have any problem, I discuss it with my professors, with respect and humility. I depend heavily on my advisor and my professors to solve any problem I face. Due to my cultural and language differences, I cannot understand everything; all of the university’s policies and procedures and, thus, consult my advisor and professors for academic matters. If the problem is out of my control, I can take major steps, such as changing departments, advisor, or the university in a final attempt to solve the problem.

Alazzi & Chiodo 2006, p.5

The assumption that the professor holds responsibility for problem-solving and interpreting university policy is held by all eight students in Alazzi and Chiodo’s sample. However, the students are also likely to acknowledge that this is not the preferred way of managing enrolments in the United States and express awareness that students are required to take responsibility for their studies. The tension between undue reliance on their professor and the necessity for taking personal responsibility appears to result in increased anxiety on the part of the student: “I work twice as much as many of my American colleagues in order not to fail or embarrass myself and my family who wait for me abroad” (Alazzi & Chiodo 2006, p.4). Alazzi and Chiodo observe that participants’ concern to earn their supervisor’s approval is undermined by their unwillingness to challenge anything they are told or request further assistance or clarification. They also reveal that students are more likely to consult
compatriots for advice in the first instance, then approach student advisers for assistance before asking for help from their professors. They are also unlikely to visit international student services provided by the university (such as counselling), preferring instead to seek support from their compatriot community. Again, the strength of personal support networks appears to protect students from loss of face in the broader university community.

However, apparently contradictory attitudes towards professors as figures of authority suggest that the Jordanian students interviewed do not feel empowered in relation to their research and administration of their program. This, in turn, appears to lead to behaviour that is overly deferential to the supervisor, in an endeavour to produce a positive relationship and superior results as a consequence. The tendency to study for a comparatively high number of hours is also noted, particularly among students commencing their studies. Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) suggest that such behaviour stems from anxiety and does not necessarily ensure smart study practices or guarantee strong academic performance. However, they attribute this behaviour to limited interest in available research topics, a conclusion that echoes Al-Mahri’s (1996) recommendation for greater coherence between research projects and human resource needs in the region. This finding has limited applicability to the Australian setting, where the majority of students from the Gulf States are enrolled in English language, undergraduate and Masters by coursework programs (Australian Education International 2008). It does, however, suggest that sponsored students who have had a particular course allocated to them may not necessarily have the personal interest required for sustained application to their studies. Douglas’s (2005, p.204) Kuwaiti alumnus who expresses little interest in working as a dentist confirms this hypothesis.

The students in Alazzi and Chiodo’s (2006) sample express considerable anxiety with regard to their studies. This is heightened by the imperative to make the most of their scholarship and their concern to preclude the perception that they are wasting a valuable scholarship and family funds. However, despite expressing considerable concern, all participants “perceived themselves capable of mastering the graduate work” (2006, p.4). Alazzi and Chiodo attribute this to the students’ adjustment to their overseas studies, consistent with Lysgaard’s (1955) u-curve hypothesis that initial difficulties experienced by international students are overcome in time. Confidence in their own potential despite all appearances to the contrary was consistently expressed by the Jordanian sample, Douglas’s (2005) Kuwaiti sample and descriptions of the Kuwaiti cohort provided by preliminary scoping for this study. Staff working closely with the latter two cohorts attributed such behaviour to the students’ “unrealistic expectations” of their own ability, probably on the basis of past experiences of education. Unsatisfactory academic outcomes for all three cohorts suggest that this is a more likely explanation than adjustment to a new educational setting.
1. c). Gulf students in their home countries, as observed by foreign teachers

In contrast to the limited literature on Gulf students overseas, a considerable body of information is available for foreign teachers intending to work in the Gulf States. Little of this is based on scholarly research; however, opinions of experienced expatriate classroom teachers in the region indicate student attitudes and behaviours consistent with those described in the literature on Gulf students overseas.

One such article, for example, describes teaching English in Saudi Arabia as “boy wrangling” (Koolmees 2000). Koolmees (2006) recommends a strong constitution for managing classrooms of 30 “immature and unmotivated” students, and warns that limited teaching methodology and rigid curriculum hinder expatriate teachers’ best efforts to inspire and motivate their students. The importance of establishing authority from the beginning is affirmed by McAllister (1999), who argues that many students are in the classroom only because:

they are told to be there by their influential parents and have no desire to achieve anything other than to disrupt the infidel’s class at any opportune moment.

Dupree (2003, p.1), on the other hand, suggests that the key to success for teachers is to emphasise their power as arbiters of passing or failing, and the consequent continuance or otherwise of stipends for the successful.

By contrast, research on the perceptions of Emirati university students as to the desirable qualities and practices of effective teachers suggests that students expect more from expatriate teachers than may appear to be the case (Saafin 2008). Saafin’s survey of 136 UAE nationals enrolled in an intensive English language program as part of their first year of undergraduate studies revealed that 61% nominated “Treats students with respect” as the most important attribute for an effective teacher (2008, p.5). The second most highly rated criterion was “flexible and willing to compromise”, although some 50% nominated this as important – significantly lower than the highest attribute. Overall, characteristics and behaviours that would generate a friendly class environment were favoured, as students felt this was an environment that would encourage confidence in expressing ideas and asking for assistance.

However, the students’ preference for “avoiding implementing the rules except in very serious cases” suggests an equation of a friendly environment with leniency and the expectation of moments of tension between Emirati students and their expatriate teachers. This being the case, McBride’s (2004) advice on how to build rapport with Emirati female students is useful, but needs to be qualified with how to maintain authority if the cordial nature of the relationship is misunderstood or tested.
A survey undertaken at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman suggests that students enrolled in Chemistry (which is taught in English) are most likely to blame their lecturer for poor results (Arden-Close 1999, p.325). In particular, they cite fast speech and pace of lectures, lack of examples, complex terminology and insufficient detail as the problematic aspects of lecture delivery. By contrast, the expatriate lecturers interviewed express concern that they are expected to teach secondary school level material to university classes. They also warn that students are likely to be literal and become anxious if material covered in lectures does not match the information they have memorised. Lecturers offering science practicals note a tendency towards finding results that are perceived to “please” the lecturer, rather than learning through the process of an experiment (Arden-Close 1999, p.326).

Comparisons of academic staff perceptions prior to taking up new teaching posts at a women’s university in the United Arab Emirates and those after teaching for a number of weeks, confirm a mismatch between student and teacher expectations (Sonleitner & Khelifa 2005). Initial perceptions of teaching staff focus on issues relating to course materials, particularly their lack of confidence in the propriety of examples and exercises they would ordinarily use:

[S]omething you would have done without thinking twice about… you can’t do that. You have first of all to check […] is everyone allowed to listen to music? You cannot give an assignment [like] watch TV […] without first asking who can watch TV and who can’t.

Sonleitner & Khelifa 2005, p.8

However, after some experience they become aware of the need to distil the curriculum into a small number of basic concepts, to the extent that only “a third” of material would be covered (p.9). They also discuss strategies to deal with the fact that students rarely prepare for class – even when requested to – and ways in which to overcome minimal verbal interaction in the classroom. Arden-Close’s survey affirms the importance of non-visual cues in ascertaining whether students are understanding material as it is delivered (1999, pp.329-331).

On a more positive note, many staff conveyed their surprise at the achievement of a number of students in examinations, particularly where the students had not given any appearance of understanding class materials or were among the students who seemed to talk among themselves for most of the time (Sonleitner & Khelifa 2005, pp.13-14). In particular, it is noted that the results of certain activities – for example, preparing PowerPoint presentations – are of surprisingly high standard. These are usually the activities that students enjoying doing because they are already good at them.

New academic staff participating in Sonleitner and Khelifa’s (2005) survey observe that lack of motivation can be directly linked to lack of career goals. The students who perform best are the ones who are undertaking university study because they have a specific career path in
mind (2005, p.14). One staff member argues, however, that some students enrolled at the women’s university do not have career goals because their spouses or families will prevent them from working after they graduate (2005 p.15). Thus the relationship between key influencers and career goals is a significant factor in determining motivation levels in the classroom.

In summary, literature available on the experiences of Gulf students internationally foreshadows a range of difficulties that Gulf students may encounter. These include adaptation to different academic approaches; learning in English for the first time; settling into the new cultural setting; and adjustment of expectations of teachers, lecturers and supervisors. The latter is highlighted as particularly important, and is also noted by foreign teachers based in the Gulf States. The students’ need to preserve “face” is evident in all studies. However, the nexus between relationships with staff and the building/protection of face is not identified, nor are solutions offered to ease Gulf students’ transition to new modes of education.

2. International students in general

2. a). Student choice and expectations
Preliminary scoping undertaken for this study, as well as the unpublished theses outlined above, indicated that Gulf students and their sponsors held unrealistic expectations about their ability to succeed in overseas study. They also had unreasonably high expectations of the nature and level of support provided by academic and professional staff at the universities where they were enrolled. Negative feedback about their academic performance was observed to engender negative attitudes towards staff, whom the students perceived as unreasonable and unhelpful. Staff noted lack of motivation and an unwillingness to commit to serious, sustained study habits.

Consideration of student expectations has emerged as a theme in higher education literature. For the most part student expectations are seen to be shaped by personal research conducted prior to enrolment (for example, soliciting opinions from family and friends, looking at websites, attending open days) and subsequently reflected in their choice of course and institution.

For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] report Responding to Student Expectations (2002) identifies the emergence of “the student as customer” as a significant conundrum for universities around the world. The role played by the marketing of university options to prospective students is taken into account as contributors to the report consider the relationship between the university, the student and society. The
question is posed: to what extent should universities respond to trends in student and societal expectations?

In providing the Australian context for the OECD report, James (2002a, pp.71-83) identifies the ways in which student expectations are shaped by their experience of higher education, as well as how the teaching and learning process is influenced by student expectations. The influence is particularly strong, he argues elsewhere, where demand for particular courses results in high entry requirements which are consequently seen to indicate the prestige, quality and character of an institution (James 2002b, October; James 2002c, April; James & Beckett 2002, July). In his OECD entry, James (2002a, p.78) examines the nexus between student and institutional expectations of each other, and points out that the former can often be limited to immediate, tangible aspects such as “ease of access from home and the ambience of the campus buildings and surroundings”. He further finds that mismatches in expectations can often reflect early inexperience on the part of the student, whereas alignment of the expectations indicates intellectual and personal growth and adjustment to the new teaching and learning environment, beyond the physical amenities.

Overall, the OECD report provides a useful context for this study as it affirms the reciprocity between student and institutional expectations. It also indicates a commitment to improving understandings of student expectations, and development of appropriate responses at the institutional level. However, the nature of decision-making prior to and during a student’s enrolment, particularly the influence of third parties such as family, friends, sponsors and employers, are not discussed. The individual research undertaken and the consequent decisions made by international students are not explored, nor is the influence of cultural values on expectations.

A significant body of literature on international student expectations is emerging for the guidance of academic, marketing and student support staff in anticipating the particular needs and requirements of newly-arrived international students. Willis and Kennedy (2004, p.4) define international student expectations as: “a preconsumption belief about the future performance of the service provided by a foreign university” (italics original). Their study considers the differing expectations of students from Hong Kong who pursue tertiary studies overseas and those who undertake degrees from foreign universities that have campuses in Hong Kong. Consistent with the findings of James (2002a) in the OECD study, Willis and Kennedy (2004) identify the failure of the literature on international student expectations to analyse how and why expectations change over time. Their own study confirms that the key contributors to formation of student expectations are: foreign university websites; education exhibitions in Hong Kong; agents and associations; foreign universities’ information brochures; friends living or studying overseas; and friends and family in Hong Kong (Willis & Kennedy 2004, p.13). They suggest that future research evaluate the ongoing formation of
student expectations once studies at the foreign university have commenced, to ascertain which of these aspects remained influential for and relevant to the student experience.

Willis and Kennedy’s (2004) study focused on the ways in which Hong Kong students researched and selected universities, in order to understand how their expectations were formed. By contrast, a survey of Thai and Malaysian students focused on the reasons for their choice of one country of destination over another (Lawley & Perry 1998). Lawley and Perry suggested that the quality and recognition of courses, and personal safety were consistently the most important factors influencing student choice. Pimpa (2002) affirmed that Thai students’ choices were largely determined by family finances. However, his study indicated that information provided by education agents was considered more critical to the decision-making process than the opinion of family or friends. Pimpa argues that family finances and education agents respectively represent the “push-pull” factors at work in the decision-making process for Thai students, as do Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) for a broader range of Asian students.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) recognise that students and key advisers (such as parents) do not make decisions in isolation: they may be “pushed” by particular motivations in their home community, but they are also “pulled” by information provided by overseas institutions to attract international student enrolments. Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) survey of Chinese, Indian, Indonesian and Taiwanese students identified the presence of four “push” factors (perceptions of quality; course availability and ability to gain entry; opportunity to learn more about the West; and intention to migrate) and an equal number of “pull factors” (reputation/profile of the host country and institution; links with alumni; competitive cost and the possibility of part-time work; and the appeal of the physical environment).

However, the reasons for selection of country, institution and course are not always the most accurate predictors of student expectations upon arrival. The majority of Gulf nationals studying in Australia are sponsored, and sponsorship limits students’ choices. It may also limit students’ (and their families’) understandings of the reality of the experience that awaits them, as they need not undertake significant research into courses, institutions and the country of destination before accepting the scholarship. These are all determined by the Ministry of Higher Education. Some negotiation with the Ministry regarding destinations is known to occur, usually at the behest of family members. Prestige, perceptions of course outcomes and the established presence of compatriot students are anecdotally cited as reasons for attempts to modify the Ministry’s allocations.

and takes up the recommendation of Willis and Kennedy (2004) to consider the changing expectations of Indian students enrolled in Australian universities. She notes the students’ confidence prior to departure that they would be: familiar with the course curriculum; learning from highly qualified teaching staff; having a lot of fun socialising with and studying alongside other elite students; and enjoying high-quality campus facilities. Ahmad records mixed reports from her sample after their arrival with respect to the level of challenge posed by the curriculum. The majority of comments about academic staff were positive, although some students expressed disappointment at being taught by tutors and junior academic staff. Likewise, fellow students lived up to expectation, the preponderance of other “Asian” students notwithstanding. A significant number experienced limited socialisation outside Indian compatriot groups because of differing cultural values and financial constraints. Ahmad’s research indicates a significant coincidence between student expectations and the reality of their studies. Indeed, she notes that her Indian respondents were much given to recalling information provided prior to departure and considering the extent to which their actual experience matched it. Social and financial factors were consistently the chief constraints on positive comparisons.

By contrast, The Kuwaiti students in Douglas’s (2005) sample were less likely to attribute their unfulfilled expectations to social constraints. Nevertheless, staff observed that they did not mix significantly with other students and experienced such difficulty adjusting their new learning environment that they failed to complete assessments to a satisfactory standard. Douglas’s findings were echoed by staff in the Australian foundation program, who found the Kuwaiti students’ poor performance to be particularly problematic when coupled with an expectation of easily maintaining in Australia the level of academic performance and grades to which they had become accustomed at home, despite the absence of family support and the private tutors. Ongoing disappointment with poor results tended to undermine motivation, which, in turn, became the main issue. None of the above literature relating to student expectations elucidates the underlying reasons for Gulf students’ behaviour or how they might be addressed more effectively by international student support programs.

In the OECD report outlined above, James (2002a, p.71) stresses the reciprocal nature of the relationship between student and institution. He further identifies a lacuna in the theoretical framework within which universities endeavour to understand the ways in which these two-way forces influence the teaching and learning experience. Literature on international student expectations is useful in elucidating the particular cultural forces which influence their decision-making and choices between tertiary study options. However, as seen above, the literature focuses on students’ attitudes as shaped by their choices, and the extent to which these may change on the basis of experience. It does not broach the possibility that institutions need to do more than just monitoring the integrity of the information provided to prospective students.
One of the earliest reports on international students commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Ward 2001) recommends further research on the impact of international student expectations on local institutions. The report highlights international student expectations regarding interaction with local students and adjustment to the curriculum as priority areas. Ward advises that an audit of local institutions' endeavours to pre-empt and/or accommodate these expectations is critical to securing New Zealand's reputation as a provider of quality education and pastoral care for all students. She argues that research situated in the “multicultural classroom” would provide more rich and valuable data than would a narrow focus on the reasons for the limited socialisation between international and local New Zealand students (p.24).

However, most New Zealand researchers have continued to focus on the student experience, particularly the impact of limited English language ability on socialisation and adjustment to the curriculum. For example, Li, Baker and Marshall’s (2002) interviews with a small sample of students from China, India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar focus on language difficulties that impede students’ ability to interact in the classroom, adapt to living in New Zealand, and master the key concepts of their business program. They also contend that adjustment to independent learning requirements is secondary to language concerns.

By contrast, Birt, Sherry, Ling, Fisher and Lee (2004) test hypotheses on classroom behaviour based on Hofstede’s (2001) long- versus short-term orientation dimensions. Their survey of 180 New Zealand and international students reveal significant differences between expectations of theoretical content and diligent study habits. Questions revealing attitudes towards teachers, by contrast, indicate little difference between the two cohorts although it is noted that international students are more likely to assume that deadlines are flexible. Birt et al. do not consider the changes required in institutional teaching practices and learning support, although they do recommend this as an area for further research.

In the Australian education setting, Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock (1995) discern little difference between local and international students’ concerns about “loss of motivation”, “doubts about academic ability” and financial problems (p.210). Both cohorts claimed difficulty in understanding the expectations of academic staff. However, Mullins et al. note that international students were more likely than their Australian peers to attribute a difficult transition or poor academic results to inadequate services rather than their own abilities or inappropriate expectations (p.214). All students rate “access to academic staff” poorly in the South Australian universities in which they are enrolled. In much of literature on international student expectations, such dissatisfaction is attributed to students’ limited language abilities. For example, several students in the sample used by Li et al. (2002) are hesitant to ask questions in class and make private appointments with their teachers (p.14). Li et al. argue
that this also hinders international students’ capacity to make friends with their local New Zealand counterparts. However, in both of the abovementioned studies, international students’ concern not to lose face and their preference for consulting compatriots for academic support are overlooked.

Ignoring these important factors impairs universities’ capacity to provide appropriate and effective support services for international students. This study demonstrates that students from the Gulf States need more sophisticated institutional support from English language centres, pathway programs and universities than the traditional English language support and orientation programs.

2. b). Academic adjustment required by international students in Australia
Research on international students in Australia is broad and addresses a range of aspects of the student experience, including academic adjustment, language issues, security and living arrangements, and migration. Literature focusing on international students’ adjustment to the academic setting has evolved since the mid-1990s, when significant numbers of international students began to enrol in Australian universities (Australian Education International 2007b). For the most part, research has focused on students from Confucian Heritage Cultures [“CHC students”] who are usually Chinese in origin (Reagan 2000). These students consistently make up the majority of the international student cohort in Australia (Australian Education International 2007a). Research on CHC students has evolved from earlier studies focusing on the “problems” of “Asian” students, to challenging stereotypes of CHC students on the basis of assumptions about rote learning and passivity in the classroom. More recent studies have recommended inclusive teaching practices for the benefit of all students, including CHC international students.

One of the earliest studies of international students in Australia identified language and “study skills” as the major “problems” experienced by Thai, Indonesian and Malaysian students in Australian universities (Bradley & Bradley 1984). Bradley and Bradley recommended that language support focusing on pronunciation and vocabulary be offered, as well handbooks and orientation programs to alert new students to gaps in academic preparation. They conclude that further studies focusing on “prior subject area preparation and motivation” be pursued, in order to provide the basis for remedial programs (p.vii). The nature of problems encountered by international students was later clarified by way of surveys and comparing student responses to those of academic staff at an Australian university (Samuelowicz 1987). Samuelowicz argues that many of the challenges faced by international students are considered problematic by academic staff due to their own limited experience of teaching students from diverse backgrounds. She notes assumptions about language deficiencies, rote learning and passivity in the classroom and observes the consequences for teaching practice. However, in cataloguing the students’ responses to these assumptions, she argues that
“weak points” in the students’ previous education” are confirmed (1987, p.125). Samuelowicz concludes that significant additional programs are required to ensure international students’ transition, including critical and analytical approaches to learning, participation in discussion groups and research methods for postgraduate students.

Studies conducted by Bradley and Bradley (1984) and Samuelowicz (1987), among others, form the basis for an instructional manual for academic staff entitled *Teaching International Students: A brief guide for lecturers and supervisors* (Ballard & Clanchy 1997). The book’s publication by IDP Education Australia – the premier international student recruitment body at the time – suggests the imperative to develop appropriate support for international students in order to ensure future fee-paying enrolments and revenue streams. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) highlight discrepancies between attitudes towards teaching styles between Australian students and international students. They argue that students’ past experience of deference to the authority of teachers is the most resilient and significant factor preventing them from adjusting successfully to studying in Australia. Ballard and Clanchy are anticipated by Pearson and Beasley (1996), who conclude that international students’ cultural assumptions about learning inhibit their adjustment to the Australian education setting. Pearson and Beasley (1996) monitor a group of international and local students enrolled in a business program over the course of four years. Through the process of regular testing, they ascertain specific areas of deficit, then implement a supervised language and learning skills session on the basis of specific course materials. Pearson and Beasley attribute the dramatic drop in course failure rates over the four year period to the provision of intensive learning support. Thus they attribute international students’ difficulties to limited past experience of critical thinking and classroom discussion, and conclude that individual language support is the single most effective mechanism for addressing deficiencies for any student. Although they observe some difference in responses between male and female participants, they do not elaborate on any differences between international and local student experiences in the course. In addition, they do not relate their findings back to the initial paradigms of individual and collectivist culture discussed.

As a consequence, later studies on international students are deeply critical of the approach taken by Ballard and Clanchy (1997) and Pearson and Beasley (1996). Biggs (1997), for example, argues for a hierarchy of classroom practices that enables a teacher’s practice to be identified by three levels characterised by the extent to which they: focus on student differences [Level 1]; work with culture-specific teaching techniques [Level 2]; and engage appropriate cognitive processes [Level 3] (p.4). He attributes the approach adopted by Ballard and Clanchy, and Pearson and Beasley to the Level 1 approach, which attributes poor teaching practice to deficiencies in students. Biggs echoes the arguments of Volet and Renshaw (1996), who point out that the “deficit view” does not assist teaching staff in developing an accurate picture of how students might overcome difficulties over time, or a
more realistic understanding of the different approaches between cohorts of international students and cohorts of local students. In their short term longitudinal study of Singaporean and local students, Volet and Renshaw (1996) observe a degree of adaptability of the international sample which suggests changes to learning patterns, motivation to achieve high marks, and participation in class. They conclude that the Singaporean sample displays a number of “desirable study characteristics” although they concede that students less proficient in English might adapt differently (1996, p.218). In a further study, Volet (1999) considers adaptability in the context of “knowledge transfer”, namely the interaction between international student and the curriculum, staff and student population of their host institution. She considers the range of expectations that international students attempt to transfer from their home pre-university context to the Australian university setting and provides examples of appropriate, ambivalent, difficult and inappropriate transfer (Volet 1999, p.630). This enables Volet to establish a range of international student experiences, recognizing both positive and negative aspects, and to identify where mismatched expectations are likely to occur. She argues that all students would benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their transition to university and develop strategies to understand their own assumptions and expectations against the prevailing norms in their new education setting (Volet 1999, p.640).

Biggs (1997) locates Volet and Renshaw’s research in the Level 3 approach, arguing that going beyond assumptions about learning styles and allowing for adaptability enables good teaching practice. Good teaching, he states, incorporates inclusive practice, to the benefit of all students. However, he reiterates the findings of Mullins et al. (1995) that mismatches between student and staff expectations (among other factors) have the potential to undermine an inclusive approach. In particular, he points out that international students’ difficulties with English language and learning skills may challenge a teacher’s confidence to manage a multicultural classroom. However, Biggs (1997) places responsibility for overcoming such difficulties on the individual teacher and the institution. Shinn’s (2002) research on the effectiveness of Learning Communities Curricula affirms that the provision of targeted academic support for new international students is essential for their transition to Australian and American universities. In addition, his case studies indicate that dedicated study groups led by academic staff, support development of reading and writing skills, critical thinking and interactive learning. However, Shinn’s study also confirms that individual student preferences will determine the extent to which they are able to reap full benefit from the Learning Communities Curriculum.

In order to assist Australian academics develop a more accurate picture of how their expectations differ from those of international students (and why), Biggs (Watkins & Biggs 1996) works to expose the paradoxical nature of Western conceptions of the Confucian Heritage Learner. Watkins and Biggs (1996) define this paradox in the contradictions that: students from countries such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea and Japan are
taught in conditions not considered to be conducive to good learning yet they consistently outperform their Western peers in international testing; and these students are also known to learn largely through passive rote methods and memorising, yet the same research indicates high levels of deep understanding.

Ballard (1996) delves further into this conundrum, attributing difficulties to international students' attachment to "reproductive" modes of learning despite the requirements of their new "analytical" and speculative" learning environment (pp.151-153). This framework echoes the top-down, bottom-up approach proposed by Abbott (2006) and Parry (1993), although Ballard (1996) acknowledges the generalisations required in order to polarise educational experiences in this way. In particular, she highlights the critical importance of discourse organisation in Western academic settings and argues that conventions regarding essay writing tend to bring mismatched expectations into "sharpest focus" (Ballard 1996, p.161). Ballard points out that in many cultures, writing is seen as a formal public record of appropriate behaviour. She argues that this does not always allow for the analysis and debate that contributes to the formation of knowledge.

It has furthermore been suggested that Gulf students' learning preferences may be more complex and varied than they initially appear. For example, a survey of Emirati 38 students enrolled at Zayed University indicates that Gulf students prefer to learn via the acquisition of "facts and information" (73%), representing an overwhelming preference for surface modes of learning (Russell 2004, p.8). However, as few as 28% are likely to agree that memorising information is the best way to learn, suggesting a preference for deeper modes of learning.

Watkins and Biggs (1996) as affirm that the practice of "repetitive learning" ensures future recall of concepts understood. In a later study, Watkins and Biggs (2001) investigate the paradox further by considering the complexity and sensitivity of educational theory and practice in countries such as China. They argue that the role of the teacher is equally paradoxical as that of the student, particularly in terms of managing large class sizes. This is explained elsewhere by likening the CHC teacher to a mentor whereby their relationship to the student does not assume the student's individuality or autonomy evident in Western education systems (Chan & Drover 1997, p.56). Chan and Drover also draw attention to the greater level of involvement of CHC families in a student's progress and achievement, affirming Biggs' recognition of the interrelationship between the school and society in the educational process.

A parallel body of studies considers the experience of Confucian Heritage Culture students in the United Kingdom. Jin and Cortazzi (1993), for example, consider the differences in cultural orientation between CHC students and academic staff in British Universities in order to challenge stereotypes about learning preferences. In particular, they focus on the difference
between CHC students’ collectivist orientation in terms of their focus on personal relationships and social advancement. Their survey of Chinese postgraduate students and visiting scholars affirm the discord between academic supervisors’ expectations of independence and critical thinking, and the students’ preferences for direction and support. In a later study, Cortazzi and Jin (1997) go on to explain how assumptions about CHC students’ passivity do not give due credit to the depth of their understanding and their potential for sound research. In particular, they argue that the political, social and family reasons for particular modes of discourse require further consideration. They confirm Chan and Drover's (1997) and Biggs’ (1997) observations of family involvement in a student’s education and consequences for the role of the teacher in the new learning context: “Chinese students may be disappointed or disillusioned if they observe British teachers who do not seem, in their eyes, to carry out their part in this reciprocal relationship” (Cortazzi & Jin 1997, p.85). As a result, the peer network that has traditionally supported CHC students’ learning may become more important in a context where teachers are not aware of students’ assumptions about their obligations. Cortazzi and Jin (1997, p.89) provide guidelines for teachers in British universities to foster an awareness of the various cultural forces at play in an international students’ adaptation to their new study environment.

However, others have taken issue with Cortazzi and Jin’s (1997) framework, arguing that their polarised generalizations about CHC students and their British lecturers are not supported by other evidence (e.g. Stephens 1997). Stephens (1997, pp.115-116), in particular, takes issue with their use of agreed characteristics of individualist and collectivist cultures, as she argues these present a static and simplistic view of complex and evolving communities. She also notes the privileging of an “idealised” British academic culture. Stephens invites a group of visiting scholars from the People’s Republic of China to comment on Cortazzi and Jin’s (1997) paper. Consistently, the scholars conveyed their concern that although statements recorded in Cortazzi and Jin’s study contained a degree of accuracy, variations between individuals’ experiences also need to be acknowledged. One scholar recommended greater distinction between the undergraduate and postgraduate research experience. Another observed some statements would be less true in the present context than they may have been a number of years ago, due to the scale and pace of education, social and economic reforms in China. Although Stephens’ concerns are only partially borne out by her sample, her recommendation that cultural preferences be seen as “historical and circumstantial rather than attributable to profound ways of thinking” is consonant with this study of Gulf students (Stephens 1997, p.119). The fieldwork for this thesis is situated in traditional social structures and contemporary economic developments. Difficulties faced by Omani students are located in traditional modes of utilising relationships in a foreign context: they are not argued to represent a particular work ethic or “Arab way of thinking”.

94
Although these studies focus on Confucian Heritage Culture students, they provide a useful background for this research on Omani students. They illuminate the major debates in the Australian higher education sector with respect to the international student experience, particularly in terms of academic adjustment. They also require that this study be contextualised in terms of the extent to which Gulf students are perceived to be deficient in academic attributes required to succeed in their studies in Australia. Biggs’ (1997) framework proposes that the work of Ballard and Clanchy (1997), and Pearson and Beasley (1996) represents a base level of educational engagement, whereby the difference between student attributes and the institution’s pedagogical practice are highlighted. Researchers such as Douglas (2005), Al-Mahri (1996), and Shana’a (1978) present hypotheses consistent with Level 1 identified by Biggs, as they attribute difficulties faced by Gulf students to deficiencies such as: lack of academic preparedness; past experience of memorisation and rote learning techniques; and lack of interest in their academic program. Their studies on Gulf (and Middle Eastern) students largely rely on participants’ claims that limited proficiency in the English language has impeded achievement of their educational goals. Recommendations are thus limited to remedial English and orientation programs to pre-empt difficulties faced. Such strategies place the responsibility for provision of additional resources on enrolling institutions without acknowledging the limited effectiveness of such programs in enabling the self-reflection required for long-term adaptability identified by Volet (1999). As Douglas’ study (2005) and the preliminary scoping suggest, Kuwaiti students resisted attending remedial English programs devised specially to address their specific learning needs and they were not likely to realise the value of attending until much later in their studies – if they progressed that far.

Analyses by Alazzi and Chiodo (2006), and Meleis (1982) may supply a more sophisticated interpretation of Gulf students’ experiences and therefore be aligned with a higher level of practice according to Biggs’ (1997) hierarchy, inasmuch as they highlight behaviours indicative of specific cultural requirements that require further investigation. Likewise, frameworks established by Watkins and Biggs (2001), Chan and Drover (1997), and Volet and Renshaw (1996), which permit assumptions about Gulf students’ academic background to be challenged. In particular, they enable: assumptions about the efficacy of rote learning to be contested; acknowledgement of the positive attributes Gulf students bring to the Australian university setting; and due consideration of the role played by the family and society in the Gulf States. This study therefore builds on the second level of analysis pre-empted by Alazzi and Chiodo (2006), and Meleis (1982) and provides deeper insight into the reasons for Gulf students’ reliance on compatriots and staff with whom they have relationships, in absence of family and society’s involvement in the educational process. The extent to which the findings of this study can support more inclusive teaching practices consistent with Level 3 in Biggs’ (1997) hierarchy might be considered in a future study. However, it is proposed that the different needs and preferences of Gulf students compared to other international students –
particularly those from Confucian Heritage Cultures – must be acknowledged and understood if more effective academic support strategies are to be developed.

2. c). International students of non-Arab origin: similarities with and differences from Gulf students

The experiences of indigenous Malay students from Malaysia in their home country and overseas, particularly in the United States are, with qualification, relevant to studies on Middle Eastern students for a number of reasons. Malaysia is an Islamic republic that possesses significant oil and gas reserves, albeit not of the magnitude of those in the Gulf States. Malaysia’s wealth is primarily generated by the private sector, particularly telecommunications, which is dominated by the ethnic Chinese community who represent approximately 30% of the population of 25 million (Australian Education International 2003, July). Both Malaysia and the Gulf States are experiencing unemployment due to a saturated public sector, the traditional employment destination for the indigenous population. They also face a sizeable and growing youth population: in July 2008, almost 32% of Malaysia’s population was under the age of 14 (Central Intelligence Agency 2008). Whereas the Malaysian Government permits the non-indigenous population to hold citizenship, it also imposes minimum quotas on private companies with regard to indigenous employment. However, by contrast to the Gulf States, Malay students who are the recipients of Government scholarships have traditionally been employed in the public service or Government-owned enterprise upon their return to Malaysia (Daniels 2005).

Malaysia is one of Australia’s longest standing and most consistent source countries for international students. Cultural divisions pervade many aspects of daily life in Malaysia and are also a significant factor in Malaysians’ pursuit of tertiary studies in Australia (Australian Education International 2003, July). Pro-Malay policies have resulted in Sino-Malaysians being denied opportunities to enter local public universities, and the affluent members of this community have responded by studying overseas. Those who cannot afford to study overseas pursue tertiary qualifications through in-country private colleges, many of which have articulation arrangements with international universities. As Malaysia’s closest neighbour offering Western style education (apart from Singapore), Australia has long attracted large numbers of Malaysian Chinese students, and this arrangement has not been unduly disturbed by occasional turbulence such as the Asian Economic Crisis of 1998 and fluctuations in currency exchange (Australian Education International 2000). Indigenous Malay students have formed provided a small, steady stream of enrolments, usually under the auspices of sponsorship agreements negotiated between Government bodies and individual Australian institutions.

18 That is, indigenous students from Malaysia (as opposed to Sino-Malaysians, Indo-Malaysians, etc.).
Anecdotally, Malay students, also known as Bumiputera (literally “sons of the soil”) are reputed to be less motivated than their Chinese Malaysian peers. Annual secondary school examination results indicate that Chinese students consistently out-perform their Malay peers (Joseph 2006; Daniels 2005). This is attributed to substantial welfare benefits for Malays, as well as positive discrimination in employment policies, which are argued to result in a poor work ethic.

Various Malay researchers have attempted to counter cultural stereotypes by distinguishing the specific learning preferences of Malay students from those of other students. Although the Malaysian secondary school sector provides a multicultural context in which to consider differing experiences of students from different ethnic backgrounds (i.e. Malay, Chinese, and Indian Malaysians), a number of researchers situate their studies in literature conducted on adjustment experiences of international students. For example, Ismail’s (1982) survey of Malaysian students at the University of Illinois considers the extent to which frameworks offered by economic theory and organisational psychology help to explain the unique behaviours of Malay students enrolled in American universities. His application of the Learning Style Inventory developed by organisational psychologist Kolb (1984) is similar to Thurogood’s (2006) use of Felder’s (Felder & Solomon 1999a) Index of Learning Styles to explain differences between staff expectations and Emirati students’ preferences. Kolb’s (1984) Learning Styles consider the range of abilities required to access information effectively and provide an inventory of characteristics to assist educators in ensuring congruence between teaching and learning styles. Kolb suggests that adult learners apply a range of approaches to their education, depending on personality and past experience, including: abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation, reflective observation, and concrete experience. The extent to which they utilise a particular approach, he argues, indicates whether they are convergent, divergent, assimilating or accommodating in their learning style (Kolb 1984, pp.78-79). This enables him to identify correlations between particular learning preferences and academic majors, career choices and personality types.

Ismail (1982) tests a series of hypotheses about the correlation between Kolb’s Learning Styles and levels of need for achievement, labelled achievement motivation. The latter are derived from McClelland’s (1961) postulation that the economic productivity of a country can be directly linked to the extent to which its citizens are impelled to work hard and attain personal success. Ismail (1982, p.82) draws attention to the pivotal role played by educational sponsorship in Malaysia’s economic development policies, and argues that this should entail significantly high levels of motivation among sponsored Malay students. Differences between levels of achievement motivation, Ismail contends, should be explained by differing Learning Styles between individuals.
Ismail (1982) does not make clear the transferability between the organisational and university settings in his own study, given that the majority of students in his sample are not adult learners. The extent to which this undermines his data is not known, however, Ismail acknowledges that his hypotheses are not borne out by his fieldwork. He is unable to demonstrate a correlation between Learning Styles and achievement motivation levels. However, he notes that Malay students who demonstrate high levels of motivation to succeed in their studies tend to prefer more abstract modes of study. By contrast, students who are more concerned with avoiding failure – students Ismail identifies as “low achievers” – tend to be better placed in more applied modes of study. By contrast, variables such as major and level of prior education are observed to correlate with learning preferences. For example, students enrolled in science majors and students enrolled in graduate programs tended to prefer abstract over concrete learning and demonstrate high achievement motivation, whereas the opposite was the case for business majors and/or those enrolled in undergraduate programs. Determinants such as prior level of education ensured that the Malay students in Ismail’s (1982) sample were enrolled in the appropriate programs for their ability and learning preferences. Thus, incongruence between teaching and learning styles was not identified.

Levels of achievement motivation exhibited by Malay students in a public university in Kuala Lumpur have also been tested, including the extent to which variables such as ethnicity, gender, year of study, and urban or rural origin are significant variables in student behaviour (Elias & Abdul Rahman 1995). The study also takes into account less quantitative aspects such as attitude towards learning, study habits and internal locus of control i.e. the extent to which the individual perceives they are responsible for what happens to them. Elias and Abdul Rahman (1995) survey 1,050 students, of whom 56.7% are Malay, 35.2% are Chinese and 8.1% Indian. They argue that their finding that Malay students exhibit the highest degrees of achievement motivation contradicts McClelland’s (1961) correlation to economic activity, given the dominance of the Chinese community in the Malaysian private sector (Elias & Abdul Rahman 1995, p.6). However, they suggest that the necessity for economic and social competitiveness which has resulted from the latter may provide a stimulus for Malay students to lift their performance. Consistent with Ismail’s study, they indicate differences between first year and more senior students, and students in different majors. The impact of variables such as attitude towards study are inconclusive in Elias and Abdul Rahman’s (1995) study, however, gender is found to be relevant in relation to internal locus of control. They argue that Malay child-rearing practices tend to result in “more optimistic” men, who hold “higher expectations” of themselves than do women (Elias & Abdul Rahman 1995, p.6). However, they note that Malay students tend to be more optimistic about their studies and future career prospects than their Chinese and Indian counterparts. Elias and Abdul Rahman (1995) do not foreground the availability of career opportunities for Malays in the public sector, choosing
instead to emphasise the disparity in financial capacity between Malay families and the affluent Chinese and Indian communities.

The studies outlined above have limited value for research on Gulf students in Australia, other than to suggest that students’ learning preferences may be a predictor of their motivation to succeed in their studies. Their findings also echo the responses of visiting scholars catalogued in Stephens’ (1997) study that distinction between undergraduate and graduate perspectives is necessary in generalisations about student cohorts. By situating students’ motivations in their home country’s economic development, Elias and Abdul Rahman (1995), and Ismail’s (1982) research is consistent with Stephens’ argument that learning preferences and attitudes towards figures of authority need to be positioned within the political, social and economic context of their home countries. However, aside from the initial acknowledgement of the relationship between economic development and achievement motivation borrowed from McClelland (1961), Ismail does not relate his findings to contemporary economic policy in Malaysia. The present study avoids the danger of generalisation and stereotyping inherent in Ismail’s approach by linking student attitudes and behaviours to contemporary economic developments in the Gulf States relevant to educational sponsorship and graduate employment.

Of greater relevance are studies of Malaysian students that consider the extent to which preferences for particular modes of personal interaction impact upon students’ academic experience. Baba (1993), for example, evaluates the extent to which Malay students in urban secondary schools rate the range of social support mechanisms available for overcoming academic difficulties. Baba’s (1993, p. 5) sample values “guidance” and “knowledge” above all other forms of assistance, with “giving/loaning” and “doing tasks for you” perceived as the least valuable. The sample also indicates that students prefer to consult their mothers, then their fathers, for such support. By contrast, siblings and teachers (other than guidance counselors) were consulted the least, with little evident difference between male and female respondents. As a consequence, Baba recommends partnership between schools and families to ensure that student support mechanisms are consistent and effective. These findings suggest that Malay students do not experience the interrelationship between families and schools attested in Confucian Heritage Cultures by Chan and Drover (1997), and Biggs (1997). Baba’s (1993) findings, however, are not supported by other research on Malay students.

It has been observed, however, that Malay students require close relationships with adults that resemble support networks available at home, as well as close networks with compatriots, in order to succeed in their studies overseas (Hodgkin 1963). In her early study of international students in Australia, Hodgkin (1963, pp.76-77) also notes financial obligations to family back home – combined with limited experience of budgeting and saving –
can undermine the security of their lifestyle and study habits. She warns that Malay students do not generally appear motivated to make the most of their overseas study experience due to the guarantee of high level employment in the public service upon their return home. As a result, she remarks that, a Malay student's failure overseas is not usually cause for shame or punishment, but rather attributable to “unhappiness, homesickness, or some other type of misfortune” (Hodgkin 1963, p.78). Furthermore Malays who do not complete their studies may still be rewarded with employment upon their return home, albeit with lesser remuneration (Hodgkin 1963, p.79). Thus, she argues that, Malay students’ poor motivation and underachievement can be related to their overly ambitious pursuit of the prestige associated with studying overseas.

However, Hodgkin’s (1963) hypotheses is challenged by a survey of 193 Malay students in American universities, which provided an inventory and rating of adjustment problems (Othman 1985). Respondents are asked to use a Social Readjustment Rating Scale to rate issues relevant to their experience in order of severity. Contrary to Hodgkin’s observations, Othman’s respondents advise that their greatest difficulties relate to learning in the English language and adjustment to American academic conventions, with the top three areas of difficulty being: “reciting or speaking in class”; “writing essays or term papers”; and “giving oral reports”. That the fourth area of greatest difficulty is “competing with American students for high grades” indicates dissatisfaction with performance consistent with scoping undertaken for this study. Othman’s study also indicates that difficulties with “reciting or speaking in class” and “competing with American students for high grades” maintained their high degree of “severity” for Malay students for the longest period of time.

Malay students participating in Othman’s (1984) study were asked to nominate the main mechanisms used to overcome issues such as speaking in class and consistently attaining lower grades than expected. The following resources for academic difficulties were selected, in order of preference: individual action; formal help; group help; and informal help (Othman 1984, p.27). However, participants were also least likely to nominate formal help as “not useful” than any other mode of assistance. Othman’s findings also suggest that individual action was the preferred mode for solving problems of a social or personal nature, although the relevance of other mechanisms did not match the preferred order for academic problems.

Othman (1984) concludes that greater vigilance on the part of universities regarding students’ English language proficiency would obviate difficulties faced by Malay students in adapting to the new learning environment. He does not discuss the contradiction between Hodgkin’s (1963) observations of reliance on formal and informal support networks and his own sample’s overwhelming preference for solving problems on their own. Nor does he comment on the low proportion of students nominating financial difficulty as a serious problem, where
Hodgkin suggested greater significance. The students’ future career aspirations are not
discussed at all in Othman’s study.

In summary, a growing number of studies are analysing international student expectations of
their host countries and universities. Considerable attention has been paid to the origins of
these expectations, in particular the nature of secondary schooling in other countries, and
cultural attributes such as collectivist orientation. Early studies focus on English language
difficulties and recommend that host universities provide additional resources for students
who may not comprehend the academic requirements of their new educational setting.
Research on the experience of Malay sponsored students fails to make clear links between
Malaysian economic development and the motivation of indigenous students. However, the
collectivist behaviours and preferences demonstrated by Malay students are similar to those
discussed in the literature on Gulf students.

Overall, literature on student expectations provides an outline of Australian and international
universities’ understanding of student choice and motivation. The consequences of unmet
expectations are clear and serious. However, the literature does not address the issue of
government sponsored student expectations in light of the specific economic and social
development imperatives that have necessitated and enabled their sponsorship. This being
the case, recommendations for managing expectations and addressing motivational issues
have limited usefulness and applicability for the needs of students in this particular situation.

3. Language difficulties faced by international students

3. a). Difficulties faced by Arabic speakers learning English

Competence in the English language remains a significant and much-debated issue in
literature relating to international students. Research indicates that international students,
including Middle Eastern students, are likely to nominate difficulties studying in the medium of
English as a major challenge. However, preliminary scoping undertaken for this study, as well
as studies of Kuwaiti students by Douglas (2005), indicate that Arabic speakers experience
adaptation to the English medium in a different way from other international students. In
particular, a discrepancy between writing and speaking skills has been observed, with the
former significantly underdeveloped compared to the latter.

A significant body of research is available on the particular challenges faced by Arabic
speakers learning English, much of it related to the range written and spoken forms of Arabic
and debate about the extent to which these can be considered first or second languages.
These theories have implications for the ways in which Arabic speakers are understood to
learn English, particularly the extent to which traditional reading strategies limit their capacity
to interpret information in a new learning context.
3. a). i. Diglossia

Motivation is identified as a significant issue for Kuwaiti students’ ability to undertake English language studies, and pursue tertiary studies in the English medium (Douglas 2005). Douglas largely attributes this to poor language preparation in secondary school, but acknowledges that Arabic speakers face unique difficulties when commencing their English language studies. In particular, Douglas draws attention to diglossia in Arabic, which is defined by a number of scholars as the necessity for speakers to develop competence in more than one version of their own language. Indeed, scholars of contemporary Arabic language are cognisant of: the classical language of the Qur’an; formal literary language known as Modern Standard Arabic [MSA]; the Formal Spoken Arabic [FSA] used by government bodies, education institutions and the media; and a number of colloquial variants depending on the region(s) in which their family lives (Ryding 1991).

A report on the status of the Arabic language in relation to quality of education in the Arab region has been conducted for the Mediterranean Development Forum (Maamouri 1998). The report outlines the central tenets of diglossia and its implications for human resource development in the Arab world. In particular, Maamouri draws attention to the separation of written and spoken forms of the Arabic language, and the political and religious implications of endeavours to protect the language of the Qur’an from “degradation” (p.21). He also explores the complexity of Arabic language use in Maghreb in the postcolonial era. Using Ferguson’s (1959) seminal work on diglossia, Maamouri (1998) differentiates written and oral modes of the Arabic language, and outlines the situations in which each mode occurs. The formal or “high register” modes of Arabic, he reports, are used in formal schooling, religious sermons, formal political speeches, newspapers and new broadcasts. By contrast, the informal or “low register” variants are used for everyday conversations, in commerce, popular media, and populist political speeches (p.31).

Maamouri (1998) also warns that there is significant debate over classifications used to distinguish different forms of Arabic, particularly in terms of what is considered fusha. Fusha is a term coined by 8th and 9th Century AD linguists and scholars to define the classical form of the language used in the Qur’an (p.32). However, the extent to which fusha also includes MSA and FSA in the contemporary context is contentious, even though the terms are often used interchangeably. Ferguson (1959) argues that fusha may be considered superior and more beautiful than colloquial language forms, as it can be taken as evidence of high education levels and, consequently, social status (p.330). In many cases, he points out, Arabic speakers will assert that they only speak fusha, even when it is evident that they use local dialects to communicate with their family or servants. Maamouri (1998) affirms that Arabs will describe their first language as “Arabic”, even though this will usually be a colloquial form and not fusha, MSA or FSA. He further notes the social consequences of linguistic practices in a region struggling to improve literacy rates and access to quality
education (pp.18-19). Maamouri attributes the “irrelevance” of the region’s education system for the needs of developing societies to the disjuncture between modern *fusha* – the language of government and religion – and its applicability to students’ everyday lives. This is particularly problematic given that MSA and FSA are the main means of instruction in government schools and the only means through which government and industry employment may be secured. However, it is argued elsewhere that even highly educated Arabs may find it difficult to hold a conversation in FSA, preferring instead to use a colloquial dialect, and that switching between the two occurs with increasing regularity (Hedaiat 2004, p.3; Kaye 2001, p.119). Ferguson (1959) affirms that attempts to use *fusha* as the primary mode of everyday conversation may be interpreted as arrogance or pedantry or – in postcolonial cultures – disloyalty to the indigenous community (p.337). Al-Harthi (1997) points out that the influx of foreign labour in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf States, has resulted in recent generations of Arab children being raised by domestic servants who do not necessarily share their language or customs (p.37). Thus young Gulf nationals may be fluent in a range of “broken” colloquial forms, depending on domestic arrangements during their formative years.

Relevant to this study is the continuing debate as to whether Arabic speakers use Modern Standard Arabic or colloquial forms, also known as Non-Standard Arabic [NSA], as their reference point for learning English (Mahmoud 2000). Mahmoud challenges the prevalent assumption that students use MSA for the written aspect of their English language learning, and NSA for the spoken, pointing to a range of common errors that Arabic speakers make in written and spoken English that can be seen to contradict this theory (p.130). Mahmoud starts from the premise that Sudanese students learn NSA as children, MSA in early primary school and English in late primary school (or “elementary level”). He then tests the methods used by 24 Sudanese first-semester university students to translate ideas formulated in NSA or MSA to free-form essays in English. He concludes that both methods are used and there is little substantive difference in terms of the accuracy of their English expression. Mahmoud’s findings are supported by experiments conducted by Ibrahim and Aharon-Peretz (2005) which demonstrate that bilingual students in Israel translate Hebrew to MSA in the same response time as they need to translate NSA to MSA.

3. a). ii. Writing and discourse organisation

Differences between Arabic and English usage have been documented extensively in various handbooks for English language teachers (Swan & Smith 2001). In particular, attention is drawn to the use of present and past tenses in Arabic, as well as the way in which future activities are conveyed in absence of a future tense. For example, the verb “to be” is not used in the present tense in Arabic sentences. Arabic relies on the perfect aspect for actions completed and the imperfect for actions yet to be completed: these verb-forms only roughly translate to the past and present in English (Scott & Tucker 1974, p.80). It is argued that differing senses of time between Arabic and English-speaking cultures require Arabic
speakers to make personal judgements about which patterns from their first language to overlay onto English sentences (Swan & Smith 2001, pp.200-206).

As a result, the four main areas of difficulty for Arabic speakers learning English, have been identified as: verbs and verb tenses; prepositions; articles; and relative clauses (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić 1983). It is argued that certain areas of difficulty can be easily overcome through remedial work, whereas other habits are difficult to break. For example, a study of 22 students enrolled in a pre-university English bridging course at the American University of Beirut indicates significant reduction in errors from the beginning of the course to the end in terms of the accuracy of constructed sentences when spoken, where little improvement is evident in sentences when written (Scott and Tucker 1974, pp.92-93). It is also noted that errors persist in verb formation, subject-verb agreement, article usage, relative clauses, and pronouns. However, substantial improvement is evident in all of these areas, with the exception of verb tense. Scott and Tucker (1974) suggest various patterns of English language acquisition for the abovementioned aspects of grammar and vocabulary, however, they resist providing a definitive conclusion and recommend further intensive research in order to map out a more complete grammar of an Arabic speaker’s English.

The significance of differing patterns of discourse organisation in various language cultures for English as a Second Language teachers is first noted by Kaplan in 1966. In his seminal article on cultural thought patterns, Kaplan (1966) outlines the linear construction of rhetoric underlying essays written in English. He contrasts this with rhetorical structure used in Arabic and other Semitic languages which tend to use parallel constructions. One example is “synonymous parallelism” which balances two phrases joined by a conjunction such as: “His descendants will be mighty in the land and the generation of the upright will be blessed” (Kaplan 1966, pp.6-7). Kaplan points out that such a construction would be considered “archaic or awkward” in an English paragraph, where subordination of main ideas over others is preferred, and cause-and-effect more evident. He also outlines paragraph constructions favoured by speakers of Korean, French, Latin American Spanish and Russian. Kaplan argues that it would be unreasonable to expect that international students proficient in writing essays their own language will be capable of writing essays in English for these reasons. He recommends making overt differences clear to students and offers the following diagram to assist students in conceptualising them (Kaplan 1966, p.15):
Kaplan (1987) is later inclined to qualify his initial suppositions by acknowledging that his framework may have been somewhat generalised and not necessarily applicable to written and spoken language. However, other studies affirm that Kaplan’s hypothesis about the differences between rhetorical organisation in Arabic and English academic discourse holds true (Ostler 1987). In analysing the writing of 22 Saudi Arabian students commencing studies at the University of Southern California, Ostler identifies balanced rhetorical patterns consonant with the structure of Classical Arabic used in the Qur’an. Although she does not explicitly analyse the relationship between recited forms of fusha evident in the latter and the colloquial language spoken in Saudi Arabia, Ostler concludes that style and structure are consistent with parallel constructions originally identified by Kaplan. Although this approach has drawn objections from scholars, who argue that Kaplan’s parallel structures do not relate neatly to Classical Arabic forms, it is also argued that the relevance of Kaplan’s theory is confirmed by research that compares the rhetorical structures used in written language to social preferences for visual harmony (Connor 1996).

The tendency noted by Kaplan to balance ideas and describe them in sequence, is argued to result in stylistic writing that requires readers to follow the chronological development of an argument or story, rather than subordinating secondary ideas in favour of major tenets (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić 1983). As a consequence, it is argued that emphasis is provided by “overassertion”, usually indicated by preponderance of the superlative and exaggeration. An experiment conducted with a group of 150 undergraduate students at the Jordanian University of Science and Technology confirmed the presence of these written stylistic tendencies (Khuwaileh & Al Shoumaii 2000). Essays written by participants lacked cohesion, though this was evident to a greater extent in the Arabic essays, where 55% of submissions lacked cohesion, compared to 36% of those written in English (Khuwaileh & Al Shoumaii 2000, p.177). Despite articulating a number of good ideas, the students’ essays appeared to be a “list of sentences” as they are not linked by words indicating relationships or sequences between, or priority of, concepts. In addition, 98% of essays written in Arabic contained inconsistent or inappropriate choice of tense, where 73% of English essays by the same students demonstrated this tendency. Khuwaileh and Al Shoumaii (2000) do not explain the deficiencies they note and fail to discuss issues of diglossia identified by Ferguson (1959), Ryding (1991) and Mahmoud (2000).
It is argued elsewhere that poor Arabic writing skills should be seen in light of negative attitudes towards MSA (Hedaiat 2004). In her study of Zayed University students, Hedaiat points to the students’ struggle to see the relevance of the classical language (pp.3-4). In doing so, she echoes Maamouri’s (1998) concern that classical Arabic’s status as a “sacred” language continues to be promulgated through the pedagogical practices of MSA teachers.

3. a). iii. Handwriting
Legibility of Arabic speakers’ handwriting in English continues to present an important difficulty for English-language teachers (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić 1983). This phenomenon is attributed to: the absence of capital letters in Arabic; the tendency to write through lines on paper, rather than above them; and the practice of writing from right to left in a series of continuous strokes (ibid. p.610). In addition, some punctuation is inverted (Swan & Smith 2001, pp.199-200). Arabic speakers’ difficulties are compounded by the need to adopt a new numeral system as well as a new alphabet when learning English.

3. a). iv. Reading
Short vowel sounds such as i, u and a are usually indicated in Arabic by the use of diacritic markers rather than letters of the alphabet per se (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić 1983, p.612). The absence of short vowels in written Arabic is noted by Hayes-Harb (2006) to cause confusion among Arabic speakers learning to read English. Her study of English-speakers, Arabic speakers and non-Arabic speakers for whom English is a second language at an American university, tests the extent to which Arabic speakers are able to identify words using consonants and vowels, without the benefit of accompanying words to provide context. Her computer-based test requires participants to indicate whether pairs of words, shown in sequence with various letters missing, match in meaning. The test is designed to test the hypothesis that Arabic speakers are proficient in using consonants to deduce word meaning. Past studies of Arabic speakers in Israeli schools indicate that senior primary school students reading story books with vowels present will perform better on comprehension tests (Abu-Rabia 1999). From this, Abu-Rabia extrapolates that absence of vowels provides a significant challenge for Arabic speakers when reading familiar texts in their first language. The slow response time and lower accuracy of responses from Arabic speakers in Hayes-Harb’s (2006) experiment confirms that reading practices in Arabic do not rely on consonants alone to extrapolate meaning.

Likewise, it is pointed out that diacritics do not usually appear in printed materials due to limitations of Arabic typefaces (Maamouri 1998, p.50). This is used to support the argument that Arabic readers use the grammatical and morphological rules of MSA to deduce meaning from the word’s placement in a sentence.
These hypotheses are verified by other researchers. For example, Fender (2003) investigates the English word recognition skills of Arabic speakers and Japanese-speakers to ascertain the extent to which sentence structure in the first language influences the way English as a second language is learnt. He points out that the traditional word order in MSA is verb-subject-object and in other dialects subject-verb-object thus closer to structures used in English than Japanese (pp.296-297). On this basis, Fender hypothesises that Arabic speakers will demonstrate greater capacity to recognise English words in context than Japanese-speakers, whereas Japanese-speakers will have greater capacity to recognise individual words out of context. His test of 39 Japanese- and Arabic speakers from an English as a Second Language class supports this theory. In attempting to identify individual words, the Arabic speakers in Fender’s study exhibit slower response times and greater number of inaccurate answers than Japanese participants. However, the Arabic speakers achieved higher results when asked to judge sentence accuracy in terms of word order. He attributes this to their reliance on phonological information when learning to read in Arabic as their first language.

Fender’s (2003) argument that Arabic speakers are proficient in extrapolating word meaning from a broader context is also supported by Abbott’s (2006) comparison of Arabic and Mandarin speakers undertaking English language classes to support their transition to life in Canada as new migrants. She uses the bottom-up, top-down model provided by Parry (1993) which distinguishes students who use data and detail from those who use concepts to comprehend reading material. She concurs with Parry that reading strategies are culturally constructed and can be related to early experiences of learning to read in the first language. Abbott therefore considers the Arabic reader’s reliance on the sentence to provide meaning for the word, in the absence of vowel markers that would define meaning when reading in English. However, she also tests the range of mechanisms used by bottom-up, top-down reading strategies and the extent to which each is successfully employed to respond to questions based on each approach. Her study reveals that Arabic speakers are more likely to utilise the following top-down approaches: skimming for gist; connecting or relating information presented in different parts of the text; and drawing an inference based on information presented in the text (Abbott 2006, p.655). This confirms that Arabic speakers utilise strategies consistent with Parry’s hypothesis of top-down reading practices. It also suggests that Arabic speaking participants in Abbott’s sample will experience difficulty when applying these strategies to questions based on a bottom-up approach. The bottom-up approach is arguably similar to the first exercise in Fender’s study (2003), which asks participants to make decisions based on raw data out of context. In either approach, it is also noted that attempts to use English dictionaries may present additional challenges for Arabic speakers, who may be accustomed to the traditional format employed by Arab lexicographers in grouping words by etymology rather than alphabetical order (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić 1983).
3. a). v. Speaking
The difficulties faced by Arabic speakers in terms of English pronunciation can are anticipated through comparison of the 22 vowels and diphthongs and 24 consonants used in English to eight vowels and diphthongs and 32 consonants available in Arabic (Swan & Smith 2001, pp.195-196). Salient features of the Arabic accent in English are identified as follows: energetic articulation with stressed syllables; use of glottal stops before initial vowels; and the tendency to pronounce all consonants on the basis of spelling, for example /klambed/ for “climbed”. The latter is also evident in the insertion of additional short vowels, to assist pronouncing consonant clusters, for example “perice” for “price”, “ispring” for “spring” and “monthiz” for “months” (p.198).

A number of studies have sought to isolate the specific difficulties of Arabic speakers with oral English. The purpose of these studies is usually to highlight potential areas of difficulty for future tertiary studies, and therefore suggest areas for remediation in secondary school English as a Second Language subjects. For example, Alqazweeni (1990) undertook a study of Kuwaiti secondary school graduates commencing studies at Kuwait University to ascertain the extent to which they have difficulty with pronouncing particular vowel sounds. Acknowledging regional variations in dialect and pronunciation across the Arab world and Gulf States, Alqazweeni’s study is intended to contribute to reforms in English-language teaching in government secondary schools in Kuwait. His Kuwaiti sample demonstrates a tendency to default to familiar vowel sounds from the limited number available in Arabic when unsure of the correct English pronunciation. Alqazweeni also notes the practice of articulating every vowel and consonant in a word, and relates this to the way in which words are constructed and expressed in MSA. He recommends greater attention be paid to the formation of English vowel sounds in secondary school ESL classes.

3. a). vi. Students' aspirations and motivation
Not all research relating to Arabic speakers learning English is concerned with the technical aspects of language acquisition. For example, one study of motivation levels asked students in the English-language subject available in the Kuwaiti secondary schools to indicate whether they intended to pursue tertiary studies at American or British universities (Kharma 1977). Responses from Kharma’s (1977) sample indicated that strong results in science subjects took priority over English, as these formed the basis of admission into degrees such as engineering and medicine – the traditional choices for students pursuing overseas education. In this sense, proficiency in English was seen as part of a means to an end – that is, a score to be considered in university entrance calculations – rather than a goal in itself. To overcome this, Kharma recommends that textbooks used in English classrooms include exercises relating to science-based disciplines, to extend students’ vocabulary and maintain their interest (p.80). The validity of Kharma’s suggestion is confirmed by a more recent study
which reported that Emirati students’ approved of additional English language testing where they recognised a direct relevance of the course materials to their intended studies in law and business (Lewthwaite 2007).

The tendency to regard English-language studies as little more than a hurdle requirement is also noted (O’Sullivan 2004). This finding conflicts with the hypothesis that Emirati students benefit from living in a community where opportunities to speak and read English are abundant due to the presence of expatriates and the ubiquity of English media and popular culture. O’Sullivan’s observations are based on teaching experience at a Higher College of Technology [HCT] in the United Arab Emirates where English is the medium of instruction. He draws on research suggesting a low reading culture in Arab families, which points to a privileging of the spoken word in Arab cultures derived from origins of the classical language in Qur’anic recitation, and he notes the unlikelihood of his students’ reading in English or Arabic outside class. O’Sullivan also draws attention to research condemning the way English language is taught in Emirati public schools, and suggests strategies to address implications for HCTs. Although he draws attention to “poor attitudes” of students in HCTs, he focuses instead on remedial measures based on the technical aspects of bottom-up reading strategies employed by Arabic speakers to learn English based on a top-down curriculum. For example, O’Sullivan (2004) refers to research conducted by Bell (2001) which indicates that an extensive reading program comprising regular library visits and borrowing a range of books is more effective in improving reading speeds among Yemeni students than an intensive program focused on one comprehension textbook. Bell (2001) argues that more interesting reading material is likely to encourage greater motivation among readers to use a more diverse range of resources to improve their English reading skills.

A survey of a group of medical students from throughout the Gulf States supports the hypothesis that independent reading is a significant factor in English language improvement, while also challenging assumptions about limited motivation to read independently on the part of Gulf students (Malcolm 2004). Malcolm inquires as to the extent to which English-language classes were considered to be useful in developing proficiency, compared to independent reading practices. She finds that 70% attribute their English ability to strategies pursued outside the class setting, including: reading for study purposes (86%); listening to spoken English (82%); writing for study purposes (71%); writing personal emails or letters in English (62%); reading newspapers, magazines, emails, websites for personal purposes (58%); and speaking in English (45%) (Malcolm 2004, p.3). Although a small proportion of the sample indicate that they are dissatisfied with their abilities in written or spoken English, Malcolm points out that students were confident in their ability to learn English as a second language and that the popular media – particularly television shows and movies, followed by books, magazines and newspapers, and the internet – are considered useful aids in attaining language proficiency. Her sample may be considered unrepresentative, given that it
comprises a group of later year medical students who have not only achieved strong results to gain entry to medical school but are experienced in university studies. She also suggests that a number of the sample may have attended English medium schools, even though she did not test for this variable. However, Malcolm’s (2004) study does challenge assumptions that secondary school English classes alone determine a student’s motivation to pursue and maintain proficiency in English.

Furthermore, it has been argued that age is a more significant determinant of an Arabic speaker’s proficiency in reading, writing, vocabulary recognition and comprehension (Al-Dali 1997). In her Doctoral thesis on Kuwaiti secondary school students in English as a Foreign Language classes, Al-Dali (1997) compares the proficiency of Kuwaiti students enrolled in Arabic (i.e. Kuwaiti Government subsidised) private schools, where English is taught at the early primary level, to that of students enrolled in public schools, where English is introduced as a subject at senior primary level. Al-Dali outlines the range of debates about early language acquisition and positions her research in the affirmative, demonstrating significantly higher capability of private school students compared to their public school peers. Of greater relevance to this study is her finding that the closer the school to the city of Kuwait – therefore the higher the school fees and, presumably, the wealthier and more educated the families – the higher the performance in all areas tested. Al-Dali points out that many of the families residing in the furthest district in her sample are of Bedouin origin and have therefore not had access to formal education until recently (1997, pp.119-120).

An important consideration for the fieldwork of the present study may be derived from Al-Dali’s finding that socio-economic status and parents’ level of education have significant implications for academic success. This hypothesis is also supported by another study that tests the extent to which the Test Of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFL] is an accurate predictor of an Emirati student’s participation levels in a Problem-Based Learning [PBL] environment (Mpofu, Lanphear, Stewart, Das, Ridding & Dunn 1998). The research affirms that the higher the proficiency in English language indicated by a TOEFL score, the greater the level of verbal interaction in the medical PBL classroom setting (p.482). This is observed to a greater extent among female students than male, although it is also noted that male students are more likely to discuss, clarify and explain concepts among themselves in Arabic rather than English. A later study challenges the hypothesis of Mpofu et al. that TOEFL scores predict success in future studies (O’Neill & Theuri 2007). However, in the latter case the method is limited to quantitative cognitive skills used to complete accounting exams: classroom behaviour and attitudes are not examined.

Significantly, Mpofu et al. (1998) argue that education levels of parents is a significant predictor of TOEFL scores, particularly the mother’s education level for male students. Some 70.8% of students participating in the Mpofu et al. study (1998) had mothers who had
attended education to completion of primary level or less: these students were likely to convey that they had been discouraged from attending medical school. Of significance to this study is the observation that students who had achieved the highest TOEFL scores were less confident of succeeding in their studies than those with lower scores. Given that female participants demonstrated higher TOEFL scores than males, it can be extrapolated that male students whose mothers had experienced little formal education are more likely to assume academic success despite lower English language proficiency. They are also more likely to preserve themselves against “losing face” in front of their peers, by discussing difficult concepts in their first language.

In summary, English language ability remains a significant and contentious issue in research about international students. However, it is acknowledged that students from an Arabic language background face a unique set of challenges when learning English (and learning in English). Of particular interest is the division between formal and informal modes of Arabic language, which have been observed to cause separation between daily informal interactions and those that underpin official communications, including pedagogical and professional practices. Ability to master formal modes of language is argued to correlate to family status: this finding is paralleled by studies that link students' English proficiency to level of parents' education.

Therefore, it is hypothesised that specific language challenges do not influence Gulf students’ capacity to adapt to studying in Australia to the same significant extent as their attitudes towards their studies, including their assumptions about the relevance of the English language to their studies and aspirations. This theory is supported by studies undertaken by Douglas (2005), Mpofu et al. (1998) and Al-Dali (1997), as well as Lewthwaite (2007), Malcolm (2004) and Kharma (1977), which link student performance to family influence and study or career aspirations.
PART III: SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW AND STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESIS

The scoping study outlined in Chapter 1 suggested that Gulf students’ limited academic background and limited English language skills may impede their transition to tertiary studies in Australia. The literature discussed in Chapter 3 confirms that these two issues relating to education are significant factors in the academic underperformance of Gulf students in Australia, more specifically: lack of preparedness for overseas study due to outmoded pedagogical practice and limited syllabus encountered in secondary school; and implications of the specific difficulties faced by Arabic speakers learning English in adapting to the curriculum offered by an overseas university. However, while these are a key areas of investigation in the fieldwork, the literature attests that many international students will face similar difficulties in adjusting to Australian university study.

The scoping study suggested that Gulf students’ attitudes towards their studies and, in particular, their high expectations of academic support staff made their academic and language problems difficult to address. The literature review confirmed that understanding student expectations is critical for ascertaining the likelihood of academic success. However, the relationship between their expectations and their specific economic, social and cultural background requires greater consideration. Specifically, it is argued that families in Middle Eastern cultures have high expectations of personal relationships, as they enable families to negotiate advanced social status through mediation and the reciprocal exchange of favours. In the contemporary Gulf States, it is critical for families to invest in cultivating such relationships (known as wasta), in view of the imminent decline of the oil revenues on which their current prosperity is founded. Gulf families are seeking to avert financial and social risks inherent in competing for academic and employment opportunities. While some of the literature attributes this behaviour to the rentier work ethic, it has also been argued that the contemporary situation has essentially reinforced traditional attitudes towards, and preferences for, work in the Gulf region. In terms of international students’ expectations, Hofstede’s theory suggests that Uncertainty Avoidance is one of the main ways in which students from the Arab region will behave differently from other groups of international students. In particular, his comparison of cultural dimensions would indicate that Arab students are more likely to try and minimise any risks of losing face in the case of a disadvantageous turn of events.

It is the presence of these cultural norms which the fieldwork seeks to test. Gulf students are pursuing niche tertiary qualifications in Australia in order to return to employment in the private sector and promulgate a shift in societal attitudes towards vocationally-driven education and the productive labour market. However, it is proposed that the students’ behaviour is indicative of their greater confidence in traditional modes of personal
advancement, namely the ability to forge personal relationships with compatriot students and university staff for academic benefit.
CHAPTER 4 FIELDWORK FINDINGS

Students' perceptions of the issues

This Chapter reports the findings of the interview process, most conspicuously the students' extreme dissatisfaction with the academic support mechanisms provided. The alleged reasons for this revolve around a claimed inability to form satisfactory personal relationships with the people responsible for assisting them, and perceived inadequacies in the range of assistance available.

Findings outlined in this Chapter are correlated with issues identified in the relevant bibliography. They support the hypothesis that Gulf students' capacity to utilise academic support effectively is limited by their unrealistic expectations of personal relationships with staff. The Recommendations and Conclusions section that follows discusses the nature of such relationships in the Gulf, known as *wasta*, and some implications for current theory on international students in Australia.

Adjustment to living and studying in Australia: anticipated and actual challenges

The literature discussed in Part II Section 2. b). *Academic adjustment required by international students in Australia*, reveals that international education necessitates a degree of adaptation on the part of the student undertaking studies overseas. It is acknowledged that student expectations prior to departure may not be matched by the reality of their experience and the Omani sample do not appear to depart markedly from what is reported in the literature in this regard. The main areas of adjustment anticipated by the sample were getting used to the lecture format and sustaining motivation in the absence of authority figures at home. Consistent with the issues revealed by the scoping study of Kuwaiti students, the main issues to emerge on commencement of English language and pathway studies in Australia, were the quantity, range and weighting of assessments, and a pervasive sense of minority cultural status. Motivation continued to be perceived as a major challenge.

Anticipated challenges: Class size and format

Prior to departure from Oman, respondents indicated awareness that studying in Australia would require adjustments of lifestyle and study habits. For most, it would be their first experience of studying in a foreign environment. The students shared their suppositions as to how the classroom experience would differ from their schooling to date, and the benefits of learning in a Western environment.

Some respondents indicated that they had received advice from family members who had undertaken tertiary studies. None of the sample was the first in their family to undertake a tertiary qualification although three students were the first member of the family to study
overseas. The quality and scope of advice varied: Hamid’s father, who had undertaken military training in several countries, exhorted his son to “wear thermal.” On the other hand, Wahid had a sister who had already commenced studies in the same Victorian institution where he would be enrolling, and Jabbar and Samad shared first cousins enrolled in similar programs to the ones they would be pursuing in different institutions. Accordingly they formed more sophisticated ideas about the likely challenges ahead. Thus Samad foresaw: “It’s very nice there, but it’s difficult. It’s very hard […]. You must do your homework”.

More specifically, respondents reported advice received that a substantial part of their university life would be spent attending lectures. Their perception that lectures would cover large quantities of material at rapid pace caused some anxiety.

I have thought about this a lot, actually. The lecture, how is the lecture? I mean this is a very different thing to me, because at school it’s not … I mean we have already books, we have all the things that we need. Even if we, for example, didn’t listen or we didn’t, I mean didn’t listen to the teacher when she’s talking, we can at the end return to the book. Everything is in the book. But here at the university, you have to look, I mean maybe you will have books, but you have to search for another books. And when you listen to the Doctors talking you have to take your own notes, you have to know which notes is the most important. This will be different.

Nura

In addition, the prospect of large classes caused apprehension that opportunities to understand key concepts and clarify any uncertainties would be limited. Students did not seem aware of the role of tutorials, although those who had undertaken science subjects in secondary school were conversant with the format of laboratory classes.

Hamid had completed his studies in a technical college, rather than secondary school, in Oman. His main concern was that he would not have the required theoretical knowledge in mathematics and physics required to take the Engineering course to which he was allocated. He worried that there would be fewer opportunities for “interaction” with staff and other students at university in Australia than there had been at his technical college at home. However, he was confident that his proactive attitude would mitigate academic difficulties: “From that aspect, I am used to actually arranging like other times, afternoons and other sessions [with the lecturer].” Unfortunately, the opportunity did not arise to ascertain the success of this approach: the University retracted its offer prior to his departure, citing reasons of inadequate academic background. He subsequently pursued Engineering studies in the United Kingdom.

Interviewees also anticipated that interaction with peers would be an important experience for their future careers. This was raised in the context of their expectations of improving their English language skills and being exposed to a diverse range of cultures, as outlined below in the section on Learning and Studying in English, and Academic Background. However, of
relevance here is their stated preference not to work in groups. Some reported negative experiences of group work at secondary school. In particular, they felt that being recognised as a high-achieving student resulted in having to lead groups of students of lesser ability, reportedly a boring and frustrating situation. Nura allowed that being forced to undertake group work, for example in laboratory classes, would provide useful skills for working with an assistant in a medical laboratory or hospital setting. However, the main priority of the interviewees was to stand out from other students and be acknowledged as “the best” or “special”. This was expected to enhance opportunities for forging positive relations with peers and figures of authority, as had been possible at home:

So the hard thing will be to be special from the other people. To stand from the rest, this will be the hardest thing… You know, working hard and having good relations with others and with your teachers and professors.

Jalil

This issue is foreshadowed in the literature by foreign nationals teaching in the Gulf States who report a tendency to produce assessments to “please the lecturer” (Arden-Close 1999, p.326).

Anticipated challenges: Maintaining motivation in absence of authority figures

Apart from the size and format of classes, respondents anticipated that developing a new, independent lifestyle would pose a significant challenge. They specifically identified difficulties in motivation and the absence of relationships with figures of authority as threats to their academic achievement. The importance of family and friendship networks for academic support is also confirmed by the literature (e.g. Alazzi & Chiodo 2006; Meleis 1982; Shana’a 1978). For example:

It will be a lot of different. Because that here I am with my friends and with my family and that I will be outside, more responsibilities there. […] And without my parents, so far from them, so everything is on my head, so it’s like a challenge for me. More than secondary school.

Jabbar

I mean, you have to work for yourself. You have to go and ask, you have to work, you have to study at home […] you have to go to libraries, research, we have the study there, study room, libraries, you depend on yourself. Not like in back home in schools, everything the teacher does. He tells you what you have to do and the exam will be the same. Not going to libraries any more, no references.

Samad

However, Hamid, a graduate from technical college, was capable of discerning some positive aspects of hardship:

I remember one of our teachers in the school, he used to say that when the situation is difficult and the study is difficult, it moulds a very good engineer. The end product is an engineer. You will be a better engineer than when you have
lenience. Here in Oman, maybe you would travel from home. I live close to the college. I travel five minutes, I am already at the college. And then I’ll come back and my mother would fix the lunch and, you know, spoil!

Government-school students tended to focus their concerns on classroom discipline and the need for teachers who “want to teach you”. Latifa had experienced excessive leniency from teachers at a private school and had found it conducive to underperformance: “We weren’t studying at classes, we were just playing. […] If you want to study, study. If you don’t want, you don’t. You are not forced to study.” She had moved to a government school for her senior secondary studies and was now anxious lest a lack of firmness on the part of her prospective Australian teachers should adversely affect her performance. Other respondents from government schools also associated teacher authority with high academic performance.

Private-school graduates expressed confidence that their schools’ curriculum had better equipped them for the challenges ahead because it was based on problem solving and was delivered in English. Their secondary school experience had given them an insight into the pressures of academic achievement where rote learning and multiple-choice examinations were not the norm. However, all students were required to take Thanawiya Amma examinations, and it was on the basis of results that scholarships were allocated. This being the case, private-school students advised that they had reverted to traditional modes of examination preparation such a memorisation and cramming so as not to jeopardise their chances of high marks. This was usually undertaken with the guidance of private tutors, as well as parents, siblings and peers. These students expressed enthusiasm for pursuing tertiary studies in a Western environment, where they anticipated they would not have to continue rote learning practices. They acknowledged the challenges that problem-based learning would bring, but were confident that past experience had equipped them well to cope with the new learning environment. This, they felt, gave them an advantage over their Government-school peers. However, private-school graduates were equally likely to link external motivators, particularly the support of tutors and family, to academic performance.

Confidence was also regularly identified as a prerequisite for success in overseas studies. Respondents defined confidence as having their knowledge and skills acknowledged by others. The importance of validation through recognition by others became continued to be an important theme as these students progressed through their studies.

**Actual challenges: Assessment**

Upon commencement of their studies, students initially observed that the quantity, range and weighting of assessments posed a significant challenge to their confidence, as defined above. This was reported by students in both English language and pathway programs. Respondents described difficulty in prioritising assessments, revision and private study. The out of class
study requirement was particularly difficult when combined with new domestic responsibilities. The short, intensive nature of teaching terms compounded their anxieties:

It’s like, time flies and if you don’t… everything you need to learn, you need to learn while you’re taking the lesson… [...] I’m not saying the subjects are hard. [...] I don’t think anything is hard as long as you’ve got the time to do it.

Wahid

Because you know, you will get the time you have to write your essay. Just make like revision in your grammar, you take it today. But you don’t get many time to write your assignments. Just make me very very confused.

Majida

Rahim had undertaken his secondary studies in the United States of America. He expressed surprise at how different Australian approaches to assessment were:

In the States, they’re more laid back. You wouldn’t have a lot of homework. You’d have assignments once in a while. And for final exams, they wouldn’t… they’re not a big thing there. Because during the course of the year you’d have little tests, like almost I remember having tests every single week. But it wasn’t hard, it was easy. Sometimes I wouldn’t study for them, sometimes I’d just read over the material and get 100%. So it’s better that way.

And the other thing I want to tell you is that over here, like in the Foundation Centre, 70% of your grade depends on the exam. While in America, I remember, 13% of your grade depended on the final exam. And the other 87% depended on assignments and tests and quizzes. [70%] is too much!

Students felt that the lack of explicit instruction as to how to complete assessment tasks to a high standard hindered their efforts to achieve high marks. This, they argued, was a significant point of difference between secondary studies in Oman and tertiary studies in Australia, and highly problematic. Concern about the new approach to assessment is reported consistently in research on Gulf student experiences in other States of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (e.g. Alazzi & Chiodo 2006; Thurogood 2006; Douglas 2005; Al-Mahri 1996). The students’ concerns at the emphasis on independent learning and the limited amount of direction given by teachers intensified as they received feedback about their academic performance. Their responses to this are analysed in the Expectations and Negotiating Difficulties section below.

Actual challenges: Being in the minority

Problems of academic adjustment were exacerbated by students’ consciousness of their status as an ethnic and cultural minority, inside and outside the classroom. They had been aware of this possibility prior to departure and at that time had expected to derive some long-term benefit from this experience and the opportunity to learn more about themselves through encountering other cultures:

When you go to a foreign country to learn, it’s not just what you get in the university. [...] I mean, if I go to Sultan Qaboos University, I’ll be dealing with what? – four, five nationalities at most. While here it’s like forty or fifty.
So you get to communicate with people more, get an idea about them and learn how to be independent. That's an important skill that is going to be in the future no matter what am I going to do, whether it was going to be an actuary or an engineer or whatever. You learn how to live.

Zahir

Interviewees noted upon commencing English language and pathway programs that student communities were less diverse than anticipated. The preponderance of students from South-East and North Asia disappointed them. They had not realised that they would not be studying alongside Australian students until they enrolled in an undergraduate degree, as English language and pathway programs are exclusively for international students.

When came here I was shocked because I couldn't find Australians, there is no Australians in here. And I thought: is this China? I think, you know, I wanted to have Australian friends.
But now, they are nice people. I have some friends.

Jalil

When I was in Oman, one of the things I told you is that I'm looking forward to having many friends from different nationalities. Unfortunately, that didn't really happen here because although they are from different nationalities ... you sort of classify Asians, you can't really differentiate between Chinese and, er, it's like they can't differentiate between Arabs, like for example Emiratis, Omanis [...] And I was looking for more diverse sort of thing, but unfortunately that didn't really happen, not to the extent that I wanted.

Wahid

However, some interviewees expressed satisfaction at the albeit restricted opportunity for exposure to other types of students and were confident that this would advance their personal and professional development:

Maybe before [I came to Australia] I was looking only from one side, but now I looking from other sides. Now when someone have another opinion to me, I accept him and I discuss with him. But before that I said, no, I am the right.
I think maybe if I have a lot of different nationalities working with me, I will accept them. And I will know about them.

Jabbar

Respondents also expressed surprise that the large numbers of Melbourne’s residents are not of Anglo-Celtic appearance.

Some of those concerned at the lack of opportunity for interaction with Australian students on arrival feared negative long-term consequences:

I'm so afraid, you know, to communicate with Australian local students because until now I don't have an idea about local people here because I am always with international students... that's confronting me, to be with local students.
First of all, they will speak much better than me. And I don't know if they like about my being from the Middle East, and wearing my scarf. That's really, that's scary.
Some of the students look at me, like staring on me, sometimes look “Strange, alien, where did you come from?” That really scares me, you know.

Aziza

Students’ perceptions of their competence in English, and supposed attitudes of Australians towards Arab Muslims, are discussed further below. Although the Omani students did not seem overly perturbed by the prevalence of particular ethnic groups per se, they did report annoyance when classroom conversations lapsed into Mandarin or Cantonese.

But sometimes you don’t feel comfortable to sit with them. Especially, I don’t like Chinese people. Because I don’t know, sometimes I feel they’re talking about us […] I don’t like to talk to them too much.

Nura

The composition of classes in Australia also differed from Oman in other respects for students from government schools, who had no prior experience of mixed gender classes or teachers of the opposite gender. All students participating in the study seemed at ease with the new experience, with the girls reporting greater ease of interaction with boys from cultures other than their own. Interviewees taking English language programs reported that studying alongside older students in postgraduate programs required some initial adjustment, but they had forged friendships with older Arab students outside class. One student felt uncomfortable that some of his classmates were older than his teacher. Calling their teachers by their first names was a novel experience for all respondents, as was the lack of formalities observed at secondary school. Aziza described feeling “so stupid” when she stood up to answer a question, only to be told that it was not necessary. However, she acknowledged that her teachers had made obvious efforts to ensure that new international students felt at ease in the classroom.

Nura noted the ease with which groups of international students were able to discuss ideas in the classroom, compared to group work in Omani schools. She had been required to bring in a newspaper article for discussion and was pleasantly surprised at the lively response to her article on binge drinking:

I saw most of them are talking, are sharing. That’s what I liked in the foreign students, they are always sharing and discussing thinking. They are imagining and I’ve noticed that really. […] I see myself, for example, I’m not that much imaginative […] not that much. Maybe the way that they educated or how they treated, something like that.

Samad felt obliged to maximise his opportunities to study with different people:

When I come to the class, […] I didn’t like sitting on the same table all the class […] I want to change… to make another friend like that.
He was exceptional in this regard, most of his peers preferring to sit next to people they already knew. Indeed, more generally, interviewees reported that associating in class with people from similar backgrounds – particularly linguistic and religious – made for the most relaxed and meaningful conversation, and deeper interpersonal “connection”. It was also conducive to good study practices. However, they further observed that large ethnic groups of international students tended to result in cliques that limited interaction in the classroom setting. Samad confirmed that he would “prefer to have some Omani students, but not that much. Maybe two or three.”

This remark should perhaps be seen in the context of the significant representation among Omanis in Australia of the some of the largest and most influential family clans in Oman, and its implications for the privacy and freedom of association of individual members:

> Whatever you do in Australia, your parents, your grandparents will know everything! Like in [the suburb where I live], we are about eleven now. Sometimes, you know, we cannot do anything. It’s scary.

All respondents also described the temptation to lapse into Arabic if compatriot students were present, inside and outside class. Although they had previously expressed their suspicion of, and annoyance at, Chinese students who lapsed into their first language in the classroom, they did not apply the observation to themselves. They also realised that living with compatriots resulted in even fewer opportunities to speak English outside class and that this was not conducive to improving their English language skills:

> Actually, up until now, I didn’t feel that my English has improved really very much, because we’re not practising too much. Maybe now over the Christmas holiday we’ll be going out more and try to practice it with other foreign people.  

**Nura**

**Actual challenges: Finding compatriots to support motivation**

The students’ apparent inability to motivate themselves independently suggests that their need for a compatriot community has academic as well as social significance. Literature on the academic adjustment required by international students in Australia indicates that most students from collectivist cultures – in particular, those from Confucian Heritage Cultures – prefer study habits that utilise the knowledge and skills of a group, rather than individual study (e.g. Alazzi & Chiodo 2006; Watkins & Biggs 1996). Most respondents confirmed that they participated regularly in informal study groups, usually comprising small numbers of Gulf Arab students not always enrolled in the same course or institution. They reported spending significant amounts of time in study groups and one-on-one consultations, reminding each other of mathematics and science content from secondary school and assisting with vocabulary. They also reported the practice of dividing up large amounts of material between three or four students to ensure greater efficiency in summarising and revision.
For Zahir in particular, pairing up with a friend made a considerable difference to his study experience. His friend was also a sponsored student from Oman. He was undertaking a diploma pathway program after failing a foundation program the year before. As a consequence of this, the participant reported that his friend’s attitude was: “I’ve played enough, I’ve a lot of good time, now it’s time to study.” Zahir found parallels with his own experience, having realised that he risked not achieving the average mark required to enter university. The course to which he had been allocated by the Ministry of Higher Education was offered at only one Victorian university, so that failure to gain entry would necessitate his moving interstate, away from his friends.

Zahir acknowledged that his study habits in Australia had mirrored those in secondary school: he had not applied himself during semester, then crammed before examinations. He and his friend considered that end-of-year examinations were likely to cover to material encountered throughout the year, rather than just the most recent months as in secondary school examinations. Zahir described his change of attitude thus: “Just open your eyes and, you know, there’s responsibility to take!”

Zahir and his friend embarked on a daily study routine in order to ensure they had adequate time to revise the year’s curriculum. They visited their local municipal library every week day after class and spent three to four hours ensuring they were familiar with material covered that day and the few days preceding. Anything unclear was broken down into “small chunks” and added to a list of discussion topics to be addressed with the appropriate tutor the following day. Zahir emphasised that immediate revision of class materials was critical to the success of his study program, so that problem areas would not be overlooked over the course of the semester.

Zahir described his surprise at an unexpected benefit of this routine: he found that he enjoyed his studies. He also reported that he was able to enjoy his leisure time to a greater extent, as he no longer felt guilty that he was not preparing adequately for his end-of-year examinations. On the day of his final examination, he got up early to watch a soccer match. He noted that his friends thought his actions irresponsible but, having applied himself consistently to his studies all semester, did not feel the need to cram the day of the examination.

On the topic of motivation, Zahir was of the opinion that he would have been able to establish such a study routine on his own. However, he observed that the involvement of another party enabled greater “efficiency” and efficacy. As his friend was not studying the same course, Zahir argued that the greatest benefit was in the support received. “It’s not necessarily that we do the same stuff, but it’s just encouraging you to do well.” The students evidently motivated each other to stick with the routine. Contrary to the observations of other participants, this student did not feel that a shared linguistic, religious or ethnic background was critical to
establishing such a relationship or routine: “It’s just the idea of somebody wanting to study. It’s not where he’s from or what he’s doing.” However, he noted at the outset he and his friend were both sponsored students from Oman. Their “wanting to study” was underpinned by concerns about entering the university courses to which they had been allocated, and the limited possibilities for negotiating alternative outcomes with the Ministry of Higher Education. It was not clear whether Zahir would have found similar motivation with a student not experiencing the same pressures.

The small number of respondents who had forged study relationships with international students indicated that these friendships had other limitations:

One of my friends she’s from Vietnam […] she’s really so clever. And the other one, she’s from Indonesia. They call us “Powerful Girls”! [Laughs] The smartest girls in the class!
[...] We’re always studying together. But they used to go out together but when I invite them, they don’t even come to the city. I invited them a number of times ago for a movie or lunch outside, they don’t come. They spend all their time at home watching cartoons.
Yeah, we have completely different personalities. I feel like I’m grown up. Different clothes, the way I’m thinking. No, they’re so nice, they’re so kind, I feel like they’re like babies. I feel like I’m evil! [Laughs]

Aziza

Although other international students were consistently described as friends, respondents confided that these friendships were “different” and “not as strong” as those with Omani or other Gulf Arab friends. Travel necessitated by differing accommodation preferences also limited participants’ ability to forge friendships with other international students.

Respondents tended to live together (or with other Omani or Gulf Arab students) in on-campus accommodation. They also rented homes in outer suburbs such as Coburg, Glenhuntly and Bundoora. These suburbs were close to university campuses that enrolled the largest number of Omani and Gulf Arab students, and also comprised a significant population of residents from similar ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The households comprised students of the same gender; exceptionally, Wahid was sharing a house with his sister.

None of the participants had cars, so they commuted by public transport into the city to study if they were enrolled at city-based campuses. They did not tend to remain on campus outside class time, unless they were using library or computer facilities. It has been pointed out that universities in the Gulf States offer little by way of “campus life” (Al-Misnad 1984, p.428) and all respondents had cars or drivers in Oman, so they could return home after their school day. Socialising in Melbourne therefore mirrored socialising patterns at home i.e. they spent evenings together in big single-gender groups (usually at Crown Casino), where the 24 hour shopping mall was reminiscent of public spaces at home. Living at a distance from the Central
Business District was not always by choice, particularly in the case of students who had grown up in metropolitan areas or lived in another Western country for a period of time:

I had higher expectations when I came here. I thought I'd be living, you know, downtown in the city.

Rahim

Respondents observed that other international students were more likely to live in apartments in Melbourne’s Central Business District, also preferring to share with international students of similar ethnic and linguistic background. Respondents felt that these students were more likely to commute to the outer suburbs for classes and socialise with each other in settings uncongenial to Omani cultural preferences:

Because to tell you personally I’m sometimes I get scared to go you know at night with like Chinese or something. Maybe they want to go to a bar and then it feels awkward for me and them. So I try to avoid that.

Jalil

The link between minority status and students’ tendency to associate inside and outside class with Omani and other Arab students should not be overstated. Not all students felt the need to live with other Omani or Arab students or socialise with them all the time. In some cases, attempts to find accommodation that fitted this profile was unsuccessful. For example, Jalil and Aziza each lived on their own in on-campus accommodation: Jalil out of preference for privacy and solitude; Aziza because she was the only female Gulf Arab student at studying at her campus at the time. Each reported that they had lived in shared accommodation upon arrival in Australia, in both cases with non-Arab Muslims. They described their respective Malaysian and Iranian housemates in negative terms on the whole. It would appear that personality conflicts and different lifestyle preferences caused some loneliness and frustration for the Omani students. They greatly valued their independence, which they correlated to good study practices and personal growth:

You know, I would love to be with my friends, but being alone, I really love it because I learn. I’m being with so many international students, so I’m practising my English all the time.

Aziza

I think you need to experience everyone and everything, keeping in mind that you’re an Omani and everything. But, you know, not coming out of Oman and coming to a new Oman. You need to improve your language, to improve everything.
I think you need to change.

Jalil

However, the students also mentioned a general preference for companionship at prayer and mealtimes, something they felt that non-Muslims “wouldn’t understand” and would be “difficult to explain”.

124
As respondents developed an awareness that their preferences for companionship differed from those of other students, they also related a growing sense of how family relationships and responsibilities in Oman differed from those in Australia. These observations were largely based on the opportunity to interact with Australian teachers and live in suburbs among Australian residents. Students enrolled in English language programs also had the opportunity to go on excursions and practice speaking with other teaching staff as well as waiters and bus drivers.

I think there’s a lot of old people in Australia, especially in Hawthorn. Lots of old people in the road.

Aziza

I think the students in Australia is different from home. The students in Australia maybe he have part time job. Always, they ask me, “Why you didn’t have part time job?” It is different from my country. Because most… I didn’t know any students in Oman that have part time job.

Samad

**Additional pressure: Being an Arab in Australia**

The opportunity to make friends and demystify perceptions of the Gulf Arab or Muslim was not mentioned as a benefit prior to departure. However, the students reported inheriting this role by default due to their minority status and relative newness as a cohort in Australian universities. Interviewees reported extracurricular interactions with teachers, fellow students and members of the general public regarding their background prompted by a range of stimuli, ranging from curiosity to discrimination. None of them felt they had experienced any overt racism. However, they indicated that Australian media portrayals of Islam, Muslims and Arabs contributed to their unease in the university and general community. They also expressed reservations about entering into discussions about Iraq and Palestine, for fear of persecution by association. Majida’s annoyance at being asked so many politically sensitive questions once led her to respond: “All of us know Osama bin Laden, but I am not his sister!”.

During the period of the interviews, the media was reporting that Al Qaeda had nominated Melbourne, along with an American city, as a future target (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2005, September 12). Respondents felt the palpable apprehension of the general public, particularly when they were stared at on public transport.

Why don’t Australians or Americans – mostly they’re Christian – if someone bombs a car or something, why don’t they say, “A Christian did it”? They wouldn’t say that. Why don’t they say “An Omani guy did it”? Why do they say, “It’s the Muslim guy”? [...] I think, yeah, it’s getting worse. Which is really bad. And now that they said something about Melbourne [being a terrorist target] then it would be worse. Yeah, for me, going with a beard on the street. People, now they’re looking. So later I don’t know what will they do to me.

Jalil
Feelings of insecurity therefore impacted on their adjustment to the new Australian learning environment. The students reported enjoying classroom discussions which allowed international students to inform their peers about their geographical, ethnic and cultural background. However, they observed that discussions relating to religion would invariably result in discomfort for them. This was particularly the case for the women, whose hijab was an obvious signifier of religious identity.

[The conversation about religion] was really fun but when suddenly he gathered all the class and he said [to me] “Start talking!” And I said “No, sorry, can’t.” [...] I don’t want to talk about Islam because I don’t have much information about it. You know, I am not super-religious. They made me feel uncomfortable.

Aziza

They make that it is strange all the time: “Can you take off your scarf?”!

Majida

However, participants did not always feel that they were in the minority or unsupported:

It happened only once in class. “All Arab are terrorists. And what is happening in Iraq is because of you”. […] And my teacher was hearing that and he came and he supported me and he said, “What do you think?” Yeah, it was really great. He is against the American bombings [in Iraq]. Most of the Australians are against the bombings.

Jabbar

**Learning and studying in English: anticipated and actual challenges**

Students from government schools in particular identified their biggest challenge as studying in English. This is consistent with the available literature on Gulf students that documents their concerns about learning in English (e.g. Douglas 2005; Al-Mahri 1996). Prior to departure, all students participating in the study who were undertaking English language studies in Australia expressed embarrassment about their spoken English. However, all students were able to express their ideas confidently, using a broad vocabulary, and only one required an occasional interpreter during the interview held in Oman. The literature indicates Arabic speakers are likely to experience difficulty reading and writing in English. Problems with written English were also observed among the Kuwaiti cohort described in the scoping study.

Those who had undertaken secondary studies in a private school where English was partly the medium of instruction focused less on the language benefits of studying in Australia (as they were already somewhat proficient) than the chance to meet students from a greater number of ethnicities than would be possible in their home country. Studying in a Western environment was also perceived advantageous for a career in business.
Contrary to the literature (e.g. Swan & Smith 2001; Khuwaileh & Al Shoumaili 2000; Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ružić 1983), respondents expressed great confidence in their reading and writing abilities. However, the confidence of the Omani sample in their writing abilities was not borne out by their experience. Respondents who had seemed assured of their writing capabilities were equally likely to express disappointment that they were not receiving high marks for written assessments. All struggled with Australian academic conventions. For Government school graduates, this was exacerbated by relatively underdeveloped literacy skills. They identified their problem as poor vocabulary and sought to remedy it by memorising technical words. Limited improvement in their subject results continued to impinge on their motivation.

**Anticipated challenges: Vocabulary**

Prior to departure, the students were positive about the benefits of learning in an English language environment for their spoken and written English. Government school graduates were aware that they would find the new learning environment more challenging, and were particularly concerned about technical vocabulary. This included having to relearn the numeral system, which they anticipated would impede their progress in mathematics and science based programs. However, they were confident that familiarity with required vocabulary would increase over time and had considered their strategy. In Latifa’s words, “I’ll need the dictionary always. But only the first two years, then I will manage.”

Upon commencing English language studies, government school graduates expressed surprise that their studies were not limited to the improvement of vocabulary:

> I was just thinking it would like discussion and listening, improving my speaking and something. But they really focus on writing reports and essays, and it was really driving me crazy.

Aziza

The anticipated problems with vocabulary did materialise in both speaking (mainly pronunciation) and listening (understanding technical language or formal discourse):

> One of my classmates, she is Italian, she’s actually a doctor. She’s coming to study English here. And she did a presentation about one of the diseases and it was really very difficult to understand. She used very big and difficult and hard words. […] The presentation must take ten minutes, it took about half an hour, just an explanation of these things.

Nura

> You know, when I read [my essay], I felt like this is a stupid international student! […] I don’t like it… the same issue about using informal words or something, I think you have to be more academic and using formal words, like that. No, I am good at structures, grammar, something I’m good at… I don’t worry about that.

Aziza
But even students experiencing extensive difficulties with English language tasks tended to attribute their problems to poor vocabulary:

I have very weak, very poor memory. So. That's the problem. But I told my teacher about that, I think that I am very weak in vocabulary and how I can pass it. She said, "No, you are good, you have good results! You have seventy!" SEVENTY! That's not very high. The highest you can get in vocabulary is seventy, seventy-five. You can't get more. OK. OK and just she tell me that I have to make a sentence and another thing. I said that I did that already but nothing, nothing, nothing in memory.

Majida

Majida relayed the teacher’s subsequent suggestion that she visit the library more regularly and read more books and newspapers in order to expand her vocabulary. She had responded that she had too many tests to prepare for and essays to write to take up the suggestion. Other interviewees were also unenthusiastic about the prescribed methods of vocabulary expansion through independent learning and questioned their efficacy:

I don't find it that much useful. Because it’s hard, you know, to memorise sixty words. So the student won’t be interesting, he will memorise them just to test them. And just maybe he will remember some few words that he or she may use them. So it’s not that much good way of teaching vocabulary.

Nura

Majida added that such repetitive tasks worked better if conducted by a teacher:

Very helpful. I like it in the session, you know, when just the teacher stand up and say, "Now: repeat, repeat." I like that!

These approaches are consistent with the top-down approach characteristic of Arabic-speaking students identified in the literature (Abbott 2006; Parry 1993). Students undertaking language studies realised they underestimated the amount of time required to improve their English. For example, Majida complained that the timeframe allocated for English language studies was “nothing”. Where she had assumed that she would complete her English studies “so easily and so fast”, she found that each assessment required a significant amount of work to be completed in a small amount of time. A number of students admitted that their assumptions that studying English would be easy turned out to be “very wrong”. However, they were equally likely to reject the recommendation of additional English language study. This may have been due to MoHE restrictions regarding extended periods of English language study. More commonly, students expressed enthusiasm for moving beyond English language study into pathway programs. They did not anticipate that difficulties encountered during their language learning would persist during their pathway and university studies.

Samad’s experience, however, illustrates the benefit of commitment to longer periods of English language study particularly if anticipated prior to departure. Placement tests for his
Australian university indicated that he needed to undertake 30 weeks of English language study, double the period he had anticipated. Samad’s uncle, an English language teacher with a PhD from an Australian university on English language teaching in Oman, recommended that he spend an entire year improving his English prior to commencing pathway studies.

In the event, Samad achieved the IELTS score needed to enter the pathway program after only sixteen weeks. Nevertheless he elected to continue his language study on his uncle’s advice and to sit for more IELTS examinations:

To improve my English. I think writing is the most important thing. Because maybe I will go to foundation year where I must to write essay, very important.

On his own initiative, Samad borrowed past examination papers from the library, competed two essays every evening and submitted them to his teacher the following morning for correction. He had realised that the short essays written in English during his secondary studies were different from those expected at Australian universities:

[In Oman] we have always introduction, talk about general information about the topic. Then you have the body, but maybe the conclusion is one sentence. Not very [many sentences], as English.

This exercise assisted the student to identify areas for improvement other than vocabulary: namely structure, spelling and grammar. Samad was confident that consistent endeavour in these areas had paid off and that his writing had improved. His friends – Omani students also undertaking pathway programs in Melbourne who also happened to be his cousins and housemates – were of the opinion that he was wasting his time. Samad, however, was certain that he had done the “correct thing”.

One the whole, respondents would have shared the views of Samad’s cousins. Their priority was to commence pathway and undergraduate studies, and believing that their language deficit was confined to vocabulary, they were convinced that memorizing was the key to improved academic achievement. Thus, in contrast to Samad, Nura took up the option offered her of spending five months less in English language study than originally anticipated. She felt she would have ample opportunity to practise her English in the foundation program. Nura’s experience in foundation studies did not match this expectation however, as she struggled with Australian academic conventions and did not practise speaking English on a regular basis.

In general, students enrolled in English language studies were confident that their ability to understand underlying issues of a topic and “have ideas” was of greater consequence than what they perceived to be an ongoing difficulty with vocabulary. In this sense, they felt adequately prepared for pathway and undergraduate studies.
Actual challenges: Australian academic conventions

Interviewees’ perceptions that they were ready for their tertiary studies were further contradicted by their problems with Australian academic conventions. Filling word limits was described as difficult, and students reported “repeating ideas” to meet the word count. They also expressed frustration with feedback on written assessments that did not acknowledge their efforts or “good ideas”, but emphasised errors in grammatical structure, expression and spelling instead. They connected such feedback with their limited technical vocabulary.

Although they had observed that the content and delivery of pathway program curriculum was different from secondary school, respondents expressed confidence they would have been able to achieve higher results in the same assessments had they been in Arabic. However, it was apparent that the students were confused regarding requirements for sourcing and acknowledging material, and the meaning of plagiarism. As a consequence, they found it difficult to improve their work. The relevance of this misunderstanding for participants’ attempts to negotiate their way through difficulties faced will be discussed in the following section.

Difficulties with learning in English were predominantly reported by government school graduates, many of whom were required to take English language studies in Australia, but private school graduates were surprised that their strong language skills did not guarantee high marks in compulsory English subjects. However, this was resolved once they understood what was required of them in assessments:

> English I was really depressed with because I was getting C. I took the teacher aside and I started speaking with him. “What is this all about? I expected English to be the subject that actually boost my grades, so can you just tell me what my mistakes are so that I can not repeat them again.”
> And he just said, “You should give more examples […] You should always give an extra detailed example so you can get the extra grade”.
>
> Wahid

In describing how they approached assessment tasks, interviewees commented on the new level of discernment required in doing research for assignments. They saw this as a shift from surface to deep understanding of course materials:

> In Oman […] it is much easier than here. Because in Oman we just have to memorise everything but here we have understand it very well to answer the question.
>
> Majida

Jalil observed that, although he had loved rote learning at school, he could see the value of “applying concepts rather than memorising the whole thing”. By extension, he noted that the
range of concepts relating to any one topic made it difficult for him to focus on the task at hand. This, in turn, negated the possibility of reliance on a single book or limited source material:

Writing the essay is not hard, the research I think is hard because sometimes you don’t find the books. You find something, but the question doesn’t ask you that and […] and sometimes you get angry.

It was also observed that obtaining appropriate and credible sources, particularly from the World Wide Web was a challenge:

For the first four weeks I had problem with my marks. I was good with my summaries and analysing […], the article was really good. But the [teacher] said, “It’s the website: it’s unrespected”. So I got so low mark from that.

Aziza

Respondents’ greatest frustration was with plagiarism rules. This was again linked to limited vocabulary:

It was quite hard to find the information that you’re looking for, and then to write that was… paraphrasing… was quite difficult. […] And you afraid that you not copying. You have to choose different words and that was quite challenging.

Nura

In addition, limitations of vocabulary was perceived to limit expression of “new” ideas. In particular, respondents appeared to associate the requirement to paraphrase with copying ideas already published. Students felt this contradicted the requirement to express their preference for certain ideas over others:

The only thing that I didn’t like is they gave us an essay and it’s a question of “Do you agree or disagree?”. And then they tell us, “Don’t say ‘I’ in the essay, don’t say ‘I think’ or ‘I don’t’.”

And you’re asking me for my opinion. How can I say… I have to say, “I think” or “I don’t think” or something like that. But they’re saying “No, you don’t have to do it”. So, I think that’s… I have to give my opinion. They say if you have an opinion, you have to give a reference to prove your ideas but if I do that, I won’t build any new ideas. You have to create ideas, you know. To so something, you don’t have to just, “Oh, I just read that in a book, OK I agree!” and just write, write the same thing, you know, change a few words and then put the reference and that’s it. You know, I think that no one will benefit from that. The book is there and everyone will read it: why do I have to write the whole thing again? It’s better to write your ideas, develop them, discuss them. I think this is what will help everyone.

Jalil

However, Jalil also acknowledged the relevance of such an exercise for his intended career path as an engineer:
In engineering, you can’t say “[I agree” or “I disagree”]. Because it’s a problem and you have to solve it. And the solution is similar, you can’t change many things, you are limited.

By and large, respondents were satisfied that Australian academic conventions – particularly the requirement to research varying opinions and present them in a particular way – were attuned to the needs of a globalised workforce. However, they acknowledged that traditional modes of communication would be required for successful negotiation in an Omani environment:

In English, we have to say first, give a straight answer, then we have to give some points, support statements. […] If I working in a private company I have to write in this style, the European style, the Australian style. But if I’m working in a government, then I have to write like home. Because they don’t know much about English.

Jabbar

We Arabs […] get around the point, around the point, ’til you get to the point. While here, it’s the other way around. You start from the centre and then start revolving around and turning around the twists and all. In meetings, in [our] culture we do not really get to business straight away. We just start generally talking and all, and then get into the point. […] But anyways things are everywhere moving towards a Western way, with more international companies happening and all. It’s actually good because now you’ve got two different ways of approaching things. And you can deal with it, I mean you can use the more appropriate one according to the situation, according to who you’re dealing with.

Zahir

For the most part, respondents focused on the difficulty of achieving high results, particularly in essays. Their lower achievement in essay writing compared to other tasks tended to deter students from investing time in it:

Like essays and reports and other things… I don’t know, maybe because we didn’t use to have this style of writing. Because of that [I don’t do well]. And sometimes because I’m lazy and I didn’t, you know, work with it.

Majida

They further observed that teachers in Australia were not inclined to award marks for effort, yet deducted them for trivial details, to the detriment of students’ confidence:

Where I started losing the marks, were because of the way that they marked it and what they expected you to write down on the paper […] in a structured order […] It’s like the answer can be there but they expect you to write it in a certain way. Sometimes you can have questions in which, if you answer half the question right, you get one mark. If you get one right one wrong, they cancel the whole mark. So it’s like, you can’t answer something you don’t know or you might get marks deducted for it.

Wahid

They want specific details of every single thing. They want your work to be complete and neat, which is of course everywhere, but like if you put your name on
the right hand side and she said put it on the left hand side, you lose ten marks for it.

Rahim

With their confidence undermined, respondents felt less receptive to explanations offered for their low marks. In some instances, loss of confidence prevented them from seeking constructive feedback or exploring other modes of preparing for assessments:

Do you know what happened from my first test? I studied really hard the same thing, and I got really bad mark. I was like, crying for two days! I don't know what's wrong with me […] I studied two times for the test. […] When I did the test I was like I was sure that I did very well. Very well. And I was shocked when [the teacher] gave me the paper and I saw the mark and I was like, “No, this is not mine” and I gave it back to him! [Laughs] […] My cousin said maybe I don't like focus on what I am studying. But I think I really do. You know I understand every single word what the teacher says, everything! Everything! […] You know, this thing makes me scared. Not trusting myself any more. So that say, I’m like, “I’m not going to study any more”.

Aziza

As noted earlier, the students perceived a strong link between confidence and success. This would often be based on comparison with the achievement of other students.

I am very good at listening. Writing too, I am good at writing. I think I’m good but when I saw that there is better than me, I feel disappointed.

Aziza

[Despite my poor results, my teacher] said that I was doing well, very well. You know, I don’t know, sometimes I feel that I should be maybe in higher level sometime. Because I didn’t feel that the students with me, they not maybe in my same stage or same level.

Nura

Respondents from government schools continued to express concern about their limited vocabulary and low confidence in written English, but all respondents who remained in the sample achieved the required English language proficiency in the allotted time and progressed successfully to their pathway studies. Outside the sample, there is anecdotal evidence of the contrary and that negotiations between the students, their families and the MoHE did not always lead to additional English study; some students transferred to institutions with lower language requirements. The tendency to change courses or institutions in preference to undertaking additional work to meet hurdle requirements continued throughout their studies. In most cases, this was blamed on lack of flexibility on the part of the teaching staff. Another study also reports that Flexibility and “willingness to compromise” are highly desirable attributes for foreign teachers, according to Gulf students (Saafin 2008).
Actual challenges: Overcoming pedagogical background and gaps in assumed knowledge

As reported above, the realisation that not all students were facing similar difficulties exacerbated some of my respondents' disillusionment with their progress. There were few other students from the Gulf States enrolled in their English language centres and pathway programs. Moreover, the other international students enrolling with them in these institutions tended to be from countries that supplied the Gulf States' working class. This compounded their surprise and disappointment when they realised that their own academic performance compared unfavourably with that of their international peers.

You know sometimes you think that [students from other countries] are really simple in their thinking. No, sometimes they are very smart, very clever. I think some people from China, they really really are a genius. Because I think you are more clever than them – oh no, they are!

Majida

This was particularly the case for government-school graduates and those whose families lived in rural areas of Oman. Whereas the former had limited experience of studying alongside different students, the latter would have very little exposure to foreigners in their daily life. By contrast, private school students tended to live with their families in Muscat. Their schools enrolled mostly Omani students but children of expatriate workers from other Arab countries were also able to enrol. Their families were established and well-connected, with many of their parents having obtained qualifications overseas. They often travelled overseas for employment and family vacations. Jalil represented the small number of rural students offered a scholarship to study in Oman's most prestigious private school, including full board on campus. Although his family was not wealthy, educated or well-travelled, his approach to his studies and to studying with different sorts of students was consistent with the profile of private school graduates.

Commencing their pathway studies, respondents sensed that their secondary schooling had not prepared them as well as other international students for the task at hand. This was particularly true of the knowledge assumed in pathway programs in mathematics and sciences. The deficits of the mathematics and science curriculum in the Gulf States, and the Arab region more broadly, are attested in international reviews (e.g. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 2008a, 2008b), as well as regional audits (e.g. The World Bank 2008; United Nations Development Programme 2003, 2002). In addition, other groups of international students appeared familiar with the material for subjects, such as accounting, which were not available at school in Oman.

Private-school graduates appeared less daunted by the abilities of other students and more confident in their own ability to compete in an academic environment. They reported less disparity between their secondary school syllabus and the knowledge assumed by their
pathway program than government-school graduates. In some cases, they felt it was more a case of attitude and overt confidence than substantive difference in knowledge:

Chinese people in Maths, they are really good. They’re really excited about it […] when the book is here and the teacher is explaining things, if they know how to do it, they start [clicking their fingers] because they want to do the question, to solve it. I can’t make a generalisation but we have a Chinese boy and he’s like that. And I’ve heard that most of them are the same. He’s good. I think the only thing that limits him is his English. But he’s good. […] When I saw the problem and I can solve it in myself and I don’t show that I solved it, I just do it. And then I write it. But they get too excited. Which is good. It makes you not feel bored.

Jalil

The experience of private school graduates with learning in English was also reportedly an advantage. However, it did not appear that their confidence in communicating in English was the only factor enabling them to form relationships with fellow international students. These relationships were sometimes based on mutually beneficial arrangements with international peers for exchange of in-depth tutoring in those academic areas in which each party felt deficient. Wahid approached a student from Hong Kong known to be good in Mathematics but less confident in English assessments. They spent time together after class going through respective areas of difficulty “from scratch”.

One area where respondents thought they compared favourably with their international peers was confidence to speak up in class. The relevant literature confirms the primacy of the spoken word in Arabic cultures and the importance of conveying ideas and opinions verbally, whereas this is less emphatic in Confucian Heritage Cultures (e.g. Chan & Drover 1997; Watkins & Biggs 1996; Jin & Cortazzi 1993). Thus respondents noted that they were admired by their peers for their verbal contribution to class and even sensed their peers’ discomfort.

I’m the most who speaks in class, I am really talkative. But they say that “You go really deep into whatever you’re talking about, sometimes you lose us!” [Laughs] I was like, “I take that as a compliment!” But when it comes to Maths class, I’m the one who tends to be giving the compliments.

Wahid

Something I like: when I just give my opinion. Because you know when I open my mouth I cannot close it! Just talk and talk and talk and talk and my teacher say sometimes, “OK OK we understand”!

Aziza

I think I speak more than them. Some of them, you know, just look at me… they tell me that “The teacher does a presentation for half an hour and [you do] for one hour!” [Laughs] Yeah, but sometimes they get sometimes rude saying that, “You don’t have to ask, you don’t have to comment” and I say, “No, I have to ask to learn and I have to comment”. Because… we do oral presentations and so the teacher gives each one or two people to comment on the student. And they hate the one who comments, because they say, “You’re not a teacher and you don’t have to comment”.

135
Well, I have to comment, that’s it. I believe that I have to master it. And I believe to learn. So maybe I too harsh in commenting. But you know, I said the truth to make him or her improve, and I’m not afraid if someone comments on my presentation. So sometimes they say, “Don’t ask questions, don’t do that”. But I always do.

Jalil

Respondents expressed surprise that their interpretation of a fellow student’s ability on the basis of their verbal contribution to the class was not always matched by their subject results:

Especially the Japanese, they don’t know how to speak but they got the highest mark in our class! But they can’t speak even one word in our class… I feel like, more comfortable in my class, they say like I am the best one who knows to speak… but […] I’m like the third or something.

Aziza

In the early months of their studies in Australia, the students were likely to link such observations to their minority within the international student population. They would also invariably discuss their perceptions of the stereotypes of Arabs held by other students, teachers and the general public. Although this preoccupation did not entirely disappear during the course of their studies – nor did their preference for compatriot study companions – respondents’ observations had a more academic focus. They were more likely to relate their difficulties to gaps in their academic background.

Greater introspection and focus on personal experience was observed when discussing the mechanisms used by students to mitigate the impact of their academic background on their assessment results. As suggested in the literature, international students are more likely to hail from collectivist backgrounds than local students, who have been raised with the Australian individualist cultural norms (Chan & Drover 1997; Jin & Cortazzi 1993). However, the Arab experience of collectivism may be somewhat more individualist in response to particular situations. This was apparent in respondents’ endeavours to overcome difficulties faced through individual consultations with teaching and academic support staff.

Prior to departure from Oman, respondents indicated that they would be confident asking for assistance should difficulties arise during their studies. Majida reported that when she didn’t understand something at school, she would stand up and ask for clarification. If she still didn’t understand, she would call her older sisters when she returned home and they would explain things to her. She was confident that this could continue in Australia, although later interviews indicated that this was not the case.

Some respondents referred to the additional complexity of navigating gaps in their academic background in absence of a private tutor. They described how private tutors anticipated topics that had not been covered at school but were bound to appear on an exam. They suggested that “all” Omani students succeeded in their secondary studies on the basis of work undertaken outside school hours with private tutors. However, not all respondents
volunteered this information, even though the hypothesis that students in the Arab region rely heavily on private tutors is supported by the literature (Chapman & Miric 2009).

Karim affirmed that family support at home was critical: “Here I have my parents and I can do anything.” He also had a tutor, to whose help he credited his strong result in Physics. He expected that in Australia he would approach his teachers for assistance, in absence of family members or a private tutor. If his difficulties persisted, he surmised that he would need to approach other teachers in the same field “if the teacher wasn’t that good”. Consistently, respondents associated the possibility for strong academic performance with good teaching.

I don't think the Physics, the way it was taught, was very good in foundation. [...] I don’t think it was taught to the best capacity. 
And the proof of that is that most people got low grades in it. Like many people got in the 20s and 10s and stuff like that. Like, I mean, who gets a 10 in Physics? Unless it’s either taught really bad or the exam is really hard, you know, to the extent where everyone needs to get a low grade.

Wahid

Pathway studies in Australia were acknowledged to be more difficult than secondary studies in Oman, usually because of the use of English language and differing assessment practices. However, respondents were likely to view the experience of studying a pathway program had been something of a waste of time. Prior to departure, the respondents had disdained the requirement to study foundation or diploma studies, deeming themselves already prepared for tertiary studies. This attitude continued in Australia in English language studies, where the students were confident that their present difficulties would not extend to the next phase of their studies, despite evidence to the contrary. Persistent difficulties with specific aspects of assessment, particularly in terms of academic conventions, were blamed on teachers’ inflexibility when it came to marking requirements.

Wahid had requested that a student from Hong Kong explain advanced mathematics “from scratch”: the Hong Kong student had responded positively and a successful working relationship was forged. The Hong Kong student’s limited confidence in English ensured that assistance could be reciprocated with language support in essay-based assignments. However, respondents’ attitudes towards authority figures such as teachers prevented them for taking responsibility for their own learning. Accordingly, their approaches to teaching and support staff were not as productive as they should have been.

Respondents readily concluded that the academic staff did not possess the requisite knowledge in particular subjects and that they were thus ill-equipped to convey the information students needed to pass the subject. In this light, assessment requirements were perceived as particularly unreasonable.
I might as well sit on my own and study and then go to the exam because it has
the same effect as going to classes.
If you ask them a question, “So what is this supposed to mean?”
“Umm… oh, I don’t know”.
I mean, any teacher who tells you “I don’t know” shouldn’t be a teacher! And then,
they don’t even go and check out the answer and come back to you.
And sometimes you disagree with the person and at the end, you end up proving
that the teacher is wrong and you are right.
In the end, you are saying “Who’s the teacher?”.

Wahid

That’s because the teacher […] doesn’t know… well, I’m not going to say she
doesn’t know how to teach but…. […] she just throws material out there for us and
we have to basically learn it for ourselves.
So if you don’t catch up at home, you won’t know anything, you’ll be lost.
And she’s the one who is always looking for specific details and stuff in a
sentence.

Rahim

Respondents who described positive exchanges with teaching staff appeared to take a
passive role during the experience, even though they were grateful for the assistance:

And accounting was good. I mean it was a bit confusing at the beginning because
it was something really really new, totally new.
But the tutor was really helping us out. I mean, she knew, she had a couple of
[Omani] students two years earlier […] and she still remembers them and all, and
she knows that we never studied this before unlike some of the other students.
So she was really helpful, always gave us like a sort of extra attention, and that
was really really kind of her. […] I mean, she always after class came to me and
was like, “Do you understand this?”
We were like, “Uh, not really”.
So she, after the tutorial, sit in her office for ten, fifteen minutes, explain the whole
thing.

Zahir

Respondents’ definition of good teaching was not necessarily shaped by their experiences
from secondary school. They were more likely to explain their criteria for good teaching
practices along the lines of the reciprocation required by relationships with authority figures.
Utilising mutually-beneficial relationships is the norm for overcoming difficulties in the Gulf
States – and the Middle East more broadly – and is known as wasṭa (Mohamed & Hamdy
2008; Hutchings & Weir 2006c; Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). Respondents’ descriptions of
their approaches to teaching staff are consistent with behaviours that usually engender
positive results where wasṭa is involved. Respondents were dissatisfied because teaching
staff appeared unwilling to assist them. However, students were unaware that their requests
were inappropriate or unhelpful.

I try to ask more questions, I try to see exactly what she’s looking for, exactly what
the teacher, him or her, are going to be grading the assignment on.

Rahim
This assumption carried through to pathway studies, where the students were equally likely to express their eagerness to complete the course and progress to the university proper. Rahim had negotiated enrolment in an accelerated foundation course, on the basis that he had completed his secondary studies in the United States of America. He acknowledged that his peers were achieving higher results because they had commenced a semester earlier in the standard program. This had given them the advantage of more time to gain familiarity with the syllabus before progressing to new concepts. Although this meant Rahim was not achieving as highly as his peers, he did not regret his choice of the accelerated program, as it would expedite his entry to university. His initial request had been to skip foundation studies altogether, but this had been denied. Rahim felt he would “do good” in his chosen major, to a much greater extent than had been possible in foundation studies.

Rahim reiterated his explanation of why it was not possible to achieve strong results in foundation studies:

A lot of my friends are in college [in the USA]. I know what they do and what teachers expect of you and everything. But here, I don’t know what teachers want, what they’re looking for. I think I have to start all over again: try to figure out the exact, what exactly they want.

Other students affirmed that they had requested from teaching staff detailed feedback on each aspect of the assessment that prevented them from achieving full marks. They indicated that they would use this feedback as a series of instructions on the expectation of gaining full marks for the next assessment.

It’s a matter of asking. Even if I ask, I still sometimes get marks that I don’t think I deserve. I think I deserve higher marks for things ‘cause some of the papers I turn in, the things they mark are ridiculous. […] And she would say, like for example, “This is what I expect you to do, and this is what I want you to do”. And you follow the steps that she said but then there are has to be something that’s wrong. Like, there’s no way you’d get a perfect score. Rahim

All respondents expressed a degree of awareness that new study strategies were required to succeed in their tertiary studies in Australia. For example, they all knew the requirement to use a range of sources rather than rely on a single textbook. Although some persisted in memorisation practices, they were clear that deep understanding was required for problem solving, critical thinking and analytical writing. Interviewees did not appear daunted by these new requirements. By contrast, there was significant focus on the issue of motivation. Awareness of new techniques did not necessarily entail their application. A correlation was noted between dissatisfaction with results and low motivation. The lower results received, the less likely students were to express confidence that their situation would improve. Several reported that they were more likely to focus on subjects and assessments that they had performed well in – and consequently enjoyed – rather than areas in which they felt they were
struggling. This continued to widen the disparity between achievement in “good” and “bad” subjects observed in essay writing tasks during English language studies:

I find it quite difficult because usually I don’t do this homework. I don’t know how to do it. Of course, I try. If we have two or three questions, I do one.

Jabbar

In turn, the prevailing attitude was that inscrutable assessment requirements formed the biggest obstacle to improving confidence. As a result, teachers were seen as the dispensers of academic success and limited improvements were interpreted by students as failure on their part to secure “good relations”. This had been anticipated by respondents who had made enquiries about the overseas university experience prior to departure:

As I hear, here in Australia, they don’t know their lecturers. They just come and read the slides very quick and then they go out.
But as I hear there in Oman (my auntie is at uni), they can talk to him and a kind of relation it could be between them.
But in Australia, I don’t think it’s possible.

Nura

However, respondents struggled with the reality that presence or absence of a good relationship had little impact on results. It is reasonable to assume that Rahim, who had studied in the United States during his secondary studies, would have adjusted with the greatest ease to the Australian learning environment. Rahim himself clearly assumed this. However, he was no less bewildered as to what was expected of him and how to achieve high results than his peers who had completed secondary studies in Oman. This, in effect, resulted in greater shock and dissatisfaction:

Yeah, [understanding] what teachers want you to do: that’s the hardest thing. [I’m surprised] ’cause, I never thought that would be the hardest thing I’d face here.

Jabbar’s prior experience of Western schooling affirms that attitudes towards teachers as a figure of authority is determined by culture to a greater extent than prior educational experience.

Overview of student expectations and methods of negotiating difficulties

The experiences related by the Omani sample are in some ways similar to those of international students from Confucian Heritage Cultures documented in the literature, particularly in terms of adjustment to living and studying in Australia and dissatisfaction with assessment results (Cortazzi & Jin 1997). The evident mismatch between the sample’s expectations and the reality of pursuing undergraduate studies in Australia is consistent with the literature about motivation and achievement for international students (Ahmad 2006; Mullins et al. 2005). However, feedback from the Omani sample suggests that their
experience diverges from those of other international students in their approach to overcoming difficulties. The Omani sample’s experiences, however, are consistent with experiences outlined by the scoping study of Kuwaiti students and documented in studies of other groups of Gulf nationals studying overseas (Douglas 2005; Meleis 1982; Shana’a 1978).

The sample demonstrated a tendency to misinterpret the roles of teaching and academic support staff, as well as their own responsibilities as independent learners. The students resisted constructive feedback about improving assessments on the basis that instructions were not as explicit as required. They also objected to following their teachers’ recommendations for improvement on subsequent assessments where they noted that their marks did not improve. This indicated the students’ assumption that the role of the teacher was to reciprocate the effort they had put into completing assessments by rewarding high marks. The sample consistently expressed disappointment that teachers were not meeting their obligations in this regard, and frustration at their consequent loss of face. This led to low motivation and disillusionment with their studies at the time.

Respondents’ enthusiasm for pursuing their allocated undergraduate degree was evident in their pre-departure descriptions of the anticipated academic environment, suggesting that the prestige associated with pursuing an overseas university degree was an important factor in their motivation. Zahir and Aziza each took the initiative of consulting course plans on the internet, in order to develop a clearer picture of what their degree courses would actually entail. Zahir found the content of subject descriptions to be positive and inspiring, despite finding the terminology unfamiliar. He described his excitement at the prospect of enrolling in a challenging program for obviously elite students.

Aziza, by contrast, reported that her research into her future studies caused her anxiety for the same reason: she didn’t understand what the subject names meant. This led her to fear that she would not have the required vocabulary to succeed in her allocated course. Aziza made an appointment with a course adviser at her pathway institution to discuss the most appropriate prerequisite subjects. The consultation appeared to leave her in greater confusion. As a consequence, she enrolled in all six science subjects on offer, instead of limiting herself to the four required to enter engineering. Aziza cited lack of trust of the course adviser and confidence in her own ability to excel in only four subjects as her reasons for overloading.

As discussed in preliminary scoping outlined in Chapter 1, the capacity for a young person to build face in the Gulf States is strongly tied to their perceived maturity, as evinced by their contribution to their family (Kennedy 1997). A young person’s ability to contribute to family advancement – particularly in times of scarcity or competition for limited resources – is limited only by the extent of the network of influence they are able to cultivate. Relationships within
this network, known as wasta, continue to be the main vehicle for securing positions of prestige in Gulf society. The development of trust is critical for the ongoing success of key relationships.

Prior to departure, respondents were evidently pleased at having gained a scholarship and excited at the prospect of studying overseas. They were clear about how an international education would support their personal and career goals. They were also aware that the prestige of returning to Oman with a specialist qualification would entail significant responsibility for the reputation of their family and community. Respondents conveyed that confidence and hard work would ensure continuing recognition as high-achievers.

However, upon arrival, the students were confronted with the reality that they had overestimated their ability to achieve high results in English language and pathway studies. Throughout the duration of the interview schedule, respondents remained of the opinion that pathway studies did not differ substantively from their secondary studies except in the language of instruction. Although they were able to articulate the ways in which assessment requirements differed, they attributed this to the nuances of Australian assessment style and consequent requirements for new self-study practices for international students.

Throughout their experience, participants displayed varying degrees of confidence in their capacity to improve results. Confidence was consistently correlated with constructing personal relationships with figures of influence and authority – namely teachers – to ensure that their efforts were acknowledged. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction at the persistent lack of recognition of their hard work on the part of teachers marking their assessments. This led them to distrust the staff and, by extension, the institutions where they were enrolled.

It is relevant that the sample did not consider the prospects for their future success in undergraduate studies to be relative to, or determined by, their performance in English language and pathway studies. On the contrary, they were optimistic that they would enjoy greater success in a new academic setting with new teachers, even though undergraduate studies] would be more challenging academically and entail a more diverse body of students. They were largely of the opinion that the preparatory aspects of English language and pathway studies were limited to studying with English as the medium of instruction (particularly in terms of enhancing their vocabulary) and acclimatisation to lower grades than in secondary school. University study, on the other hand, was perceived to hold greater relevance in that students would be able to pursue majors that would enhance future career opportunities. More relevant, however, was their apparent conviction that their limited success in inducing teachers to recognise their hard work and good ideas was endemic only to their pre-university studies.
This suggests that participants placed the onus for improving relationships on teaching staff – the figures of authority whose role it was to reward good work with high marks – with the anticipation that teachers at higher levels of learning would not be limited by the same narrow views. This may also be related to the dewania tradition whereby Omani citizens enjoy the right to approach uppermost figures of authority directly, including the Sultan (Meleis 1982). Higher status accorded to university studies may have entailed participants’ speculation about access to academic authorities.

Not all participants remained confident of their ability to influence university teaching staff. One student expressed concern that moving to a foreign environment would severely limit her possibilities of progression on the basis of relationships with people who had authority over student advancement:

Yeah, the expectations [here in Australia] are different. Because, for example, you don’t expect yourself that you will fail in a subject in Oman. […] You will find a way, you know. But here it’s quite different, studying is. You don’t know anybody here. You have to work by your own and nobody is helping you. But there you might know someone who can help you.

Nura

To ascertain the extent to which other participants were conscious of these issues, they were asked to consider how they would advise future Omani students to prepare for studying in Australia. Consistently, respondents said that they would alert future cohorts to the reality that the “shops close at 5pm in Australia”. On the surface, this statement does not appear relevant to the academic difficulties faced by Omani students. However, it does indicate the students’ assumption that they would be able to maintain similar social networks and patterns to those available at home. In Oman (as in all the Gulf States), shopping malls are open late as evening meals are usually taken quite late in the evening. Malls provide an acceptable public environment for groups of young people to socialise. The students’ interest in availing themselves of such an opportunity overseas highlights the importance of socialising with compatriot communities. For participants in this study, preference for associating with compatriots extended to study-related activities.

This preference is consistent with literature highlighting the importance in Gulf communities of personal relationships to overcome difficulties faced (e.g. Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). This cultural norm is best exemplified in Nura’s experience of requesting permission to take leave of absence from her pathway studies in order to attend her brother’s wedding. Initially pessimistic about the chances that her request would be approved, Nura expressed her relief at learning that the staff members from whom she needed permission had been her teachers in the preceding semester. She therefore felt equipped to convey her needs in a manner that would be positively received by the teacher:
It was easier for me to go and talk to them, because I know the person that I will be talking to. So… and I know her and […] I knew her way. The words I am saying, the way that I am saying, the sequence of my talk. Mentioning my brother’s wedding at the beginning, and then I want to [take leave]. You know, it’s different when you know the person.

Nura was granted leave and attributed her success to the personal relationship she had previously had with her teacher. This, she felt, enabled her to describe her brother’s wedding in a way that she was sure would appeal to the teacher. Her being granted permission – despite having to miss a significant number of classes – was a logical result of the effort Nura had invested in ensuring that her teacher understood the request “in her own way”. This is consistent with the literature that indicates that for *wasta* to work, significant effort must be invested to ensure that the bestower of the favour is happy with their course of action. Reluctance to bestow a favour not only suggests lack of effort on the part of the seeker, but the presence of more important and pressing priorities elsewhere. Lack of response might therefore be interpreted by the seeker as an indication of their comparatively low status in the eyes of the authority figure. This helps explain why poor results affected motivation within this sample of students so severely.

Despite the apparent preponderance of complaints and reports of negative interactions with teaching staff, the sample remained positive about their Australian study experience. They were also able to articulate clearly the benefits of the experience for their future personal and professional lives. Respondents were eager to speak of the positive changes they had noticed in themselves, particularly noting: their enjoyment of expressing ideas and opinions in class; improved time management; a greater appreciation of different points of view; and cultivation of an independent lifestyle.

Even difficult interactions with teachers were perceived to be of long-term benefit inasmuch as it usefully fostered independence from authority figures:

> Although I don’t like it, it’s going to benefit me in the future when I go to work. Because you’re not going to go to your boss or whoever you’re working for and ask him every single thing. You’re just going to do it.

> Rahim

> If you compare people who studied [in Oman] to people went abroad, you see a big difference in the thinking […] because they lived on their own. They know how to deal with life.

> Zahir

In this sense, the students retained a positive outlook consistent with their original aspirations. Prior to departure, respondents seemed clear about their future career plans, even if they were not familiar with the nature of the roles they would be pursuing. Their thoughts about requisite skills and qualities to succeed in their careers were, by extension, reasonably well developed.
Definitely people skills, definitely. Management skills. Motivational skills, very, very important when you are working as a head of a department or head of a project. […] In the end, you are working with people who are maybe under, er, who are working with you. Really you need to be able to communicate with them at the very highest level to be able to achieve the very highest quality, very highest targets that you set yourself.

Hamid

Although their expectations of their own academic performance were somewhat over-optimistic, participants were mindful of the future rewards for negotiating current difficulties. In particular, they looked forward to the recognition that would be accorded to them by employers and their families upon their return to Oman.

No one [in Oman] has Actuarial so I will be special. I like to be special.

Jabbar

They were also excited to be able to contribute to the development of Omani society by filling a gap in expertise. This suggests that this cohort might not join the “brain drain”, indeed all interviewees expressed a commitment to return home. However, some initial course choices were considered risky because they were too specialised in relation to work opportunities in Oman. The advice of well-meaning relatives and friends was heeded in identifying an viable niche.

In engineering you are too specific, you can’t work wherever you want. [My father] he is civil, he is working in a housing bank. He cannot go to Petroleum Development Oman because nothing about housing. […] So he said to me, “Do commerce. Business because you can work wherever you want.”

Jabbar

I saw this nano engineering. And I’ve listened before about the nanotechnology. So I thought it was very good. Yeah, but if I return here, I don’t think I’ll have a job. Yeah because it’s still not as technology as some other countries in here

Karim

I wanted to become a vet but reality struck me at one point. Probably four years ago, or three years ago, someone told me that, “Listen, you might end up being in Oman, and if you are in Oman, what are going to treat? Camels and sheep?” And I was like, “OK! Hold on a second!” So I was like, I think I have to change this second!

Wahid

Some students were surprised upon commencement of pathway studies to learn that their undergraduate degrees held less prestige than originally anticipated.

19 None had intentions of migrating to Australia, although a couple indicated that working in Europe or the United States of America might provide useful professional experience.
I think that I won’t like it because this is not what I wanted. […] That I’m not a Doctor. I am just a specialist. But maybe because it’s a new major, we will have quite of attention […]. So maybe they can improve our degrees in future. I hope, yeah, but I really don’t like about it too much.

Nura

In Nura’s case, this discovery led her to plan for future studies in Medicine after completing her studies in Podiatry. She also advised her younger sister, who was completing her secondary studies and applying for a scholarship to study overseas, that she stood a greater chance of gaining admission to a medical degree if she studied in Oman. She confided that their father had said to her and her siblings, “I want to see all of you Doctors”.

However, the students’ aspirations were framed within certain expectations of the system of power relationships and interaction with figures of authority. This was clear in pre-departure interviews when students spoke of aspiring to management status and their personal and family goals.

The more people say, “OK we can’t go there because it’s limited to a few people”, that makes me say, “OK now I want to really reach there.” […] So to be the actually head of a company is that you have reached the last stage. And then you can say, “Then what?”. But you have at least satisfied your inner self that you have actually achieved what anyone could have achieved. And I think that’s the main issue.

Wahid

I have a lot of dreams, I am using shortcuts! […] The same time I always remember that everyone really depends on me in the family. It’s really hard.

Aziza

Again, confidence was identified as a key attribute in pursuing high level goals.

I want to be a manager or something. I don’t want to work as an employee! Self-dependence [makes a good manager]. And I have to trust what I am doing, in my work. And I have to like what I am doing. I think that travelling abroad, it will help that a lot.

Aziza

Self-confidence. That’s the most important one I guess. [At university] they are really, really into presentations and all. Really, really builds your self-confidence.

Zahir

Prior to departure, respondents were likely to share their intention to achieve “special” status during their studies in Australia. Upon commencement of their studies, this was evidently associated with being vocal in classes, achieving high marks, and being held in positive esteem by academic staff. These qualities had been relevant to their achievement as elite secondary school graduates and scholarship recipients. However, faced with the reality that they were not the highest performers in their English language and pathway studies,
cultivation of personal relations with teaching and support staff gained greater significance. Respondents’ unrealistic expectations as to the availability, propriety and reciprocity of such relationships impeded their ability to overcome learning difficulties.

The consistency of students’ responses suggests little difference between male and female Omani student experiences. Some divergence was noted in terms of the responses of private school students with respect to learning in the medium of English. Students from urban backgrounds were also more likely to express confidence with working in groups with students from other ethnic backgrounds. Not all urban students went to private schools. Further studies into family background across a broader range of Gulf States would provide a more nuanced account of family expectations against these variables. As discussed in Chapter 2 in the section on sample selection, opportunities for women in Oman in terms of education and employment are greater than most other Gulf States. Having met the families of almost all fieldwork participants, the researcher is given to conjecture that parents who are comfortable in sending their daughters overseas to study unchaperoned have a world view that differentiates them from parents who are only willing to send their sons overseas. A study focusing on this variable alone would be a valuable addition to the literature.

The final section comprising Conclusions and Recommendations below discusses implications of the fieldwork sample’s assumptions about personal relationships for current theory on international students in Australia.
HYPOTHESIS TESTED: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

How does wasta shed light on Gulf students’ expectations of Australian universities?

Data gathered from the fieldwork outlined in Chapter 4 support the hypothesis that Omani students’ dissatisfaction with academic support provided by Australian universities is based on their expectations of the obligations of academic and support staff. The literature outlined in Chapter 3 indicates that the students’ assumptions about the scope for cultivating the personal patronage of staff are consistent with social structures in their home community. The definition of this patronage – otherwise known as intercession or mediation – is identified as wasta, and its prevalence in the Gulf States and Middle East is demonstrated. The social structures are built on personal relationships through which figures of authority can be accessed and influenced, and are the main mechanism through which Omani families advance their interests and improve the main aspects of their daily lives.

The Omani students’ reliance on personal relationships to overcome challenges was the most problematic aspect their overseas study experience, as it determined the extent to which they were able to utilise the extensive services available to international students to overcome the academic and language difficulties they encountered. The fact that this issue was apparent in the attitudes and behaviours observed of the Kuwaiti cohort described in the scoping study in Chapter 1 some five years prior to the fieldwork suggests that Australian universities’ efforts to manage Gulf students’ expectations have not succeeded. Furthermore, the resilience of these expectations, despite experience in an overseas learning environment and culture, undermine the Gulf States’ intentions to skill up their national workforces and foster knowledge economies.

This final section draws together the implications of evidence that traditional values such as reliance on wasta are the most significant point of divergence between the experience of Middle Eastern students and other international students in Australia. The conclusions draw together other thematic threads from the analytical chapters in support of this central argument and the consequent conclusions. These threads include the questioning of stereotypes and ill-founded assumptions about Gulf students.

Towards a richer understanding of academic difficulties attributed to Gulf students in Australia

Young Gulf nationals are encouraged to pursue careers that enhance their ability to build face for their family. The cultivation of culturally appropriate networking skills and important contacts are vital to this endeavour. The consolidation of a Gulf family’s status is critical to ensure their social and financial security as employment opportunities become more competitive and less certain. The Omani respondents participating in this study were rightly confident that their sponsorship held a guarantee of unique and prestigious employment when
they returned home. Despite this guarantee, they indicated their concern that they be perceived as “the best” in their classes in Australia, as they has been at home. This entailed not only achievement of high marks but having “good relations” with their lecturers. Prior to departure from Oman, they feared that the lecture format would preclude this due to the anonymity of large classes. Upon commencement of their classes, respondents were concerned that their poor results led to unsatisfactory conversations with teaching staff about how to improve. Limited improvement in subject results led respondents to question the extent to which it was possible to achieve their goals in Australian universities, citing the inflexibility of the latter as a key reason for this. The students felt that Australian university staff and policies were preventing them from meeting their educational goals, particularly achievement of top marks and recognition as outstanding, popular students. Although their academic achievements in Australia would not necessarily preclude them pursuing prestigious careers upon returning home, the students did not question the necessity of these goals.

Many international students experience difficulty meeting their educational goals when they pursue tertiary studies in Australian. The students, and the staff who teach and advise them, are likely to attribute this to limited English language proficiency. This is certainly a factor in Gulf students’ difficulties. Research attests that Arabic speakers do face unique challenges when learning English. However, several studies have identified a correlation between parental education and family attitudes towards education and proficiency in English as a foreign language. Career aspirations are also important variables in this regard, where students' opinions as to the value of English language study to their aspirations has a direct impact on their motivation. The Omani students who had attended Government schools did experience difficulty with their English language studies and with learning in English. Most admitted that they had underestimated how challenging their English language studies would be, and felt that they had not allocated sufficient time to improve their proficiency before joining university. However, they tended to attribute poor results to their limited vocabulary and did not wish to extend their language studies, confident they could proceed regardless. Likewise, they tended to view pathway studies as a waste of time. All students interviewed (including those who had studied in English in private schools in Oman) struggled with Australian academic conventions in their pathway studies. This did not affect their opinion of the limited value of pathway studies in relation to their aspirations. This being the case, it is argued that English language proficiency was not as significant a determinant of the Omani students’ academic success as their attitudes towards their studies. Level of parental education and parental attitudes towards education were not tested in this study. However, future studies in this area would add a valuable dimension to the research. Anecdotal evidence volunteered by respondents suggested that opinions of family members and friends had significant bearing on their attitudes towards their studies, particularly hurdle requirements such as English language proficiency and pathway studies.
Respondents were aware that poor academic preparation placed them at a disadvantage compared to other international students, particularly in mathematics and science subjects. However, they attributed this to pedagogical factors such as rote learning, multiple choice testing and single text books. These features of outmoded educational practice have been extensively documented in the literature. National curriculum reviews and international comparisons reveal that qualitative improvements have not eventuated, despite significant Government spending on education in the Gulf States. In addition, development of knowledge economies have been hampered by restrictive conditions for researchers in universities and limited innovation in a fledgling private sector. However, interviews conducted for this study suggest that employment goals and, consequently, economic development are more strongly influenced by family values and aspirations than secondary school experiences. For example, the students did not question their assumptions that they deserved to do well, despite their awareness that different strategies were required to succeed in their studies in Australia. They tended to work hard in subjects that they did well in and neglected the ones that they found more difficult, rather than the other way around. They also discussed their lesser motivation to study in absence of authority figures such as parents, siblings and private tutors. They often correlated motivation to the opportunity for relationships with compatriot students, particularly when forming study- or revision-groups outside class time. Discussions with family members about courses and careers were considered highly influential in planning out their English language, pathway and undergraduate studies. International reviews demonstrate that the need for educational reform in the Gulf States is undeniable. However, literature on international students suggests that many students go overseas poorly prepared for the tertiary curriculum. Furthermore, it is argued that this is less a question of syllabus than it is approaches to learning. In the case of the Omani students, it is hypothesised that the capacity for curriculum change to influence family attitude and expectations is questionable.

Much of the literature about Arab and Gulf students attributes their attitudes towards their studies and career aspirations to their collectivist cultural background. This is an attribute shared with other international students. Hofstede’s research into cultural dimensions is significant in that it indicates how collectivism manifests itself in their behaviour – for example, in their concern not to lose face – and is different from that of other international students. In particular, Gulf students’ judgement of the value of relationships with figures of authority such as teachers is evident in their expectations of reciprocity and reward. The Omani students interviewed for this study linked teacher authority very strongly to high academic performance. They recounted examples of authoritarian teaching styles at home, preferring them to what they felt to be ambiguous and apathetic teaching practices in Australia. They blamed lack of explicit instruction for their poor performance in assessments. In addition, the students complained that their endeavours to improve their results had not been rewarded, and that there were no “marks for effort”. Literature on cultural values indicates that Middle
Eastern students are apt to attribute success to effort rather than ability, where the opposite can be said to be true for other groups of international students. Again, the students appeared concerned that these unexpected setbacks reflected badly on their efforts to maintain their elite status and forge good relationships with their teachers and advisers. This undermined their motivation to deal with the specific obstacles they faced in their subject and language studies.

Research into experiences of Gulf students internationally touches upon their expectations that when such difficulties arise, they are likely to expect intercession by university staff. This is also noted by foreign teachers based in the Gulf States. The students appear to expect substantial levels of support from lecturers, tutors, supervisors and advisers in order to overcome difficulties such as: adaptation to different academic approaches; learning in English for the first time; and acculturation to the new setting. This expectation was very much in evidence in the scoping study on Kuwaiti students in Chapter 1 and, despite staff concerns that Gulf students’ expectations be more carefully managed in future, the same issues were present in the Omani sample some five or six years later. The Omani students felt that staff reluctance to assist them by offering additional tuition or adjusting their marks reflected badly on them as elite students. They were also concerned about losing face among family and friends. Both of these issues had considerable impact on their motivation to study and overcome the various difficulties they experienced in different subjects. The respondents for this study clearly articulated that “not knowing someone who can help you” was a key difference between studying in Australia and studying in Oman. The nature of the help they required was evidently inappropriate in the Australian university context. This issue is consistently overlooked in the literature on Gulf Students in Australia, and the ongoing prevalence of unrealistic expectations continues to be a significant problem for Omani students enrolled in Australian universities.

**Understanding “work ethic”**

Gulf students in Australia are, for the most part, sponsored by their home governments to obtain niche qualifications and graduate attributes not available from institutions in their home countries, with a view to reducing their country’s reliance on foreign expertise. Upgrading the skills of the national workforce is also intended to promote economic diversification, a national imperative in view of the finite supply of the oil on which Gulf economies are currently so heavily based.

However, the enormous wealth derived from the exploitation of oil in the region since the mid-20th Century has enabled two or three generations of Gulf nationals to benefit from extensive state welfare and subsidies. This has raised expectations regarding the “dues” to which a Gulf national feels entitled, regardless of population growth and dwindling oil supplies. Moreover, the public sector – the traditional employment destination for nationals – is saturated, with the
result that youth unemployment is growing. By contrast, the private sector continues to rely heavily on foreigners, who are perceived by employers to work harder for lower salaries. Tens of thousands of university graduates enter the Gulf job market each year, the vast majority having majored in Islamic studies or Egyptian-style social sciences, neither of which serve the national imperatives of nationalising the private-sector workforce and economic diversification.

The likelihood that these national objectives will be met through sponsorship of overseas study for Gulf nationals is not currently high, to judge by the stereotypes formed by staff ministering to them in Australian and North American universities. Typical students from the Gulf States are supposed to be wealthy and indulged, and well aware that they “don’t really need to work hard” at their studies, as they are guaranteed prestigious and lucrative employment upon their return home. Again according to the stereotype, these students’ academic difficulties are attributable to underdeveloped secondary school curricula and the ease of obtaining high scores in a system rife with private tutors, rote learning and multiple choice examinations. Scholarly research on the topic, including the dissertations of Gulf nationals for British universities, does little to discredit such assumptions about the education background of Gulf students but chooses instead to focus on English language problems and transition issues such as culture shock.

Another facet of the stereotype devised to explain the poor academic performance of many Gulf students is the assumption of corruption, cronyism, or, at best, lack of objectivity in the allocation of the scholarships which have brought these problematic students overseas. As seen above, this assumption also finds support in various allegations made by students themselves or disgruntled members of their families. Investigating such allegations is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis; suffice it to note the congruence, in theory, between partiality in allocating privileges such as scholarships and aspects of the dewanía culture in the Gulf States which gives citizens access to figures of supreme authority for the purpose of petitioning their favour. It is also consistent with perceptions, attested above, among Gulf nationals that personal relationships and access to people who can help are more efficacious and secure than merit-based achievement.

Critics of the Gulf States’ limited progress in diversifying their economies have likewise argued that this rentier work ethic is the most significant issue undermining nationalisation policy implementation. The rentier work ethic was not evident in the Omani sample’s course and career choices: this was anticipated when selecting the sample, given the emirate’s comparatively small oil and gas reserves. With the exception of participants who were enrolled in allied health programs that would not result in their becoming doctors, the students were pleased with their allocated course choices as they would be among the first Omanis to be qualified in these areas. They anticipated that their employment would hold significant
prestige, autonomy and freedom to develop innovative solutions for their country’s development needs.

It is therefore inaccurate to assume that Gulf students lack a work ethic or that it is underdeveloped because they are from an oil-rich region. For example, it is wrong to assume that the phenomenally high per capita GDP of Kuwait is typical of other Gulf States, where great wealth is largely confined to the royal family. As for the previously mentioned welfare payments, subsidies and employment benefits enjoyed in the past by many Gulf nationals, these are now diminishing and contested by a growing population. Complacent confidence in a secure future is therefore not a luxury available to Gulf students overseas. Indeed, their nations’ future, and more immediately their families’ fortunes, weigh upon them at a critical and turbulent time.

However, their attitudes towards their studies, and the ease of which they anticipated overcoming each hurdle requirement, was more indicative of a rentier attitude. That is, the students appeared confident that they would pass easily on the basis of the talents they had displayed in secondary school, on the basis of which they had been awarded a scholarship. Furthermore, they were comfortable in the knowledge that their employment was guaranteed. However, literature on cultural values in the Middle East (particularly Sharabi 1988) reveals that the students’ educational goals, and the attributes cited as most useful in meeting them – namely confidence, tenacity and the cultivation of good relationships – stem from traditional attitudes towards work in relation to social aspirations. It is argued that the rentier economy has reinforced the importance and value of these attributes, rather than create them. By extension, it is proposed that contemporary economic conditions in the Gulf States are persuading nationals to place even greater emphasis on the efficacy of traditional modes of leveraging personal relationships for economic and social advantage. In terms of the Omani students interviewed, it was evident that their application of these traditional principles in Australia hindered their ability to overcome difficulties with their studies. The students expressed surprise and disappointment at this, given how important and successful their relationships with teachers and other authority figures had been at home.

Resilience of traditional values such as wasta
The United Nations Development Programme’s (2002) Arab Human Development Report argues that profound changes are taking place in the Arab world:

The weakening of the position of the state relative to its citizens is supporting such a shift. Two simultaneous processes are taking place. The position of the state as patron is diminishing partly as a result of the reduced benefits it can now offer in the form of guaranteed employment, subsidies and other inducements. By contrast, the power position of citizens is increasing as states increasingly depend on them for tax revenues, private sector investment and other necessities. Moreover, human development accomplishments that have
endowed citizens, particularly the middle class, with a new range of resources have put them in a better position to contest policies and bargain with the state. United Nations Development Programme 2002, p.9

However, there is evidence that such a change is not necessarily occurring in the Gulf States, even though the outward appearance of successful programs such as educational sponsorship may suggest it. Although the position of the state is weakening in relation to its citizens due to diminishing oil reserves, the position of ruling elites is arguably perpetuated by social forces both deep-rooted and ultimately beneficial to the citizens themselves. Increased education levels among young citizens have not resulted in their challenging the status quo, as is evident in responses from fieldwork interviewees. The presence of an established middle class of potential malcontents in the Gulf States is also debatable.

Literature on traditional cultural values in the Middle East indicates that wasṭa has been an important force in these societies ever since the characteristics and behaviours of family tribes have been recorded. Contemporary studies of the Gulf States provide evidence that traditional tribal values continue to dominate social relations and family aspirations. The operation of wasṭa has been seen to offer compelling parallels for the behaviour and attitudes of young Gulf nationals seeking to improve their situation, for example, through overseas education. The highly influential work of Sharabi (1988), reviewed in Chapter 3, demonstrates how long-established cultural values such as wasṭa still operate to advance tribal interests through affiliation to a patriarch in antithesis to the norms of modernity (p.18).

Behaviour attributable to a vertical collectivist outlook is evident in the attitudes of Gulf students in Australia. However, the prime importance of families’ and, in particular, parents’ involvement in the lives of school- and university-age children is largely ignored by the literature on Gulf students, as are the aspirations of this key group of influential players. In particular, parents’ limited understanding of the ways in which overseas universities function and the realities of the modern, globalised workforce, may limit students’ perspectives on their own potential and responsibilities. Literature on international student expectations does not investigate satisfactorily the relevance of family aspirations and link these to economic and social reasons developments in their home countries. For example, research into the low motivation of Malay sponsored students could reasonably be expected to provide insights into the attitudes of Gulf students; however, it focuses on issues such as English language and collectivist cultural practices. Certainly these attributes were evident in the Omani sample interviewed for this study. However, the broad recommendations for academic and social support do not address the underlying problems of unrealistic expectations and deeply rooted prejudices against particular types of work.

The fieldwork for this study did not directly elicit data on the students’ parents, but demographic data on age, literacy and education levels of Gulf populations indicate that the
educational opportunities of the past two generations were significantly lower than those available to the present generation of secondary school leavers. It is therefore plausible that the influence of older generations on decisions affecting the education of younger generations would bring to bear “traditional considerations that reflect narrow affiliations and loyalties more than broad scientific rationalism” (United Nations Development Programme 2003, p.47).

In the volume compiled by The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research of education in the Arab region, a number of recommendations focus on improved partnerships between schools and parents (Davies 1999; Al-Sulayti1999; Al-Suwaidi 1999). Benefits for this model are multiple and include more appropriate support for students in studying outside school hours, and greater support for the teachers on the basis of parents’ first-hand knowledge of the schools aims and methods (Davies 1999, p.74). The presence of wasta in all facets of life in the Arab region suggests that such collaboration would not be immune to misunderstandings as to the value of closer relationships between principals, teachers and parents. However, such partnerships could support significant long term culture shifts at the local level, provided all parties were committed to reducing potential for corruption, and consistent penalties were imposed for breaches of approved conduct. Involvement of local universities, as well as foreign universities with campuses in the region, may also ensure that students and parents are more familiar with adjustments required to adapt to new teaching and learning styles, as well as relationships with the institution.

In summary
This study provides a resource for academic support staff at Australian universities who wish to develop a more accurate understanding of what makes Gulf students so different from other international students.

Preliminary scoping reveals the prevalent assumption that students from Kuwait and, by extension, all Gulf States are lazy, complacent and arrogant. This study shows this hypothesis to be incorrect: Gulf students are disaffected and bemused because their endeavours to overcome obstacles are ineffective and likely to be interpreted as adversarial. Far from complacent, they are burdened with responsibility for their family’s status in turbulent times. The fieldwork attests that Omani students hold high expectations regarding the efficacy of personal relations with academic support staff – to a greater extent than confidence in their own ability – in negotiating their way through academic and administrative requirements.

Relevant literature suggests that low levels of competence in English and poor academic preparation pose significant problems for Gulf students adapting to university studies in Australia. The importance of academic preparation is affirmed through the fieldwork. However, the students’ attitudes and behaviours are arguably of greater relevance as it is
these aspects that prevented Omani students from utilising academic support services to overcome shortcomings in their language skills and academic preparation.

Although reports compiled by the United Nations Development Programme indicate the need for societal shifts in the Arab world, these should not be equated with the demise of traditional values. On the contrary, greater reliance on mechanisms such as washta to cope with anxiety brought about by additional competitiveness and uncertainty is imminent. This conclusion is supported by literature on cultural values in the Middle East, particularly research into the prevalence of tribal and patriarchal values in the region. Furthermore, analysis of the socio-economic climate in the Gulf States – particularly the limited success of nationalisation policies – confirm that traditional values have continued their dominance of education systems, employment opportunities and personal advancement.

As a result, students’ (and their families’) ambitions continue to challenge their sponsors’ human-resource requirements and their home governments’ economic goals. Gulf students are fielding the consequences of decisions made for them by families looking backwards and public servants looking forward. Importantly, the pressure and confusion impede Gulf students’ abilities to overcome hurdles to their successful completion of their studies at overseas universities.

Recommendations for Australian universities
In order to overcome these issues, further research into student and family expectations is recommended. A larger student sample from a range of emirates will indicate the extent to which values held by Omani respondents in this study are more broadly held by their peers in the region. Although a more nuanced understanding of the difference between emirates will emerge, similarities between observed behaviours of the Kuwaiti students in the scoping study and the Omani respondents suggest that stronger conclusions about Gulf students may be drawn. A more systematic analysis of opportunities for women in each emirate and experiences and attitudes of female students would also provide a clearer picture of how motivations are formed. A comparative study with sponsored students from other rentier economies facing similar employment challenges (such Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam) would also enable broader conclusions to be drawn about the resilience of traditional values in a welfare state. Interviews with parents may also support hypotheses about the extent to which limited cognisance of the requirements and challenges of university study beyond assessments, as well as the future employment aspirations they hold for their children, influence their students’ attitudes about the value of their overseas education experience. This may also provide important data about similarities and differences of attitudes held by parents/families of male and female students.
Research should also extend to graduating Gulf students, in order to ascertain the realities of their employment situation upon their return. Comparisons with students who pursued studies in local institutions, or international university campuses based in the region, will reveal whether perceptions of the value of their overseas education experience changes in relation to their experience in the working world. Perceptions of employers in the public and private sector will provide useful data with which to compare student and graduate opinions. Liaison with newly opening careers counselling centres, such as the one proposed for Oman, would be critical in this endeavour.

Until a more comprehensive picture is available, Australian universities and their associated pathway studies and English language centres could benefit from a review of their recruitment policies and academic support programs for the Gulf cohort. Given the intensity with which Gulf students require individual attention from teaching and administrative staff, universities may benefit from limiting the numbers of students they admit from the region. Smaller numbers may alleviate the drain on academic and pastoral care resources in institutions, and ensure greater balance between providing a community of compatriots and ensuring opportunities to mix with other international and local students. Extensive support of small numbers in the short term represents the greatest chance for academic success of Gulf students. This, in turn, creates the greatest possibility for sustainable enrolments from the region into the future.

Additional remedial programs in English and other key subject areas may be useful if advocated by senior students from the Gulf who have recognised their value (even if only retrospectively). However, scoping and relevant literature for this study suggests limited success for additional academic support if it is not perceived to “count” towards final assessments or results. Furthermore, the shock and discomfort expressed by fieldwork participants upon arrival in Australia indicates that pre-departure briefings enjoy limited effectiveness in preempting difficulties faced by this cohort.

Importantly, the appointment of a small number of dedicated staff mentors who are authorised to make decisions about Gulf student enrolments – including liaison with recruitment and admission staff, as well as sponsors located in the Gulf States – is recommended. A finite number of authorised staff will be able to get to know Gulf students personally and stand a better chance of case-managing the students’ requests. The opportunity to meet these staff mentors personally in a social setting (e.g. lunch for Gulf students during orientation) and ongoing opportunities for “drop-in” sessions where coffee is served will represent key aspects of the dewania tradition prevalent in the region. Consistent referral of queries and problems to staff mentors will eventually engender acknowledgement of the authority of these key members of the institution by the Gulf student community. This, in turn, will minimise opportunities for students to impose on staff unfamiliar with their particular needs to make
inappropriate adjustments to assessment or other requirements, or complain that they do not have appropriate support. This study did not reveal compelling evidence that staff mentors need to be male, although the ability to converse in Arabic – particularly when fielding enquiries from families or sponsors – and familiarity with Arab culture and customs may be an advantage. Such a mechanism will draw on the positive aspects of *wasta* for the pastoral care aspect of international student support, but also use a recognisable medium to transmit important messages about the requirements and responsibilities entailed by the students' new situation.
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