WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO BE IN A MIXED-GENDER ENVIRONMENT?

A Phenomenological Study of the Experience of Saudi International Students in a Mixed-gender Environment

by

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research programme; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Ahmed A. Alhazmi

Date: 11/01/2013
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to

My soul mate: Fatmah...

My eyes: Zakiah and Ali...

My Heartbeats: Nasibah, Muath and Anas...
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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This study provides a phenomenological investigation of the experience of Saudi international students in Australia. It focuses particularly on the experience of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment. The study was undertaken because an increasing number of Saudi students pursue their studies in mixed-gender environments in Western countries like Australia, and there is a lack of literature that focuses on Saudi students’ cross-cultural experiences. Two general aims have guided the current research: the first aim was to explore how the experience of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment manifested itself to Saudi international students studying in an Australian context. The second aim was to investigate the potential impact that this experience could have on the individual’s identity. To facilitate these aims, two questions were developed for the research. The major question was: What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia? A second supplementary question was developed: What potential impact does the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment have upon the identity of Saudi international students?

A phenomenological approach, influenced by a qualitative paradigm in social science research, was developed to allow the participants to describe their encountered experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather data from four Saudi international students who were studying at Australian universities and sponsored by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of High Education. The participants were three males and one female.
Phenomenological explication of the data indicated that the experience of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment appeared to be constituted by two essential structures: the first was the developmental structure, which constituted the positive meanings made about the phenomenon. The second structure was the psychological complex associated with mixing with the opposite sex that informed the challenges and obstacles involved in the transition. Issues relate to engagements with the Australian community, and the participants’ previous experience in a mixed-gender environment appeared to be an influential part of the individuals’ experiences. Significant indications were found to support the research assumption that dialogical and dialectical influences occur between international students’ cultural identity and the formation of the cross-cultural transitioning experience.

The significance of this research lies with the growing number of international students in Australia, including those from Saudi Arabia, and the acknowledgment that students from Saudi Arabia come from a unique context and would, therefore, encounter different experiences of enculturation to students from other cultures. The research contains implications for the theory, policy, and practice of the Australian and Saudi Arabian governments and the host educational institutions.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview of the chapter

This thesis, conducted from March 2009 to December 2012, is about the experience of Saudi international students in transitioning from a strictly gendered environment to a mixed-gender environment. The thesis describes and explains the research activities and outcomes in six chapters, as outlined in the last section of this chapter.

This introductory chapter provides an overall view about the study and the report. It introduces the phenomenon under research, the purposes of the investigation, and the organisation of the thesis. The chapter content is guided by three questions: what issue has been explored, how it was explored, and why it was explored. As presented in the map of the chapter (Figure 1), the chapter consists of five sections on the following topics: 1) the research phenomenon, 2) the scope of the study, 3) a review of the literature, 4) the significance of the study, and 5) the organisation of the chapters.

In the first section, I introduce the research topic and its contexts. The cross-cultural transitioning experiences of Saudi international students in Australia are highlighted as a phenomenon which this research has sought to explore. In the second section, I narrow down the scope of the research by introducing the purpose and the perspective of the investigation. Five interactive issues are remarked upon in order to set the scope and to position the investigation. The research purpose and research questions define the scope and the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, as well the research methodology, position the investigation in a particular perspective. The third section introduces the activities of the literature review conducted for the study and shows how the investigation links with previous work. The fourth section highlights the potential significance and contribution of exploring
the transitioning experience of Saudi international students. Both the theoretical and practical significance are discussed. The fifth section introduces the remaining chapters of this dissertation, and the main ideas of the remaining five chapters are highlighted.

Figure 1. Map of chapter 1

1.1. The research phenomenon

In 2005, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, issued a royal decree for the establishment of a national programme to provide scholarship opportunities for Saudi citizens to study overseas. The main aim of the programme was to meet the needs of Saudi Arabia in relation to developing a professional and academic workforce that would be internationally competitive. It was an ambitious project designed
also to contribute to the international exchange of scientific, educational, and cultural experiences (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). In other words, the Saudi Arabian government had determined to expose Saudi culture to globalisation.

Today, young Saudi students are increasingly travelling overseas to experience new educational and social environments in a range of host countries. In 2009, Saudi Arabia was listed as the fifth highest country – after China, India, Korea, and Germany – to have students studying overseas (Deputyship for Planning and Information, 2010). According to a final report by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education in 2011, the number of Saudi students abroad went up from 25,441 in 2006 to 119,592 students in 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education (MOH), 2011). Other statements made by officials in this Ministry of Higher Education indicated that there will be about 200,000 Saudi students studying abroad by the end of 2015 (Al-Shutayly, 2011; Alshayban, 2011).

However, it should be mentioned by way of introduction that the main reason for the scholarship programme is to give Saudi students a presence across the globe, and it has drawn researchers’ attention to concern about the cross-cultural experience of Saudi students (e.g. Clerehan, McCall, McKenna, & Alshahrani, 2012; Fallon & Bycroft, 2009; Kampman, 2011; Midgley, 2010; Shaw, 2010). Generally speaking, five goals have been cited for this programme: 1) to sponsor qualified Saudis for study in the best universities around the world; 2) to work to bring about a high level of academic and professional standards through the foreign scholarship programme; 3) to exchange scientific, educational, and cultural experience with countries worldwide; 4) to build up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment; 5) to raise and develop the level of professionalism among Saudis.
It is not uncommon for international students to experience both social and academic difficulties. Saudi students are no exception, and they, too, require support to adjust successfully to these challenges. It is well known scholarly and professionally that international students require support to navigate a cross-cultural experience positively and successfully.

I believe that understanding the experience of students is the first step in approaching their needs, and it is also a vital way to provide the students with constructive and practical support. The basic assumption here is that international students are ‘individuals’ with unique identities and backgrounds (Kumar 2004; Midgley 2009), and we should acknowledge that while some issues apply generally to international students, others relate more specifically to students from particular countries and to their social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. The ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work, and overgeneralisations that ignore ethnic and background diversity can cause serious misunderstanding of students’ issues (Kumar 2004; Midgley 2009).

In the context of Saudi international students, it could be argued that this particular group of students is unique compared to other international students for two reasons. First, most of these students are sponsored by the Saudi government – with the scholarship programme – and are offered sufficient financial support; they also have access to some academic and social advice. By way of illustration, the Saudi government has established a specialised agency named the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM) to manage overseas educational programmes, including the financial and cultural needs of Saudi citizens in the host countries. SACM provides students with an allowance to cover different expenses, including university fees, health insurance fees for the students and their family members, a monthly stipend,
annual return tickets for the students and their family members, and financial support for conferences. Therefore, they have fewer issues than usual relating to such concerns as finding accommodation and employment, and struggling with course fees.

The second reason is that this student cohort has come from one of the most segregated gender environments in the world. Therefore, Saudi international students may have serious challenges and difficulties adjusting to a social environment that is extremely different from and, in some respects, contradictory to their home environment. As will be discuss in the context of this study (in chapter 3), gender segregation is a culture-, politics-, and ideology-based practice that has influenced the structure of Saudi Arabian society. Moving from this particular context to any other context where the genders mix freely might be a large transition. The transition would even more difficult if the gender-mixed environment contains other cultural and social differences.

As a Saudi international student myself, I found coping with a mixed-gender environment to be one of the biggest problems upon my arrival in Australia. It was an extremely strange situation for me to be taught by a female teacher and to study with female classmates. When I arrived by myself (my wife and children joined me several months later), I stayed in a home with a woman and her children; this experience was initially confrontational for me. I should acknowledge also that these social and cultural differences were real challenges that affected my international experience on both the personal and academic levels.

My experience raised a critical question for me, which I think should also be asked by those who are interested in studying Saudi students’ experience: how does an individual who has spent most of his or her life in a segregated-gender environment experience a mixed-gender environment? Any academic response to such a question may provide valuable information to
the body of international education literature and may also furnish useful data that will help identify how to support Saudi international students. In the current investigation, the research focused on this concern and explored the phenomenon of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment in the cross-cultural experience of Saudi international students.

1.2. Scope of the study

The focus of this study took into account three criteria in terms of the material: researchable, interesting, and useful (Rudestam & Newton, 1992). Exploring individual cross-cultural experiences is a large topic that involves many complexities and can go in various directions. Therefore, in order to ensure that the explored topic can be achievable in the available time and is not overly challenging, and that it has the potential to add knowledge and to contribute to the research field and the practice, the research topic has been defined and positioned in a particular perspective. Four parameters bounded the scope of the research: 1) research purpose, 2) research questions, 3) adopted conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and 4) research methodology.

1.2.1. Study purpose

The research purposes were the first to define the research scope (Creswell 1994). The study was designed with particular aims, of which there were two. The first aim was to explore how the experience of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment appears to and is represented by Saudi international students who are studying in an Australian context. The second aim was to investigate the potential impact that this experience may have on the individual identity.

The reasons behind selecting these aims are summarised in the following points:
Little attention has been given to exploring or researching the experiences of Saudi cross-border students, and Saudi Arabia is now considered one of the largest countries that exports students internationally.

Studying the experiences of Saudi international students and understanding their needs can have important and significant benefits for the Saudi government and Australian higher education providers with regard to policy and its implementation in order to better prepare and support Saudi students abroad.

The phenomenon of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment does not seem to be addressed as it should be in the literature of intercultural communication and cross-cultural psychology.

1.2.2. Research questions

According to Creswell (1994), research questions are considered a guideline for the researcher throughout the research process. They give the researcher direction without assuming the findings at the end of the research (Willig, 2008). However, the main task of research questions is to clarify the research purpose and scope (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, & Anderson, 2011; Creswell, 1994). Therefore, in order to clarify the previously stated aims of this study and in order to make them more specific, this research was undertaken to answer two questions. The main question of the thesis:

1. What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?

A further supplementary question was also developed:
2. What potential impact does the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment have upon the identity of Saudi international students?

These questions have been developed throughout the investigation process. In particular, I started the research activities by developing a conceptual and theoretical framework for a relatively broad question: how do Saudi international students in Australia experience the transition? Then, I kept formulating the research question in order to reflect a conceptualisation of the transitioning experience. The second question emerged later after I engaged with the research and developed the conceptual theoretical framework. Therefore, both of these questions are presented in order to reflect the theoretical assumptions underlying the concept of experience in this research (further details are provided in chapter 4).

1.2.3. Conceptual-theoretical framework

The third feature for narrowing down the research scope was identifying the conceptualisation of the transitioning experience and demonstrating the theoretical assumptions underlying the investigation. As chapter 2 will outline, the conceptual framework referred to the group of assumptions and perspectives that underpin the research (Maxwell 2005). The framework included the philosophical and theoretical assumptions that lead to a particular structure in the study. Such a framework limited the scope of the research within a particular perspective. It also allows identification of the researcher’s lens through which the research phenomenon is seen.

The phenomenon of transitioning and its impact on the formation of a person’s identity has been seen from three perspectives: 1) the sociocultural theory, 2) the theory of symbolic
interactionism, 3) the theory of formation of Arab reason. These perspectives have influenced how the transitioning experience, gender segregation environment, and mixed-gender environment were conceptualised in this investigation. The following concepts and assumptions are relevant to limit the research scope. They will be further discussed in chapter 2, but they are briefly presented here.

- The transitioning experience. This experience is regarded as a result of the interaction between the person and his or her context (e.g. Dewey, 1958).

- A person’s using tools and means to interact with the context. These tools are embodied in his or her identity (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Turner & Bruner, 1986).

- The use of the mind as a tool to mediate our understandings and figuration (Urrieta, 2007). The mediating mind (Vygotsky, 1962) or ‘reason’ (العقل), as Al-Jabri (2011b) calls it, is a combination of two minds: the constituent mind and the constituted mind.

- Examining experience. This concept alludes to looking at the interaction between identity with all its components (e.g. values, beliefs, personal characteristics, and skills) and the surrounding and recognised world (e.g. Daniels, 2005).

- A person’s cultural practice, with all its attached values. Such practice, along with the cultural group, contributes to the construction of the person’s view of self (e.g. Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

- Mixed-gender environment. This term, created by the researcher, refers in this study to the host environment where the status and role of gender within
society is different culturally and in practice from the home environment of Saudi students, which is a segregated-gender environment. Therefore, the transition from one environment to another is considered as cross-cultural contact rather than cross-gender contact.

- Segregated-gender environment. This term refers to the status of male and female social interaction in Saudi Arabia where males and females who are not close relatives to each other – e.g. father mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, uncle, aunt, husband, wife… etc. – are segregated.

- ‘Saudi international students’ means students who are sponsored by the Saudi government to study at Australian universities. Those students are potentially required to be committed to their sponsor role, which includes obligations to Saudi Arabian religious and cultural principles, encompassing a good representation of the country.

The above conceptualisations and assumptions have formed the research boundaries and have also posited dissection of the examined phenomenon.

1.2.4. The research methodology

Research methodology was the fourth feature that defined the research scope. This investigation has approached the transitioning phenomenon from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology (which will be described in greater detail in chapter 4) is a particular research methodology with strategies that guided the investigative activities as well offering a protocol to maintain the rigor of the process in order to achieve the research aims.

To illustrate, the main concern of this research is to shed light on the transitioning experience, but through use of phenomenological methodology, the investigation was directed toward
identifying the essence of the experience. The scope of the research was on the phenomenon itself. Utilising phenomenological methodology bounded the study by ‘the importance of each individual and his or her respective view of reality’ (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006, p. 16). The phenomenological approach also provided the best strategies for exploring the research questions. According to Jose (2008, p. 31), phenomenological methodology has seven features: (1) recognises observable matter, (2) opposes objectivism, (3) searches for cognitive evidence, (4) strives to make all of life evident, (5) focuses on objects as they are encountered, (6) can be known through description, and (7) produces useful knowledge.

The phenomenological approach, along with the conceptual and theoretical framework, governed the development of data collection activities for this investigation. The research data was based on in-depth interviews with four Saudi international students. The interviews were conducted in Arabic.

Because the research involved human participants, the ethical guidelines from my institution need to be considered (see Appendix 1). The following points clarify how this study takes into consideration some important ethical concerns.

- After completing the proposal for this study, I submitted an application to the RMIT Ethics Committee for approval. Upon receiving approval, I started collecting the required data under conditions approved by the committee.

- This study required voluntary participants. Therefore, Saudi international students who are studying at Australian universities were asked to participate voluntarily.
The research involved the use of an interview appropriately administered to adult participants.

The questions were designed to be non-invasive, and the participants chose how much information to give.

The data was stored in a computer, and only the researcher had access to the interview tape and transcripts. According to the rules of my institution, the data must be deleted after five years.

The phenomenological methodology as a scope of the research also guided the data treatment activities, which have been developed from Giorgi’s (1997), Hycner’s (1985), Moustakas’ (1994), and Wertz’s (2005) works. Further detail about the data treatment will be provided later (chapter 4).

In this introduction, it should be noted that the relationship between the above features of the research scope were reflexively considered together, and the entire investigation was formed by these features. Therefore, the scope of the research can be seen through its purposes and questions, as well as within its conceptual and theoretical framework and its methodological approach.

1.3. Overview of reviewed literature

This report contains no chapter devoted merely to presenting the reviewed literature, despite the fact that reviewing literature was an ongoing activity during each research stage. Instead, I decided to integrate the aspects that emerged from the literature throughout this report to support arguments and issues as they are discussed. There are two reasons behind this decision: the first is to indicate the role of the literature in the current investigation, and the
second is that I could not find another study dealing with the transition to a mixed-gender environment experienced from the perspective of Saudi international students.

The role of literature in the phenomenological approach is similar to that in most qualitative research: the literature has a limited and specific involvement in the research (Haverkamp & Young, 2007), and the researcher’s attitude consists of bracketing the previous knowledge about the investigated phenomenon in order to approach it with fresh eyes and with less anticipation of a specific outcome (e.g. Giorgi, 2009; LeVasseur, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Therefore, the role of literature in this study was to contextualise and conceptualise the concepts being researched (Creswell, 2009). In other words, the literature was used to identify the concept of cross-cultural transitioning rather than to anticipate what such transitioning might look like because the investigation was established precisely to explore the pattern of transition encountered by a particular group in a particular context. Approaching the researched phenomenon from a perspective of non-anticipation is usually critical in such inductive investigation. That is because the power of qualitative research generally and of phenomenology in particular is to allow the researcher to discover more textures, features, and structures of the phenomenon under research, all of which help provide a better understanding of the researched phenomenon (e.g. Creswell, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Such an attitude – approaching the phenomenon of transitioning without strong presuppositions – required continuous reflection on prior knowledge as well as on my own previous experience of the transition to a mixed-gender environment.

Therefore, the effort of the literature review was directed only toward clarifying the context of the research and to identifying the key concepts of the research questions. According to Furniss, Blandford, and Curzon (2011), ‘the purposeful use of extant theory can be a source
of creativity and insight, which a more traditional inductive approach would not afford’ (p. 114). Thus, instead of presenting the outcomes of the literature review in a specific section, the relevant literature is presented in each chapter according to its relevancy. Most of this literature is discussed in the second chapter where the conceptual and theoretical framework is identified and in the third chapter where the context of the study is clarified. The literature that informed the research methodology, methods of data collection, explication of meaning and interpretation are presented with the discussion of the research methodology in the fourth chapter. In the final chapter, then, the findings are linked to the previous relevant literature.

There were three critical stages in the literature review process. The first stage was developing the research proposal. During this stage, the aim of reviewing the literature was to identify the existing knowledge in the field, not to be directed to particular expected results or hypotheses. I was influenced at this stage by Lichtman’s (2009) suggestions about how relevant literature can be selected and reviewed. Therefore, I engaged with the literature during this stage for the following purposes: 1) identifying and limiting the topic, 2) locating the existing research and knowledge, 3) evaluating the material to decide what is relevant and important, and 4) identifying the significance of the current investigation. I reviewed literature relevant to international students, to Saudi international students, to cross-cultural contact, and to research methodologies. The second stage was immediately prior to collecting the data, and the focus here was to determine the best way to conduct phenomenological interviews and to treat and interpret the data, once collected. The main emphasis was to develop the most useful methods and construct a model data analysis procedure based on the existing literature of qualitative research, particularly literature about phenomenological research.
The third stage consisted of discussing the findings of the research. The review of literature at that stage was aimed at making sense of and connecting the findings to the existing work relating to cross-cultural transitioning and international students’ cultural identity; it aimed to link the findings from the research to the wider picture in the field.

In this section, I look at the literature dealing with general background relating to the cross-cultural experience of Saudi international students. First, different aspects of international education have been discussed and examined by academics and other researchers. For example, issues such as cultural shock (Cullingford & O’Neill, 2005; Furnham, 2004; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), academic and social adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Grayson, 2008), intercultural sensitivity and competence (Bennett, 1993; Gill, 2007; Volet, 2003), international students’ security and rights (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010), and internationalisation (Baker, Creedy, & Johnson, 1996; McTaggart & Curro, 2009) have all been treated. These aspects, however, can mostly be divided into two major categories. The first category is international students’ experiences, including their social and academic experiences, their psychological and sociological needs, and their rights and security. The second category is business and marketing; in this literature, researchers look at international education as a product and are concerned with how to export education to the global market, how to internationalise the product, and the quality and reputation of individual universities and providers. In this literature review, my focus is on the first category: international students’ experiences.

A wealth of literature has documented the personal, academic, and social problems that international students face while trying to adjust to an unfamiliar academic and cultural environment. In Australia, most of this literature is focused on students from East Asia and
India, simply because of the huge number of students from these regions compared to students from other regions. A review of the relevant literature reveals that only a few studies exist about Saudi international students, and most of these were conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s in the United States of America (USA). According to Shaw (2009),

This lack of early research may be due to historical factors…. Saudi Arabia was characterised by isolationism, and a significant percentage of its population was nomadic Bedouins…. Oil money…dramatically changed Saudi Arabia’s deeply traditional society. The nation opened its doors to outside influence and began sending its students abroad a decade later. (p. 49)

Another reason why Saudi people preferred not to study overseas in the past was the restrictive religious discourse that did not permit travelling to ‘the lands of the infidel’ (Abu-Sahlieh, 1996; Ibn Baz, 2000). Thus, this current study will help to address the absence of Saudi students’ voices in the international education literature. The existing literature on the Saudi international student experience has provided the following insights.

First, most studies that have examined Saudi international student experiences have attempted to test hypotheses and correlate variables quantitatively (Al-Banyan, 1980; Al-Nassar, 1982; Shabeeb, 1996) in order to identify students’ academic difficulties, their attitudes toward their new academic environment, and their perception of the facilities and services offered by a university (e.g. Akhtarkhavari, 1994; Al-Dakheelallah, 1984; Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Nassar, 1982; Basfar, 1995).
Second, in relation to the current study, no research has been published that is specifically about the experience of Saudi international students living in a mixed-gender environment. However, some published material relates to Saudi international students’ general problems (e.g. Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Shedokhi, 1986; Alkhelaiwy, 1997; Hassan, 1992; Midgley, 2009b), academic problems (e.g. Gauntlett, 2006; Shehry, 1989), adjustment issues (e.g. Jammaz, 1972; Midgley, 2009a; Shabeeb, 1996), perceptions of achievement (Al-nusair, 2000; Shaw, 2009), motivation (e.g. Gauntlett, 2006), engagement (Midgley, 2009a), and home-stay experiences (e.g. Fallon & Bycroft, 2009).

Third, quantitative studies have reported that Saudi international students consider the English language to be one of the most difficult adjustment areas (Jammaz, 1972; Rasheed, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996; Shehry, 1989). These studies found that students’ age (Jammaz, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996), marital status (Jammaz, 1972; Rasheed, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996; Shehry, 1989), courses of study (Jammaz, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996), and gender (Shabeeb, 1996; Shehry, 1989) were associated with their perceptions of the difficulty experienced in adjusting to the English language. The literature reported that social relationships with local students and the community also had a significant effect on students’ ability to overcome language difficulties and hence increase academic success (Jammaz, 1972; Shehry, 1989). In 1986, Al-Shedokhi reported that the greatest concern for Saudi international students was financial assistance, and the least concern was interaction with the opposite sex. Different historical factors may have been operating here: for example, at that time, many students who travelled overseas to study came from privileged families, and this presented problems of a particular kind. Today, students from Saudi Arabia represent a broader cross-section of the society because of King Abdullah’s scholarship programme. Certainly, Sl-Shedokhi’s findings are not supported by present research.
Fourth, there is an absence of qualitative research about the Saudi international student experience (Midgley, 2009a, 2009b; Shaw, 2009). When the research began in 2009 only five qualitative studies were found relating to the Saudi international student experience, and these consisted of one unpublished research project (Shaw, 2009) and four published research papers. The first two papers were written by Midgley (2009). Both papers are based on ongoing PhD research about the experiences of male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university. The third study was conducted by Gauntlett (2006), who reported ongoing research about the academic expectation of Gulf-sponsored students in Australia. The fourth study was conducted by Fallon and Bycroft (2009) to develop materials for Saudi Arabian home-stay students. All of these papers have focused on Saudi international students in Australian institutions. In addition, Shaw (2009) undertook a PhD study to examine the educational experiences of Saudi Arabian students in institutions in the USA. In general, qualitative research demonstrates the following findings:

- Some Australian home-stay research reported that some Saudi male students showed lack of respect for women (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009).

- Culturally, a Saudi male must take responsibility for his family members, particularly women who depend on him completely; therefore, Saudi male students, compared to males from other cultures, tend to have a ‘higher’ level of concern about their wives while they are studying, and this might have a negative impact upon their experience (Midgley, 2009b).

- Some Australian home-stays who hosted Saudi students have reported positive experiences. They perceived Saudi students as ‘reliable, respectful, caring, polite, honest, and involved in family life’ (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009, p. 5).
• Amongst Saudi students themselves, there was a range of different experiences and approaches to living in Australia deriving from each student’s individual personal relationships that epitomise a ‘unique and highly complex internal networks of attitudes, values, experiences, abilities, beliefs and convictions’ (Midgley, 2009a, p. 93).

• Personal adaptation resilience and intercultural competence are the most fundamental characteristics for Saudi students if they are to have a successful international experience (Shaw, 2009).

• Saudi sponsored students might lack motivation to take responsibility for their studies compared to other international students (Gauntlett, 2006).

To sum up, it is obvious that most research on Saudi international students’ experiences is not current; rather, it dates from several years ago, and many changes have occurred in both the international education sphere and the Saudi socio/culture sphere. Therefore, more recent research is necessary, and this present research will add to our knowledge by investigating the phenomena of how Saudi international students experience being in a mixed-gender environment.

1.4. Research significance

This research has the potential to provide useful recommendations to students themselves to find appropriate supports for adjusting to a culturally very different context. In addition, these recommendations can be constructive and valuable for international education providers in terms of improving their institutional practices. According to Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008), studying international students’ life experiences is important not only because life experience affects their academic performance but also because the impacts
from this experience are ‘passed along to their family and friends and so enter the formation of country and Institutional reputations within the industry, with the potential to influence market choices’ (Sawir et al., 2008, p. 3). Therefore, studying international students’ life experiences can influence students themselves, their families, and their nations.

This study is also seen as significant for the following reasons. First, it provides insights into the Saudi international students’ experiences that have not been studied in the Australian context before. Most studies that examine Saudi international students’ experiences have been conducted in the USA, and most of them set out to test hypotheses and correlate variables quantitatively (e.g. Al-Banyan, 1980; Al-Nassar, 1982; Shabeeb, 1996). This study, however, provides a qualitative understanding of the students’ experiences. In addition, the main focus of the research is exploring and examining Saudi students’ cross-border experiences with regard to their adjustment to a mixed-gender environment. This particular issue has not been presented in the literature about international students yet. Therefore, this study will be an important addition to our present body of knowledge.

Second, this study is useful for Saudi international students because it provides an understanding of their common adjustment experiences, which contribute positively to improving intercultural sensitivity and competence. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), it is impossible for individuals to obtain definite understandings of other cultures; ‘the basis for success’ in terms of cultural adjustment is derived from an understanding of our own culture and our own expectations about how people in another culture think and act.

Third, Saudi Arabia is one of the countries with a high number of international students throughout the world. For Australian institutions, the understanding of Saudi international
students’ experiences and needs assists the Australian international education organisations that support those students in having successful experiences. These experiences, if positive, encourage more Saudi students to choose Australia for their education, which, in turn, brings an economic benefit to Australian institutions and society (Wang & Shan, 2007).

Fourth, the study has the potential to shed light on some aspects of the current debate in Saudi Arabia around the scholarship programme: for example, opinions are divided about the efficacy of the programme. Some express caution and suggest that these experiences, mainly in Western countries, might have negative effects on the cultural identity of the students (see, for example, Aldossary, 2011; kokb7l, 2011). Others amongst the decision-makers in the Ministry of Higher Education argue that the programme is a step forward and that it was devised in order to bring about effective reform in the country (see, for instance, Abouammoh, 2009; Clary & Karlin 2011; Marginson, Kaur, Sawir, & Al-Mubaraki, 2011; Mazi & Abouammoh, 2009). The impact of Western influences will, in the end, rely heavily on how the group of returning international students, dubbed ‘reformers’, have changed and what they bring back from their international experience. Such changes are often subtle and some even unexpected, so it is a complex task to try to examine and evaluate the influence of international study and the role such activity can play in the Saudi government’s plans for economic and educational reforms. There is also the potential that the influence of international education will lead to social change within Saudi Arabia, though that is not the focus of this study. The research participates in this argument by showing part of the picture that includes the lived experience of these students and its impact on their cultural identity.
Finally, a phenomenological investigation of the Saudi international students’ experience is not only a philosophical exploration of the phenomenon under study but also a foundation and a key to helping others who wish to practice the phenomenon (Sokolowski, 2000).

1.5. Structure of the study chapters

The results of the research are reported in seven chapters as follows. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study and the details of the proposal. Chapter 2 contains the conceptual and theoretical frameworks adopted for the study, and the concept of experience and cultural identity is presented in relation to the study. The third chapter presents the background to the phenomenon, discussing gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi students, and the King Abdullah programme for international scholarship and its pre-departure course. The research design is presented and explained in chapter 4, including the philosophical stance, methodology, and methods. The data analysis is presented in chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses the findings, draws the research conclusions, and makes recommendations.
Figure 2. Structure of the study chapters
CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview of the chapter

The previous chapter provided an introduction to this report. The phenomenon under investigation, the research scope of the study, the reviewed literature, and the significance of the study were briefly outlined.

The chapter concluded by showing an overview and maps for this report. As mentioned in the introduction, chapter 2 discusses various groups of concepts that related to the study and formed the conceptual framework. According to Maxwell (2005), the conceptual framework for the research is ‘the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied’ (p. 33). Two fundamental questions were asked in order to pursue the exploration and also in order to develop an appropriate way to approach the phenomenon of Saudi international students’ transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment; these two questions related to what the transitioning experience means and from which perspective the meaning has been identified. In other words, the conceptual framework is, therefore, referred to clusters of interrelated assumptions that constituted what the transitioning experience refers to as an essential signifier in this navigation (Hill & Hansen, 1960).

To identify the major conceptual assumptions, the research questions are considered as starting points because they identify the basic features of the phenomenon being explored. As stated (in chapter 1), this study has raised two questions the second being an emergent question that arose from the research activities. The questions:
1. What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?

2. What potential impact does the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment have upon the identity of Saudi international students?

Breaking these two questions down indicates that the investigated phenomenon consists of two essential concepts: the transitioning experience and identity. In addition, the study is limited to these two elements within a particular context which has two layers: the gender-segregated environment in Saudi Arabia, the home country of the students, and the mixed-gender environment in Australia as the host country. Further detail of the context of the study will be provided later (in chapter 3). In this chapter, the conceptualisation of the phenomenon is addressed, and the theoretical perspective informing the conceptualisation is introduced.

As presented in Figure 3, the chapter consists of three sections. The first section is the theoretical perspective, which introduces the theories informing the conceptualisation and the ‘lenses’ used to look at the phenomenon. Three theories are introduced: 1) the sociocultural theory, 2) symbolic interactionism, and 3) the formation of Arab reason. The relevant theoretical assumptions within these three theories are highlighted.

The second section explains how the transitioning experience has been conceptualised within the context of the theoretical perspective adopted for the study. The conceptualisation of the experience is discussed first in this section in order to shape the transitioning experience. Then, the concept of the cross-cultural transitioning experience is presented in relation to the context of this investigation.

The third section relates the concept of identity to the previous conceptualisation of the cross-cultural transitioning experience.
2.1. Theoretical perspective

This section highlights the key theoretical perspective that lends support to conceptualising the transitioning experience. According to Crotty (1998), the theoretical perspective usually offers ‘a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria … [because] different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world’ (p. 66). Therefore, it is important to explicate these perspectives in order to provide a ground for the conceptual framework and the research design adopted for the study (Macdonald et al., 2002). It could be argued, accordingly, that identifying the theoretical perspectives by which
the phenomenon has been considered and conceptualising the enquiry contribute to an increased level of trustworthiness and transparency in the research approach.

The conceptual framework of the study was guided by the three perspectives listed above, as follows: the sociocultural theory, which has been developed from Vygotsky’s works (e.g. Cole, 1995; Doelling & Goldschmidt, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995); the symbolic interactionism theory, which draws on the works of Mead, Blumer, and others (e.g. Blumer, 1979, 1986; Clammer, Poirier, & Schwimmer, 2004; Denzin, 1992; Kuhn, 1964; Mead, 1967; Urrieta, 2007); and Al-Jabri’s theory of the formation of Arab reason (Al-Jabri, 2011b). These three perspectives informed the conceptualisation of the research phenomenon and how the phenomenon has been approached methodologically. Each theory is introduced in detail below.

2.1.1. Sociocultural theory

The first theoretical component of the research is the sociocultural historical perspective, which is referred to in this study as the sociocultural approach (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995), a social-cultural-historical approach (Cole, 1995; Cole & Engeström, 1993), and sociocultural-historicism (Schuh & Barab, 2007). This group of theoretical perspectives was developed in response to the work of Lev Vygotsky and his collaborators (i.e. Leont’ev, 1997; Luria, 1976). This perspective has influenced many scholars around the globe from different disciplines (Matusov, 2008; Wertsch, 1986). Therefore, sociocultural theory can be considered as an umbrella for such various theories as activity theory and social development theory.

In psychology and anthropology, for example, scholars have used a Vygotskian perspective to emphasise how the society, culture, and history together intertwine in an individual’s
psychological development. For this study, sociocultural theory supports two assumptions that have influenced the study – namely, mediation activity and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – which are briefly introduced here.

2.1.1.1. Mediation activity

Mediation activity, the first and the most influential aspect of Vygotskian theory that informed the study, has been considered important by many scholars (e.g. Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007; Rogoff, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky, Rieber, & Hall, 1998) for understanding the individual psychology. According to Daniels et al. (2007), mediation is a foundational aspect of the sociocultural perspective that provides a bridge between two processes: the social and historical process on the one side and the individual’s cognitive process on the other side. Therefore, mediation activity is considered a ‘formulation’ for how people interact with their contexts, which have been constituted by the surrounding social, cultural, institutional, and historical players (Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995, p. 21).

Mediation activity is conceptualised as an internalisation process. As the socioculturalists assume that a person can only internalise ‘forms of mediation provided by particular cultural, historical, and institutional forces that their mental functioning sociohistorically situated’ (Wertsch, 2007, p. 178) and the mediation activity labels the process of how we are transforming the external world into the internal world. In other words, mediation is the process of a person’s ‘internalisation’ of his or her external world (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1994; Wertsch & Stone, 1999).

Another associated assumption is that as a person only internalises the external world in order to perceive it, he or she is capable of doing so only by using higher mental functional tools and signs. Tools and signs, from this perspective, usually refer to cognitive or material means
that individuals use to perceive and think. Mediation tools and signs include ‘language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs and so on’ (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137). The higher mental functional tools, however, are dialectically influenced and influence the mediation activities (Smagorinsky, 1995; Wertsch, 1984).

This assumption focuses attention also on the role of language in mediation activity. According to Wertsch (1984),

> Vygotsky’s account of mediation by signs, especially linguistic signs, plays a fundamental role in his overall theoretical approach. The phenomena of intersubjectivity and its negotiation are no exceptions. The processes involved in these phenomena are sometimes conceptualised as operating independently of speech, a view that mistakenly assumes that speech simply names or reflects a previously existing situation definition. (p. 13)

Therefore, language is at the heart of mediation activity, which cannot be ignored or overlooked when we attempt to understand a person’s experience. In relation to conceptualising the transitioning experience of Saudi international students, mediation theory indicates two considerations:

- It highlighted the idea that for the transitioning experience to be fully understood, the researcher must extend its conceptualisation from immediate and ongoing experience to a cycle of mediated constructed experience in which mediated and constructed experience continuously becomes part of the mediating tools and
signs. Such an assumption proposes that researchers can have access only to the mediated constructed experience, which cannot be expressed until it goes through the mediation process.

- The second consideration reflects on the role of language as mediation tool and signs that allow for understanding the mediated experience of Saudi international students because ‘language can be used to create strategies for the mastery of many mental functions, such as attention, memory, feelings, and problem solving’ (Diaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1997, p. 134). This consideration is also embodied in the second theoretical perspective that influences this research, which draws on symbolic interactionism. This perspective reflects the essence of the relationship between experience and the expression of that experience.

2.1.1.2. Zone of proximal development

Another theoretical assumption that influenced the conceptualisation of the transitioning experience is the so-called zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Daniels, 2005; Rogoff, 1982; Vygotsky, 1962; Wertsch, 1991). According to socioculturalists, the higher mental functions, which include tools and signs, can be acquired and developed also throughout a mediation process and within a particular ZPD (Wertsch, 1984; Wertsch, 1991). The ZPD refers to the space between the development of the individual independently and his or her development as interactively assisted by a more experienced member of the same social and cultural context (Manning & Payne, 1993). Therefore, learning and development, from the sociocultural perspective, is culturally shaped by the social environment in which it takes place (Smagorinsky, 1995) as well as by interaction with other individuals in the context. The development in this particular sense usually refers to cognitive development, which is the
development of the higher mental functions (Rogoff, 1982). The context generally consists of three layers: 1) the immediate level with which the person is interacting, like a particular event or situation; 2) the structural level, like networks of family and school friends (the micro context); and 3) the general cultural and social context (macro context) (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). The higher mental function is the ability to think and communicate.

The ZPD suggests that human developmental capabilities are not fixed but are rather flexible and continuously developing throughout their interactions with other advanced members in the context (Daniels, 2005; Rogoff, 1982; Smagorinsky, 1995; Vygotsky, 1962; Wertsch, 1991). The cognitive development of the individual from this perspective is seen as dynamic (Smagorinsky, 1995). That is because of the interactive role of the surrounding context; the context which is mediated and usually in a state of continuous transformation according to historical and cultural movement on the higher line of development (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition to this complexity of dynamic and dialectical relationships between an individual’s cognitive development and the changing context, individual development may be seen from a sociocultural perspective, to be influenced by practices common to the surrounding community and the assistance received.

Smagorinsky (1995) asserted that socioculturalists assumed that there is no specific universal direction of cognitive development but that the direction is subjected to how individuals interact with their surrounding contexts. Even the concepts of universal human needs, such as the sex drive, peace, and justice, are rooted in social-cultural values; therefore, such concepts might change according to changes in the surrounding social and cultural environments, and can thus vary from group to group. This variation reflects the flexibility of the human mind and how it is directed by the ZPD. Therefore, it is assumed that we are always developing
into a new and more complex state according to the dynamic change in the context (Smagorinsky, 1995).

Some relevant questions arise from this assumption: does the interaction between Saudi international new students and adjusted students during the cross-cultural transitioning experience influence the adaptation outcomes? And does the institutional support provided for Saudi students contribute to the adaptation outcome? It could be argued that the ability of engaging with a mixed-gender environment in general and with the opposite sex in particular can be acquired within the ZPD. The Saudi individual in a mixed-gender environment would have flexible abilities for learning how to adjust within the new context to which he or she is exposed. In other words, the adjustment capabilities are not based only on his or her current ability but rather on the assistance and support within the zone of development. Therefore, in conceptualising the transitioning experience, it is assumed that the context of individuals and their higher mental functions are the main players in how the transitioning experience is formed.

To sum up, the sociocultural perspective influenced the study in its consideration of the individual ability to adjust. The assumption that underlies the investigation is that individuals can acquire new cognitive development and patterns of thought from the mediational assistance of tools, signs, and other cultures when such are offered within their ZPD. The assumption of the ZPD suggests that individuals’ ability to adjust or to learn how to adjust is not limited to their current condition; rather, the condition is heavily based on the support and assistance that individuals receive in the context. That is to say, adjustment to a cross-cultural context is based on the context itself, as well as the support and assistance, rather than on the newcomer’s ability to adjust.
2.1.2. Symbolic interactionism

Associated with mediation activities introduced by the sociocultural theory is symbolic interactionism, which stresses the role of interaction between individuals and their social context. The focus of this approach has been mainly on the role and process of interaction in individuals’ development of meaning. This approach extended the work of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), Herbert Blumer, one of Mead's students, gave the approach its name (for more details, see Blumer, 1978, 1980, 1986; Denzin, 1992; Kuhn, 1964; Schneider, 2011). Dewey’s pragmatism has greatly intersected with (Denzin, 2004) and been influenced by the development of this approach (Blumer, 1986). According to this theory, our sense of the world is constructed socially. The meaning of objects (including things, events, and deeds) is created and mediated through people interactions. Much attention within this perspective has been directed to the role of social interactions in the forming of individual self-concepts (e.g. Cooley, 2007; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Mead, 1967; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979).

The assumption promoted by this theory is that individuals are active makers of their experiences as they have a strong motivation to make sense of their world as they interact with it (Schneider, 2011). This theory has influenced the perspective by which the phenomenon of transitioning is examined; such influence can be reflected in the three basic premises that underlie the symbolic interactionism theory. As stated by Blumer (1986, p. 2) three premises are commonly recognised in symbolic interactionism theory:

- Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
- The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction one has with one’s fellows.
• These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

Thus, humans have an active self in creating meaning about their world. The concept of active self is a central proposition in symbolic interactionism assuming that the 'h' Human being can be the object of his own actions. He can act toward himself as he might act toward others' (Blumer 1978 P.97-98). In other words humans are considered active agents, not merely reactive (Manis & Meltzer, 1978).

The symbolic interactionism approach has informed this study by taking into consideration the role of symbolic meanings in forming Saudi international students’ experience. The core assumption here is that symbolic meanings are developed during the same time that Saudi students acquire their own understanding of both their internal and external world reality, subject to these meanings.

Another relevant consideration when using this perspective to conceptualise the cultural identity of Saudi international students is that symbolic interactionists assume that the definition of a person’s self and identity are both constructed in and played out through interaction with the environment and the other selves surrounding us. As stated by Hollander, Renfrow, and Howard (2011),

The most basic requisite for symbolic interaction is the existence of social selves who come together to share information, emotions, goods – the full range of human activities. The images people have of themselves and of others shape how they present themselves. In turn, how they present themselves allows others to infer what actors privately think of themselves and of others. (p. 123)
2.1.3. Formation of Arab reason

The third perspective that influences the current investigation is the theory of Al-Jabri (2011b) concerning the formation of Arab reason (tkouin ala'kl ala'ri). Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri (1936–2010) was a professor of philosophy and Islamic thought. Al-Jabri has been considered one of the leading voices in the discourse of cultural authenticity in the Arab world (Abbassi, 1999). His philosophy was focused on how to integrate and harmonise tradition and modernity. This aim has been explicitly expressed within his works *Our Cultural Heritage* (Al-Jabri, 2006), *Contemporary Arab Discourse* (Al-Jabri, 1994), and the massive *Critique of Arab Reason* (Naqd al-Aql al-Arabi).

The *Critique of Arab Reason*, considered a major work that contributes substantially to an understanding of Arab intellectual development, was published in four volumes: 1) *The Formation of Arab Reason* (Al-Jabri, 2011b, 2011c), 2) *The Structure of Arab Reason* (Al-Jabri, 2010), 3) *Arab Political Reason* (Al-Jabri, 2000), and 4) *Arab Ethical Reason* (2011a). The first volume (*Formation of Arab Reason*) was published for the first time in English in 2011. In this first volume, Al-Jabri (2011b), introduced his theory in approaching the epistemological structure of Arabic mind. The project endeavoured to chart a route towards modernity via the proposition that respect for textualism (Al-Nass) and tradition (Al-Turath) do not contradict rationalism and science, and that both history and philosophy are key to the evolution of knowledge systems and ways of reasoning in Arab culture.

The basic assumption throughout this volume has influenced the way in which the concept of experience has been conceptualised. According to Al-Jabri (2011b), culture plays a fundamental role in how we perceive and see the external world. That is because when individuals interact with the world, they must use a combination of two minds: the
constituent mind and the constituted mind. The constituent mind is the faculty of thinking, the ability to perform cognitive activities which distinguish humans from animals. The constituted mind refers to the thoughts and knowledge used to create the principles and rules we rely upon in our inferences. The constituted mind, however, is the means by which we understand the world and make meaning of it; it is constituted, first, by our cultural and social discourse, and then by language and cultural artefacts as interpreted by the constituent mind (Al-Jabri, 2011b). This basic premise is explicitly stated as follows:

[What] we mean by the ‘Arab reason’ is constituted reason, namely all the principles and norms provided by Arab culture to its members as a basis for the acquisition of knowledge, or, let us say, imposed upon them as a system of knowledge. Constituent reason is the characteristic that distinguishes humans from animals – that is, the ‘capacity for elocution’ (al-qu¯wwah al-n¯at.ıqa) in the terminology of the ancients. With this concept, we can say that a human being shares with all persons, whoever they are, and in whatever age they may be, the fact that they are equipped with a constituent reason, distinguishing them along with whoever belongs with them to the same cultural group, by constituted reason which is an expression of the system of knowledge (understandings, conceptions etc.) which underpins and establishes the culture to which they belong. (Al-Jabri, 2011b, pp. 8–9)

Al-Jabri’s (2011b) view about the role of the culture is consistent with both the symbolic interactionism approach and the sociocultural perspective. However, each one of these theories focuses on particular aspects. Al-Jabri places more emphasis on the role of the culture and intellectual thoughts concerning how individuals perceive and act within the context, whereas symbolic interactionism focuses more on the dialectical relationship
between meanings and interaction. The sociocultural perspective traces and ascribes the influence of the social, cultural, and historical context upon individuals’ psychological development. Each one of these views has influenced the investigation as highlighted in the rest of this chapter and the fourth chapter. An aspect of Al-Jabri’s work that influenced this research is his view about the relationship between Islam and politics. This view has influenced the way the Saudi Arabian context is perceived here, particularly the integration between Arab traditions, Islamic religion, and the politics (Al-Jabri, 2011).

In conclusion to this overview, though Saudi international students are somehow seen as subject to the social circumstances around them – including the social, cultural, historical, political, ideological, and institutional circumstances in which they find themselves (in other words, the surrounding structure) – at the same time they are also shaping some part of these circumstances in the course of interaction with others. In this case, they are actually in a context in which they and their surrounding structure are in a dynamic interplay; they are in a dialectical relationship with the social, cultural, political, and material structures. This is our context.

It is true that this context becomes, at some stages, a structure that determines and may control our experience, but what we experience also determines and shapes our context by mediation and internalisation processes. The content of our experiences in some stages becomes a tool by which we experience situations. In the end, a person’s experience, to some extent, shapes his or her structure even as the structure, in turn, shapes a person’s experience. Therefore, it becomes extremely complex to define what has the greatest influence. Because of this complexity, we need to consider a person’s context in understanding his or her
experience. The key aspects of the context of Saudi international students are clarified in chapter 4.

In the next section the concepts of the transitioning experience and cultural identity are identified in light of the above three perspectives, which frame the theoretical framework of the investigation. I begin with the concept of the transitioning experience.

2.2. Conceptualisation of the transitioning experience

2.2.1. Experience

The questions that arose at the beginning of the investigation were as follows: what does experience mean in this investigation, and what is the constitution of the transitioning experience? Experience has been a central and fundamental term in the research. When I engaged in responding to these two questions, I realised that a variety of perspectives relate to the experience concept so that it remains without consistency and particularisation. The term has appeared as a ‘floating signifier’ (Midgley, 2010; Smith & Turner, 1995). According to Holmes (1971), experience as a term is problematic when it is used as an object for research because it is epistemologically complex. The complexity can be seen from two sides: first, a problem arises with the significance of experience as knowledge; in other words, how significant is knowledge that is based on subjective experience? The other aspect to the problem is whether experience can be understood as a source of knowledge, as well as a final court of appeal for all empirical knowledge. Therefore, at the heart of this investigation is the need to identify the concept of experiential knowledge as a source of knowledge in order to conceptualise the transitioning experience.

The concepts of experience and of the transitioning experience are developed, as mentioned, around symbolic interactionism (in addition to the sociocultural perspective and the
formation of Arab reason). These three perspectives have offered a broad set of interrelated assumptions about the two-way relationship between man and the context (Musolf, 2003). Although each perspective is a large umbrella covering a range of diverse theories, there are some shared assumptions relevant to the concept of experience. Two major assumptions are described below:

1. Human experience can exist only as a result of the interaction between a person and his or her world.

Both symbolic interactionists and socioculturalists believe that humans are not merely passively influenced by the environment; rather, they consciously interact with it. This process creates development and transformations in the course of our lives. On the basis of this assumption, the relationship between individuals and the world is a reciprocal relationship that results in reciprocal influences (Blumer, 1980, 1986; Daniels et al., 2007; Denzin, 1992; Mead, 1967). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, interactions are based on the meanings that we assign to them. These meanings are ‘derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society’ and are ‘handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters’ (Blumer, 1986, p. 1).

Interaction is a constituent of our experiences, and humans experience things in the process of interaction with the world, which is a combination of two worlds: the physical world (i.e. space, time and events, languages as voice), and the nonphysical world (i.e. beliefs, culture, society, politics, languages as signified meanings). We interact with these two worlds in a dynamic way, and this activity is what forms our experience.
According to Daniels (2005), experience, from a Vygotskian perspective, is considered a unity of self and environment. Thus, when we examine someone’s experience, we actually examine the interaction between a person’s self with all its components (e.g. values, beliefs, personal characteristics, and skills) and its surrounding world (Daniels, 2005).

2. Experience is the consequence of a person’s interaction with the surrounding recognisable world.

This assumption is interrelated with and dependent on the previous assumption. It is the foundation that underlies the concepts of the transitioning experience and cultural identity. It is assumed that experience can be created only by interaction with the recognisable world or with what Holland (2001) calls the ‘figured world’ (p. 41). Our figured world is the context that is produced socially, constituted culturally, and developed historically (Clammer et al., 2004; Holland, 2001; Urrieta, 2007). This figured world is the space we are actually interacting within and is the context within which our activity is placed.

To know this world, we use our mind as a tool to mediate understandings and figuration (Urrieta, 2007). The mediating mind (Vygotsky, 1962), or ‘reason’ (العقل) as Al-Jabri (2011b) calls it, is a combination of two minds, as explained earlier: the constituent mind and the constituted mind. The constituted mind is the means by which we understand the world and make meaning of it; it is constituted, first, by our cultural and social discourse, and by language and cultural artefacts as interpreted by the constituent mind. Experience is a result of interactions between persons and their recognisable world, and is influenced by the social and cultural context of the figured world.

Experience develops historically. According to Dewey (1998), ‘experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those
which come after’ (p. 27). Dewey suggests that experience is a consequence of a person’s subjective action combined with the judgment of the consequences of that action within an object (environment). To understand experience, we must consider both subject and object together (Glassman, 2001).

Three ideas arise from this discussion: one, the **figured world**; two, the **active self**; and three, **context**. These concepts have each been developed in a different and specific theoretical frame. However, they share two assumptions that provide an important connection. First, we interact with our surrounding world; and second, the interaction occurs within a contextual environment that mediates the production of meaning within and between exchanges. Thus experience, in a basic sense, is considered an emergent and dynamic phenomenon that results from the interaction between individuals and their context. This phenomenon, a unit of meaning created within an interaction, includes feelings, knowledge, images, impressions, and even the developmental and transformational status of the meanings that emerge (e.g. Engeström, 1999; Glassman, 2001; Heinemann, 1941; Urrieta, 2007). The experience of Saudi students in a mixed-gender environment can be viewed as the interaction of ‘the Saudi self’ within a mixed-gender context.

### 2.2.2. Cross-cultural transitioning experience

Any sudden shift or quick change in the context, that is, the figured world, will cause a transitioning experience, which results from interacting within a new context, using a constituted mind produced in another. It continues to be a transitioning experience until knowledge and meanings of the new ‘figured world’ develop. Therefore, the concept of transitioning experience refers the phenomenon encountered by Saudi international students when they are transitioning to a mixed-gender environment. This conceptualisation has
emerged in the literature of international students and cross-cultural psychology in various ways. In the following review, the relevant conceptualisation is addressed.

2.2.2.1. The transitioning experience as an adaptation process

Research on cross-cultural transitioning uses different terminologies when discussing the process of fitting into a new context, such as adaptation (Klineberg & Hull IV, 1976; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006), adjustment (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Church, 1982; Furnham, 1988; Jazaeri & Kumar, 2008; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Searle, 1991). According to Kim (2000), most of these studies refer to the ongoing process by which newcomers, ‘upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments’ (p. 31). For Kim and Gudykunst (1988), adaptation refers to the complex ongoing process which an individual goes through in order to reach ‘fitness’ or ‘compatibility’ in the unfamiliar environment.

Matsumoto, Hirayama, and LeRoux (2006) have made a distinction between adaptation and adjustment in the transitioning experience. Adaptation is considered to be the entire process of trying to fit with the new environment. It was referred to as social-cultural adjustment in Ward et al.’s model of cultural shock (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001) and as acculturation in Berry’s model (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002; Sam & Berry, 2006). The adjustment consists of the psychological outcomes of the adaptation and the condition of individual well-being. From this perspective, adjustment can be positive or negative according to the adaptation process and the social-cultural competence.
In terms of the adaptation process Furnham (2010) noted that the literature on cross-cultural transitioning – that is, the transitioning experience as an adaptation process – shares the following findings:

- The motivation and reason for travail has an obvious impact on a person’s adjustment and acculturation.
- Culture shock can be a common phenomenon that people experience when moving to a new and unfamiliar culture.
- Individuals are different in their degree of shock according to various factors and variables, and for some people, it can be ‘chronic and debilitating’ (p. 34).

However, reviewing the literature of the cross-cultural transitioning experience indicates that factors influencing the degree of adjustment can be categorised into three groups: individual or personal characteristic factors, organisational factors, and contextual factors (Parker & McEvoy, 1993). Individual factors included the previous experience of international students (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Black, 2011; Klineberg & Hull IV, 1976; Martin, 1987) and demographic characteristics (Adler, 1987; Church, 1982; Ivancevich, 1968; Stening & Hammer, 1989; Tung, 1982; Wang, 2003, 2009), such as gender, nationality, and age (Black, 1990; Church, 1982), the personal motivation for being international students (Gauntlett, 2006), and the pre-departure knowledge of the host country (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Seow, 2005).

Organisational factors include institutional policies and the pre-departure orientation as well as the counselling services provided for international students (Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994) and extracurricular activities (Al-Nassar, 1982; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Yusoff, 2011). For example, Al-Shedokhi’s (1986) study showed that
financial support, academic records, and admissions-related issues have produced some adjustment difficulties for Saudi international students. Participating in pre-departure orientation programmes is also associated with facing fewer adjustment problems.

The contextual factors relate to the context of students, such as family and spouse adjustment (Midgley, 2009), and the differences between the two cultures, or what is called ‘culture novelty’ (Black et al., 1991; Takeuchi, Yun, & Russell, 2002). These factors have been associated with the adjustment process to the new host environment for international students. In the case of Saudi international students, one of the major contextual factors is the academic level, as beginner students face more problems, and the higher students’ academic level, the fewer problems they face (Al-Shedokhi, 1986).

Searle and Ward (1990) distinguished between psychological and sociocultural forms of adjustment during the process of cross-cultural transitioning. According to them, the psychological adjustment associated with well-being and depression and sociocultural adjustment reflect the sociocultural competence and the social difficulty experienced by international students (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth (2007) examined identity gaps as a source of the depression that international students may encounter. They assumed that the language barriers and the cultural differences encountered by international students may lead to the feeling that they are not expressing themselves as they want, as these barriers may be restrictive when they communicate with members of the host culture. According to Jung et al. (2007), such feelings can lead to discontinuities between their self-concepts and how their peers and teachers see them.
International students potentially encounter culture shock, homesickness, lack of supports, limited social skills, stereotyping and prejudice (Ward et al. 2001; Ward & Landis, 2004). These kinds of stressors and anxiety can be related to depression (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) and loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008).

2.2.2.2. The transitioning experience as an intercultural learning process

According to Gill (2007), a cross-cultural transitioning experience, from a sociocultural perspective, is seen as a source of personal development and growth as a person goes through the experience of the unfamiliar and adapting in order to fit into a different sociocultural context. Therefore, international students can be considered as learners from the new intercultural experience, which become a ZPD for them.

Gill (2007) asserted that cross-cultural experiential learning occurs through the participants’ own reflection on their experience in unfamiliar sociocultural contexts, via their attempts to make sense of different situations, and from trying to adjust and adapt in the new host country. This intercultural learning process is a continuing process that goes in a cycle, starting with every new experience. Participants can usually go back and forth to reflect on their experience and perceptions. ‘intercultural learning is essentially about change, moving places, encountering people, learning across cultures, and above all, about becoming more aware of the self, Other and of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all’ (Gill, 2007, p. 179).

2.2.2.3. The transitioning experience as moving between ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism

According to Bennett (1993), people hold two positions: ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. The ethnocentrism position has three different stages, which include denial, separation, and
minimisation. In the first stage, people deny cultural differences, even the obvious ones. This position can be a result of isolation, and it appears clearly with people who live in towns with a homogenous population. The second stage, separation, is a result of international or social barriers. People in this position do not consider the existence of cultural differences in the society; they take a defiant position against what they think is a threat to their culture or identity. In the third stage, minimisation, the similarities seem to outweigh the differences, so people try to minimise their differences and try to achieve a peaceful atmosphere. On the other hand, people whose position is ethnorelativism also take three different positions with regard to cultural difference. The first one is acceptance. People in this stage accept other cultures’ values without evaluating them as good or bad. The second stage, adaptation, refers to the stage in which people understand that culture is flexible and that adapting to another culture does not affect their identity in a negative way. The last stage is integration. People in that stage integrate to any culture; they try to create their own values without belonging to any specific culture.

Similarly, a number of researchers (Berry, 2005; Berry, Phinney & Vedder, 2006; Berry, 2010) have identified two aspects encountered by individuals or groups that experience cross-cultural transitioning: maintenance of original cultural identity and maintenance of relations with other groups. Four strategies have been identified: 1) integration, 2) separation, 3) assimilation, and 4) marginalisation.

2.2.2.4. The transitioning experience as culture shock

Another concept of adjustment is the culture shock theory. According to Oberg (1960), ‘culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse’ (p. 176). From culture shock, cross-cultural adjustment is what
most navigates us through the so-called cultural shock process (Furnham, 2010; Ward et al., 2001).

The core assumption in this perspective is that people from different cultures ‘obey different moral, religious and social codes of behaviour, and have a history of distrust or animosity. People from different cultures may hold very different views on the relationship between the sexes, which can be both perplexing and annoying’ (Furnham, 1993, pp. 91-92). However, people are usually unconscious of these rules because they occur naturally, and this raises difficulty in noticing them in interaction. The difficulty of creating successful social interaction depends on the degree of difference between the participants’ cultures. Therefore, to help newcomers in a society to settle in effectively in their host country, ‘bicultural communication competence’ needs to be acquired (Ward et al., 2001).

Culture shock, from this perspective, is seen as a stress reaction when one is transitioning to a new cultural environment, which means that a ‘person is anxious, confused, and apparently apathetic until he or she has had time to develop a new set of cognitive constructs to understand and enact the appropriate behaviour’ (Furnham, 1993, p. 96).

Reviewing the literature concerning this perspective reveals that studies have taken different approaches to the culture shock theory (Bochner, 2011; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Furnham, 1993; Furnham, 2010; Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). Furnham (2010) summarised these approaches under three labels. The first is the culture learning approach, which stresses that the adjustment process is passed on by acquiring culturally relevant social knowledge, social etiquette, conflict resolution, non-verbal communication, rules and conventions, etc. in order to cope with the new society. The shock from this perspective arises from the lack of the social and behavioural skills of the host society (Ward et al.,
Researchers, who adopt such an approach, argue that the success of social interaction depends on the shared bases of interaction between the sojourners and the people of the host culture. In order to reduce stress associated with culture shock, international students need to learn the new tools and signs of the new environment.

The second approach is the coping and adjustment process, which focuses on the coping styles of individual sojourners as they attempt to adjust to the new culture. Thus, their personality, social support network, knowledge and skills, and personal demography (e.g. age, sex), either together or in part, predict and explain how quickly and thoroughly they will adapt. Researchers who considered this approach note, ‘[B]oth macro and micro level variables affect transition and adjustment, and characteristics of both the individual and the situation mediate and moderate the appraisal of stress, coping responses and long and short-term outcomes’ (Ward et al., 2001, p. 96).

The third approach is social identity and inter-group relations. The idea is that how people see themselves and their group affects how they deal with those from a different group. Stereotypical attributions for the causes of behaviour and discrimination against ‘out-groups’, but in favour of in-groups, are all seen to be functions of a person’s self-identity. It is argued that various individual and social forces influence people’s sense of themselves which, in turn, influence their adaptation to and acculturation in a new society.

2.3. Cultural identity

I now discuss the second concept, introduced in this section, which is cultural identity. Cultural identity is the self-concept that addresses the question of who ‘I’ am in relation to the wider community. Identity refers to the cognitive concept that people perceive something about themselves in relation to the surrounding world (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285).
There are two essential dimensions involving the concept of identity, which can be used to label and overlap attributes associated with the concept. First is the personal dimension, which focuses on the sense of self derived from personality (Jameson, 2007). With the emergence of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), the concept of identity has been extended to consider the important contribution of the social context and the group in forming a person’s self-concept and self-awareness. This introduces the second dimension of the identity, which is collective identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Taylor & Usborne, 2010). Collective identity refers to the sense of self that derives from membership in society. Cultural identity is one aspect of collective identity. Cultural identity a) has contributed to forming the collective identity of Saudi students and b) allows for the incorporation of a number of different ‘selves’ at different levels.

According to Jameson (2007), cultural identity implies the sense of self that is ‘derived from formal or informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions, and ways of life’ (p. 207). Such concepts have assisted in bringing about practices like gender segregation with attached values, ideology, and history, particularly if the self is considered as an artefact that has different configurations and different functions depending on the culture, the historical era, and the socioeconomic class in which a person exists. According to Kroger (2007), identity from a social perspective should be considered within its social and cultural context, as it is a product ‘which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation’ (Hall, 2003, p. 234). In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation is a cultural norm that is evident in almost every public and private institution (AlMunajjed, 1997; Mayer, 2000). The phenomenon of gender segregation is central to most people’s social, educational, economic, and political activities. This phenomenon is a significant contributor in forming Saudi cultural identity.
Accordingly, it could be argued that the gender segregation practice, with its attached values and associated beliefs and ideological discourse, has contributed in some way or another to fabricating and constructing the Saudi cultural identity. In relation to the Saudi international students in Australia, there are three ‘types’ of identities that interact to construct the students’ cultural identity: tribal identity, religious identity and the national identity (Baroni, 2007; Doumato, 1992). For Saudi international students the religious identity is the most important identifiable and overlapping identity (Baroni, 2007). Religion is in the prime position because Saudis consider their religious identity and national identity intertwined since the Saudi state’s authority is not accomplished without supporting Islam in its Wahhabi version (Baroni, 2007; Ochsenwald, 1981). Another reason is because tribal identity is not so noticeable in Australia and therefore Saudi students tribal affiliations are do not impede on social relationships in the Australian society in an obvious way. Therefore most Saudi international students attach themselves culturally to Islam; they identify themselves as Muslims who follow Allah’s commands. For the Saudi international student religious identity is a central affiliation in terms of cultural identity. This type of identity has been supported by the Saudi government through bodies like the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission and the pre-departure course offered by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education emphasizes the importance of maintaining cultural identity as more important than assimilating into the culture of the host nation.

In relation to the previous theoretical perspective, particularly sociocultural theory and symbolic interactionism, Burkitt (2011) has suggested that:

... identity is not formed prior to our upbringing and our life in a particular place and time; instead, the historical context is the very means by which we
bring identity into existence. It is formed not just by the relation we have to
our own self, but prior to that by the way we are interrelated to others and
the power relations that both enable and constrain the possibilities to
become a certain sort of person. (p. 269)

Holland et al. (1998) also suggested that cultural reproduction and social activity are an
important process in constructing identity. Therefore, the social context of gender segregation
and the cultural and historical aspects of the practice contribute to forming the cultural
identity of a Saudi citizen as a member of the larger community. Phinney (1990) observed
that cross-cultural travellers have two independent dimensions of cultural identity:
maintaining their culture identity and engaging with their current host society. According to
Hecht (1993), formation of identity involves psychological and sociological aspects which
include the individual, role, social, and communal elements of identity. Therefore, identity is
inherently a communicative process, consisting of symbolic linkages between and among
people who share the same context. Therefore, identity research must examine contexts in
which identity is contested or is undergoing transformational shifts (Penuel & Wertsch,
1995).

In the context of cross-cultural contact and transitioning, the cultural identity reflects how
individuals think and feel about belonging to their culture and to the larger society from
which they come; ‘it is, in essence, a sense of belonging to, or attachment with, either or both
of these cultural groupings’ (Berry, Phinney, Kwak, & Sam, 2006, p. 11). It also indicates the
self-constructed awareness of the cultural elements that inform one's sense of self (Phinney &
Alipuria, 2006). The issue and complexity of cultural identity are usually encountered 'when
people are in contact with another culture rather than when they live entirely within a single culture’ (Berry, 2001, p. 620).

In relation to Saudi international students, the transitioning to another cultural context has an effect on how they perceive gender identity. According to Al-Qataee (1984), exposure to western culture tends to raise the awareness of Saudi international students about sex-role stereotyping. Such awareness tends to influence the students’ personal outlook and somehow Saudi students tend to begin to view sex roles in a more western way, thus altering their personal characteristics fit into these different perceptions.
CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Overview of the chapter

The study was meant to investigate the phenomenon of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment as encountered by Saudi international students who study in Australia. The investigation also aimed to track how such an experience may affect the cultural identity of the participants.

In order to clarify the context of the phenomenon under investigation, the issue of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is revisited, and necessary backgrounds are introduced. The endeavour here is to highlight how gender segregation contributes to the identity and the norms of society of which Saudi international students are a part (Doumato, 1992).

The assumption underlying the study in general and the following discussion in particular rests upon the argument that gender segregation in Saudi Arabia has been driven socially through cultural and religious discourses, and politically through legislation and politics; therefore, it has actively contributed to shaping most aspects of the Saudi macro and micro social context. For providing an insightful understanding of the context, a brief background about Saudi Arabia is provided in the second section, following this introduction. Then, the issue of gender segregation is revisited in the third section.

It should be mentioned here that the review of the literature concerning the context is only for the sake of clarifying the context rather than analysing it or explaining the phenomenon of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the following discussion intentionally does not analyse or evaluate the phenomenon. Such an attempt would go beyond the purpose of the
current study and its framework. In addition, evaluating gender segregation practices requires a different approach and wider consideration for both the macro and micro social contexts.

Figure 4. Map of chapter 3

3.1. Background about Saudi Arabia: History and sociocultural identity

Contemporary Saudi Arabia occupies around 2.24 million square kilometres. It is surrounded by seven Arab countries: on the east, it is bordered by the Arabian Gulf and the states of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. In the north, it is bordered by the states of Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan, and in the south by the state of Yemen. The Red Sea is in the west, which is shared by Egypt and Sudan. Thus, the country is in the heart of the Middle East and the Arab countries. Saudi Arabia is one of a few countries that did not experience a direct colonisation.
Internally, the state is divided into 13 administrative provinces as follows: first is the middle region with two administrative provinces, Riyadh and Qasim. The middle region is considered the birthplace of the state, as all three Saudi states were established and first started from there. The region also has the highest population density, and the capital city is Riyadh, the most sophisticated and largest city in the region and the country. The Western Region comprises the two holy places, Makkah and Madinah, which are two provinces. The fourth province is the Eastern Region, which is the largest area; but most of it is desert and thus part of the Empty Quarter. The north region comprises four administrative provinces: Tabouk, Hail, Al-Jawf, and Northern Borders. The southern region comprises four administrative provinces: Jazan, Najran, Baha, and Asir.

According to the Census of Population and Housing in 2010, the total population of the country is 28,376,355, of whom 19,405,685 are Saudi citizens. The population growth rate is 2.9%, and the population density is 14 persons per square kilometre (Central Department Of Statistics & Information, 2011). The population of Saudi Arabia is relatively very young with almost half of all Saudis under the age of 19 (Ministry of Economy and Planning of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia(MEP), 2010).

Before the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia was a poor, traditionally tribal society; hence, people are still gathered in tribes to some extent. Mainly Bedouin tribes (nomadic tribes) lived in the middle of Saudi Arabia. However, the tribes become more stable towards the borders of the state. The Western Region (known historically as Hejaz and currently as the Western Region) is mixed between tribal and non-tribal communities because of migration to the two Islamic cities Makkah and Madinah for religious or trading activity. This migration activity has occurred ever since the existence of the two holy mosques.
Saudi Arabia is not an ethnicity or land. It is the short name of a relatively new state occupying most of the Arabian Peninsula. The official name of the country is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (in this study, it is referred to as either the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or Saudi Arabia). The country is sometimes referred to as ‘The Land of the Two Holy Mosques’ in reference to Al-Masjid al-Haram (in Makkah), and Al-Masjid al-Nabawi (in Madinah). This name is usually used from the religious perspective, as well as from the opposition perspective.

The official title of the king became ‘Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’ as a replacement for ‘His Majesty’ in order to reflect the religious identity of the state. The Saudi flag is green, and written on it is the statement of faith in Islam (There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah), with a sword beneath. The state coat of arms consists of crossed swords and a palm tree, which is a common tree in Saudi Arabia. A literal translation of the Saudi national anthem (Broberg, 2002) is as follows:

‘Onward toward the Glory and the Height’

Hasten the glory and supremacy!

Glorify the creator of the heavens

And raise the green, fluttering flag,

Carrying the emblem of light!

Repeat (the words): Allah is the greatest!

O my country,

My country, may you always live?
The glory of all Muslims!

Long live the King,

For the flag and the country!

All of this official information has been provided to reflect the official identity of the state, which has two intertwined aspects, religion and monarchy. Religion and politics are merged together in a complex mixture that is inseparable. The power of politics and the power of religion separately can affect any society in varying degrees and can influence the nature of societal changes and transformation. However, in Saudi Arabia, religion and politics have joined forces to become very powerful, and of course they have both contributed heavily to reshaping the identity of the society. Individuals, in turn, socialise with and internalise that given identity.

Further insight for this context may be gained from a brief historical overview of the establishment of Saudi Arabia, which will show how religion and politics influence the social and cultural context of Saudi students and their attitude toward gender segregation.

3.1.1. A brief social and historic overview

Though it is not desirable here to turn the focus of the chapter too much on the Saudi historical background, highlighting some events from the past is necessary for understanding the current ‘Saudi Arabian’ society and culture. This is especially true if one considers that before the establishment of current Saudi Arabia as a state in 1932, there was no ‘Saudi Arabian society’ or ‘Saudi Arabian culture’.
Reviewing the history of Saudi Arabia shows that the contemporary Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1932–present) came from two political and religious movements called metaphorically the ‘first Saudi state’ (1744–1818), and the ‘second Saudi state’ (1824–1891).

The first movement refers to the time when Muhammad Ibn Saud (the father of the royal family in current Saudi Arabia and the ruler of Diriyah, which is a small city in Riyadh province) and Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab (a religious scholar, and the father of the grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia) joined forces to establish a community based on Islamic principles called *Ummah al-Islam*. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab (the founder of Wahhabism) believed that the people of the Arab Peninsula had lost the right path of Islam and that it was the duty of a religious scholar to initiate reform.

Aside from his definition of the right and wrong paths, which is not the focus of the current research, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab began calling for revival based on the doctrine that the community must return to the pure Islam, which is what the early generation of Muslims had practiced. He rejected the fads and innovations in faith and worship known in Islamic literature as Bid’ah. The idea, therefore, was started as an Islamic revival to correct the beliefs and practices of Islam. This call was later known as Wahhabism.

Ibn Saudi Muhammad Ibn Saud, as a ruler of Diriyah, provided Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab with protection and gave his full support to the new call. The movement started in 1744, when both Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab and Muhammad Ibn Saud took an oath to call for and protect the new reform of Islam in the Arab peninsula. They and their families successfully gained followers and established many allies among the tribes in the Arab peninsula. At that time, the Arab peninsula belonged politically to the Ottoman state, or as it is called in the Islamic literature, the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate. The Ottoman state was
watching this new movement cautiously, which it considered to be rebellion, and military campaigns were waged until the movement was controlled in 1818 by execution of the leader of Diriyah Abdullah Ibn Saud (grandson of the founder) and the imprisonment of most of the Muhammad Ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahab families (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Kostiner, 1993; Long, 1997; Wynbrandt, 2004).

The second Saudi state refers to the second attempt of the Ibn Saud family to regain sovereignty in Diriyah, to return to alliances with the tribes after the Ottoman State had interfered. From 1840 to 1891, the Ibn Saud family managed to get back to Diriyah and to re-establish alliances with the surrounding tribes and leaders. Then, because of conflicts between the Ibn Saud family relating to who should become the ruler, they became weak and another tribe gained the sovereignty (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Kostiner, 1993; Long, 1997; Wynbrandt, 2004).

These two movements paved and smoothed the way for a third attempt, which resulted in contemporary modern Saudi Arabia. Briefly, in 1919 Abdul-Aziz Al Saud (the great grandson of Ibn Saudi) returned again from exile with a strong determination to re-establish the sovereignty of Riyadh. He successfully captured Riyadh and then attempted to unite the tribes around Najd based on a revival of Wahhabism, which had already taken part of the Najd area and had gained many followers. The followers of Wahhabism who were for Abdul-Aziz constituted a very strong military force, which allowed him to spread his sovereignty over the peninsula. After 13 years of hard work, Abdul-Aziz Al Saud declared a new state in 1932 to be the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and proclaimed himself as the king. This history review of the roots of Saudi Arabia leads to the following conclusions, which are important for understanding the Saudi social, cultural, and political context.
It can be argued that the concept of state was not really applicable to the first two forms of what were called the Saudi Arabia ‘first state and second state’, as they were most likely tribal alliances between the Ibn Saudi family, the leader of Diriyah, and other leaders and tribes in the region. These two movements were based on a ‘chieftaincy structure’ (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Kostiner, 1993, pp. 4-5), which was common in the peninsula (Kostiner, 1993). The state’s institutional structures and the unity of the society were not initially formed until contemporary Saudi Arabia was declared (1932–present).

The first Saudi states witnessed the birth of a new Islamic revival in the Arabic peninsula known in the political and historical literature as ‘Wahhabism’. It should be acknowledged that the labels Wahhabi and Wahhabism are sometimes considered uncomplimentary, as they are names given by ‘the enemies’ (Al-Hefdhy, 1994, p. 18). Instead, some people use such labels as Muslim, Al-Salafiah, ahl al-tawhid or almuwahhidun (monotheism) (for more detail, see Al-Rasheed, 2007; Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Lacroix, 2011). However, the term Wahhabism is used in this study with no intention to evaluate, judge, or label the movement but rather to be consistent with the greatest body of literature.

The Wahhabi revival turned into religious-political theory or a religious-political ideology around which contemporary Saudi Arabia revolves (Otterbeck, 2012). The kingdom with all its official institutions is based on Wahhabist doctrine. Wahhabism spread over the Arab peninsula and was followed by many people, particularly the Bedouins (Kostiner, 1985; Nevo, 1998). These people became later, in the third attempt, as Talamith Al Dawah al Islahyah (pupils of the reform call) and Ikhwan Najd (brotherhood of Najd), who served as military officers for King Abdul-Aziz, the founder of contemporary Saudi Arabia, as well as
preachers of the Wahhabi revival around the peninsula (Al-Hefdhyy, 1994; Al-Rasheed, 2002; Commins, 2006; Ochsenwald, 1981; Otterbeck, 2012)

To conclude this brief history, Al-Hefdhyy (1994), when he examined the role of Wahhabism in the development of education and particularly of attitudes about women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, stated that

> [t]he story of the [contemporary Saudi] union is the story of the Ikhwan movement, another term used for the Wahhabis in the modern history of Saudi Arabia. The Ikhwan … are those Bedouins who accepted the fundamentals of orthodox Islam… as preached by Muhammad Ibn Abd [al-Wahab] during the middle of the eighteenth century. (p. 25)

Similarly, Hoveyda (2002) stated that ‘without the Wahhabi doctrine, the Saudis would not have succeeded in their drive to dominate the whole peninsula. In fact, the alliance their ancestor Muhammad Ibn Saud struck with [Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab] was tantamount to a Faustian pact’ (p. 495). Thus, understanding Wahhabism is vital in recognising the Saudi Arabian social identity, as well as understanding the segregation of the genders in Saudi Arabia because the current gender segregation practice in Saudi Arabia has been ‘cultured’ within the medium of Wahhabi religious and political ideological discourse as it spread.

To illustrate, my grandmother told me that when she was a child 80 years ago, she remembers males and females working in agriculture together without any physical segregation. They interacted without the women covering their faces. One of the participants in this research told me that his grandfathers and -mothers told him similar stories. I remember, just 20 years ago, my mother sitting in the same room with my uncles, which is now not acceptable and is prohibited. She was listening to music, which she now believes is prohibited.
The change has quickly happened in people’s daily practice. Gender segregation was promoted and imposed by Wahhabi ideology, which has dominated the state institutions (Otterbeck, 2012; Yamani, 2004). According to Yamani, the cultural identity transformation was accomplished through three phases, particularly in the western part of Saudi Arabia in Hijaz, which at that time was more similar to an urban community. The first period was after the ‘unification’ of the society under one state, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in 1932. This time was when the Saudi Arabian identity was first manifested. The second phase was after the oil discovery and huge revenues of oil influenced the country in the 1950s. The third period was in the 1980s, when the oil price dropped; this phase also witnessed an appearance of internal and external religious revivals that either competed with Wahhabism or were influenced by it (see also Lacroix & Holoch, 2011; Otterbeck, 2012). Within all three phases, Wahhabism was the official face and the major factor driving the social changes and transformation of Saudi society.

To sum up, the ideology of Wahhabism is the cornerstone and the essential key to understanding Saudi Arabia as the sociocultural, historical context of the Saudi student. Wahhabism is a complex ideology that was subjected to and influenced by particular interpretations of Islamic teachings, Arabic culture, and political conditions. However, certain features are embodied within Wahhabism, which I do not intend to address here. I will discuss in the rest of the chapter only those features that inform the wider context of the research. It must be recognised also that Saudi Arabia comprises many tribes and religious schools, which respond to Wahhabism ideology differently, to some extent.
3.2. Some key social and political features of Wahhabism

A remarkable feature of Saudi society is the role that religion plays in forming the social identity. Wahhabism has been advocated in Saudi Arabia as the right interpretation of Islam and the reform of the correct faith. It also has enhanced and sometimes imposed itself as a ‘uniform moral code for anyone on Saudi soil’ (Otterbeck, 2012). This status has been reached through the following three features: the command to obey those in authority, cultivation of a Saudi Arabian community, and censorship in society.

3.2.1. ‘Obey those in authority among you’

From a Wahhabi perspective and in a very general sense, the religious scholars (Ulama) are considered community rulers who have the authority to give guidance in the form of teachings for Muslims, who must obey them. This idea comes from the Quran, particularly from Ayah (verse) 59 in Surat An-Nisa (The Women), in which Allah said,

ُيا أيها الذين آمنوا أطيعوا الله وأطيعوا الرسول وأولي الأمر منكم فإن تنازعتم في شيء فردوه إلى الله والرسول فإن كنتم تؤمنون بالله واليوم الآخر ذلك خير وأحسن تأويلاً.

‘O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and best in result.’

The term ‘those in authority among you’ is interpreted by the Wahhabi to refer to both political and religious leaders because religion and politics are merged in Wahhabi ideology. Religious scholars, also called Mufti, generate legal opinions (fatwa) which significantly contribute to political and social activities, as well as to individual actions (Commins, 2006; Otterbeck, 2012). Therefore, the Mufti have great authority and a strong alliance with the king.
According to Al-Hefdhy (1994), Wahhabi religious scholars have considerable influence in all aspects of Saudi lives, and their presence is felt in the education, legal life, and social life of the Kingdom. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between what is political and what is religious as religion is inseparable from social and individual life (Farsy, 2004). Wahhabi doctrine states that obeying the king’s order (which, it is supposed, does not interfere with the clear order of Allah) is an obligation for all Muslims. This obligation has its power from Allah and his order of prophets. Therefore, people of Saudi Arabia must obey the king as long as he is not an obvious infidel and as long as he allows the people to pray. Breaking such a pledge or revolt against the leader is considered a major religious sin (Al-Hefdhy, 1994).

Accordingly, it could be argued that Saudi Arabia as a state is a ‘theo-monarchy’ (Al-Atawneh, 2009, p. 733), an integration of a theocracy and a monarchy. Al-Atawneh also asserted that ‘[t]he fusion of religion and politics is clearly recognised and acknowledged by Wahhabi scholars, who believe that religion and state are inseparable’ (p. 733). Both Ulama (religious scholars) and the royal family as rulers are ‘those in authority among you’. Thus, obeying them is religiously essential because total union and interrelation between religion and politics is the correct way of life.

3.2.2. Cultivation of a Saudi Arabian community

Throughout the intertwined relationship between Wahhabi religious scholars and the Saudi kings, the power of religion and politics has formed a joint force which has heavily contributed to cultivating the Saudi society and refining its identity based on religious values and political principles (Nevo, 1998). In other words, Saudi Arabia has promoted its national identity by means of Wahhabism in order to develop a united society. According to Nevo
(1998), the contemporary Saudi state has made ‘efforts to cultivate Wahhabism both as a state religion and as an essential attribute of Saudi national identity’ (p. 34).

Wahhabism promotes Islam not only as a religion for individuals but also as a faith which touches every aspect of individual, social, private, and public lives (Al-Atawneh, 2009, 2011; Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Commins, 2006). It is ‘a comprehensive system for governing everything public, social and political and Islamic law is a complete moral code that prescribes for every eventuality, including governance’ (Al-Atawneh, 2009, p. 733). Thus, Wahhabism as an ideology forms the structure of the social and political institutions. Al-Hefdhy (1994) has noticed that Wahhabi ideology can be embedded in the following institutions:

- The judicial system, which has been the administrated and implemented according to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law.

- Islamic law, by encouraging government to adhere to the law as it pertains to social and economic activities, such as the banking system.

- A religious group that enforces Wahhabi religious values. This group is sometime known as the religious police, particularly by the external media. This body has offices all over the kingdom.

- Religious education. They regulate legal and theological education at all levels.

- Research in Islamic subjects.

- Girls’ education. All texts and curricula are supervised by the Ulama.

- Mosques. The Ulama supervise the operation of mosques throughout the kingdom.

- Religious jurisprudence.
• Islamic proselytising. This means regulating the preaching of Islam abroad.

3.2.3. Censorship of social activity

One of the most powerful means of forming the Saudi social identity is the censorship ensuring that public and private activity will adhere to the religious values of Wahhabism (Mostyn, 2002). Different procedures have been adopted in order to create a strong censorship over the society (Otterbeck, 2012; Yehia, 2007): For example, banning certain books, newspapers, and TV shows that picture ‘real’ life (Yehia, 2007).

One of the most effective means of maintaining censorship is what in Saudi Arabia is called AL-Hay’ah, referred to in the Western media as religious police. In the early 1980s, this group formed a Commission, chaired by the King himself, that they officially named the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). This commission is directly linked to the King, who is the prime minister. According to the official website of CPVPV (2011), their main tasks are as follows:

• Guiding people and urging them to virtue

• Working to prevent people from committing taboos and vice

• Working to prevent bad customs, traditions, and religious innovation

• Getting people to perform the duties of Islam

• Ensure that this country appears as an appropriate model of the Islamic world

In short, the main last aim summarises the mission of this agency. According to Otterbeck (2012), these aims directly serve ‘this policing aims at upholding the official Wahhabi political theory of the social that is built on the premise that individuals are quick to err if not controlled by moral and legal codes pointing in the right direction.’ (p. 343). In practice,
individual behaviour, views and hair, clothing, symbols in public, mixing between genders – all these acts must be prohibited, and this group must be responsible for maintaining them (Otterbeck, 2012; Yehia, 2007).

The other censorship means is gender segregation. Otterbeck (2012) argued that the most effective means for social control is gender segregation. It has become traditional culture in Saudi Arabia since the contemporary 'Saudi state has, through laws and regulations, spread the Wahhabi conception of segregation in the society' (p. 343). However, such censorship activity has become increasingly difficult due to the revolution of technology (Otterbeck, 2008).

These three key features of Wahhabi ideology, perhaps the most effective features in reshaping the discourse, promote the gender segregation in contemporary Saudi Arabia. This claim does not ignore the fact that the root of gender segregation has previously existed in the Arab culture generally and, in particular, in some of the Bedouin tribes. However, observing the development of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia leads to a valid argument which considers that the practice of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia today is a new phenomenon developed from Wahhabi ideology and power, and from the cultural and original Islamic role of gender interaction, as will be discussed later in this chapter. In other words, Wahhabi religious, political, and economic power creates the current face of gender interaction roles, which is called ‘gender segregation’.

3.3. The influence of Wahhabi ideology on gender segregation in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation is evident in almost every public and private institution. Educational sectors, including schools and universities, and most places of entertainment, as
well as parks, forbid the mixing of the genders (AlMunajjed, 1997; Mayer, 2000). For example, a single-sex school is the only available kind of school in Saudi Arabia (including private, public, general, and religious schools); the situation is the same in universities and colleges, except for the KAUST University, which was recently established for international graduate-level research by King Abdullah. The university has been criticised severely by some Wahhabi scholars because of its co-educational system reflecting the ongoing transformation on the state in social and political levels (see Meijer, 2010) as will be mentioned later in the chapter). Medical schools and institutions allow for certain level of mixing between sexes because of the shortage in female doctors and nurses. Most restaurants also have two sections: one for men and one for families (where each family is seated in a separate, partitioned arrangement). Some restaurants cater to men only; none cater to women only as there are no female waiters. Obviously, the phenomenon of gender segregation is central to most people’s social, educational, and political activities.

One of the important questions to address here, in order to clarify the context of this study, is why are Saudi people segregated according to their gender? Further, how do Saudi people regard the mixing of the genders? To answer these contentious questions, we need to look more closely at the phenomenon of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and try to understand its constitution. Tackling the phenomenon of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia can help in understanding Saudi international students in relation to the examined phenomenon.

Gender segregation, as currently practiced in Saudi Arabia is a new phenomenon, but it has its root in the Arabic traditions. Arabs most likely have a very traditional view on the role of the genders in society. They believe that a man is responsible for working outside of the home and for providing a secure and safe life for his wife and other family members, while a
woman takes responsibility for inside the home, looking after her husband and children, and providing love and warmth in the family. Even prior to the appearance of Islam, the Arabic tribes held these views about females, which had a significant influence on the role of women in these tribes. As mentioned in the Quran, some Arab tribes considered that having a female child was shameful and/or a cause for shame, and this view about female children has been pointed out as a vice that Arab Muslims need to change. For example, in Ayah (verses) 58-59 (Surat An-Nahl 16:) Allah said,

"And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision."

Thus, it could be argued religiously that such a worldview has nothing to do with Islamic principles (Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999; AlMunajjed, 1997; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002); it was, in fact, structured on a traditional historical view of gender roles that existed several hundreds of years before Islam. Such a traditional worldview often creates a masculine world in which gender separation is prominent, there are quite different roles for the sexes (Marcus, 2005), and authority and domination are vested in the men (Kabasaki & Bodur, 2002).

The Arab society, including the new Saudi Arabian society, is traditionally divided by men into two separate worlds: the public world and the private world. The public world is the area of business and political activity, which is the man’s domain (AlMunajjed, 1997). Therefore, economic, political, and religious activity is associated with the male. Women belong
exclusively to the private domain. This space is associated with the home, kinsmen or family members, family life, intimate relationships, and gardens. The private world is usually considered as a retreat and a sanctuary that a man should keep safe and secure (Deaver, 1980, p. 32). Therefore, Arab people are usually very sensitive to what belongs to the public and what belongs to the private domains (AlMunajjed, 1997).

Another concept that has developed from the notion of ‘sanctuary’ is the concept of ‘ird’ (عرض). Many Arabs and Saudis would consider that the concept of ird (عرض) has been most responsible for the practice of gender separation. The concept is best described as associated with personal honour. ‘Ird’ refers to family honour and particularly to a woman’s chastity. The term does not appear in the Quran, but it existed among the pre-Islamic Arabs and has been mentioned in Hadith (the prophet’s speeches). As noticed by Patai (1983), the concept of ird appears to have a secular value rather than a religious one. According to Baki (2004), Saudis are more sensitive to ird than to anything else. Soffan (1980) also confirmed that ird is a very sensitive aspect of Arab life when he stated that in Arab societies ‘woman is the repository of moral deeds in her family, thus she can destroy the honour of the family. She carries her family honour with her even after marriage and she continues to represent her family through modesty’ (p. 18).

The Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic values has been influenced by this traditional view. Thus, it is well known that ird is considered as the fourth of the five hierarchies that Allah commanded Muslims to protect, which are religion, self, mind, ird, and wealth. However, other Muslim schools argue that such Islamic resources as the Quran and the Hadith, as well as previous historical practices, indicate that the phenomenon of gender segregation did not exist in the past as an Islamic order (Abu-Shuqqah, 1999; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002).
Quran and other Islamic teachings clearly indicate that a woman has a right to education as does a man; she also has the right to work as long as her work does not harm herself or her family (AlMunajjed, 1997). In Islamic history, in the centuries prior to the Wahhabi revival, women not only mixed with men in mosques but also played significant roles in society (Abu-Shuqqah, 1999; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002).

Wahhabi scholars maintain that gender segregation is an Islamic teaching because Islam encourages chastity and virtue, and the importance of respecting a person’s ird. For Wahhabi scholars, this implies gender separation; the importance of protecting ird has led them to slide into a belief that gender separation comes from basic Islamic teaching (AlMunajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004; Fanjar, 1997; Patai, 1983; Zant, 2002). As a result, most Saudi citizens believe that gender segregation is a religious order from Allah (God) and his prophet (Mohammed – Peace be upon him). Consequently, they also believe that the mixing of genders is a sinful practice. Many examples can be given to illustrate how the clerics of the Wahhabi revival view any gender issue (Al-Ashaikh, 2009; Ibn Baz, 2010). According to Achoui (2006), gender segregation, and the associated values to such practices, appear not to have changed and little desire is noticed for such change as gender segregation is based on entrenched by fundamental tribal values, and powered and sanctioned institutionally by Wahhabbism and the state.

For instance, according to a press release from alarabiya.net on Wednesday, 24 February 2010, a famous Saudi cleric, Shaikh Abdul-Rahman al-Barrak, backed gender segregation with a ‘fatwa’. The cleric said that mixing genders in the workplace or in education ‘as advocated by modernisers’ is prohibited because it allows ‘sight of what is forbidden, and
forbidden talk between men and women’. In addition, Alarabiya.net( 2010) cited him as saying;

    Whoever allows this mixing ... allows forbidden things, and whoever allows them is an infidel and this means defection from Islam ... Either he retracts or he must be killed ... because he disavows and does not observe the Shariah.

This religious idea has interacted dialectically with the Arabic traditional culture of ird (which does not promote directly the practice of gender segregation). Therefore, the current Saudi society has been structured to keep religious and cultural ird within strictly defined limits that lessen the possibility of losing it because it is associated with the sanctity of women. Thus, many restrictions were imposed on women because the tribe and family honour is connected strongly to ird. A woman will lose her ird if she commits adultery or even attempts to do so; and if the ird is lost, it cannot be regained even after many generations. As a result, there are many restrictions on Saudi women in society (for example, females are not supposed to drive or travel alone without a guardian, which would be a close relative male like father, brother, son, or, of course, husband).

Thus, as already mentioned, gender segregation has come about as a means of censorship to prevent people from committing adultery, vice, or any associated sins, all of which are considered major sins. It is worth noting that, in practice, in Saudi Arabia today, a loss of ird is associated only with female – and not male – chastity. It has been argued that this perception of ird has led to a woman’s being considered an ‘erotic creation’ (Jawhari, 2007), and it also provides a sexualised depiction of women who live in mixed-gender environments. An understanding of these issues is vital to comprehending the situation of Saudi students, both male and female, when they come to study in a country such as Australia.
where there is no gender segregation. They require sensitive understanding and support on the part of those who work in educational institutions.

The above picture of gender segregation has been taken, perhaps, from the most observable and dominant image of the context. However, the image is not stable, and a dynamic change and transformation has occurred in the picture because of many interactive factors, but probably mostly because of those related to the political and socioeconomic domain (Achoui, 2006; Al-Hefdhy, 1994; Al-Mubarak, 2011; Baki, 2004; Clary & Karlin, 2011; Nevo, 1998; Otterbeck, 2012).

To illustrate, in relation to gender segregation, Saudi Arabia has experienced a reforming activity after the terrorist attack on Saudi Arabia in 2003, particularly in the political domain, which influences most aspects of Saudi lives. For example, soon after the attack, the king issued a Royal Decree to the centre for national dialogue, known as the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue. The centre aims to be an environment for dialogue between all sectors and classes of the Saudi society. More reform has been witnessed since King Abdullah was crowned in 2005. Both women’s status and education have been prominent topics for reform (Meijer, 2010). The new technology of communication has also enhanced the changing trend, adding a socially based orientation to the political reform activity. Hamdan (2005) argues that ‘satellite dishes and more recently, Internet access, have allowed Saudi society to view others not only in Western and European nations but in neighbouring Arabic countries’ (p. 56).

Two groups took different positions: the conservatives who are against the reform and the liberals who support it (Meijer, 2010). The debate between these two parties is taking place in the media. One of the major debates between them concerns mixing genders, which came to
light in 2009 with the opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). This new university does not implement the practice of gender segregation, and the extension of the King Abdullah Scholarship programme for studying abroad allows women to study in mixed-gender environments.

The conservatives among the Wahhabi scholars who represent the religious establishment and its associations, such as the CPVPV, consider the university as corrupted and evil because men and women are mixed, and this is prohibited. The conservatives believe it is a threat to people’s religious morals. They have a major influence on the people’s opinion especially with the spread of a video of male and female students dancing together.

The conservatives accuse liberals of Westernising society and corrupting values (Meijer, 2010). On the other hand, the liberals who supported the reform were in favour of the university as being an important step towards reforming the educational system and giving women equal opportunity to participate and contribute in society and in the job market. They accuse conservatives of being against modernity and progress, and of using their influence on people for their own agenda (Meijer, 2010). The establishment of the King Abdullah International Scholarship Programme, which relates closely to the current study, has been one of the largest subjects of this debate.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview of the chapter

Chapter 2 provided a theoretical ground of the research phenomenon and highlighted the key concepts utilised in the research inquiry. The concepts of experience and transitioning experience, a gender-segregated society, a mixed-gender environment, cultural identity, adjustment and adaptation, have been discussed and their application in the context of this study has been identified. This chapter introduces the research design to explain how the research was conducted. I constructed the chapter around two main questions. The first question focuses on the design of the study, and the second provides a rationale for why it was designed in such a way. These questions were used to articulate the research process and to show how the research inquiry was developed and approached. In summary, it is about clarifying and justifying the research process and all associated activities. The chapter consists of six sections as presented in (Figure 7).

The first section describes the terminology that has been used. It provides the definitions of the terms used in this chapter in order to avoid the confusion that often surrounds key concepts of research in social science because of multiple meanings assigned to many terms. The expressions research design, philosophical foundation, methodology, phenomenological approach, and research methods and activities are identified in relation to this research. The second section provides an overview of the research design and the utilised methodology. This section introduces three characteristics of the research design, which are exploratory, qualitative, and phenomenological. These characteristics are highlighted in order to identify, explain, and justify the research approach.
The third section presents the philosophical foundations that underlie the research methodology. It demonstrates the ontological and epistemological positions that can be adopted when a phenomenological methodology is used. In the fourth section, the methodological strategies are outlined and justified. This section provides the scope of the phenomenology adopted for this research. It introduces two strategies that directed and guided the research methods and activities. As shown in Figure 9, the strategies were based on a descriptive and an interpretive phenomenological attitude. These strategies include the use of a bracketing mode to assist in the reduction process and an imaginative variation mode. In the fifth section, the research methods and activities are described. They have been divided into three categories: 1) preparation activity, 2) activity for collecting data, and 3) activity of data explication. Finally, a summary of the chapter is provided in the sixth section.

4.1. Terminological issues

Before starting to describe and justify the research design, it is relevant to acknowledge how challenging it was to engage with the terminology of qualitative research in social science because there is little consistency in the use of words. The more I engaged with the literature of research methodology in social science, the more I was convinced that the field further complicates the complexities that are already constituted within the field of social science. It seems that authors in the field, in order to reach a certain level of consistency, generalise across paradigmatic beliefs in their use of terms and concepts. It could be argued that to present a consistent theoretical framework requires being precise and specific in identifying terms used, as well as carefully dealing with other terms that interact with the researched topic.

I see this precision as the critical starting point in writing any qualitative report, not only
because the terms are significant in presenting the research process clearly to avoid confusion and misunderstanding, but also because terminologies usually reflect the context and positions underlying the research design and justify the investigation process.

Adjusting to the contradictions in the terminology of qualitative and phenomenological research required some time. An example of this dilemma can be seen when discussing assumptions behind the selection of methods and terms like *worldview*, *research paradigm*, *methodology*, *ontology*, and *epistemology*, which often have been used interchangeably. *Methodology* and *methods* are terms most often used interchangeably throughout the literature and in texts.

The ‘problematic’ which cannot be resolved here is that these terms have become, to an extent, floating signifiers which have no specific meaning; therefore, they are used differently from one context and perspective to another. Thus, to avoid any potential confusion associated with these terms, I decided to identify the meanings of the main terms adopted to describe the research design for this thesis.

*Research design* refers to the general structure used to guide the investigation. Research design consists of three pillars: the research aims, paradigm or philosophical foundations, and methodology (Maxwell, 2005). It also involves the interactional relationship between these pillars (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). The research design for this investigation was developed to be flexible and reflexive in order to track complex and cross-discipline phenomena. Three characteristics identified the design of this investigation: it is 1) exploratory in terms of the research aim, 2) qualitative in terms of the philosophical foundation, and 3) phenomenological in terms of the methodology and strategies. These characteristics are introduced in the second section of this chapter. The research methods and
activities, however, are the outcome of the research design.

**Philosophical foundation** refers to the basic set of beliefs and assumptions about ontology, the epistemology that guides the development of the research questions, and the conceptual and theoretical frameworks; and it is consistent with the methodology. This concept sometimes is referred to as a *paradigm* (Guba, 1990), or a worldview (Creswell, 2009). It is the assumptions that influenced how the researcher considered the research phenomenon in terms of its existence. These assumptions accordingly guided the construction of the research methodology. Two types of philosophical assumptions were identified: *ontological* and *epistemological* (Crotty 1998). These assumptions are discussed in the third section of this chapter. The philosophical foundation underpinning the current investigation was influenced by the general assumptions that underlie the qualitative practice of research in the social sciences and was also derived from the philosophical movement of phenomenology as described within the chapter. *Phenomenology* is the philosophical foundation utilised to label the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying the research design.

**Methodology** refers to the strategies that guided the plan of action and from which the research activities were derived, and these led to the research findings (Crotty 1998). This concept is sometimes referred to as a *strategy of inquiry* (see, for example, Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). However, it is used here to refer to the phenomenological strategies of the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological attitudes as described in the fourth section of this chapter (see Figure 9). Within this thesis, I refer to it interchangeably as methodology, approach, and strategies. In this investigation, the phenomenology methodology was the research methodology. *Phenomenological attitudes* refer to the methodology and strategy that guided me in the design of the research question and dictated the type of data collected and the interpretation of the data. The adopted
phenomenological methodology was developed from different phenomenological models, relying mainly on the phenomenological model developed by Moustakas (1994), who modified Husserlian phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology, and the works of Giorgi (1985), Hycner (1985), and Finlay (2008).

Method and activities refers to the procedures that led to the findings of this investigation. This process is referred to as methods (Crotty 1998). However, I also added the term activities for three reasons: first, to avoid the popular confusion between methodology and methods; second, to reflect on the dynamic and reflexive conduct of this investigation (Blumer 1986); and third, to reflect on the theoretical perspective by which the research is contextualised. In this context, method and activity refers to a group of actions on and engagement with an object ‘generated and integrated by a motive’ (Van Oers, 1998, p. 479).

Three types of activities were conducted: preparation, data collection, and data treatment. All these activities were guided by the phenomenological methodology.

4.2. Overview of the research design

The research design of this study consisted of three pillars: research aims, philosophical foundation, and methodology and strategies. This section provides an overview of these pillars (see Figure 8).

This research inquiry investigated the experience of Saudi international students in transitioning from a gender-segregated society to a mixed-gender environment. The study aimed to understand how such an experience may affect the Saudi students’ cultural identity. The major question and the supplementary question around, which the study revolved, were as follows:
1. What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?

2. What potential impact does the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment have upon the identity of Saudi international students?

As the questions are broad in scope and quite complex, the research has addressed them through two angles to assist in touching the essence of the students’ experience rather than providing a surface description or a personal reflection of experience. The first perspective attempts to identify the most prominent manifestations of the students’ experience; it focuses on investigating the most invariant and essential aspect of the participants’ experience. From this viewpoint, the research was directed to the quest of ‘what’ Saudi international students encounter when they are transitioning to a mixed-gender environment and ‘how’ they encounter it. The second perspective examined how students’ cultural identity might be affected by their current experience.

As a research methodology, phenomenology offered useful strategies for conducting this investigation. In the light of the phenomenological discourse, I developed the research design both at a philosophical level (particularly using Husserl’s thought) and at a practical level (e.g. Crotty, 1996; Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As described below, I characterise the research design as an exploratory (e.g. Blumer, 1986; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Stebbins, 2001), qualitative (e.g. Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Holloway, 1997; Mason, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007), and phenomenological investigation (Crotty, 1996; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 2006a; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 1990). The research design was developed to offer a systematic process for conducting the research.
Research design

Research aims

Exploratory

Philosophical foundations

Ontological assumptions

Phenomenology

Epistemological assumptions

Phenomenological methodology

Descriptive phenomenological attitude

Bracketing mode

Developing research questions

Reviewing relevant literature

Collection of the data

Phenomenological reduction

Textural description

Structural description

Imaginative variation

Phenomenological reduction

Phenomenological reduction

Methods and activities

Descriptive phenomenological attitude

Interpretive phenomenological attitude

Interpretive phenomenological attitude

Discussion of findings

Reviewing relevant literature and developing research questions

Collection of the data

Textural description

Structural description

Imaginative variation

Phenomenological reduction

Phenomenological reduction

Methods and activities

Descriptive phenomenological attitude

Interpretive phenomenological attitude

Interpretive phenomenological attitude

Discussion of findings
4.2.1. Exploratory research aims

This research is characterised as an exploratory design to highlight the fundamental aim of the inquiry. As the main aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of Saudi international students in relation to the transition from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment, the exploration involved investigating, discovering, and testing a vague and ambiguous social phenomenon (Stebbins, 2001). More specifically, the study aimed to uncover essential elements of the transitioning experience encountered by the Saudi international students. Therefore, the mode of exploration was a necessary presence during all of the research activities because ‘exploratory research aims to establish the most basic criteria of the research topic’ (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 11).

Exploratory research design has been defined by three features (Stebbins, 2001). First, it aims to provide an examination and investigation of a social phenomenon. Second, it allows researchers to test and experience social phenomena. Third, it is a research journey of discovery that consists of adventure (Willig, 2008) and surprise. The researcher, guided by the research inquiry, may arrive to discover an unanticipated phenomenon. The current exploratory study aimed to provide an examination that involved the basic attributes discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1.1. Exploration as discovery

The current study investigated and examined the transitioning experience of Saudi international students to a mixed-gender environment in order to understand how this experience might affect their cultural identity. Therefore, I wanted to know what this
experience looked like and to uncover the essence of the participants’ experiences. The study took a position of exploring *what is out there* rather than confirming it (Willig, 2008).

Thus, the study process was not a recipe to follow but rather a journey to take, and as Willig (2008) pointed out, the concept of research ‘has moved from a mechanical (how-to-apply-appropriate-techniques-to-the-subject-matter) to a creative (how-can-I-find-out?) mode’ (p. 2).

### 4.2.1.2. Exploration as subjective and inter-subjective research

The study was designed to maintain the undeniable subjectivity of the researcher towards an understanding of the research phenomenon, as well as to involve and to appreciate the inter-subjectivity involved in the phenomenon itself. The phenomenological position allows empathy and recognition of both the researcher’s and the participants’ subjectivity about the phenomenon being explored. Such a design instigates research *with* the participants rather than research *on* them.

The design was aimed to provide me – as both the researcher and a Saudi international student in a mixed-gender environment – and the audience, with an opportunity to test and experience the phenomenon through descriptions of the essence of the experience as reported in chapters 5 and 6 of the thesis. This particular aim has inspired the research activities at every level.

The research is described as an exploration in order to evoke flexibility – the type of flexibility that allows researchers to shift between lines of inquiry and move from one activity to another in order to uncover the structure of the phenomenon. This particular mode of exploration was developed by Blumer (1986):
[Exploratory research] is the way by which a research scholar can form a close and comprehensive acquaintance with a sphere of social life that is unfamiliar and hence unknown to him … it is the means of developing and sharpening his inquiry so that his problem, his directions of inquiry, data, analytical relations, and interpretations arise out of, and remain grounded in, the empirical life under study. Exploration is by definition a flexible procedure in which the scholar shifts from one to another line of inquiry, adopts new points of observation as his study progresses, moves in new directions previously unthought of, and changes his recognition of what are relevant data as he acquires more information and better understanding. (p. 40)

This flexibility was taken into consideration. The methods and activities of this study were developed during the ongoing progress of the research and reflexive activities that focussed on what needed to be done. This meant that the direction and proposal were open enough to accommodate the complexity and ambiguity that surrounded the examined phenomenon. Flexibility consisted of merging the exploratory research with phenomenological practices.

4.2.2. Qualitative in paradigm and philosophical foundation

The second characteristic of the research design is that it is qualitative, which defines the research paradigm – which labels the research methodology and activities. The research paradigm means the core beliefs and worldview held by the researcher about the social world and the way that the world can be understood (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigmatic worldview plays a significant role in the way that a researcher engages with the research (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998).

Three general categories of the research paradigm appear in the literature: first is the quantitative paradigm, including the school of positivism and post-positivism; second is the
qualitative paradigm, which includes the anti-positivist schools like constructionism and the hermeneutic school; and third is the new paradigm movement – namely, mixed methods which draw on pragmatism and critical theory. In essence, the paradigm is what makes the research quantitatively or qualitatively oriented, or a mix of these orientations. As already indicated, the research design is qualitatively oriented. The qualitative paradigm offered a logical and ‘rational’ justification for the research aim, on the one hand, and for the research practice, on the other. A qualitative paradigm was therefore selected. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have suggested that the research paradigm should be defined by four philosophical and theoretical elements: namely, ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and the nature of human existence within this world. Epistemological beliefs in social science research are concerned with knowledge and the relationship between the knower and what is known. It revolves philosophically around the basic question of how I know the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Axiology is the philosophy of values and ethics. Axiological beliefs, in research, are concerned with the role of values and ethics in knowledge acquisition. They deal with the question of how one can be a moral person in the social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) Methodology is the strategy of acquiring knowledge. It focuses on the question of what one should do to know the social world, or to gain knowledge of it (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Many different perspectives and beliefs have influenced the development of the qualitative paradigm in research (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Sarantakos, 2005). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), a qualitative approach is a ‘complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surround the term qualitative research’ (p. 2).
The following points summarise the features of the qualitative design adopted for this investigation:

- It is a naturalistic study that is like most qualitative research in the field of social science: ‘naturalistic – studying real people in natural settings rather than in artificial isolation’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 524).

- It is a reflexive design in the sense that the thoughts and opinions of the researcher are part of the research (Krefting, 1991), and his or her activities are not only driving the research result but are also part of the research findings (Daniels, 2005).

- It is meaning-focused. As described, this research was aimed at finding the most essential meaning of the participants’ experience of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment. It is concerned with identifying and understanding meaning making, and describing it in the context from which is constructed and mediated (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Giorgi, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Qualitative research is concerned with meaning-making within a context (Maxwell, 2005). According to Willig (2001), ‘qualitative researchers tend to be concerned with meaning. That is, they are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events’ (p. 9).

The specific beliefs and assumptions about the paradigmatic elements from which this research design was derived are identified in section 4.3 of this chapter where the philosophical foundations are presented.
4.2.3. Phenomenological methodology

The third characteristic of the research design is phenomenological. A phenomenological methodology was used to underpin the research proposal, and the questions were formed and reformed through the phenomenological strategies used for the study. These strategies included maintaining the process of selecting participants, identifying my role as the researcher alongside their roles, and remaining consistent in approach throughout the data collection explication.

Phenomenology, which means the study of a phenomenon, is used to describe a particular type of qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2006; Crotty, 1996; Giorgi, 1985; Marton, 1988; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). This methodology is used to allow the researcher rich, detailed data which can provide a deeper understanding of lived experiences.

In sum, this research design was exploratory in terms of the research aims, qualitative in its paradigm, and phenomenological in terms of its methodology and strategies. The first pillar of the research design, as discussed previously, was the aims of the research, which have been presented in the first chapter and justified in the second and third chapters. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to the second and third pillars: the philosophical assumptions, discussed in the next section, followed by an examination of the methodology and strategies of the inquiry.

4.3. The philosophical foundation

In the context of this study, the philosophical foundation refers to the ontological and epistemological beliefs about the reality that constitute the phenomenon of the transitioning experience. Such assumptions are considered as an essential part of the research design. Therefore, researchers should identify these assumptions for engaging with the research
process, as they will play a significant role in framing the research questions and justifying the research methodology, on the one hand, and the methods and activities, on the other hand (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Denzin, 2003; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The philosophical foundation of this investigation was found in the movement of phenomenology.

4.3.1. Phenomenology as the philosophical foundation of the qualitative approach

The core idea of phenomenology came to qualitative research from the field of philosophy (Gadamer & Linge, 2008; Heidegger, 1988; Husserl & Carr, 1970; Husserl & Hardy, 1999; Tymieniecka, 2002). Husserl is considered the trigger for the phenomenological movements in contemporary philosophy. In designing my phenomenological study, I took into account Creswell’s (2006) suggestion that the researcher who intends to engage with phenomenology, as a research methodology, should have a solid philosophical basis in the phenomenological philosophical movement, in order to conduct the phenomenological investigation.

Therefore, I started with Husserl’s perspective of phenomenology (Husserl & Carr, 1970; Husserl & Hardy, 1999; Husserl & Koestenbaum, 1975; Husserl & Moran, 2001), moved to Heidegger’s perspective about ontology and existential phenomenology (Heidegger & Dahlstrom, 2005; Richardson, 2003), and then to Gadamer’s hermeneutic phenomenology perspective (Gadamer & Linge, 2008). Engaging with this philosophical discussion was useful as I directed myself through the complexity that usually involves qualitative investigation because it is concerned with individuals’ lived experience.

As a result of this engagement, I started to distinguish between phenomenology as a branch of philosophy and phenomenology as a research methodology with strategies for qualitative inquiry (Giorgi, 2006; Sharky, 2001). In addition, I realised how the philosophical discourse of phenomenology influenced the practice of phenomenology directly as a methodology with
strategies for qualitative research.

For example, two forms of phenomenological methodologies can be noticed in the literature of qualitative research: descriptive phenomenological methodology and interpretive phenomenological methodology (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Descriptive phenomenology was derived mainly from the philosophical work of Husserl and particularly from the idea of transcendental phenomenology (Giorgi, 2010; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). In contrast, interpretive phenomenological methodology had its roots in the works of scholars like Heidegger, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty.

For this study, the investigation was underpinned philosophically and to some extent by the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl (Crotty, 1998; Husserl & Carr, 1970; Husserl & Hardy, 1999; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Marton, 1988; Tarozzi & Mortari, 2010). It also relied on the general assumptions developed from constructionism as a label of most qualitative research (Crotty, 1998; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000).

4.3.2. The philosophical foundation of phenomenological methodology

Crotty (1998) and Blaikie (2000) have introduced two distinct philosophical aspects that should be considered when designing research in social science, ontology, and epistemology. According to Crotty (1998, p. 10), ‘[o]ntological issues and epistemological issues tend to merge together’, and it is conceptually difficult to discuss them separately.

As mentioned, ontological assumptions are propositions about the nature of social reality – that is, what exists (Blaikie, 2000; Crotty, 1998). It relates to questions about reality: for example, what reality does exist? Does it have an external existence or is it internally constructed? However, not all phenomenologists consider ontological issues a real concern for designing and practicing phenomenological inquiry. Two perspectives can be noticed in
First, ontological assumptions were not really a concern in phenomenological investigation. That is because the ideas of phenomenology appeared as a reaction to the scientific positivist philosophical view of knowledge that dominated the philosophy of science. Therefore, the phenomenological arguments, when they first appeared, were not concerned with ontological questions but rather focussed on providing an alternative epistemological approach about how we can access knowledge that tends to be subjective and internally mediated. In other words, phenomenology, in its original form, is an attempt to philosophise the relationship between the knower and the known, which is an epistemological issue in philosophy rather than an ontological position. The basic argument of phenomenology, from these perspectives, is this whether we assume or do not assume that things may exist outside the human mind, before we think about them. The epistemological question needs to be answered from both positions. The epistemological question is the real dilemma, and therefore we need to return to a study of human consciousness. From this perspective, what is provided by human consciousness is our social reality, regardless its internal existence, before we think about it. Knowledge is what research usually attempts to provide, therefore, it is what should concern a researcher. According to Spinelli (2005), ‘We have no idea whether “things in themselves” truly exist. All we can say is that, as human beings, we are biased toward interpretations that are centred upon an object-based or “thing-based” world’ (p. 15).

Second, ontological assumptions should be identified clearly before one practices phenomenological research. This perspective has relied on Heidegger’s thesis,
which moved the discussions concerning phenomenology to the ontological level when he discussed the philosophy of existence and being from a phenomenological perspective (Laverty, 2008; Tarozzi & Mortari, 2010). According to Tarozzi and Mortari (2010), after Heidegger, ‘phenomenology is usually seen as a philosophy that refutes ontology; phenomenology is an ontology, the study of being and of real and possible things, since it focuses exclusively on the way things appear, and on the relation between appearance and reality’ (p. 16). This movement has totally changed the focus of phenomenology from being a philosophical approach for understanding the intentional consciousness of a person, to a study of being and the existence of the consciousness itself. Such movement paved the way to what has been called existential phenomenological research (see, for example, Valle & Halling, 1989; Von Eckartsberg, 1998).

For this investigation, identifying the basic ontological assumptions was useful in order to identify the concept of experience itself and the transitioning experience, and to determine in which form a person’s experience exists. Therefore, the basic assumptions are identified and presented in the following sections.

4.3.3. Ontological assumptions of the phenomenological investigation

Apart from the debate within the philosophy of phenomenology, ontology, and epistemology, the basic ontological assumption underlying phenomenology (whether asserted by Husserl or not) is that truth can be found and can exist within the individual lived experience (Spiegelberg & Schuhmann, 1982). This belief is linked with the concept of experience as presented in the second chapter of this thesis. The study was based on arguments, put forward
by the interactionists and social culturalists, about the existence of a social world which is internally mediated. As humans, we must interact with this existence and construct meanings based on our culture and beliefs, historical development, and language symbols.

The experience of transitioning in this study, therefore, was considered an internal reality that was ‘built up from the perception of social actors’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 18) and was consistent with the subjective experiences of the external word (Blanche & Durkheim 1999). This assumption was supported by Dilthey (1979) when they said that ‘undistorted reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience [, and] the analysis of these facts is the core of the human studies’ (p. 161).

The meanings emerged from the research methods and activities, and from my systematic interaction with the Saudi international students who participated in this research and shared their experience of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment. These meanings should be considered a central part of the social reality that the study has reported upon. This assumption underlies and merges implicitly with the second level of assumptions, the epistemological assumptions of phenomenology.

4.3.4. Epistemological assumptions of the phenomenological investigation

Epistemology is concerned with the relationship between subject (knower) and object (known). In qualitative research the researcher can be considered the subject who acts in order to know the phenomenon that is considered as the object. Therefore, identifying the relationship between the subject and object is essential to developing a coherent and sound research design. The following epistemological assumptions are relevant to the current investigation.
4.3.4.1. Intentional knowledge

The first assumption is intentionality. This epistemological concept is at the heart of the phenomenological approach (Barnacle, 2001; Creswell, 2006; Crotty, 1998; Husserl & Hardy, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; Tarozzi & Mortari, 2010). The original idea of phenomenology was built on this concept. Husserl assumed and argued that consciousness is a consciousness of something, as humans always act intentionally to know and to understand things that appear to them. This is regardless of whether the appearance of the thing is an appearance of the thing itself or an appearance of a mediated thing. Such consciousness and knowledge of the thing is perspectival understanding. Therefore, a person’s understanding is an understanding of a thing or an aspect of a thing (object). According to Spinelli (2005),

Husserl adapted Brentano's idea by arguing that, for human beings, consciousness is always consciousness of some thing in that the most basic interpretative act of human consciousness is to experience the world in terms of objects, or things. For instance, if I am conscious that I am worried, then I am worried about some thing; if I am confused, I am confused about some thing; if I react, I react to some thing; and so forth. Even if I did not know what the specific ‘thing’ was, or even if the ‘thing’ to which I reacted was imaginary, my attention would focus upon the eventual identification of ‘some thing’. (p. 15)

The key epistemological assumption, derived from Husserl’s concept of intentionality, is that the phenomenon is not present to itself; it is present to a conscious subject (Barnacle, 2001). Therefore, a human’s knowledge about the phenomenon is mediated and we cannot have ‘pure or unmediated access’ which is other than subjective mediated knowledge (Barnacle,
2001, p. 7). We have access only to the world that is presented to us. We have a human intention to act, to know what is out there, and we only can have access to an intentional knowledge that the knower can consciously act towards (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997). Therefore the assumption held here is that knowledge is conceived as a result of a conscious act toward the thing to be known (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997).

4.3.4.2. Subjectively mediated knowledge

The second epistemological assumption is related to the previous one, to that of intentionality. It is that either we assume either that the social world and a phenomenon does exist outside of our consciousness, or that it does not, but we are able only, as humans, to interact with it and produce a meaning for it through a conscious act. The consciousness is the ‘medium of access to whatever is given to awareness’ (Giorgi, 1997, p. 236); therefore, epistemologically, only subjective knowledge can be known about the experienced world. It could be argued that it is a dependent relationship between knower and known, where the knower intentionally acts towards the social world and mediates it by the mind that is culturally and socially constituted.

This assumption leads to the next epistemological assumption held in this investigation, which claims that knowing other people’s experience is a constructed and dialogical knowledge.

4.3.4.3. Constructed dialogical knowledge

By stating that the knowledge conceived in this current study is constructed dialogically, I differentiated between philosophical knowledge on life experiences, and the knowledge provided by certain research practices that explore and understand other people’s descriptions of
their lived experience (Finlay, 2008; Giorgi, 2006a; Giorgi, 2006b). According to Finlay (2008):

… in the former, just the philosopher’s reflections are involved in work on properly philosophical research problems. In the latter, the researcher engages other people and attempts to reflect on these research participants’ lived experiences based on interactions (such as interviews) with them which adds various layers of complexity. (p. 11)

Therefore, I assumed that knowledge provided through my research activities was a result of the researcher’s and participants’ interactions with the phenomenon of the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment. The essence of the argument here is that the experience of transitioning to mixed-gender environments was best known and represented only through dialogical interaction. In other words, interaction occurred between two inseparable domains; between the conscience of the researcher and the participants, and secondly between these consciousnesses and the phenomenon of transitioning.

The phenomenological methodology provided a direction for this study by way of navigating through the first domain, which was the interaction between researcher and participants. In the second domain, sociocultural theory, symbolic interactionist theory, and Arabic reason theory provided a theoretical framework for conceptualising the phenomenon of transitioning. The first domain had two levels of interaction, with the first being the interaction between researcher and participants, and the second level the interaction between the researcher and the raw data. These two levels were the formative source of the knowledge included in this thesis.

From a phenomenological perspective, I see the relationship among researcher, participants, and raw data as a dialogical relationship – a dialogical relationship in the sense that the researcher was actively engaged, through dialogue, in constructing reasonable and sound meanings from the data collected from the research participants (Steentoft, 2005). Such a dialogical relationship,
in phenomenological research, is supported by Rossman and Rallis (2003) who stated that:

… phenomenological research focuses in-depth on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection the quintessential meaning of the experience will be reviewed. Language is viewed as the primary symbol system through which meaning is both constructed and conveyed. (p. 97)

4.4. Methodology

I developed a phenomenological methodology to find out what it looks like for Saudi international students to transition from a gender-segregated society to a mixed-gender environment when studying as international students. Phenomenology, as presented in the rest of this chapter, assisted in capturing and describing essential aspects of the participants’ experience in order to understand the transitioning experience encountered by these students.

4.4.1. Rationale for using phenomenological methodology

The phenomenological methodology underlies the research methods and activities of this research for the following reasons.

4.4.1.1. Identifying the essential structure and essence of the experience

Phenomenological methodology provides strategies that identify the essential structure and essence of the lived experience as described by participants (Cresswell, 2008; Crotty 1998; Moustakas 1994). Moustakas states that a phenomenological methodology allows research to ‘return to the concrete’ of the investigated phenomenon (p. 26) by offering a systematic attempt to present the experience as it actually appears in the consciousness (Polkinghorne, 1989; Tesch, 1990) and by focusing on the importance of the individuals and their respective views about the lived experience (Lodico et al., 2006). These observations aligned with the
aim of the study, which was to explore and understand the essential structure of the lived experience encountered by Saudi international students in Australia.

4.4.1.2. Understanding lived experience

Van Manen (1990) described phenomenological methodology as a type of research that allows one to 'borrow' other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to come to a better understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience’ (p. 62).

This feature is useful when exploring a phenomenon that has not been sufficiently theorised; for example, the phenomenon of the Saudi transitioning experience – and therefore the experience of those who are transitioning and their reflections – constitutes a first step in the understanding of this phenomenon.

4.4.1.3. Flexible methods and activities

Phenomenological methodology offers strategies that ‘sharpen the level on ongoing practices in the area of phenomenologically inspired qualitative research’ (Giorgi, 2006a, p. 306). Methods and activities for data collection are flexible, and the explication was designed to be aligned with the theoretical and philosophical assumptions underlying this type of qualitative research. In this case, I was able to dialogue with both the participants and the data to produce a layered description of experience. This feature is important in terms of conducting a rigorous qualitative study that provides trustworthy knowledge (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Denzin, 2003).

These three reasons influenced the direction of the development of the current research methodology. The next section demonstrates the phenomenological methodology and its
strategies that guided the research methods and activities.

4.4.2. Phenomenological strategies

According to Keen (1982), ‘[U]nlike other methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced to a ‘cookbook’ set of instructions. It is more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals’ (p. 41). As there was no model of phenomenological research to adopt, I had to develop my own phenomenological practice. The phenomenological practice during this study was guided by 1) the research aims, 2) principles of qualitative research, and 3) the discussions surrounding the phenomenological approach, particularly those of Moustakas (1994), Creswell (2006), and Giorgi (1985, 1997, 2009).

The phenomenological methodology of this study consisted of two general attitudes (see Finlay, 2008; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Hycner, 1985) towards the study aims; 1) a descriptive attitude and 2) an interpretive attitude (see Figure 9). These attitudes overlapped the research methods and activities, and were used to assist in positioning during the research by promoting engagement with responsive and improvised activities rather than with mechanical procedures. No definite line distinguished or separated these two approaches or attitudes, and I moved between them. To use Finlay’s (2008) terminology, ‘dancing’ between these two binaries is what differentiates the phenomenological approach from other qualitative approaches in the field (see also Langdridge, 2008).

4.4.2.1. Descriptive attitude

The descriptive attitude involved two strategies (the bracketing mode and the reduction process) that were adopted to capture and re-describe a participant’s lived experience. This approach to description re-describes participants’ lived experience as a whole, rather than
situations and events. The descriptive attitude in ‘the sense of description versus explanation’ (Ihde, 2012; Langdridge, 2008, p. 1132) occurred where the emphasis was on describing what I heard, read, and perceived when entering the participants’ description of their experience. According to Ihde (2012), the emphasis is ‘to describe phenomena phenomenologically, rather than explain them’ (p. 19). Therefore, the process was not description versus interpretation, as interpretation is inevitably involved in describing and understanding the description of other people’s lived experiences (Langdridge, 2008). In practice, as presented in Figure 9, the descriptive attitude was served by the bracketing mode and the reduction process in order to generate a textural description of the described lived experience (Creswell, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).
4.4.2.1.1. Bracketing mode

The first strategy of the descriptive attitude was the bracketing mode. Bracketing refers to the
efforts that I made to be open to hearing and seeing the described phenomenon with fresh eyes. It was an attempt to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (Salsberry, 1989; LeVasseur, 2003; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, *bracketing* was considered self-preparation for deriving new knowledge, an approach for providing the researcher with a fresh look at the examined phenomenon. This mode also required a stance that allowed me to engage phenomenologically with the reduction process of participants’ descriptions of their lived experience. The bracketing mode offered the study 1) temporary suspension of any pre-judgments or assumptions related to the examined phenomenon that might have limited and restricted how the phenomenon appeared for the participants while fully understanding that it is impossible to be totally free, in one’s mind, from presuppositions and 2) assistance in maintaining the involvement of previous experiences and perceptions about the phenomenon in order to recognise and realise what constitutes other aspects of the explored experience. According to Moustakas (1994), adopting a bracketing mode allows that ‘whatever or whoever appears in our consciousness is approached with an openness’ (p. 85).

The bracketing mode influenced most stages of the research activities with regard the following aspects:

- Forming descriptive research questions free from assumptions to guide and direct the research enquiry, leading to the achievement of the study’s aims.
- Responding to and engaging with previous works that were concerned with the cross-cultural transitioning experiences of international students.
- Conducting descriptive interviews that allowed participants to share and describe their lived experience.
- Re-describing the described experience with careful treatment of the data that
included maintaining the involvement of the researcher and avoiding being selective or discriminating in the re-description of the experience.

4.4.2.1.2. Phenomenological reduction

The second strategy of the descriptive attitude was phenomenological reduction, which is the process of re-describing and explicating meaning from the described experience (Creswell, 2006; Crotty, 1998; Finlay, 2008; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi, 2006a; Moustakas, 1994; Todres, 2005). Phenomenological reduction was a strategy used in this research in order to allow me to re-perceive what was described by participants. This strategy was used to underlie the data treatment activity. I used the mode of bracketing to relate to the initial description of the experience. For Moustakas (1994) and other phenomenologists (e.g. Todres, 2005; 2007), phenomenological reduction of human experience deals with two dimensions of the experience: texture and structure.

Texture is the ‘thickness’ of an experience (Todres, 2007, p. 47); it is a description of what the experience was like. Therefore, the texture is an extensive description of what happened, how it appeared to me as a listener. The texture is the quality of the experience (Creswell, 2006; Moustakas, 1994). The structure of the experience deals with emergent meanings and these describe the essential aspect of the experience. Such themes ‘can be grasped only through reflection’ on the textural descriptions of the participant’s experience (Keen, 1982, p. 79).

4.4.2.2. Interpretive attitude

The interpretive attitude was the second attitude adopted for the current phenomenological methodology and used for relating to the data that was part of this study. It is part of the phenomenological approach towards discovering the essential structure and meanings of the transitioning experience as described by the participants. In other words, the interpretive
attitude was part of the methodological strategies used to search for the essence of the experience. This attitude was applied mainly in the final stages of the research activities when the data treatment and explication was being conducted. Although interpretation is not the aim of phenomenological research, it is an approach that acts as a bridge to achieve a meaningful description of the phenomenon as there is no other way to re-describe experience. Interpretation must be involved to some extent.

Finlay (2008, 2009) argued that ‘interpretation [in phenomenological investigation] is not an additional procedure: It constitutes an inevitable and basic structure of our “being-in-the-world”. We experience a thing as something that has already been interpreted’ (p. 10).

Therefore, in order to achieve a meaningful description and understanding of the essential aspect of the experience, I moved from the bracketing mode to another mode which is called the imaginative variation mode to reflect on the outcome of the phenomenological reduction, which was textural description.

4.4.2.2.1. Imaginative variation mode

In the phenomenological literature, imaginative variation is akin to the induction process in that it aims to extract themes and essential meanings that constitute the described experiences (Creswell, 2009; Giorgi, 2006a; Giorgi, 2006b; Giorgi, 2009; Klein & Westcott, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). It should be noted, however, that shifting the phenomenological practice from a descriptive to an interpretive attitude meant it was ‘interpretive so far’ (Klein & Westcott, 1994, p. 141).

For this investigation, imaginative variation was seen as a strategy for guiding the process of seeking the structure of the experience and essential meanings. The imaginative variation mode enabled a thematic and structural description of the transitioning experience to be
derived within the process of phenomenological reduction. This mode assisted also in focusing on the second aspect of the research, which required an examination of how the experience might affect a participants’ cultural identity. This strategic mode guided me to shift from the descriptive to the interpretive attitude with the conscious intention of developing a reflective description of the data. According to Von Eckartsberg (1972), such a mode ‘constitutes the reflective work, looking back and thinking about this experience, discovering meaningful patterns and structures, universal features that are lived out concretely in an unique fashion’ (p. 166).

The intention of reflecting on people’s personal experience requires mutual and reciprocal respect between researcher and participants (Klein & Westcott, 1994). This respect allowed me to engage with the texture of the participant’s personal experience, to reflect on it, and to negotiate possible meanings in relation to the whole context. It also allowed the participants to evaluate my reflection on their description. This methodological mode played a significant role in the process and activity of data interpretation.

4.5. Methods and activities

The study aimed to capture and understand the essential structures of participants’ accounts of their transitioning experiences. Since the focus was on describing an experience, the appropriate methodology chosen was that of descriptive and interpretive phenomenological attitudes. In order to implement and explicate this approach in the practice of the research, I employed Moustakas’s (1994) suggestion of organising phenomenological methods around three categories: 1) methods of preparation, 2) methods of collecting data and gaining descriptions about the phenomenon, and 3) methods of analysing and searching for the meaning. These categories were useful for this study because they allowed for the reporting
of the most significant methods and ensured that activities were conducted in a logical order.

4.5.1. Methods of preparation

By way of preparation for conducting this investigation, the research purpose and questions were developed. As the nature of this study was emergent, like most qualitative research (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2011), the research purpose and questions were emergent too; they grew initially from personal experience and then emerged through the process of conceptualising a research topic around the cross-cultural transitioning experience. The outcome of this process was presented as part of the context of the study in chapter 2, and as part of the theoretical and conceptual framework in chapter 3.

My experience as a Saudi and an international student, who came from a segregated-gender environment to live temporarily in a mixed-gender environment in Australia, was the main driver for selecting this research topic. This experience allowed me to reflect on my identity, my cultural and religious practices, and my perception of the host society’s interactions with me during the course of my scholarship.

Another related trigger that led to my enthusiasm for examining the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment was the current public debate within Saudi Arabian society about the scholarship programme and its impact on the religious and cultural identity of the society. I sought to participate academically in this debate by exploring one aspect of it.

The investigation was started with the general purpose of understanding the experience of Saudi international students, particularly the experience of living and studying in a mixed-gender environment. As noticed by Hays and Singh (2011) and Maxwell (2005), developing a conceptual and theoretical framework in the early stages of the research allows a researcher to identify achievable purposes and to form coherent research questions. Therefore, in the
beginning of this investigation, I started developing a conceptual and theoretical framework in order to identify the research purposes and questions.

The first activity I undertook was to enrol in an elective course about designing research in the educational field, which was offered by the School of Education at RMIT University. The course, which was titled ‘Research Design: Theory and Practice’, took one semester.

Although I had previously taken two courses in research design when I was doing a Master of Education degree, this elective was more practical because I enrolled in it with the specific intention of developing my research proposal. The course allowed me to engage with different perspectives about research in the social sciences as it was an eclectic course delivered by a number of different researchers. By the end of that course, I was able to submit a draft of my research proposal.

The second activity, in terms of developing the theoretical and conceptual framework, was reviewing literature about the topic. As mentioned in chapter 1, the process of the literature review, at that stage, did not aim to theorise the phenomenon of transitioning from a gender-segregated environment to a mixed-gender environment and did not lead to a structured hypothesis to be tested and examined by the investigation. However, the aim of the activity was, first, to develop a conceptual and theoretical framework for the investigative process, and second, to contextualise and position my research within the field of social science in general and to link it with the literature of cultural transitioning in particular. The outcome of that literature review was discussed in chapters 2 and 3 for the task of clarifying the research context and conceptualising key aspects of this investigation.

This process has been ongoing as the literature review activity was done repeatedly, including during the period after I wrote the findings of the data explication, in order to link the
findings with existing knowledge and to emphasise the contribution of the investigation. However, it was also considered preparation prior to establishing methods and activities because the collection and explication of the participants’ descriptions, activities, and methods could not be started until a clear purpose was set and the main research questions formed.

In relation to the phenomenological methodology and strategies presented earlier, the preparation, methods, and activities were derived from and underpinned by the descriptive attitude and bracketing mode. I engaged with these activities using an approach that would achieve a descriptive end for this investigation without being overly influenced by my own presuppositions and judgments about the investigated experience. To sum up:

- The research questions sought to provide a whole picture instead of a situational picture of the transitioning experience of the participants.
- The questions were developed in the form of exploratory questions which enabled me to engage with research activities without anticipating the outcome.
- The role of the literature review, prior to the data treatment process, was limited to conceptualising the investigation process and contextualising the study within the field rather than theorising it and generating hypotheses.

4.5.2. Methods and activities of collecting data

Giorgi (1985), Moustakas (1994), Van Manen (1990), and other phenomenologists have stated that interviewing individuals who experience phenomena is the foundation source that phenomenological investigation relies on to understand the phenomenon. As this investigation took a phenomenological perspective to underpin its activities and methods, I
used interview methods to collect the data, encouraging participants to share their lived experiences with me.

In order to present the interviewing activity, the following aspects of the interviews are described: 1) general attributes of the conducted interviews, 2) criteria of selection for potential participants, 3) ethical considerations of dealing with human participants, and 4) the interviewing procedures and some examples.

4.5.2.1. Attributes of the conducted interviews

The interviews were constructed with the methodological strategies adopted for this investigation. The aim was to obtain, as much as possible, descriptions of the transitioning experience that were open but focused. Therefore, the interviewing activities were designed to adopt a descriptive attitude and to use the mode of bracketing.

The main attributes of the interviews may be summarised as follows:

- As the interview was influenced by the mode of bracketing, it was decided, prior to each of the conducted interviews that the purpose of the interview was to elicit the participant’s experience separate from any comparison with my own. The interviews were about what they wanted to say rather than what I wanted them to say or what I expected them to say. I engaged with the interviews to seek new views and perspectives about the phenomenon of transitioning.

- During the interviewing activity, I also shared my experiences with the interviewees, to indicate empathy (August & Tuten, 2008; Corbin & Morse, 2003; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006; Mallozzi, 2009; Mitchell & Irvine, 2008) and respect for what they had felt about their experiences (Klein & Westcott, 1994). These
techniques were to show interviewees how much I was interested in hearing detailed accounts (Hays & Singh, 2011) of their experiences. As Hays and Singh have suggested, such involvement during an interview activity may encourage participants to share their experience more freely if they feel they are in a friendly situation. The advantages of this technique can be reflected in the descriptions of experiences provided and in the participants’ helpfulness in reviewing the transcribed interviews and adding or correcting data.

- The interviews were conducted in two phases: the first phase involved two participants (Ali and Zahra) and the second phase involved two participants (Salem and Khamees). The aim of the interviews in the first phase was to explore and develop the interviewing activity. Then the second phase of the interview was conducted.

- The length of the interviews differed from one participant to another, and the number of interviews with each varied as well. These variations depended on the participant’s available time and also whether we, the participant and I, thought that more time was needed to explore further details.

- Five interviews were conducted individually with four participants as shown in (Table 1) and as described later in the interviewing activity.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Interview phase</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Original region</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>South and West</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahra</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>South and Najd</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khamees</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>South and East</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Participants and interview phase*

4.5.2.2. Selection of the participants

The study sought participants from Saudi Arabia who were undertaking their education at the time in Australia and who were sponsored students of Saudi governmental institutions. Therefore, a purposive sampling method (Merriam, 2009) was used to select the study participants. Such methods were considered fitting for this investigation, as I wanted ‘to discover, understand, and gain insight …from which the most can be learned’ (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Another reason to use a purposive sampling method was that in qualitative, particularly in phenomenological inquiry, the aim is not to generalise findings to a population, but to develop insights and in-depth exploration of an under-researched phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

I selected participants according to the following criteria:

1. They were Saudi international students on a governmental scholarship.

2. They were willing and interested to share their personal experiences with me.
3. They were willing to participate voluntarily in an in-depth interview, and possibly in a follow-up interview, discuss these conversations, and review the interviews.

4. They agreed to sign the consent form for using their data with a different scholar form (see Appendix 4).

The participants were four Saudi international students. In this investigation, I was not concerned about the number of participants; rather, I focused on the level of participation and the diversity of the participants. Moustakas (1994) suggested that the number of participants in a phenomenological study can be from 1 to 20, depending on the time frame.

4.5.3. Data treatment activities

This section describes how the data was treated and reports on the activity conducted to generate findings from the interviews. The following series of processes is indicative of the path I followed to arrive at the findings for this research, which are presented in the next two chapters.

I relied heavily on the works of Giorgi (1997), Hycner (1985), Wertz (2005), and Moustakas (1994) when I developed a plan for data treatment.

In writing this section, I took into consideration Hycner’s (1985) warning against using the term data analysis when engaging in a phenomenological approach. Using a popular term like analysis may be inconsistent with how the data was actually treated because the term analysis usually implies a process of breaking things into parts, and this was not the case for this study. Therefore, in order to avoid a misleading use of terminology, I decided to use the term data explication, which Groenewald (2004) suggested. Explication usually points to the process of being explicit about the constituents of whole phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1985).
In order to capture and explicate the essence and the structures constituting the transitioning experience encountered by the participants I followed nine steps; 1) transcribing participants’ interviews, 2) developing a general sense of the whole, 3) developing meaning units for each participant’s experience (horizontalisation), 4) clustering relevant units of meanings, 5) translating the meaning units, 6) developing textural descriptions for each individual, 7) searching for essential structures that could express the entire textural description, 8) evaluating the textural description, and 9) synthesising the structure from all participants’ accounts. Each step is addressed in further detail in the following lines.

**Transcription.** After the interviews were conducted with all the participants, the interview tapes were transcribed. I transcribed two interviews, Zahra’s and Ali’s, and two different professionals transcribed the other two interview records from the male participants after I had obtained the participants’ approval to send their records to a third party to be transcribed. Cultural sensitivity dictated that I should not send the female account to a third party. Ali did not mind having a third party involved, but for other reasons he preferred that I should do it myself; therefore, I respected his preference. After I confirmed the privacy and confidentiality statements provided by the third party transcribers, verbally and by email, I sent the interviews to the transcribers. I asked for the two records to be deleted from the computer after completing the transcription process.

After I had all the transcripts, I started checking the transcriptions done by the third party against the recorded interviews to make sure that nothing was missed. At the end of this step, I had 77 pages of raw data.

**Developing a general sense of the whole.** Following the transcription process, I began the second step of developing a general sense for each participant’s description. This involved
listening to all of the tapes several times as well as reading the transcripts a number of times. This process helped me, as the investigator, to become familiar with the context of the units of meaning and themes that I sought to extract in the next step. My goal at this stage was to get a general sense of what participants had told me about their experience. This sense provided a foundation for the following process of data explication. Engaging in this activity helped me to switch on and keep my focus on the phenomenon itself, which was about to appear within the descriptions of the participants.

Having paid full attention to both the spoken and written forms of the data was essential to the phenomenological attitude in this study. In other words, developing a general sense about the wholeness and the entirety of what each individual had expressed regarding his or her experience was necessary because the goal of the investigation was find the essential meanings of the transitioning experience as encountered by the participants (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994).

Each transcript and record was read and listened to separately and at different times. At the end of this process, I found myself listening to and reading each interview more than three times before conducting any formal engagement with the data explication. This step allowed me to get an overall sense of the data, particularly the two interviews that I did not transcribe myself.

*Developing meaning units for each participant’s experience (horizontalisation).* After transcribing the interviews, and once I had gained a general sense of the whole description as a context of the phenomenon, I started formally engaging with the data treatment in order to extract the invariant meaning units and themes that constituted the transitioning experience encountered by Saudi international students. Every statement, phrase, sentence, and
paragraph in each transcript was examined in order to elicit statements relevant to the experience. At this stage, the attitude was to go through the transcripts with as open a mind as possible (Hycner, 1985). This meant I stayed in the bracketing mode and was as descriptive as possible.

Moustakas (1994) called this stage of data treatment ‘*horizonisation*’, as this is where the descriptions of each individual turn to a horizon. The horizon, in the discussion of phenomenological data treatment, refers to the context from which experienced phenomenon could appear; it is the source which comprises the core themes and meanings of the experienced phenomenon. *Horizon* has been conceptualised differently according to which philosophical perspective is taken. For example, the term can appear in Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, wherein it has been used to refer to very different concepts (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Heidegger & Dahlstrom, 2005; Husserl & Hardy, 1999; Scott, 1988; Von Eckartsberg, 1989).

Therefore, to avoid confusion around the term *horizon*, I decided to use the term ‘meaning units’, as this term refers directly to what is being achieved at this stage of data explication. Invariant meaning units are the non-repetitive or overlapping statements that explicitly or implicitly capture a moment, or moments, of what has been experienced (i.e. the texture of the experience). To develop the meaning units from the participants’ accounts, I started with the following sub-steps.

*Listing all statements relevant* to the experience of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment. However, sometimes I found myself uncertain about whether the statements should be considered relevant or not. Therefore, my strategy at this stage was to take the safer path, so I included these statements, hoping that clarity would
develop over time (Hycner, 1985). It was not a straightforward process; thus, I kept revising the lists and sought the opinion of my wife, who was working as a lecturer in the department of linguistics at Jazan University. About 427 relevant statements were identified at this stage. These are presented in Table 2.

Testing the list of statements by checking each statement against two criteria suggested by Moustakas (1994, p. 121): 1) Is the statement essential in understanding the phenomenon being studied? 2) Can it be abstracted and labelled? Any statement that conformed to these criteria was included as an invariant meaning unit. The statements that did not meet these criteria – those that were repetitive, overlapping, or unclear – were eliminated (see Table 2).

This process was a difficult step as well as a most critical one (Wertz, 1985) because the entire investigation depended on these units of meaning. Therefore, careful treatment was taken to navigate this stage. It took time to be confident in eliminating some statements that did not meet the relevancy requirement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Relevant statements</th>
<th>Invariant units of meaning</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First stage of interviews</td>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zahra</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second stage of interviews</td>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khamees</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Relevant statements and invariant meaning units and themes from each transcript*
Clustering relevant units of meaning into groups. After developing the list of relevant meaning units for each individual, I went through them several times in the mode of imaginative variation in order to identify a significant theme that could be clustered as a possible unit of meaning. Turning my attention to imaginative variation was useful in examining identified meaning units reflectively, adding the dimension of allowing subjective judgments. To avoid inappropriate subjective judgment, I made an effort to keep bracketing my presuppositions to see what might possibly emerge (Eckartsberg 1972; Moustakas, 1994). However, it should be acknowledged that a researcher’s pre-experience cannot be completely isolated, as the researcher must use his constituted mind (Al-Jabri, 2011b) to understand and to identify the emerging themes. To minimise this necessary risk, I decide to ask two of my colleagues to be independent judges and check for consistency under the themes I had selected.

At this stage, each case was still being treated individually to identify the unique experience of each participant. This approach was also useful for obtaining an in-depth understanding of the data, rather than rushing into the whole. The following themes were derived from the data and are presented in Figures 10 to 13.
Figure 10. Clusters of meaning units of Ali’s experience

Figure 11. Clusters of meaning units of Zahra’s experience
Figure 12. Clusters of meaning units of Salem’s experience

Figure 13. Clusters of meaning units of Khamees’ experience
These clusters were considered to be the core themes to use in organising the invariant meaning units before revisiting them to develop the textural description of the participant’s experience. This step helped organise the textural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Translating the meaning units. In previous stages, I was keeping the data explication, as much as possible, to what had been expressed by the participants. This was all done in Arabic. As mentioned, I decide to conduct the interviews in Arabic, which is the first language of the participants, to allow them to express their experience by using their ‘tools’ (Vygotsky, 1962). It was important for getting a deeper description of the experience because language interacts with thinking and consciousness dialectically. The underlying assumption expressed earlier in this study (Chapter 2) was that language as a mediating tool shapes participants’ experience of reality, and it is also a result of experience, and for Arabs, as stated by Al-Jabri (2011b), language, in its comprehensive sense, is considered a significant constituent of the Arabic epistemological system. Furthermore, like Burkitt (2011), I argued that sociocultural theory and symbolic interactionism theory promote an assumption ‘that language does not express thoughts that already exist, but provides the tools to bring thoughts into existence’ (p. 269).

I had two choices regarding language and data for this thesis: translating all of the transcripts from Arabic to English and then treating the translated data as Jamjoom (2010) did in her phenomenological study conducted with Saudi participants, or keeping the data in Arabic and treating it in Arabic. The former involved a very high risk of interpreting the data at a too-early stage, which potentially could lead to a loss of the soul and the essence of the experience – which was expressed originally in Arabic. The second choice would reduce the
risk but would raise a challenge of how to present the findings in English for the purpose of
the thesis. After consulting with my research supervisors, I decided to accept the latter
challenge. For the sake of remaining close to the phenomenon as first-hand experience, I
conducted the first four steps in Arabic until the meaning of each individual had been
explicated and the themes of these units had emerged. Then, I moved slightly toward the
interpretive attitude.

In practice, I engaged with the question raised by Temple and Young (2004): Does it matter
who does the translation? Taking into account the epistemological and methodological
positions that overlapped the research activities, I decided to hire a professional translator in
Saudi Arabia to translate the meaning units. I then validated the translation against the
original Arabic meaning unit to confirm that the identified themes were there. During this
process, I was assisted by my wife and a colleague. When necessary, if I was uncertain about
an expression, I contacted the participant to validate the translated meaning.

As this translation was for the purpose of presenting the findings in English, I kept the
original Arabic meaning units as the main source when writing the textural description in
English. The English translation is used to show English readers where the described texture
of the experience came from.

*Developing a textural description for each individual.* The sixth step was constructing a
description of the texture of the experience from the clustered meaning units. I revisited the
transcript once again to refresh the general sense I had about the participant’s description
before constructing a description from the meaning units. This step provided rich, thick
descriptions of each individual’s experience. The textural description, which was written in
English, presents what was experienced by each participant while transitioning to the mixed-
gender environment; in particular, I described what appeared to me as the investigator. I constructed my description upon the participant’s Arabic expression of the invariant meaning units, and then had the translation beside this description to give the English reader an idea of where my understanding came from. In order to provide this thick description I asked the following question of every invariant meaning unit: what can possibly appear as the texture of the participant’s experience?

It should be indicated that as part of the process at this stage, some of the texture can appear in different meaning units, which means there is still some repetition and/or overlapping of the meaning units that were not eliminated in the fourth step. Participants’ textural descriptions are presented in chapter 5.

Searching for essential structures that could express the entire textural description. After constructing textural descriptions for each participant, I used the imaginative variation mode again to search for essential structures that could encompass the entire textural description of the participant. I was seeking to find a possible theme that could be the essential structure of the experience of this particular participant – essential in the sense that the experience could not be described without this theme, or themes.

At this stage, I positioned myself in the interpretive attitude to identify the structure of the textural description. I adopted the interpretive attitude because this process involved deep contemplation and reflection on the textural description in order to capture the structural meaning. The structures generated in this step are presented in chapter 5.

Evaluating the textural description and structural theme of each participant’s experience. When I had the textural and structural descriptions ready, I had reached the evaluation step.
In this step, I developed the following criteria from Hycner’s (1985) phenomenological guidelines:

- Do the participants agree with the identified textures and structures to represent what they had described in the interview?
- Did I miss any other essential aspect of participants’ experiences that they would like to add?

I contacted the participants, three of whom agreed to meet with me to give their opinion, and Zahra participated by e-mail. We came to the agreement that the current findings were acceptable as a presentation of what had been discussed in the interviews about the transitioning experience.

_Synthesising the structures from all the participants’ accounts_. The final step was synthesising the structures from all participants’ accounts to ‘communicate the most general meaning of the phenomenon’ (Giorgi, 1985, p. 20). Because this activity was the final activity in terms of data treatment, the main research question of this study was addressed directly. Therefore, I restricted this synthesis to the main question of the study: _What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?_

Discussion of the structures that emerged from all participants’ interviews took the form of writing a composite summary to describe how the phenomenon of transitioning was seen by the participants (Giorgi, 1985; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). In this summary, I concentrated on the common aspects of the experience as an essence of the phenomenon. However, I did not ignore the unique and different views of the participants. The summary is presented in chapter 6 of this study.
Summary of the chapter

This chapter has presented the research design. It started with identifying and defining the key terms used for discussing this research design: *research design, philosophical foundation and paradigm, phenomenology, methodology, phenomenological attitude*, and *research methods and activities*. Then, an overview of the design was presented by focusing on three pillars as the basis of research design: 1) the research aims, 2) the paradigmatic philosophical foundations, and 3) the research methodological strategies. These pillars have guided and justified the activities of the investigation. The three bases for the research have been characterised as 1) exploratory research aim, 2) qualitative research paradigm, and phenomenological methodological strategies. In addition, the interactional relation between the pillars was demonstrated.

The ontological and epistemological assumptions have been identified in order to justify the phenomenological methodology utilised for the research. Two phenomenological attitudes were presented as the main methodology that guided the research activities. These were descriptive and interpretive phenomenological attitudes. The bracketing mode and phenomenological reduction process were identified as strategies influenced by the descriptive phenomenological attitude. Imaginative variation mode was a strategy used within the interpretive phenomenological attitude.

The research methods and activities were categorised into three activities: 1) preparation methods, including the development of research proposal and conceptual framework, 2) data collecting methods, and 3) data treatment methods. The following chapter presents the outcome of the data treatment activities.
CHAPTER 5: DATA EXPLICATION

Overview of the chapter

As presented in the previous chapter, the findings of this study were developed and generated from individuals’ descriptions of their experiences of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment. The participants’ descriptions have been phenomenologically treated in order to capture the most structural parts of the transitioning experience that the research participants encountered. This chapter aims to explicate the data collected from the interviews. The explication of the data in this chapter is used, first, to introduce and, second, to contextualise the answer to the research questions in the end of the chapter. Each participant’s description was reduced to three layers which, taken together, reflect the whole description provided by the individual. These three parts are then synthesised to communicate the general and common structure of the experience.

As presented in Figure 14, this chapter presents each participant’s account. Therefore, it consists of four sections as follows: Sections 1–4 present three aspects of the experiences of four of the participants: Ali, Zahra, Salem, and Khamees. For each of these participants, the three aspects of experience are: 1) biographical description, 2) textural description of the transitioning experience, and 3) emerging structures of the described experience. Section 5 presents the synthesis of the apparent structures, and section 6 is a summary of the chapter.
Figure 14. Map of chapter 5
5.1. Ali’s experiences

5.1.1. Biographical description

Ali shared a great deal of background information with me during the interviews, which I am including here so that readers can obtain the biographical context of his experience without revealing his actual identity.

Ali is a 30-year-old Saudi male from a large city in the Western Region of Saudi Arabia. He was originally from the south of Saudi Arabia, from a city close to Yaman, and his father moved to the Western Region for work before Ali was born. For most of his life, he lived with his family before recently moving to the southern region again for work after he completed his bachelor’s degree in teaching English. Generally, he is descended from a tribe of noble origin and economically he is from a *middle class* family.

Ali studied during intermediate and high school (from age 11–17) in a religious school belonging to Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. These types of schools are called *Al-ma'ahid al-`ilmiiyya* (scientific institutes). The school focused mainly on Arabic language, Islamic principles, and Sharia in addition to small units in mathematics and the English language. After finishing the sixth year in the scientific institute, he went to college for a bachelor’s degree in English at one of the colleges of education in Saudi Arabia.

Later, he got a scholarship from his work to study for master’s and PhD degrees. Ali has been studying in Australia since 2006. He studied English language courses for almost 4 months and obtained a master’s degree in applied linguistics. At the time of the interview, he was studying for a PhD in applied linguistics, and he expected to complete his study in 2012.
Ali is married, but at the time he began his studies, he did not have children. He decided to come to Australia alone for the first 4 months to complete an English course and to find appropriate rental accommodation for his wife. After 4 months, he travelled back to Saudi Arabia to bring his wife to Australia, and he then commenced his master’s degree work. Ali was successful in obtaining a scholarship for his wife also to study English and get a bachelor’s degree; therefore, his wife was sponsored, too, as a companion of the main sponsored student.

5.1.2. Textural description

The phenomenological treatment of Ali interviews revealed that Ali’s transitioning experience was very rich. In the interview, Ali described his new experience in a mixed-gender environment as one of the best periods of his life. He perceived it as a period where he could learn and ‘become mature’. Therefore, he repeatedly described the new experience with phrases like ‘pleasant experience’, ‘good experience’, ‘marvellous experience’, and ‘mixing gender is the best thing in education’.

As a listener to and reader of Ali’s interview, I perceived that Ali’s description for his experience was reflecting that Ali was enjoying living in a mixed-gender environment. For example, when Ali first replied to my question, ‘How can you describe the experience of coming from our segregated-gender environment to live and study in this environment where sexes are mixing with each other?’ he said:

\[
\text{إنه شيء جميل وتجربة جميلة خصوصا جاء جمالها أنني عشت في بيئة مختلفة عنثقافيا واجتماعيا. كانت جميلة جدا...}
\]

\[
\text{It is a beautiful thing and a pleasant experience where beauty came when I lived in an environment culturally and socially different for me. Really, it was so pleasant.}
\]
Through the interview, Ali presented his experience as a ‘marvellous experience’. It was marvellous because it contributed to his feeling a certain level of ‘maturity’. The new experience provided a rich source of learning that assisted him in seeing his natural self. Such a texture appeared clearly when he said,


I feel that I am [Ali], the human being. Honestly, here [Ali], the human being, has shown up. This does not mean that I was not alive [in Saudi Arabia], but I mean that I consider this period as one of the growth periods when a person starts to become mature. I don’t say to mature, but I mean to start maturing... I feel that I am living my own life as I want... Even though I am staying away from my family [my parents and my sisters and brothers], I still feel that I have a natural life.

This quote shows that the feeling of maturity was a remarkable feature of Ali’s lived experience. His feeling of maturity appeared to be associated with the feeling of independence and the experience of being a free individual with reference to the social and cultural restrictions, which were referred to both explicitly and implicitly during the interview. Therefore, Ali’s transition to a mixed-gender environment provided him an opportunity to feel like an independent human 'الإنسان المستقل', and a free human 'الإنسان الحر', not one subject to social and customary rules 'لا الإنسان التابع للقوانين الاجتماعية وعرفية'. 'I am human and 'I am’ free: these feelings were remarkably obvious textures of Ali’s new experience in a mixed-gender environment. Ali characterised these feelings as an indication
that his maturity was beginning, and he was looking for more maturity, which was obvious when he redressed his statement in the previous quote by saying;

ما أقول ينضج لكن أقول بدأ ينضج...

*I don’t say to mature, but I mean to start maturing....*

Ali’s description revealed that living and studying in a mixed-gender environment provided him with the opportunity to feel liberated from what he called *social and customary obligations* which had restricted the normal relations between male and female. He expressed these feelings when he said,

... وفيه نوع من الحرية عياشها ما فيه مجتمع يلزمك بشيء، انت انسان حر هنا. في السعودية كان فيه التزامات اجتماعية والتزامات عرقية.. هنا ما فيه مجتمع يلزم بك بشيء

.... and there is a kind of freedom that I am living with. No society can force me to do something. You are free here. In Saudi Arabia, there were social obligations and customary obligations... Here, the society does not force you to do things that you do not want.

Similarly, he said:

أشوفها الفترة الذهبية في حياتي لأنني كونت صداقات هنما من أول شهرين ولا زالت مستمرة، ما شعرت بأني وحيد أبداً، في فترة بسيطة كونت صداقات [يقصد مع الذكر والانثى], [لكن] فيه ناس الدين كان عائش لهم. أنا ما عندي limits ما عندي أي مشكلة أنا كنت اختار أصدقائي و ما أشعر بأي حرج مع الأنثى

*I regard this time of my life as a golden period because I made new friends the first two months I came here, and such friendship still continues. I do not feel I am alone here. In a short period, I made friends [he means male and female friends]; however,*
religion may hinder some people from that, but I do not have limits and no problem in
making friends. I’ve chosen my friends, and I do not feel any embarrassment from
having women friendships.

For Ali, the mixed-gender environment was considered to be a natural environment that suits
a normal human being. This feature of his experience can be seen clearly when he said:

أفضل أن يكون التعليم مختلطاً وأشوف أن التعليم المختلط أحلة حاجة لأنه الطبيعي. إذا أفضل العيش في مجتمع مختلط. أنا من الناس اللي ما يعجبني أحد يقيد حريتي، في السعودية فيه نوع من تقييد الحرية.

I prefer to have mixed-sex education and I see mixed gender education as a pleasant
ing because it is human nature. [So] I prefer living in a mixed society. I am one of the people who do not like anyone to restrict my freedom, In Saudi Arabia, there is a kind of freedom restriction.

It is apparent that, for Ali, the transition from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment
was like moving to a natural environment which is suitable to the free and independent
human being: it was like readapting to nature.

Being in a mixed-gender environment was a ‘golden’ opportunity for Ali to start recognising
his free and independent self; therefore, he repetitively stressed that this new experience
reflects the transitioning to the nature. Another example of this element of Ali’s experience
appeared when he said,

أحس حياتي طبيعية هنا ، فأنت انسان ، وفيه نوع من الحرية عيابشها ..

I’m feeling my life is natural here, where you are human being, because you have a kind of freedom...
Ali’s description reflects how he saw himself in relation to the new mixed-gender environment. Specifically, the development that he experienced, toward what he called ‘maturity’, had appeared as a result of the new image Ali developed of his own society. The interview indicated that Saudi society appears to Ali as a closed and restricted society, particularly in the context of practicing gender segregation and when dealing with women. In addition, he felt, during this new experience that cultural boundaries had been created around the social life of the ‘Saudi human’, restricting his or her natural freedom. Ali reflected this texture in different moments. For example, he once said,

السعودية فيه حواجز، فيه عوائق... ما اتوقع أنني كنت أشوفها بشكل جلي- يعني ما تظهر لك بشكل واضح جداً- زي ما هي ذهني تظهر لك... [هنا] أحس حياتي طبيعية هنا، فإنني نوع من الحرية عايشها...

In Saudi Arabia, there are barriers, there are obstacles which I could not see clearly— which means they did not appear for [me] as clearly as they do now. So, I feel my life is natural here; you are human and you feel a type of freedom...

In another part, Ali said:

نحن جينا من مجتمع يؤطر علاقتك؛ علاقة المرأة والرجل...

We have come from a society which places boundaries on your relationship – the relationship between woman and man...

In another meaning unit, he also stated,

أنا أشوف بالنسبة للتعامل مع المرأة هنا بالعكس ما فيه شيء يدعو للقلق... ما هي ذهني تظهر لك اننا عندنا (خليتي اجمع)، أقول نحن عندنا عقدة في التعامل مع المرأة. يعني انا احتفالين ثقافيا أنه في حدود لتعاملنا مع المرأة...
I think dealing with a woman here does not raise any concerns except that ‘we’ have (let me generalise) – in our society – a ‘woman complex’ when we deal with a woman. That means [I am] culturally prepared to have restrictions when I deal with a woman.

In another context, Ali said,

Because we came from a society considered to be so closed, I faced difficulties at the beginning...

The interview distinctly showed that the view Ali had about the new environment (mixed gender) and the previous environment (segregated gender) has contributed directly to how he experienced the transition between these two different environments. His perception about a mixed versus a segregated-gender environment seems to underpin the ‘beautiful’ texture of the transitioning experience and the positive and constructive that meaning emerged in Ali’s description.

In addition to the positive picture that Ali presented of his experience, an explication of his description showed that he had passed through some challenges at the beginning before arriving at the happy and enjoyable moments of the experience.

For Ali, moving into a mixed-gender environment and society in the beginning was like facing ‘something strange’. Therefore, the questions occupying his mind were ‘How are you going to control yourself?’ and ‘How do you normalise it?’ This feeling, however, was not attributed only to the transition to a mixed-gender environment as it encompassed more than...
that. Ali associated this feeling with the entire transitioning experience as moving from a familiar to an unfamiliar environment. By way of illustration, Ali said,

*It [the scholarship experience] is a new experience, and you do not know how to handle it or how to get familiar with it. It is something strange [so] that you need to know how to control yourself and how to normalise it.*

He also said,

*I did not find a shock, but it was like a strange and unfamiliar feeling [because] in an open society, there was no shock. It is a new experience, [and] I need to learn how to deal with and how to adapt to it.*

In the context of this investigation, Ali revealed that dealing with females in an unfamiliar mixed-gender environment became a source of difficulties during his transition. In his homeland, dealing with females is extremely restricted. He was allowed to deal only with a female related by blood, except for certain societally imposed conditions and circumstances in which he could deal with a non-related female. Females also are not allowed to be seen by a non-related male at all. Therefore, the difficulty – as he said – was in ‘*how to deal with a human whom you did not deal with before during your life.*’

This texture of Ali’s experience appeared when he said,
As we have come from a closed environment, I met difficulties in dealing with the other sex; for example, when I spoke with a female, I had to be very accurate when selecting the words because it was a new experience, but some time later I started feeling that I am dealing with a woman as I am dealing with anyone else to whom I should show respect. Before, I got worried when there was a female I had to deal with.

The first three months were the most challenging time for Ali.

I stayed here for more than three months before I brought my wife. So [by that time] I felt that I was kind of used to it. The important thing was that this period came after the first three-month period when it was difficult for me to deal with a woman….

The challenges, for Ali, involved hesitations, fears, and ambiguity, and this texture of the experience emerged up front when Ali narrated a situation he still remembers with one of the female professors. That situation reflected the hesitation and sensitivity toward females that was occupying his mind at the beginning, particularly during the first three months. He said,

آذكر موقف حصل لي مع واحدة من الدكاترة درستني. كانت المحاضرة من خمسة إلى ثمانية في أول فصل لي. أذكر كان عدنا (بريك) تقريبا ربع ساعة. قالت لي [الدكتورة]: تعالí معي على أساس كانت تبني تعطيني اوراق من مكتبتها قلنا رحتم عادي! ... فلما رحت معاها، استغربت أنها قالت خل الباب مفتوح، أنا أعرف أنما الباب مفتوح... قلت لها...
I still remember a situation that I passed through with one of the female professors who taught me. The class was from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m. I remember that we had 15-minute break and the professor said to me come with her [so that she could] give me some paper that I wanted from her office. Anyway, I went with her normally…. As we were going to her office, I was surprised when she said to me, ‘Keep the door open; I know it is not allowed for you to stay alone with a woman’.

I said, ‘Do not worry, it is normal; I have no problem’.

[Ali reflected, laughing]: Maybe, because she was old, and you know in our religion, it is not a big problem. The most important thing is that they are aware of others’ cultures. They have a sense of multiculturalism. Therefore, I received good treatment from people here.

It was clear to me that Ali was attempting to tell me about two issues from this situation: the first was his confused feelings when he had to deal with females, particularly in the beginning. This confusion, Ali believes, arose because the Saudi male has what he called a ‘woman complex’. Therefore, he said when he narrated the situation:

This situation was in the first three months, which were the most difficult time in terms of dealing with women, even though the woman complex is still with me until now.
The second issue was how his professor realised the cultural differences and how she dealt with him according to his culture. It was apparent that Ali admired the ‘sense of multiculturalism’ when he described the situation. This sense becomes clearer later in the interview when Ali said;

"When I brought my wife, it was so clear how they dealt with a woman covering her face or putting a veil on her face or putting on a head covering. Respecting other cultures was so clear from how they dealt with us."

The challenge for Ali in the beginning of his experience was that he had some hesitations when he had to deal with a female in this mixed-gender environment. This problem appeared when Ali said,

"...before, I had some fear when there was a female and I had to deal with her..."

As Ali described it, such a challenge appears to have been a cultural complex that created hesitation and fear when there was a need to deal with women in this new environment. Ali reassured me from his description that his hesitation did not last for a long time. Ali was able to solve many issues relating to this cultural ‘woman complex’. Therefore, I found that Ali more than once at least implied that his experience had taught him that dealing with a woman should not bring any kind of worry and that the fear is more perceived than real. For example, he said;

لما جبت زوجتي كان واضح كيف يتعاملون هم هنا مع المرأة التي تعتبر مثلًا مغطية وجهها و متلثمة أو حاطة حجاب في هذا (يعني احترام الثقافات الأخرى) كان ظاهرا من تعاملهم،

...Before, I had some fear when there was a female and I had to deal with her...
I can say that dealing with a woman here does not cause you to worry except that we – let me say ‘we’ – we have a complex when it comes to dealing with a woman. That means we are culturally prepared for the limits enforced when we deal with a woman.

After the first three months, Ali had no problem in dealing with females nor did he have a problem living in a mixed-gender environment. For example, he said:

الآن صار ما عندي مشكلة في التعامل مع الأنثى.

Now I have no problem to deal with a female.

In another example and in a different context, Ali said,

ما أشعر بأي حرج مع الأنثى ... زميلاتي في المكتب يعرفون زوجتي ودائما تجينا بالامر [صار] طبيعي، زميلاتي في المكتب كلهن غير سعوديات [لذا] من أول يوم جئت تعرفت عليهم هاجس الجندر ما كان هاجس عندي.

I do not feel any problem when dealing with a female.... My female colleagues in the office know my wife and some of them always come to see us. It became normal....

However, my female colleagues in the office are not Saudi. So, from the first day, I got to know them, and I had no concern with their gender.

The gender issue for Ali was part of the customs, as opposed to the religion, in Saudi Arabia; thus, he did not consider dealing with gender to be in conflict with his religion and religiosity. For example, he said,

cالدين بالنسبة لي أن تعاملي معي المرأة جائز حتى السلام اشوقه عادي...ما عندي مشكلة طبعا إذا الأمر استدعى في مصافحة المرأة.
From my perspective, the religion allows dealing with a woman. It is also normal to say “hi” and to shake hands. I have no problem if it is required to shake hands with a woman.

Therefore, Ali felt comfortable, in a mixed-gender environment, when dealing with females in general once he got used to the new environment. The only hesitation that remains with him is associated with dealing or communicating with a Saudi female. This feature became apparent when he said,

لا زلت مع الزميلة السعودية أشعر بحرج لأننا -زي ما قلت لك- أحنًا جميعًا من مجتمع يؤطر هذا الشيء يتوفر علاقتك [هنالك] أنا بالنسبة لي ما عندي أي مشكلة بالتعامل مع السعودية لكن يضل فيه هاجس يضل فيه شيء في النفس أنه ممكن هذا الأخت مثلا تحس أنه في حرج في تعاملي معها

With the Saudi female colleague, I still feel embarrassed – as I said – because we have come from a society that imposes limitations for relations with a female. I have no problem dealing with a Saudi female, but I still have something on my mind – something I am concerned about, that maybe the girl who I am dealing with is embarrassed.

Further, he said:

لما تجي سعودية ، احترازها [إليها] أكون متحفظ بقدر تحفظها ... فكلما زاد تحفظها أنا بأعطيها احتراما لها وأزيد التحفظ لن تأتي سعودية، أحترازها في تجنب تعامل مع المرأة السعودية فقط لأنها سعودية لأنه لما تتعامل مع غير السعودية أنا أعرف أشياء عندها صح وأشياء عندها غير صح مع السعودية أصل في تردد، هل هي مع مجتمعها التي تحتفظ كل حاجة غلط. وللآن بس التعامل ما يجوز بين الرجل والمرأة أو إنها انسانية منفتحة أعمالها كمعاملة أي إسترالية أي صينية أي لبنانية؟

When [I encounter] a Saudi girl, for example, to show her respect, I become conservative as much as she does. As she increases the limit of conservativeness, I
show respect for her and become more conservative…. It still exists, a kind of
hesitation when you deal with a Saudi woman because she is Saudi. When I deal with
a non-Saudi woman, I know what is wrong and what is right. With a Saudi woman, I
remain hesitant. Does she, with her society, does she see everything [involving male
and female] as wrong and [think] that any interaction between men [and women] is
not allowed? Or is she an open-minded person whom I can deal with similar to an
Australian, Chinese, or Lebanese woman?

These quotes demonstrate that Ali’s experiences within a mixed-gender environment
involved two kinds of mixing: with Saudi females and with non-Saudi females. The quotes
also show that even though Ali overcame the difficulty of mixing with non-Saudi women, he
still had some barriers in dealing with Saudi females in a mixed-gender environment. He
indicated the presence of this barrier in his previous comment that ‘the woman complex still
continues with me until now’, particularly when he mentioned that he overcame the challenge
he met in the transition to this mixed-gender environment.

To sum up, Ali’s experience of a mixed-gender environment was described as containing
some difficulties at the beginning because it was a new and strange situation. The challenge
for him was how to get used to this new environment and how to overcome what he called
the ‘woman complex’ – the complex created in the Saudi mind about dealing with females.
This complex and the complexities it creates were implanted by the practice of gender
segregation in the associated cultural discourse. As Ali described it,

فيه عقدة في التعامل مع المرأة يعني احنا مهيأين ثقافيا أن فيه حدود لتعامللي مع المرأة . فالمرأة هذ ما أشوفها في مجتمعنا
ما أشوف إلا المحارم يعني لي الكشف عليهم لكن لما أجي هنا ... مو بس [تشوف] المرأة [لكن] تشرف
منها ما لم تشرف يعني [تشوف شيء] غير
there is a complex when dealing with a woman, as we are culturally prepared to have restrictions when we deal with a woman. The women I see here cannot be seen in our society. I can only see females with whom I have a blood relation, and they can uncover their [faces] to me. But when I came here, you do not just see women, but you see something that you have not seen, something different.

After a while, Ali was able to overcome the woman complex, as well as the fear and hesitation caused by such a complex, when dealing with a non-Saudi female. The Saudi females, however, presented a real cultural challenge because he did not know how he should deal with them. Should he consider the culture of the new environment, which allows mixing freely, or must he consider his and her original context, a gender-segregated environment and culture?

Besides the description of how Ali experienced the transition to a mixed-gender environment, the interview revealed some other aspects relating to his experience as an international student studying within a new environment and living in a new society. For example, a major concern for him at the beginning was related to doing well in his studies, even more than the gender issue. I noticed that at different moments during the interview. For example, Ali said:

I had an intense fear of studying. I was extremely frightened because I did not have a clear perception of the studying methods, exams, or assignments. Was it going to be easy for me to deal with people who have a different language, despite the fact that
my English is not bad? The language issue dominated most of my thinking and concern.

In relation to this context, Ali said:

الترم الأول كنت أشوف لا أشارك رغم أنو كان عندي حاجات يعني أقدر أبدع فيها لكن كان زي ما تكون مفهومة كنت متحف و هذا له علاقة بالثقافة. ما وذك تظهر بمظهر محمر. [إذا] أنا أول ما جبت جلسات مراقب أكثر من مشارك جالس مراقب أيش المقبول وايش الغير المقبول.

In the first semester, I did not participate even when I had something exceptional that I could show and add, but I had some hesitation and some fear, which had to do with the culture, so I did not want to embarrass myself. [Therefore], at the beginning, I stayed as an observer more than a participant. I was observing what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

Ali was able to overcome this dilemma after the first semester, as he said, and he started to feel that he was an outstanding student. He said,

الترم الثاني بعد بدأ تعليمني [تعودت] حتى أبدعت في الاتراكالي بعدها أبدعت أكثر من الي قبلها ... إلى ما بعد أنا عرفت كيف في التعامل مع الناس مثل ما قبل الطلاب.

By the next semester, I felt that I was used to it, and thus I was exceptional in the coming semesters. What helped me is that I started recognising the academic environment here. It was like a game, and I had recognised its rules. So I started being more open when dealing with students around me.

Another side that appeared in the interview related to being an international student living in a new environment and a new society. Ali felt that he wanted to engage and be part of the Australian community. That can be seen when he said,
I still have some weakness when it comes to mixing with the Australians, and I wish to know how they think in order to engage with them to integrate. This was so important for me because it is an experience which will never be granted to me again.

Another aspect appeared when I asked Ali about the preparation organised for the scholarship students and how this course contributed to preparing him for the new experience. He replied,

I did not attend this course because it was not compulsory, and I felt I did not need to attend such a course. I think that the course was religious based, and the aim was to tell us what is allowed and what is prohibited in our religion.

5.1.3. Structural description

The reflection activity on the texture of Ali’s experience was reinforced by the imaginative variation mode. This activity arrived at the conclusion that Ali’s experience was constituted by two essential structures: the 1) ‘golden time’ (constructive experience), and the 2) ‘woman complex’.

First structure: golden time (constructive experience)

It was clear that Ali was enjoying the transition from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment. The experience for him was marvellous and beautiful. He enjoyed the space of freedom within the new environment, which made him feel like a normal human who can interact with the other gender. The new experience allowed him to feel that he was mature enough to decide what is appropriate for him and what is not appropriate. It also allowed him
to reflect on his identity as an independent human who does what he thinks and wants rather than what society wants him to do. For Ali, it was like a golden time when he realised that a mixed-gender environment is the way natural humans should live, and it is the natural environment for a human being.

It was a golden time for Ali because when he learned that mixing with the opposite sex is part of human nature, he easily adjusted to his nature. The transitioning experience was golden partly because he learned that he could be mature in dealing with the opposite sex; therefore, he does not need social restrictions and limitations to protect him from the other sex or to protect the other sex from him. Ali’s golden time was marvellous to feel and constructive to live.

Second structure: *woman complex*

It was revealed within the textural description that the transitioning experience for Ali involved some difficulties and challenges in dealing with the other sex. Ali encountered hesitation and fear because he did not know how he should communicate. This problem, for him, constituted a psychological complex that in the beginning kept him from acting as a normal person when dealing with a female. The normal person, from Ali’s perspective, is one who can express himself regardless of to whom he is expressing himself. Therefore, in the beginning, Ali did not feel that he was a normal person; he was very hesitant in dealing with the opposite sex, and when he had to interact with females, he carefully selected his words and the topic because communicating freely with females was a new phenomenon.

Ali found that all of his challenges in dealing with the opposite sex stemmed from gender segregation and the ideology behind it. For him, gender segregation had created what he called a ‘*woman complex*’, which caused him to fear something that would not usually be
frightening, and he hesitated from engaging in situations in which a normal person would naturally engage. Therefore, the woman complex is what created the challenges in his transitioning experience.

5.2. Zahra’s experience

5.2.1. Biographical description

Zahra, a 27-year-old female, is from the city of Jeddah. Zahra came to Melbourne in 2007 to study for a master’s degree in the medical sciences. She is originally from the Hadhrami tribe that immigrated to Hejaz (which is now the Western Region of Saudi Arabia). The Hadhrami tribe, in general, is well known as a business and trader community in Saudi Arabia, and its members are considered high class, economically speaking.

She had studied medical sciences in Saudi Arabia; and, as I have indicated in chapter 2, the medical sciences schools have semi-coeducational education for undergraduate students. Female students share some courses under certain circumstances with male students, and students are usually trained in a hospital, which is one example of the few mixed-gender institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Zahra was a student sponsored by the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Programme. She was among the first waves of students sent by the programme to study in Australia in 2007. She started her journey by doing an English course for one year, and then she enrolled in a master’s degree programme in 2008.

Zahra was single and was accompanied by her father in the first month. Then she moved in with some other Saudi women, and her father came to visit her yearly.
5.2.2. Textural description

The description provided by Zahra during the interview indicated some features that were woven into the texture of her experience. The first texture that clearly appeared in reading and listening to Zahra’s description was that the transition to a mixed-gender environment allowed her to regain her self-confidence and to discover how capable she is in managing her own affairs without a man’s assistance.

For Zahra, being in a mixed-gender environment taught her that even though she was considered a dependent human – as she had been all her life in Saudi Arabia – she realised that she could be independent in some respects. This feature was apparent at different moments during the interview, for example, when she said,

"living here has completely changed my personality; there are so many positive aspects here. If I were to continue counting such aspects until tomorrow, it would be impossible to count all the advantages, but the most important one is that it has reshaped my personality, and I have started depending on myself."

Zahra’s words ‘reshaped my personality’ convey that her experiences had made her feel stronger and more confident, particularly when it comes to dealing with a male. This can be realised when she said in the same context,


"العيشة هنا غيرت شخصيتي تماما فيها ايجابيات كثير. لو جلست من اليوم لبكرة ما حأعطيك كل المميزات. من اهمها: صقلت شخصيتي واعتمد على نفسي."
The output of my experience is that my personality was reshaped. It is not me or my parents who said that; all the family said, ‘Zahra has changed’. So, when I come back, I will know how to handle my affairs confidently and how to set my own boundaries. It is over now – that if a man crosses the boundary, I remain unable to take action. It is over, I can act and stop him....This experience and my travel to Australia have reshaped my personality.

In relation to this texture, Zahra pointed that studying abroad has allowed her to learn how to manage her own affairs without intervention from a man, upon whom she was totally dependent when she was in Saudi Arabia. This idea appeared when she said,


In Saudi Arabia, I did nothing. We depended on men. Here I have to deal with all issues myself. So, when I did something, I got happy. No family members expected that Zahra would do such things. Nobody expected that Zahra has travelled or depended on herself: to depend on myself to do everything such as searching for a house, buying things, or paying bills. It was impossible to gain such things in Saudi Arabia because we used not to do such [things] alone. When we arrived first to Australia, we had some difficulties, but they helped to reshape my personality.

From these examples, it is easy to see that the space left for Zahra to depend on herself in this mixed-gender environment strengthened her personality and assisted her in regaining her
self-confidence as well as providing her with an opportunity to trust her capabilities as an independent person. Therefore, she used such strong expressions as ‘when I come back, I will know how to handle my affairs’, ‘how to set my boundaries’, and ‘It is over!...It is over. I can act and stop him.’

On the opposite side, the experience of a mixed-gender environment involved some serious challenges and difficulties at the beginning. A thoughtful reading of Zahra’s description leads one to see that she suffered to reach the positive status that she was focusing on when she described her experience. Zahra described the early stage of her life in a mixed-gender environment as an unknown and shocking environment which was fraught with fears. She was really shocked by the ‘foreign’ environment and the fear of ‘foreign’ men. It was apparently clear that she was fearful not only because she had moved to a new place to live in a new and unknown environment, but also because she knew that she was moving to an environment where she would have to deal directly with men – with whom she was not used to dealing before. This impression can be derived from a statement in which she said,

Unlike most Saudi families, mixing with males was not an issue in my family, I could sit with my nephews and cousins, but there were still some limits. Here it is different because I am alone here. There, I sat with my nephews only if my mother or brothers were with me.

Here, Zahra started expressing concern about the new environment. Although her family in Saudi Arabia – as she said – did not practice gender segregation entirely as it is commonly
practiced in the Saudi society, mixing between sexes in the new environment was still causing her worry because she was without her mother, sisters, or brothers, who are a source of strength for her.

The beginning of her life in Australia was difficult for her, and she suffered when she first arrived in Melbourne, as she says here:

I became exhausted once I arrived here. I did not know how to do things, and I could not do anything by myself, so I always cried...

Even the weather was part of the strange new environment. Zahra clearly portrayed an image of the unknown environment and how it shocked her when she said,

Yes, I was with my father, but I still remember the first time we came to Australia. It was cloudy [foggy]. You feel nobody is there. I could not even see the road. So, I got afraid. It was a shock. I was shocked the first day I came.

The shock continued through her first day at the language centre when she went to class and took her seat there. She said,

The first day was a dream. It was a nightmare. The first class was horrible. It was very bad. It might be so because I had not experienced such a situation before. I
remained silent all the time. I did not speak with anybody. I was isolated all the time in a corner.

She preferred to keep silent and isolate herself. Fears and worries occupied her mind. From these descriptions, we can deduce that the mixed-gender environment was not simple at all for Zahra to cope with. It presented a set of complex situations that she needed to interact with in navigating positively through her experience; it was a combination of different community, different culture, different language, and different gender. She had never experienced anything like it before, so she felt unable to interact with such differences. She was shy, hesitant, and afraid, and her feelings can be captured from the following quote:

When I wanted to make communication with people, I felt shy, but it is not only because of my language limitation, as I thought that we are all [in the language centre] coming to learn English and we are in the same level. I was not afraid of that [talking with people in English] as much as I was afraid of being in a mixed-gender climate with strange young males around.

Therefore, the open presence of ‘strange young males’ was one of the major concerns that Zahra asserted in this quote when she said, ‘I was not afraid of that [talking with people in English] as much as I was afraid of being in a mixed-gender climate with strange young males around.’ For Zahra, their presence was a source of anxiety and fright. This aspect of the experience obviously appeared when she said,
Mixing with the other gender was difficult for me because in this case, I had to interact with non-relative men whom I did not know...the problem was not particularly in talking with men, but because I thought sometimes that if this man would cross the lines and the boundary, I did not know how to act and stop him. So, I preferred to keep my distance and be away from men...of course this was at the beginning, but now I know how to deal [with them].

For Zahra, there were religious, cultural, and personal limits and boundaries that she was afraid she could not maintain in a mixed-gender environment. Her greatest concern was, as she said, ‘that if this man crosses the lines and the boundary, I did not know how to act and stop him’; therefore, she preferred to avoid dealing with men during her first days in Australia.

At this stage of her experience, she was regularly talking to her mother in Saudi Arabia and consulting with her. Even though her father was staying with her, because this is a female issue, it could not be discussed with her father. She pointed that out when she said,

I always called my mother and cried; she just encouraged me. Even though my father was staying here with me, he is not like my mother [she meant that she could not talk to him about this issue].
During the interview, Zahra highlighted that the strong fears and worries she had did not last long. She overcame most of them after a month and started enjoying the adventure of studying abroad. She indicated this when she said,

هنا صرحة خفت، كان تأثيره سلبي مرة علي، فمرة خفت وتأثرت فترة طويلة [لكن] بعدن بدأت أنقم

Honestly, I got afraid, [and] it negatively affected me. I got afraid for a while, but I then started to adapt.

When I asked her how long it took her to get rid of fears and worries, she said,

[ثم] شهر تقريبا وعدين استوعبت...

It took me one month, and then I realised that I could cope...

In relation to this aspect of the experience, Zahra noted that the motivation she had to study overseas and get a master’s degree was very strong, and it helped her to pass and not retain the fears and hesitations she had at the beginning of the experience. The motivation and determination she had were stronger than all her fears and worries. She said,

من أهم الاشياء التي خلدتني انغلب على خوفي أنني أتذكرني أنا الي اختبرت هذا الشيء فلازم أنو أكون قد انتحبت في هذا البيئة فلا زم انجاوز هذه الاشياء . هذه الاشياء كلها في سبيل تحقيق حلمي

One of the most important factors which made me overcome my fears was that I usually remembered that it was my choice. So, I had to honour my commitment toward the decision I made. I placed myself in this environment. So, I had to overcome all difficulties. And I said to myself, ‘All these challenges are nothing if they are the way to make my dream real.
This aspect was stated clearly when she described how she was passionate and determined to continue her study and get a master’s degree. Here, her strategy was to ignore the anxiety associated with being in a mixed-gender environment, instead evoking her goal each time she had difficulties or felt uncomfortable. This strategy, as she described, helped her to some extent in terms of reducing her worry and concern.

Once I got my bachelor’s [degree], I had in my mind that this does not meet my aspirations. I wanted to have the master’s, either inside Saudi Arabia or abroad. This was my goal, and I was determined to achieve it. So I put it in my mind. When the scholarship programme was established – and getting a master’s [in medical science] was difficult in Saudi Arabia and [is] still really difficult – so when the scholarship programme was established, I started thinking, why not take the challenge?! So I am feeling that I am in the way of my dream… so I did not focus on and consider the negatives I am facing or the difficulties.

Another factor that Zahra mentioned as a supportive aspect in forming her positive experience was her family. She stated that she comes from a relatively non-conservative family – as she described – and she has educated parents, who have supported her as she goes through this experience. Therefore, she does not have any kind of family pressure with regard to mixing with people of the opposite sex, which other Saudi females might have. She talked about her family, which does not fully practice gender segregation – not as the predominant
style prevailing in Saudi Arabia. Her father works for Aramco, a working environment that, if compared with others in Saudi Arabia, allows for mixing between sexes. Moreover, Zahra’s family allowed her to study for a bachelor’s degree at a medical school which is, at least to some extent, a mixed-gender place. She clarified this aspect saying:

وصراحة استشرت ماما وبابا فما كان عندهم أي مانع. هم ما هم من الناس إلي ما هم مرة

وأولاد متعلم جامعي كان يعمل في ارامكو ووالدته متعلمة ومدرسة

Honestly, I asked for the advice of my parents; they did not show me any hesitation as they are not restricted. My father is educated. He is a university graduate and working at Aramco, and my mother is educated and she is a teacher.

Therefore, Zahra pushed herself to venture to overcome fears without any extra stress imposed from her family. She started by sitting in class at a table where young males were sitting, despite the worries she had. She thought that trying to overcome her cultural inhibitions would be a basic step in facing the hesitation. We can see this in her comment,

كنت أجلس في الطاولة التي عليها شباب كنت أحاول أن أغلب على شعوري وخوفني...

I sat at the same table where some young males were sitting and tried to defeat my feelings and fears.

It was quite clear during the interview that Zahra was focusing on how to explain and justify to me the fears she had at the beginning of her experience. Therefore, she gave some reasons why she thought they effectively shaped the early stage of her difficult experience, although she thought that the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment overall was beneficial and successful.
She said that she had a difficult experience in the beginning and that it might be more difficult than that of other Saudi women who would arrive in Australia later on because, in addition to the challenge posed by the new environment, she was one of the first female Saudi scholarship members to arrive in Australia. Zahra thought that neither did she have a clear image of the new environment and society, nor did Australian society have enough awareness of how to deal with a Saudi female. She said,

As one of the first scholarship members, I was the only Saudi girl in the class. This means the experience I had was more difficult than the new comers. We have large numbers now. Before, I was the only Saudi girl. This is the difficulty.

She also thought that the most prominent factors for successfully fitting into the new society are students’ openness to requesting assistance and advice, the quality of the pre-scholarship programme, and the university’s ability to create an environment where female Saudi students can forge friendships with other female students. These elements are reflected in the following statements.

First, Zahra thought she had encountered difficulties in the beginning because she was not open enough to request advice and support from others. At the beginning of her study life in Australia, she avoided going to the university counselling service despite the fears and anxiety she had. She said,
I just knew in the second semester that if you had a problem, you could visit the university adviser, but I did not go, and I did not want to go. This was my personality; if I have a problem, I do not disclose it.

Second, Zahra pointed out that the scholarship training course she attended did not address difficulties that a female might have in a mixed-gender environment nor how to handle such difficulties. She did not expect that she would have a shock that would cause such an impact. She wished that the scholarship training course would have focused on such an issue. She said,

In the scholarship training course, the trainers talked only about Australia and what it has [to offer]. I meant we should have had a qualification training course. I did not want to have the course we had. The course we attended was only to give information about the country. What you are going to meet and how to act were not addressed. I was given no information ... from a person who had gone there and come back. The course did not help.

She added in the same context,
They should train [the students] how to mix with people. In the courses, they focused only on respecting the law of the country. A scholarship student should know how to live in a new environment to achieve his academic goals.

Third, Zahra felt that she was lucky because she was around people who helped her without any prior arrangement. They helped to lessen the impact of her shock. She said,

When I met a woman from UAE, she was only the one who encouraged me. She worked in the institute. She took me to the class and introduced them [i.e., the other students] to me. The UAE girl availability helped. She found me shy and silent. Then, she introduced herself to me.

In the same context, Zahra said that her teacher in the institute helped her to meet a female Chinese student in all the activities she did in the class. Such an action helped her to make friends with another girl. That was encouraging for her.

I have got rid of fears and a desire to keep silent, thank God. I started talking during the first days or the first week. Later on I met a Chinese girl. Such a meeting helped very much. I met the Chinese girl because we worked together during the class activities assigned to us by the school. Then, I had a friendship with her.
5.2.3. Structural description

The phenomenological reduction process revealed that Zahra’s transitioning experience appeared as a generally positive and ‘beneficial’ experience, despite all the challenges she had when she first arrived in Australia and interacted with the mixed-gender world.

Reflecting upon her biographical information and the textural description showed that the experience Zahra encountered relied on two main structures: 1) fear of males and 2) reshaping her personality. These structures may be described as follows.

First structure: fear of males

Zahra’s account indicated that transitioning to a mixed-gender environment can be a difficult experience for the Saudi female. Thus, avoiding engagement was a phenomenon in Zahra’s case. She preferred isolating herself rather than engaging with her classmates, particularly the males. It can be noticed from the description that the presence of male classmates was considered a source of difficulty and anxiety. As she described, the first days were ‘horrible’, and it was like a ‘nightmare’ because of the presence of young male classmates with whom she did not know how to interact positively. Being in a mixed-gender environment for Zahra was like being threatened. Therefore, she considered it a ‘scary’ experience.

This facet of the experience can be understood if we revisit how mixing between sexes is considered by Saudis in general and by Saudi females in particular. As mentioned in the context of the study, gender segregation practices have contributed to acculturating Saudi females to perceive members of the opposite sex who are not relatives as a source of threat. In the gender-segregated society, females are brought up with ‘intimidation’ and ‘warnings’ about boys and about mixing with them. The males are portrayed as sexual and evil, not as friends or classmates, and they are described to the females as human wolves, ready to attack
(Fanjar 1987; Jawhari, 2007). In other words, the core idea behind the practice of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is to protect females from males, to protect the family ird.

As a Saudi and an interviewer, I clearly understood what she meant by saying ‘if he crosses the lines’; she was referring to the harassment of her family ird. At the time of her experience, she was inhibited by the traditional images of herself as a female and of males. The traditional image suggests that the female is weak, dependent on the male of the family, and the traditional image suggests that the male is a source of threat that may stain her ird.

As stated in chapter 2, it is not acceptable at all for Saudi females in a traditional Saudi society to have a male friend in any way, even among relatives who are not considered close to the female (the concept of ‘close relative’ was identified in the chapter 2). The contemporary social mindset in Saudi society cannot imagine that a normal relationship can exist between male and females out of blood kinship or marriage, so the female is seen only as mother, daughter, sister, or wife; otherwise, she is considered as a foreigner. The foreigner female sees the foreigner male as a source of threat to the family ird, which is associated with her as discussed in the second chapter. Thus, any level of relationship with the foreigner from different sexes was prohibited from the Saudi perspective, socially and religiously, and it is the female responsibility to maintain any necessary interaction not to cross the boundary of the relationship.

Zahra’s experience seemed to be associated with this cultural image when she was first exposed to a very open, mixed-gender environment, which is different from what she used to live in. She was not confident enough in the beginning to risk engaging with males. Therefore, she preferred to stay away and isolated herself because she was afraid of the ‘unknown young male’ as she described it; in addition, she did not know how to act if that the
‘unknown young male’ should try to ‘cross the lines’ between her and him. However, perhaps because Zahra came from a slightly open Saudi environment and background (in comparison to the typical Saudi environment), she was able to find her way quickly to control this fear and to start feeling positive about her transition to a mixed-gender environment. She started to gain confidence in herself and to realise that she is an independent female who can protect herself. This particular aspect of the experience is reflected in the second structure.

The second structure: reshaping the personality

Zahra’s account demonstrates that the most positive aspect of the experience in being an international student in a mixed-gender environment was the feeling of confidence and independence. She learned ‘how to handle [her] affairs confidently and how to set [her] own boundaries’ in relation to communication with males. For Zahra, the transition to a mixed-gender environment was an opportunity to gain ‘self-confidence’ and ‘self-independence’.

Even though she was afraid, in the beginning, of interacting and engaging with the males in the new environment, she felt at a certain stage of her experience that her personality was becoming steadily stronger. All the described challenges that she faced in the beginning of her experience ‘helped [Zahra] to reshape [her] personality’ in a positive way. The reshaping of Zahra’s personality was reflected in how she had grown up as a female dependent on males in most aspects of her life, whereas now she could deal with her affairs independently. She lived most of her time in Australia without her family and particularly without a male who was, according to the culture, supposed to take care of her affairs (Midgley, 2009). Such circumstances may have led her to feel, as she described, unsafe and anxious at the beginning, but at the same time, this challenging experience allowed her to learn how she could navigate through these challenges. Living with females may offer an
appropriate space for gaining confidence and practicing independence. For Zahra, the transitioning experience with all of its associated challenges was an experience of reshaping a strong, confident, and independent personality.

5.3 Salem's experience

5.3.1. Biographical description

Prior to and within the interview, Salem provided some background information that helps in understanding some aspects of his experience. Without revealing any information that might indicate his actual identity, some of this information may be given here.

Salem is a 33-year-old single Saudi male from the middle region of Saudi Arabia. He is originally from Albaha Province in Saudi Arabia. Salem’s family travelled from Albaha to Riyadh before he was born; therefore, he lived most of his life in Riyadh with his family. Salem moved to the Eastern Province in order to work as a tutor at one of the universities there. He completed his bachelor’s degree for teaching art. Generally, he is descended from a popular tribe in Saudi Arabia, and economically he is from a *middle class* family.

He got a scholarship from his work to study for a master’s degree in Australia. Salem has been studying in Australia since 2006. He studied an English language course for almost a year and a half. At the time of the interview, he was studying for a Master of Education degree. He lived with three home-stays during his English course, shared living quarters with two Australian couples, and finally lived by himself. Salem is an artist; therefore, he managed to establish some friendships in Australia on this basis. He is planning to study for a PhD in Australia as well, because he thinks that the social environment here is safer than that in the USA.
5.3.2. Textural description

Salem was obviously open and engaging during the interview. He appeared to speak freely about the experience. I noticed also when I listened to the interview that he tended to explain the feelings and the events he encountered and reflected on them in relation to his background. He spoke much about how he conceived of the practices in both a segregated and mixed-gender environment. His explanation and his individual personal perception are considered useful, even though they were not the focus of the investigation, because they assisted in tracking and navigating the essential structure of the transitioning experience. I combined his explanation with the description here because it indicated some relevant features that can assist in understanding the experience he encountered. His explanation also reflected some aspects of his cultural identity.

The interview revealed that the Australian experience was not Salem’s first exposure to a mixed-gender environment, so he regarded the current experience in Australia, particularly with the mixed-gender environment, as an extension of his previous experience. Therefore, he started describing his current experience by reminiscing about his first exposure to a mixed-gender environment, which was 10 years ago when he visited Kuwait. In Kuwait, women are allowed to participate in some mixed-gender activities more openly than women do in Saudi Arabia. Females in Kuwait can be seen driving, working alongside males, and not covering their faces, which was not the case in Saudi Arabia 10 years ago.

The first experience for Salem was shock and surprise, even though he was prepared for the fact that Kuwait is a mixed-gender environment compared to Saudi Arabia. This meaning emerged from the units:
I think it is worth mentioning that I have travelled before. It was my last year when I was studying for my undergraduate degree that I visited Kuwait. I was shocked by seeing a female driving a car there. It was so confrontational to me to know that a woman can do such thing even though we were in Kuwait [which is still conservative compared to the Western world]. I was shocked even though I know that women drive in Kuwait; hence, I had expected to see this situation, but I really had some surprise and wonder.

As Salem described in this quote, experiencing a mixed-gender environment for the first time was confrontational for him, even though he was expecting it. However, this was not the case in his current experience with a mixed-gender environment in Australia. The mixing between sexes in his current experience was not surprising or shocking for him; rather, it inspired him to reflect on and to re-discover the new society. For Salem, the current experience opened an opportunity to revisit how he perceived others (i.e., Western society, including Australia). He was ‘amazed’ when he noticed that Western society is not like what he expected – a ‘materialistic society’ in which there is no space for humanity and morals. The most surprising aspect Salem noticed is how the Australian community, in a general sense, values humanity and human rights, which is reflected in the practice of mixing between the sexes. When I asked him how he would describe living and studying in a mixed-gender society, he started by pointing out that the current experience for him was seen as an opportunity of
learning and discovering the similarities between humans. Yes, he had encountered some
challenges in the beginning, and he felt anxiety; but it was nothing compared to what he has
gained. This particular feature became clear when he said,

\[\text{I think that most of what was in this experience – will not be called problems – but I}
\text{will call them unusual things... My experience helped me to explore differences}
\text{between us as two societies [Western and Eastern] and what we have in common. It}
\text{has surprised me, seeing the aspects of humanity which I never thought existed in a}
\text{well-developed society such as the Australian one. One of these aspects is the right to}
\text{be an independent person. The independence of the individual here is too high.}
\]

Salem’s description indicated that the transitioning experience to the Australian mixed-
gender environment has ‘helped [him] to explore’ the differences and similarities between his
Saudi society and the Australian society. This exploration began by his questioning the
previous perception and stereotype about the West in general and Australian society in
particular. Further, this facet of the experience had involved ongoing personal reflection on
his attitude toward gender roles and gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, particularly when he
is expressing that within his art works. After the interview, Salem shared with me some of his
reflections, which I will comment on when I discuss cultural identity in the findings section
of chapter 6. Many examples in the interview dialogue could present this feature of Salem’s
experiences. In one of his clearest statements, he said,
I don’t know in the beginning, but I think that I had a certain idea about [women’s roles], like working outside the home. My mind was so occupied by some ideas created by religious scholars’ opinions and traditions, but when I came here and saw women’s lives – yes, certainly women don’t live in paradise – but in the end she can be herself [what she wants to be] in one way or another...

Reflecting on the transitioning experience for Salem seemed to be a means of and a tool for re-identifying his relationship with his cultural group. In other words, the reflection was a tool he used in searching for his cultural identity. Another example that showed the depth of such a reflection is presented in this quote:

Comparing my previous experience in Riyadh and here in Melbourne made me reflect on my ancestors’ life rather than our current life [in terms of] searching for identity.

When I think about our grandfathers’ way of life in our original areas, they were tolerant and simple [in terms of the female role]. If compared with other [societies],
they were such normal people, acting normally and having manners similar to the other people in the world. They had the same manners which allow women to mix with men in the farm fields, stores, and markets. They dealt normally with each other. And once a person made a mistake, the society would judge him if he or she violated its rules and traditions. There were no limitations to which each person should be kept restricted, and one found it difficult to create private space as well. This has helped me to have more knowledge about the different things Saudi Arabia has. Saudi Arabian areas are not the same. The predominant thought is the governing religious thought, which takes advantage of these things. Regardless of how correct this thought is, this party leads it.

This unit of meaning also indicated that coping with a mixed-gender environment, from Salem’s perspective, was seen as a representation of being ‘normal’ that is similar to other normal people. It is a representation of being a normal person who can engage with one of the common and universal human practices (mixing between sexes). It appeared clearly from the interview that Salem saw the transition to a mixed-gender environment as being like moving from an ‘odd’ environment to living in a ‘normal society’ in which humans should naturally live. Mixing between genders is the natural practice for Salem. Thus, although a mixed-gender environment is a new context for Salem to live in, involving some challenges, it is the natural environment where humans (male and female) can live a normal life, and it is easy for them to re-adjust. By the time he reached a certain stage, Salem felt that a mixed-gender environment is the regular environment where people can practice their natural activities. He said,
I integrated with Australian society very quickly, and I like such a climate because I see it as a normal society. I felt, this is the society! So as soon as I lived in it, I discovered how healthy it is. I am not saying it is perfect and free of problems; such a perfect society does not exist, but at least the problems here are still in the normal trend, which is better than problems that create an odd shape to a society.

Rather than being difficult, it was exciting for Salem to cope with a mixed-gender environment. This feature of his experience perhaps stemmed from Salem’s perception that mixing between genders is a human practice that is natural for human beings. He said,

For me, it was probably ‘exciting’ to see women and men working together; I have seen it not as a kind of modernism, but for me, it is a humanitarian practice and very old. That is what human beings are supposed to do.

The interview with Salem disclosed that his perception about mixing between sexes as a ‘humanitarian’ and ‘natural’ practice influenced his entire transitioning experience. Many statements indicated the contribution of that perception to the adjustment process. It can be noticed that Salem was motivated by his attempt to be a ‘normal person’ like his ancestors and other ‘normal people’ who engaged with a mixed-gender environment naturally. For example, he said,
I was trying to be ‘more’ natural; because I felt that they think we are coming from a closed society. As a result, the nature of our dealings with [females] was with anticipation and hesitation.... They think about us that we are closed (not open to the other). Therefore, I was trying to be a very normal person in my relationship with them regardless [of what they think].

Another similar statement:

We have no normal human life. When I come to Saudi Arabia, I feel I need to live the same life I had in this country. This feeling may be raised because I am really living normally here. I felt myself here and felt more normal in this normal society.

The notions of ‘normal person’ and ‘natural environment’ were evident in almost the entire description of Salem experience. However, the details of Salem’s account, particularly his attempts to show that he can be ‘normal’, were not free of anxiety and concern.

He was concerned about being an exile and an isolated person if he could not engage with the new context. He said, for example,
I was trying to live here as an engaged, not isolated, person, and to engage, you have to show respect to the context of the society. When you show respect, it does not mean you give up your principles, but it means you are not inflexible and restrictive.

Reading this quote in relation to other units of meaning can clarify the indicated characteristic of a normal person from Salem’s perspective. For example, he said in one of the previous quotes that ‘our ancestors were so normal. This is the normal way of humans...Men mixed with women in farms, stores, or markets. They dealt with each other normally’. He also said, 

When I came, I was never concerned about who I was dealing with – man or woman – as much as I was uncomfortable, afraid, tense – say whatever you want – from being in exile and alienated in a new society. However, I got rid of this feeling later... So the idea of mixing between the sexes did not occupy my mind, but I was concerned about being in exile.

Salem was not thinking about mixing between genders as a problem but as a natural situation where he could decide for himself to be a normal person who can interact with others normally or not a normal person who isolates himself or is isolated by other people involved in the situation. He was worried but at the same time determined to show how normal he is. This feature appeared explicitly and implicitly in his description; for example, he said,
They think we are closed. I tried to be normal when I built up a relationship, regardless of whether it was with a male or female.

Another unit of meaning showing that feature is as follows:

I was not motivated against experiencing mixing with the other sex or nervous about it because I was so interested to live in this Australian gender climate; I was wanting to experience the climate. So I had no reservation or thought of anything which might be an obstruction. For example, staying close to a girl or communicating with her was not a big issue. I really was not disturbed or frightened of such issues....

Salem’s experience appeared not to include concern about the mixing between genders or engaging with the opposite gender itself; rather, his concern was associated with the process of interaction with the opposite gender, which might involve some mistakes because he was not used to such interaction and engagement. Therefore, such new and unfamiliar engagement was a ‘source of timidity’. He expressed that by saying,

The issue of mixing between men and women was a source of timidity. It wasn’t because of the mixing itself, but I was afraid of being impolite [in such a situation] ...

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Salem’s experience appeared not to include concern about the mixing between genders or engaging with the opposite gender itself; rather, his concern was associated with the process of interaction with the opposite gender, which might involve some mistakes because he was not used to such interaction and engagement. Therefore, such new and unfamiliar engagement was a ‘source of timidity’. He expressed that by saying,
I was wary because I might make a mistake, and mistakes in our culture mean something very big! Particularly mistakes toward females…. anyway, I have discovered the truth ... I mean, I was not cautious of dealing with females ... I was just afraid to look rude!

Salem had some ‘timidity’ because he did not want to appear ‘rude’ if he made an unwitting and unintentional mistake. He discovered later that the worry and timidity he had was not real or genuine, but at the beginning, he was influenced by his culture in terms of making a mistake with a female. He referred to that by saying ‘in our culture, it means something very big! A particular mistake toward the female...anyway, I have discovered the truth’. Thus, he did not hesitate to deal with females because of religious prohibitions; rather, he was afraid of being excluded or isolated from the new context if he were to make a mistake when dealing with a female. He wanted to appear normal. Salem saw himself, during his first days in a mixed-gender environment, as feeling shy and confused, particularly when he interacted with friendly females. He said,

في المعهد كانوا زملاءنا الكولومبيين, يعني هم أكثر من صدمني ربما أو سوّى لي صدمة في المعهد, لأن البنات عندهم كانوا يبوسون بحميميّة, وكانوا يعتبرونا 'روود' إذا ما سوّينا كذا, فكانت في البداية فيها نوع من الحقل.

In the institute, it severely surprised me to see our Colombian female colleagues kiss warmly. They think we are rude if we do not kiss. At the beginning, I had some sort of shyness.

These quotes indicate that Salem had concerns about the new setting when he first started to study English in an Australian institution, in a mixed-gender class, and with a diverse range of international students. He started overcoming this concern in order to interact with people rather than simply react to them. This aspect can be seen in some events involving physical contact that Salem shared with me in the interview:
زواج (ماري) ‘الهومستي’ التي كنت عضدها، لما تغيرت ا Hóaمي [عمرها تقريبا 83 أو 84 سنة في الزواج] قالت: أليف أن أتصور معني وحضنتي. في زفافها كانت تشعر بألف كيف أصف الموت ... هذا، بين حديثي: أليف، وألف، وألف، وألف، وألف. ولكن أليف صار لي شيء غير متوقع في ذهني، يعني كان مستحيل التوقع في ذهني أن يكون لدي حضنتي بطريقة سريعة جداً.

I got confused at Mary's ('the home stay') wedding party. [Jimi's] mother requested to have a picture with me. She hugged me. She was 84 or 83 years old, but it was difficult for me to describe my feeling at that moment. I did not feel that I had made a mistake, but the idea is that hugging happened unexpectedly. It was impossible to expect such incident.

بس اللي كنت يعني ألاحظه هنا أنني كنت أشعر بالأمان أكثر أنني أتكلم مع إمرأة أو مع بنت أكثر من أنني أروح أسأل رجل، وقبل أن نفكر أحس أنني كنت أضعيف في بلغة أسل عربية أنت تكلم مع أشياء أنت تكلم مع شخص أنت مكلف عليه. بعدما كنت أشعر بالأمان أكثر، يعني أشعر أنني أتكلم مع إمرأة أو مع بنت أكثر من أنني أروح أسأل رجل، كانت أكتشف أن كان أيميل أكثر للتعامل بشكل عام في المجتمع مع الإناث، وأصبح أن عرفنا مشكلة في اللغة. عندما مشكلة في يعني - أقولنا - إكلال الأصابع. ربما تتسويل نوع من الاتصالات في ذلك نتتتكلم مع شخص، أنت مكلف عليه بعددهك، أنت مكلف عليه، فالبنات عندما تقبل أكثر لأن الرجال أحياناً تبدو دائماً أتمتاع لما يكون عليه في السؤال أو تلتح عليه بتسافر، ووجد أن البنات ألطف. بعد ما طلعت من ‘الهومستي’ صارت مناسبة ‘الكومونوليث’ قيم، فذات في ‘الفريدشين’ سكوير. كانت المرشدات السياحيات في الساحة، كانوا مشاهد من أشياء. يعني بعد شهرين من وصولي، تجاوزت أشياء كثيرة جداً مثل (ماكان عندي مشكلة أن أحضر وما كان موضوع العمر حاجز) وحدها فيهم كبيرة في السن، فيهم كبيرة في السن، ما كانت كبيرة في السن.

I can remember that I [started to feel] more secure when I talked with a woman or a girl than in talking to or asking a man. If I lost my way, I had reservations about asking a man, but I felt more secure to ask an old lady because she is more considerate. I only had a more secure feeling when I talked to a woman. I discovered
that I like to deal with woman more than with men because I have found that women are more considerate and more open to accepting questions. We have problems with English – let me say, a problem with approaching others. If you approach someone you do not know to talk to him, he might think it is an attack instead of an approach. You also apply your own criteria for limits [in such a situation], not his. Girls here are more open; I have seen men show some ill will when you ask them. I have found out that girls are more considerate. When I left the ‘home stay’ I attended the ‘Commonwealth Games’. When I was in the ‘Federation Square’, the tourist guides came into the square wearing special dress. I took a picture with them. The picture shows me hugging the two girls. This action demonstrates the change I had. After two months, I had overcome many things (I had no problem hugging, and ages did not create any barriers). One of the girls was young, and the other was a little bit older.

Salem further observed regarding physical contact,

ما كان عندي مشكلة أنني أصافح، وأني أيضاً أبوس ع الخدّ، يعني خدّ على خدّ يعني زي سلامنا... تجاوزت تصويري المغلق عن التلامس الجسدي ربما

I have no problem, in shaking hands [with women], and I also touch on the cheek, I mean cheek to cheek like in our greetings [as males do with males] ... I overcame my closed ideas about physical contact [like shaking hands and touching cheeks].

These quotes suggest that Salem had overcome the issue of dealing with females in a mixed-gender environment. Salem mentioned two factors which have influenced his transitioning experience toward adjustment: understanding the new context and the extent of the available freedom. That can be seen when he said,
I had a kind of understanding to some extent. People here do not have the same image. There is no religious police here.

He was identifying himself in the beginning as a cultural representative; therefore, he was very concerned about being a good representative for his culture. This situation changed when he said:

I was seeing myself that, I represent [my] culture ... that meant a lot to me to be a good representative. [However] this [thought] took me almost two or three months.

Then his perception of gender-segregated culture changed completely, as he said,

We have no normal human life. Whenever I go back to Saudi Arabia, I feel I the need to live the same life I had in this country. This feeling may be stronger because I am really living normally here. I feel like myself here and feel more normal in this normal society.

Salem elaborated on his Saudi Arabian life in another statement:

Life is difficult, life is annoying, life 'is testing', life 'is tasteless', life is without colors, it is like this. I read in an American research that 'the black veil is a popular among Saudis', and 'it is more popular among women'. So, I directly faced a lot of analysis. I thought the black veil is a phase of culture, which means that we are no longer able...
التفاعل مع الجمال أو صنع الجمال، لذلك غطي كل شيء. وخله يغطي بالأسود وانتهى واللي تحته ما يطالعون فيه. ما فيه حياة طبيعية للإناث. ما هي بحياة.

It is a difficult, disturbing, and tasteless life. I read an American writer who wrote about customs in Saudi Arabia. He mentioned the ‘abbaya’ as the ‘very popular cover dress in Saudi Arabia’. I had read an analysis stating that the ‘abbaya’ covering all the body is representing a cultural period. We cannot feel beauty or make beauty, either. We have covered everything and no one looks at the parts covered under the ‘abbaya’. Females have no normal life.

5.3.3. Structural description

The textural description of Salem’s transition reflected that his experience essentially comprised two intertwined facets. The first is the positive excitement facet, which is reflected in the feeling of enjoyment and excitement that Salem acknowledged in his description. The second is the negative timidity facet that was reflected in the anxiety and worry that Salem faced during the transitioning experience. As presented above, Salem admitted that living in a mixed-gender environment was an ‘exciting’ experience, and he was not ‘disturbed or frightened of the mixed-gender environment’. That was perhaps because he conceived the mixing between sexes as a natural practice, which ‘human beings are supposed to do’ naturally. On the other hand, Salem articulated in his description that he felt uncomfortable and anxious and that such feelings became dominant when he said, ‘The issue of mixing between men and women was a source of timidity’. However, the date clearly indicated that the timidity facet of Salem’s transitioning experience was not associated with the mixing between sexes itself; rather, the timidity was associated with his concern about the level of his
engagement and involvement in the Australian environment. He was worried about being an ‘isolated foreigner’ and an ‘exile’. He explicitly stated that by saying:

> It wasn’t because of the mixing itself, but I was afraid of being impolite [in such a situation] ... I was wary because I might make a mistake, and mistakes in our culture mean something very big! Particularly mistakes toward females... Anyway, I have discovered the truth ... I mean, I was not cautious about dealing with females ... I was just afraid to look rude!

Salem’s description suggested that the mixing between sexes has attracted him to engage with the new environment. It was like a motivation for him in adjusting to the new cultural and social environment.

In order to identify the essential structure of Salem’s transitioning experience, the phenomenological reduction of the units of meanings that emerged from Salem’s interview has suggested that the transitioning experience, including both facets, has been constituted by one essential structure that seems to be tied to the texture of Salem’s experience. This structure has been labelled ‘journey toward nature’.

For Salem, the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment, with its excitement and timidity seemed to be like a journey toward the humane lifestyle of mixing between sexes. The practice of mixing between sexes is a natural human practice; therefore, his experience was a transition from an ‘odd’ segregated-gender environment to a natural mixed-gender environment. This meaning could be captured in various statements in the textural description; for example, he said, ‘I have seen it not as a kind of modernism but for me, it is a humanitarian [practice] and very old. That is what human beings are supposed to do’.
Even Salem’s anxiety and timidity were grounded by the idea of how he could be a normal person who coexists and gets along in a natural environment. The description implied that most of the anxieties and concerns were underlined by Salem’s perception and attempts of how to be normal person in the new ‘normal’ society, and for him the opposite status for being a ‘normal person’ was being an ‘exile’, an ‘isolated foreigner’, and/or ‘odd’. Therefore, Salem was worried about the mixing and engagement rather than from the mixing itself. Thus, the basic characteristic of the normal person that emerged from Salem’s description was not that of an exile or an isolated foreigner from the natural environment, but rather one who engages and is involved in the natural context.

5.4. Khamees’ experience

5.4.1. Biographical description
Khamees is a 33-year-old Saudi male. He is originally from the south of Saudi Arabia, from the Aseer region. He descends from a well-known tribe in Saudi society. Khamees studied in the Saudi public schools and completed a bachelor’s degree in English and translation. He is working as a lecturer in the English department at one of the colleges in the Eastern Province. He got a scholarship from his work to study for a master’s in TESOL in Australia. In 2006, he started an ELICOS programme in order to start the master’s course, which he did after about six months. Then he got another scholarship to study for a PhD in education in Melbourne.

Khamees is married and has one daughter. His family was with him during his study in Australia. His wife had obtained an independent companion scholarship, and she studied English with him at the same institution, which was a remarkable shift for Khamees; for example, he said,
At the beginning, I didn’t deal with females students too much, honestly, because my wife was studying with me at the language institution, and of course we were sitting alone because my wife was wearing the niqab, so there was not much chance for me to engage with females – I think, because I came with my wife. So if I had been single, it wouldn’t have been as difficult as it was.

Khamees was an active person, so he joined the Saudi student club in one of the Australian states and was, therefore, engaged quite a lot with the Saudi students in Australia. This work influenced his transitioning experience to the mixed-gender environment because he was being careful about engaging with mixing between sexes because of the impact it might have on his role as an officer of the Saudi club. He said,

In the first year, I joined the Saudi student club, which offered a similar cultural environment, so we had our prayers and customs. It was like a small Saudi community here which represented the large community in Saudi Arabia. Because of that I engaged with Saudis more than with others because of my role in the club.
I was reserved in my relations with Saudi females and very formal in communication with them because it could damage my reputation among my colleagues, and the press might become involved because of my position.

Along with his study and his work as an advisor of undergraduate Saudi international students, Khamees was also a consultant for a project about Saudi international students and education.

5.4.2. Textural experience

Khamees was less forthcoming than the other participants in his interview when describing his personal experience, but he provided valuable opinion and commentary, which involved significant units of meanings that have been used to address the phenomenon of the transitioning experience. Here I offer a description of Khamees’ response when he was asked to discuss the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment. Khamees saw moving from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment as a very new experience for him and for most of the Saudi international students. For him, the new experience has involved some ‘excitement’ and ‘stirring’ at the same time. This ‘excitement’ and this ‘stirring’ encouraged him to discover the new environment and motivated him to acquaint himself with this new condition, which was not within the range of a Saudi’s experience and understanding.

However, Khamees thought that discovering the unfamiliar and unknown, while exciting, also involves some caution, and he thought that transitioning to a mixed-gender environment is best described as an experience that comprises two edges: excitement and caution. Thus,
even though the discovery is exciting, Khamees approached it very carefully because he did not know in the beginning the right and appropriate way of interacting with the opposite sex. He also believed that caution in engaging with the opposite sex in a mixed-gender environment is a common issue for most Saudi students who face a mixed-gender environment for the first time. This meaning emerged from various statements from Khamees, and some typical examples here represent this texture:

The transitioning experience for me was not that shocking; yes, it was new, but it was not to the extent of shocking – unlike some people who find it shocking.

At the beginning it was so new and then became very normal with time….

In the beginning, the mixing between sexes is something that we were not used to, so it was exciting. It is exciting because the Saudi guy does not see females like it is here. He is not used to sitting next to a girl that has not really covered her body and is wearing, for example, [clothing] (above the knee). It certainly would be exciting in the beginning; believe me, it is not an exaggeration... For example, imagine you go to
McDonald’s or you go to a bar and you see a beautiful girl handing you your order….stir and excitement! Do you know the excitement of getting new things or exploring a new thing – for example, when you get a new iPhone or purchase a new thing – in the beginning, you feel that you want to know everything about it, so I could say that in the beginning, there would be a kind of exploration.

Because the distance between me, as a man, and the women is large and because there was not such mixing [in Saudi Arabia] between the sexes as is here, there were some hesitation and caution in the beginning. Afraid of misunderstanding…I think that fear and hesitation are a phenomenon with all people who come across the unknown.

This last quote from Khamees’ description suggested that the transition to a mixed-gender environment can be challenging for Saudi students. The challenge, from Khamees’ perspective, stemmed from the level of differences which he and most Saudi students encountered in the new environment. In a very particular sense, he saw that the appearance of females in an Australian mixed-gender environment is significantly different from their appearance in a Saudi environment, and accordingly the experience was challenging when it came to interaction with the opposite sex. Various indications expressed in the interview suggested that one of the remarkable differences encountered by Saudi students in a mixed-gender environment is associated with the issue of the veiling and unveiling of the female’s body, and some situations from his experience with Saudi students in Australia were
mentioned to support and exemplify his claim. The following units of meanings stimulated and promoted this particular issue in Khamees’ description.

In the beginning, the mixing between sexes is something that we were not used to, so it was exciting. It is exciting because the Saudi guy does not see females like it is here.

He is not used to sitting next to a girl that has not really covered her body and is wearing, for example, [clothing] (above the knee). It certainly would be exciting in the beginning; believe me, it is not an exaggeration...

التجربة هذي راح تكون صادمة لبعض الأشخاص بالخصوص اللي جاى من بيئة محافظة او قد تكون بدائية او قروية...

فالموضوع مختلف هنا، هنا لا نرى المرأة فقط بل نرى أجزاء من جسدها... وما نعتبره هناك (في السعودية) كيثر هنا

نعتبره حرية... يعني الكلمة التي توصف البيئة الجديدة أنها (بيئة) مختلفة عرفت

Yes, this experience can be shocking to some people, in particular those who come from a primitive province or village, as the situation is very different here; here we not only see women, but also we see her and some parts of her body...!! What we consider to be there [in Saudi Arabia] a major sin, here is considered a freedom and a right... I think the best word to describe the new environment is ‘different’; it is a different environment.

Obviously, the issue of the female body was considered as a factor involved in the experience. In addition to this attractive ‘scene’, the available space of freedom in the Australian mixed-gender environment was present as an active player in constructing the shape of the transitioning experience of Saudi students, which was explicitly stated when Khamees said,
as the situation is very different here; here we not only see women, but also we see her and some parts of her body...!! What we consider to be there [in Saudi Arabia] a major sin, here is considered a freedom and a right... I think the best word to describe the new environment is 'different'; it is a different environment.

Khamees also stressed another issue, which was considered as a contributing factor in making the transitioning experience challenging for Saudi international students. That was the conflict and contradiction involved in conceptualising the practice of mixing between the sexes, which reflects different meanings in the Saudi and Australian general communities. These meanings are contradictory to each other. For example, Saudis in general look at mixing between sexes as an inappropriate practice, and for some it is religiously forbidden and is a sin. In opposition to this, the mixing of the sexes in an Australian community is seen as normal, and they practice it everywhere. These opposite views have caused a conflict among the Saudis themselves, particularly when they engage with each other as students and classmates in a mixed-gender environment. Saudi males and females find it more difficult and challenging to interact with each other as classmates because some of them still see it as a sin and think they should avoid it whenever possible, whereas others are starting to see it as a normal practice that should not be avoided. This element of the transitioning experience appeared within several of Khamees’ statements:

كسعودي اعتقد الاختلاط راح يوجد كونفلكت ... لان فيه اشكال بشكل عام (عندنا) الاختلاط و جلوس المرأة مع الرجل بدون سبب يعتبر في السعودية امر غير مقبول .. (لذا ) ما حيكون طبيعي الانتقال من مجتمع غير مختلط إلى مجتمع مختلط شخصيا انا ما عندى المشكلة هذي او بالاصح اننا اقولك اننا مقنع اني إذا أنا طالع لهدف وكان فيه اختلاط فلا يوجد بأس، لكن بعضهم يقولك بهدف ولا بدون هدف لا يجوز الاختلاط.
As a Saudi, I think the mixed-gender environment likely causes conflict, because the mixing itself is a problematic issue for us. The presence of female and male together in any situation for no good reason is unacceptable ... [So] a transition from our community to a mixed society would not be normal. Personally, I did not have a problem or more accurately, I believe that if I have to live in a mixed-gender environment or [if there is a] reasonable goal, the mixing is not an issue. But I know some Saudis still believe that with reason or without reason, the mixing is prohibited.

These two quotes show the source of the conflict. Khamees identified himself as one of those who see the practice of a mixed-gender environment as normal, particularly if it is the only way to achieve study goals. So he did not feel that he committed a sin when he was mixing with the opposite gender. However, he knows of and has experienced situations that have shown the conflict between these views and how it affected Saudi students’ activities, particularly when he worked in the Saudi club. He said,

Clearly the presence of a Saudi girl in any Saudi gathering will be an issue, and I know of many cases in which a Saudi female participated in Saudi mixed activities, and then the [people began to] question and doubt her chastity. Women who mingle with men in our culture are losers ... So I think if she has to engage in any mixed activity with a Saudi male she will be doing that with fear. She will be scared of distorting her reputation.... The biggest blackmail that a Saudi female might face is
the tarnishing of her reputation…Even if she reported that to the police, her reputation is affected. This is the biggest blackmail.

I was reserved in my relationships with Saudi females and very formal in communicating with them because it could damage my reputation among my colleagues, and the press might become involved because of my position.

These quotes demonstrate one of the challenges involved in the transitioning experience of Saudi international students. They also indicate that a mixed-gender environment may be considered as a source of fear for some Saudis, particularly when they deal with each other. A female is seen as more subject to this fear because any compromise to her reputation can harm her family as well. A Saudi person who is involved in public work is also more subject to such fear because his reputation might be destroyed in Saudi society if the media become involved, as Khamees explicitly stated.

Khamees also related another incident to illustrate his point:

I know how difficult it is for Saudi girls: the girl is affected more and her reputation can be harmed more than that of the boy…. I remember a situation: a Saudi female
student was doing a PhD and she was older than [the rest of] us in the Saudi club. She attended the graduation ceremony with us, and she participated in organising the ceremony... Some of the Saudi students were complaining that she did not sit in the back with the other females ... So I have a Saudi female colleague, and I still cannot ask her if she wants to have coffee unless we have another non-Saudi female and we have some shared work.

In relation to the same challenge and how the mixing between genders is conceptualised differently by Saudi students, Khamees encountered two opposite situations that caused some conflict and tension not only among the Saudi students themselves but also between the Saudi students and members of the Australian communities. The concept of mixing between sexes and some of the practices common in an Australian environment, such as the way females dress and how they speak, might be misinterpreted by some of the Saudi students, particularly those who come from a very traditional area of Saudi Arabia. Khamees gave two examples for two opposite behaviours related to the misinterpretation of particular practices in a mixed-gender environment. He said,

Some Saudi students misunderstand if a girl smiles at them, for example. That is because the relationship between man and woman in Saudi Arabia is formal, and if a female tries to exceed this formality, it means that she is flirting and employing coquetry to establish a personal relationship [a relationship of friendship] ... For example, I have a female colleague who was working in an interview with a Saudi...
student, and on the third day of the interview he came ‘opening his shirt buttons’ and flirting because he had misinterpreted her kindness!

On the other hand, I know some Saudis who refused to take a key directly from the hand of the apartment manager, who was female. And he told her to put it down on the table so he could take it! Because he believed that his hand might touch her hand, which is a sin and is prohibited for him.

Another factor Khamees noticed that has been involved in his transitioning experience is the marriage status of the Saudi student. Khamees suggested that transitioning to a mixed-gender environment involves some challenge to a student’s family and to his marriage. This challenge is reflected in some of the statements – for example, when he said,

At the beginning, I didn’t deal with females students too much, honestly, because my wife was studying with me at the language institution, and of course we were sitting alone because my wife was wearing the niqab, so there was not much chance for me to engage with females – I think because I came with my wife. So if I were single, it wouldn’t be as difficult as it was.

Khamees suggested, based on his experience, that in order to successfully navigate the transitioning experience and adjust to the mixed-gender environment, Saudi students need to...
be bold and brave in their engagement. He illustrated that by admitting that he did not
collapse to the pressures that might be faced during the transition to a mixed-gender
environment. He said,

I was bold and that helped me to adjust... For example, I allowed my wife to study in
this mixed-gender environment, so I broke one of our social taboos.... Nowadays I
share an office with another female student, and I have worked on some projects with
a group of females and I had an excellent relationship with them... my wife was
wearing the niqab during the first months, and later she unveiled her face (I have
adjusted).

As stated, Khamees was less forthcoming in expressing his own transitioning experience
directly in the first person; instead, he was explaining and describing the phenomenon of
Saudi students’ transition as he saw it generally. That was useful in terms of reflecting on the
phenomenon using Khamees’ perspective; however, this description did not offer much
insight into his conscious lived experience. However, a careful treatment of Khamees’
interview has resulted in the identification of some moments that are considered sufficient to
describe aspects of his lived experience. He said,

في أول سنة اشتركت في النادي وهذا يخيلك كأنك تعيش نفس ثقافتك. إذا صلاتنا وعاداتنا وشغالتنا بمجتمعنا
الصغير. وكان هذا المجتمع الصغير هنا يمثل المجتمع الكبير (في السعودية). ... أول ما وصلت يعني؟ كان تعاملنا مع
السعوديين أكثر لاني كنت اعمل في النادي مع السعوديين (نائب رئيس النادي
In the first year, I joined the Saudi students’ club, which offered a similar cultural environment, so we have our prayers and customs. It was like a small Saudi community here which represented the large community in Saudi Arabia. Because of that, I engaged with Saudis more than others did because of my role in the club.

These statements described the first stage of his transitioning experience and how he felt. He did not feel that it was a huge transition. He found that being with the Saudi community in the beginning offered him a comfort zone. He also did not comment on the changes he had experienced and how he considered his own transitioning experience after four years of living in a mixed-gender environment. It was a healthy and successful experience, particularly in how it contributed to his views about the females in his own family:

I call it a healthy experience which I lost [he means that he did not have]. … My view towards women was changed from the negative side; I am now more daring in terms of raising my daughters in the future. This means my daughters will grow bolder. I will teach my daughters the best by virtue of the fact that I knew that I lived here and had successful experiences.

From his lived experience, his transitioning experience was influenced also by the level of security he had about his ird in Australia. Such an aspect emerged when he started comparing his attitude toward mixing with the opposite sex when he would return to Saudi Arabia, and his current attitude in Australia. Khamees felt safe in the mixed-gender Australian environment. He felt that his family is safe, as there is a clear law that protects females from
being abused, which is not the case in Saudi Arabia, so he will not allow his family to practice mixing between sexes.

When I returned to Saudi Arabia, I would be reserved ... but out of Saudi Arabia, I would not. Do you know why, Ahmed? Because no one can ensure your rights and no one can protect your wife if someone harasses her. In Saudi Arabia, there is no such rigorous system and law that prevents harassment. Here in Australia, I know that my wife is safe and secure. So I'm the one who encouraged her to study in Australia, even in a mixed-gender environment. That was because I believe in the importance of women's education. So I do not have a problem allowing my wife to study, and I am more eager to see her studying.

This unit of meaning also reflects the changes in his cultural identity and how he looked at his own society. More clear inductions were seen in his description in which he reflected on the changes in cultural identity, for example:

المجتمع تغير في العشرين سنة الماضية ..الصحوة الدينية أثرت ..الصور عن المرأة والصوريدة الذهنية عنها كانت أفضل في عهد أبي.. كان الرجل ينتخبر بنته وزوجته وأمه. كانوا يجتمعون في نفس البيت ونفس المجلس.[لكن] صورنا المرأة على أنها شهوات انسا كومة شهوات ..[و] غواية دور المرأة ورسالتها اختزلت في حضانة الرجل - تربية الأولاد - الولادة - الطبخ ..[و] المشكالة ان المرأة صدافت ..المرأة ترسخ في عقلها أنها ضعيفة ضعيفة ضعيفة ..الرجل عايش حياته بدون حدود .[لكن] صف المجتمع الآخر معطل تحت ذراع ما تخلت ما تروج ما تشغل ..احنا جينا من مجتمع عدد حواجز
The Saudi Society has been changing in the last 20 years. That was because of the Islamic revival. The perception about women and their image was better in my father’s generation. The man was proud of his daughter and his wife and mother…They were not segregated as now; they mixed with each other in the same house.

Now women are portrayed as sign of lusts and symbols of allurement. The role of women and their mission has been reduced to being housewives (taking care of the husband, raising the children, giving birth, and cooking) ... the problem is that women have believed it, they believed that they are weak, weak, weak ... on the other side, the man gets to live his life with less limitation. So the other half of the community is unused because of the discourse of gender segregation. We came from a community that believes that mixing between sexes is forbidden for the sake of ird (honour, shame, and jealousy).

We come from a conservative environment, [so] the Saudi female avoids talking to men in general, but the Australian women do not have a problem.

5.4.3. Structural description

Khamees’ description was focused much on the factors that influenced the transitioning experience. As most of his commentaries did not describe the lived experience, they have been considered as a reflection resulting from his lived experience. Khamees’ comments were significantly useful for understanding aspects of the transitioning experience because he was involved with Saudi international students during his work in the Saudi Club and during
his work as an advisor for undergraduate Middle Eastern students at his university in Australia.

Three essential structures have appeared in Khamees’ reflection and description: 1) misinterpretation of the practice of mixing between genders and its associated activities; 2) threat to a person’s ird; and 3) a healthy experience.

First structure: *misinterpretation of the practice*

The first challenge that Khamees noticed in the experience of transitioning was the large gap and differences in how Saudi students see the mixing between sexes and how the Australian community sees it. These gaps and differences in conceptualising the mixed-gender environment might lead to a misinterpretation of the practice itself and to some conflict. The mixing between sexes might be conceptualised by three general perspectives. For some Saudi students, it is a sinful practice, which they try their best to avoid as they can, and they are allowed to engage in it only in necessary and unavoidable situations. For others, it is a practice for establishing a gender-based relationship, and it looks like an open door for flirtation and some other associated activities. The mixing of the sexes is also seen as a normal and natural practice that is not linked with sin or a gender-based relationship. The difference between these two concepts may lead to conflict not only between Saudis and other members of the Australian community but also between Saudis themselves. Khamees provided a situation in which he had been involved to exemplify the conflict resulting from these different views.

Khamees’ reflection was seen as relevant to the phenomenon because I found some examples to support his claim. The first came from a manager of student services at one of the ELCOCE institutions in Australia, who asked me to speak about the difference between
flirtation and harassment on the induction day for new Saudi students. She had noticed during her work that some of the new Saudi male students, when they first arrived, hardly recognised the line between acceptable flirtation and illegal harassment. As another example, a new Saudi student in the English institution talked to me about a situation that might indicate a similar issue. He moved from the home stay, preferring to pay the charge of breaking the contract, because he thought that the way that the women at the home stay were dressed was a kind of flirtation, and he was afraid of being there because he might commit a sin by living in such situation.

To sum up, the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment for Saudi students, according to Khamees’ reflection, might comprise a challenge related to cross-gender communication because of the differences in how the mixing between the sexes is seen, and it leads to a misinterpretation of the activity that occurs in a mixed-gender environment.

Second structure: threat to a person’s ird

Khamees’ description also indicated that the transition to a mixed-gender environment might threaten a person’s ird. As explained in the third chapter, ird refers to a person’s honour, chastity, and virtue, and that of his or her family. Khamees admitted that at a certain stage of his transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment, he felt some threat to his ird; therefore, he preferred not to mix with Saudi females, particularly during his work with the Saudi Club. The threat, as described by Khamees, rose specifically when Saudis dealt with each other. Based on his experience, mixing with the opposite sex was more of a threat to females than to males, as the small community here might start talking about how she is not virtuous and chaste enough. Such talk would negatively affect her relationship with the Saudi society, her family, and perhaps her wellbeing. Khamees supported this view by sharing some
situations he had heard about and others that had been reported in the media about Saudi girls in the USA. However, he has acknowledged that the Australian environment can be seen as safer and harmless for the female’s ird because of the legislation associated with sexual abuse, harassment, and blackmail. Therefore, some of the Saudi females may engage in a mixed-gender environment with less concern about their ird, as they feel they are protected by law rather than by gender segregation.

Third structure: healthy experience

The last structure that appeared to be a part of Khamees’ transitioning experience presented the positive aspects of the experience. Khamees, despite the challenges he saw and the threat he felt, considered the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment as a healthy experience for himself personally and for his family as well.

Khamees explicitly stated that his way of raising his daughter has been influenced and developed by the experience he had in a mixed-gender environment. His views towards women were changed from the negative side, and he stated, ‘I am now more daring in terms of raising my daughters in the future. Which means my daughters will grow bolder. I will teach my daughters the best by virtue of the fact that I knew that I lived here and had successful experiences’.

5.5. Synthesis of structural descriptions

This phenomenological investigation sought to uncover the essential structure (essence) of the experience of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment which was encountered by the Saudi international students in Australia. The above explication of the data has revealed, so far, the essential structure of each participant’s description. Therefore, the final stage of the phenomenological reduction process was synthesising the described experiences offered by
participants in order to capture the most universal and essential meanings among the participants’ accounts. Using Giorgi’s (1985) term, the aim of the synthesis was ‘to communicate’ (p. 20) the most general meanings that emerged from the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon.

From the above explication of the data, the research question is still not fully answered. Thus, the synthesis focuses on the research question to develop general meanings that can inform the research question directly. The question was; ‘What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?’

As I described above, eight structures have appeared from the participants’ descriptions. Both Ali’s and Zahra’s experiences appeared to contain two structures each, Salem's account was tied to one structure, and Khamees' account was tied to three structures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Structure of the description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Golden time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahra</td>
<td>Fear of male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reshaping of personality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>Journey toward natural human life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Misinterpretation of the practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khamees</td>
<td>Threat of ird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healthy experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3. Structures of experience for each participant*

For Ali, the transition looked like a constructive experience and a golden time in his life so far. The transition for him also constituted identifying and overcoming a woman complex;
therefore, it involved some challenges. For Zahra, the transitioning experience was difficult, and it looked like facing her fear of males. The other structure was that the transitioning experience looked like a reshaping of personality from a dependent to an independent self, and from other-reliant to self-reliant. For Salem, the transitioning experience looked like a journey toward a natural human life. For Khamees, the transitioning experience appeared to hold three structures. It looked like a misbehaviour led by a misinterpretation of the practice, as all involved parties appeared to Khamees to be subject to the misinterpretation issue. Khamees’ experience also looked like facing a threat to the ird, and these two structures presented the most of difficulties, as addressed in Khamees’ description. It appeared also as a healthy experience that allowed him to learn how to deal better with females either from his family or outside his family.

The above structures and their associated units of meanings were revisited in the textural descriptions, and reflecting on the entire dialogue of participants with the researcher has paved the way to capturing the common structural meanings of the phenomenon that kept emerging repeatedly in the all accounts. Two meanings appeared during this investigation as common structures of the transitioning experience lived and described by the participants: the first is developmental experience, and the second is a sex complex, meaning that constant awareness of a person’s gender can be a constraint.

5.5.1. Developmental experience

The first common meaning among participants’ descriptions of their transitioning experiences is that it is a developmental experience which they have lived in and encountered. The development was noticed in two aspects: development in personal attributes and development in perceptions toward others. Although all participants had gone through various events so
that in their descriptions they stressed a variety of changes, they all considered the changes as positive, which appeared in their description as helping them move forward. To avoid excess repetition, a few examples follow to show the developmental experience perspective.

Zahra experienced development in her personal attributes, such as gaining confidence, being self-reliant, and becoming independent. It appeared from her textural description that the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment reshaped her personality positively, as described in the structural description of her experience. Reshaping personality positively can be categorised under personal development. Such a meaning emerged in many statements presented in the textural description. In her own expression, translated into English, she noticed that the transitioning experience had ‘completely changed [her] personality; there are so many positive aspects... it would be impossible to count all the advantages, but the most important one is that it has reshaped [her] personality and [she] started depending on [her]self’.

Ali also experienced some development in his personal attributes. He learned how he could be mature in dealing with others. The maturity in his account referred to being independent and responsible. The transitioning experience for him was a developmental experience in the sense that he discovered his ability to interact with the opposite sex without the need for social maintenance. As he said,

*I feel that I am Ali, the human being. Honestly, here Ali, the human being, has shown up. This does not mean that I was not alive (in Saudi Arabia), but I mean that I considered this period as one of the growth periods when a person starts to become mature. I don’t say to mature, but I mean to start maturing... I feel that I am living my own life as I want...*
Salem and Khamees both saw the transitioning experience as a developmental experience informing their perceptions towards others, either other people like Westerners, as Salem admitted, or the other gender, as they both experienced.

In his description, Salem emphasised how his transitioning experience was like a journey toward nature and being natural. In the heart of this journey was the development of his perception about a mixed-gender society and Western society in particular, and his statement demonstrates this meaning:

*Comparing my previous experience in Riyadh and here in Melbourne made me reflect on my ancestors’ life rather than our current life [in terms of] searching for identity. When I think about our grandfathers’ way of life in our original areas, they were tolerant and simple [in terms of the female role]. If compared with other [societies], they were such normal people, acting normally and having manners similar to the other people in the world. They had the same manners which allow women to mix with men in the farm fields, stores, and markets. They dealt normally with each other. And once a person made a mistake, the society would judge him if he or she violated its rules and traditions. There were no limitations to which each person should be kept restricted, and one found it difficult to create private space as well. This has helped me to have more knowledge about the different things Saudi Arabia has. Saudi Arabian areas are not the same. The predominant thought is the governing religious thought, which takes advantage of these things. Regardless of how correct this thought is, this party leads it.*

Therefore, the transitioning experience looked like a developmental experience for Salem, an experience which developed his identity and the way he identified others. In terms of the
development in his perception about the opposite sex, many statements can indicate that a
development did occur: ‘I have no problem in shaking hands [with women], and I also touch
them on the cheek, I mean cheek to cheek [as males do with males] like in our greetings ... I
have overcome my closed idea about physical contact [like shaking hands and touching
cheeks]’. This was a change from what he had experienced earlier:

The issue of mixing between men and women was a source of timidity, not because of
the mixing itself but because I was afraid of being impolite [in such a situation] ... I
was wary because I might make a mistake, and mistakes in our culture mean
something very big! Particularly mistakes toward females – anyway, I have
discovered the truth ... I mean, I was not cautious of dealing with females ... I was
just afraid to look rude!

These statements reflected how Salem was changed and how he considered the changes as
positive and developmental.

Khamees’ account also presented the transitioning experience as developmental, particularly
in how he came to perceive the other sex. Such a meaning can be seen clearly when he said,

I call it a healthy experience, which I had lost. ... My view towards women was
changed from the negative side; I am now more daring in terms of raising my
daughters in the future, which means my daughters will grow bolder. I will teach my
daughters the best by virtue of the fact that I lived here and had successful
experiences.

Considering the transitioning experience as a developmental experience also leads to
examining how participants generally considered the experience to be constructive, positive,
enjoyable, and healthy. It could be argued that all the positive elements described as part of the transitioning experience can be read and understood within this structural common meaning that emerged from the participants’ descriptions.

Thus, part of the answer to the research question is that the transitioning experience looked like a developmental experience for Saudi international students in an Australian context.

5.5.2. Psychological gender complex

The second structural and common meaning can be referred to as a ‘psychological gender complex’. To describe the anxiety and concern he experienced during his transitioning experience, Ali used the term ‘woman complex’. Here, I have modified Ali’s expression to embrace the whole phenomenon.

For all of the participants, the transitioning experience looked like facing a type of sex complex. This complex involved fear of males and females, as noticed by all participants, and fear concerning ird, as noticed by Khamees. One of the essential aspects of the transitioning experience was its difficulty in the beginning. All the participants encountered challenges and experienced anxiety. Ali was hesitant, Zahra was afraid, Salem was worried, and Khamees was threatened. These forms of concern and anxiety were presented in the descriptions. Reflection on these concerns has shown that the fundamental source of this concern is the concern about sex. The practice of gender segregation was developed to maintain minimal sexual interaction between the sexes. Transitioning to a mixed-gender environment broke this maintenance and left the Saudi students to interact with the opposite sex according to a different rule rather than the rule of segregation and separation.

Therefore, the transition was difficult and challenging until the participants could resolve the psychological gender complex, either by feeling mature as Ali did, or by feeling strong and
confident, like Zahra. It was also resolved through an understanding that the interaction between sexes is a natural activity that a person should not worry about, as Salem indicated.

Thus, the other part of the answer to the research question is that the transitioning experience looked like facing a psychological gender complex; therefore, it was challenging and difficult until and unless the complex was resolved.

In the next chapter the findings are discussed and the research is concluded.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overview of the chapter

The previous chapter presented the findings of the investigation. The data was explicated according to each unique individual, and common aspects of the transitioning experience were identified. In this chapter, the findings are discussed and general conclusions are drawn. The chapter is divided into three sections: the first section revisits the research questions, and the second presents a summary of the investigation. In the third section, the findings presented in chapter 5 are re-addressed in relation to the relevant literature. The second section also provides three conclusions to sum up the investigation. The first conclusion is about the potential practical implications of the findings and possible contributions to the body of knowledge in international education. The conclusion provides important remarks on the research methodology and its limitations, and finally Suggestions for further research.
6.1. Revisiting research questions

1. What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?

In chapter 5, I discussed this question under the heading synthesis and explicited eight structures related to the participants’ description of their experiences. These were divided into individual and common structures, and the findings are explained in 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 in this chapter.
2. Supplementary question: What potential impact does the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment have upon the identity of Saudi international students?

Question 2 was designed as a supplementary question of question 1. Therefore, findings were emergent and discussion of the cultural identity arose from the description of the participants in the process of answering the first question. Discussion relevant to this question is contained in chapter 5.5.5.1., which explores the participants’ developing understanding of themselves. This is further discussed in 6.2.1. and 6.2.2. of this chapter. The role of questions in phenomenological research is to assist in identifying the phenomena and perspectives taken when exploring experience. Therefore, the answers to the questions are threaded throughout both the data and the discussion chapters as outlined in the research design chapter (chapter 4)

6.2. Summary of the investigation and discussion

In this research project, I have attempted to explore the experience of transitioning from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment as it is encountered by Saudi international students. To accomplish this aim, I developed a preliminary plan for the research, and the journey of exploration began. As it was a ‘full-time’ journey that influenced my personal and academic life, the findings went beyond the research question itself. However, in this thesis only the findings associated with the research question are addressed. The other findings will be addressed in future projects.

In order to highlight the emergent findings of this investigation, I have summarised the central issues addressed in the pages of this thesis. In the first chapter the research topic, purpose, and significance were identified, and key aspects of the report were introduced.
In the second chapter, I identified the conceptual and theoretical assumptions that I adopted for directing the entire process of the investigation. The concepts of experience and transitioning experience were the central points of that chapter. Three interrelated theoretical perspectives were identified as an umbrella for the conceptualisation of ‘the transitioning experience’; these theories are sociocultural context, symbolic interactionism, and the formation of Arab reason. In that chapter, the concept of the transitioning experience was positioned within and aligned with the three widely accepted models in the literature of cross-cultural transitioning: the transitioning experience as an adaptation and adjustment process (Berry, 1992, 2010; Berry, 1997b; Furnham, 1988; Kim, 2000; Matsumoto et al., 2006; Ward & Kennedy, 1994), the intercultural learning process (Bochner, 2011; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Gill, 2007; Hoffman, 1990; Taylor, 1994), moving between ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism (Bennett, 1993; Bennett, 2004; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003), and culture shock (Ward et al., 2001).

In the third chapter, the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment was contextualised. Two layers were identified: the gender-segregated and the new mixed-gender environment. Gender segregation practice in Saudi Arabia was presented as a very complex phenomenon that was influenced by interactions of cultural, political, and religious factors. The environment of gender segregation also appeared to be unstable, involving dynamic reform and changes. Different opinions and parties are influencing the direction of the social changes. In that context, international education was considered as a vital means for change; hence, it involves different and sometimes contradictory opinions. The second layer was the context of a mixed-gender environment. It was presented as a new context where new cultures, new languages, and new social norms cannot be separated from the new experience of mixing between the sexes.
The research design, addressed in the fourth chapter, was built on three pillars: the research aim, research paradigm, and research strategies. The key characteristics of these three pillars were discussed in the beginning. Then, the utilised phenomenological approach was presented by identifying the adopted philosophical foundations and strategies. The discussion of these two aspects was particularly justified in terms of how the investigation was conducted. This discussion also demonstrated the rigor and restrictions, as well as the flexibility and pliancy, of the phenomenological approach employed.

The process of the investigation was presented as consisting of the following intertwined activities: planning, collecting the data, and analysing and explicating the data. The investigation began with the process of getting an approved research proposal that could be accepted academically and ethically; then, the data collection activities began.

The findings of the investigation were grounded in descriptive data collected via interviews with four international students from Saudi Arabia. The students were asked to participate in this investigation and to assist me by sharing their personal experiences and reflecting on my interpretations of their descriptions. The interview questions were designed to explore how the participants experienced living and studying in the new mixed-gender environment. The collected data was reduced from the large transcripts of the dialogical interviews into two essential structural meanings that appeared to be the general and common constitution of participants’ transitioning experience. The reduced data were explicated in chapter 5. Individual and common aspects of the transitioning experience were described as they appeared to me.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Individual biographical and textural experience</th>
<th>Individual essential structures</th>
<th>Common essential structures</th>
<th>Individual aspects of the experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali’s experience</td>
<td>Golden time</td>
<td>Need to engage with Australian Community</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women complex</td>
<td></td>
<td>Role of pre-departure course</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zahra’s experience</td>
<td>Fear of male</td>
<td>Developing experience</td>
<td>Role of pre-departure course</td>
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<td>Reshaping of personality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salem’s experience</td>
<td>Journey toward natural human life</td>
<td>Psychological gender complex</td>
<td>Need to engage with Australian Community</td>
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<td>Previous experience of mixed-gender environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khamees’ experience</td>
<td>Misinterpretation of the practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Threat of ird</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Healthy experience</td>
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*Table 4. Outcome of reduction process*
6.3. Discussion

This investigation brought to light some striking aspects of the cross-cultural transitioning experienced by the Saudi international students, with a significant emphasis on the adaptation experience in a mixed-gender environment. The discussion here suggested that the identified aspects of the revealed phenomenon are understood better if they are considered within the field of cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Berry, 2002; Sam & Berry, 2006; Ward et al., 2001), and if they are read along with the literature of inter-cultural communication (e.g., Bennett, 1993; Bennett, 1998, 2004; Kim, 2000).

It should be highlighted here that the findings I discuss have already been captured during the bracketing mode of the literature, so I developed this discussion to link the revealed aspect of the phenomenon with current trends in the literature.

Like most phenomenological efforts, the investigation ultimately focused on defining the constituent essence of the transitioning experience – that is, the common and shared aspects of the phenomenon itself. Nonetheless, some unique and individual aspects emerged because the individuals (participants) were like lenses that allowed me to see the phenomenon from their perspective. That means the common aspects of participants' experiences cannot be reached and captured without engaging and dealing with individual unique experiences. In this discussion, therefore, both levels, common and unique aspects, are addressed in relation to the relevant literature and contexts.

6.3.1. Common aspects

In response to the research question; ‘What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?’, two aspects appeared as a constituent essence of the lived experience of the participants. First, the
Transition to a mixed-gender environment was commonly experienced by the participants as a development. Second, this developing experience was informed to a great extent by a certain psychological complex toward the opposite sex in a mixed-gender context.

It could be argued that the developing part of the experience was most likely driven by the phenomenon of moving to a culturally new and unfamiliar setting. In other words, the participants' attempts to ‘adapt’ and to ‘adjust’ to the unfamiliar context have contributed to forming the development as an essence constituting the transitioning experience of participants. This argument draws upon many empirical findings in the literature of cross-cultural psychology and intercultural communication. Adaptation and adjustment, as identified in the second chapter, may potentially lead participants to experience aspects of personal development, such as developing intercultural communication skills, competence, and perceptions (e.g. Gill, 2007; Sam & Oppedal, 2011).

The psychological complex part, in contrast, seemed to be associated with the participants’ sociocultural, historical, and contextual backgrounds. It is formed by the gender segregation discourse and ideology, and in particular, by the concept of self that has been inherited by and developed within the gender-segregated environment, given that many studies within cross-cultural psychology have recognised the role of cultural identity and of the self in cross-cultural transitioning (e.g. Furnham, 2010; Leong & Ward, 2000; Phinney, 2000; Sussman, 2000).

To make more sense of these two aspects and how they embodied the transitioning experience, the conceptualisation of the transitioning experience in the literature has been revisited. The concept of the transitioning experience is presented in the literature in different forms, such as adaptation, adjustment, acculturation, and cultural shock. It is significant to
this discussion to conceptualise these terms. From the literature, I adopted the following concepts that assisted in shedding more light on the identified aspects of the transitioning experience of Saudi international students:

**Adaptation:** the adopted conceptualisation of adaptation was drawn from Kim and Gudykunst’s (1988) framework. It refers to ‘the complex process through which an individual acquires an increasing level of “fitness” or “compatibility” in the new cultural environment’ (p. 9). This concept is comprehensive and consistent with most of the models (Nishida, 1999). Therefore, adaptation, in this study, referred to the process of trying to fit into the mixed-gender environment.

**Adjustment:** refers to the outcome of the adaptation. In this discussion, it referred to the psychological outcomes of the process of trying to fit into the mixed-gender environment and the condition of individual well-being (Matsumoto et al., 2006). Therefore, both positive and negative adjustment experiences can occur based on how the adaptation process is going (Matsumoto et al., 2006). The positive experience involves self-esteem, self-confidence, positive mood, interpersonal relationships, and stress reduction understanding and awareness (Babiker et al., 1980; Kamal & Maruyama, 1990; Matsumoto et al., 2006). From this perspective, it could be argued that positive adjustment is an indication of personal development.

**Acculturation:** this specific conceptualisation is relevant to understanding the second aspect of the phenomenon, which was the psychological complex of gender. The concept is based on Berry’s acculturation framework, particularly the strategies of acculturation (Berry, 2010; Berry, 1997a, 1997b), and it is considered relevant in terms of recognising the role of
background and cultural identity in the cross-cultural transitioning experience. Berry et al. (1987) identified three critical changes in the acculturation process:

- Cultural changes include alteration of political, economic, technical, religious, and social institutions.
- New sets of social relationships, including in-group, out-group, and dominance patterns, may become established.
- Psychological changes, behavioural changes, and alterations to well being may occur.

In relation to the identified psychological gender complex in this investigation, Berry (1992) has stressed the social and psychological problems that frequently appear during acculturation, particularly on the individual level, which he refers to as acculturative stress. During the acculturation process, cultural maintenance is critical. Based on this issue, four interactive strategies are identified according to the yes/no answers to two questions: (1) Is it considered to be of value to maintain my cultural identity and characteristics? (2) Is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups in the host environment? If the answer is yes for both questions, the person is using an ‘integration’ strategy. In contrast, if the answer is no for the two questions, the person is considered to be using a ‘marginalisation’ strategy. If a person says yes to the first question and no to the second, he or she is considered to be using a ‘separation’ strategy, and if he or she says no to the first question and yes to the second, that means the person is employing an ‘assimilation’ strategy. Thus, these strategies reflect the role of one’s cultural background in cross-cultural transitioning.
6.3.1.1. The developing experience

The findings suggested that the transitioning experience of Saudi international students appeared to all participants as an experience that contributed to their personal development. Participants experienced some changes while they were trying to fit into the new and unfamiliar environment. The four participants presented these changes generally as progressive, positive, and indicative of growth and maturity. Three aspects of personal development could be remarked upon in the participants’ descriptions.

The first was development in the feelings that they had about the transition to a mixed-gender environment, the feelings that developed from stress, depression, and anxiety, as well as fears of enjoying themselves, settling in, and having a sense of well-being and security. The second was development in interaction skills with the new setting. Participants reported that they had encountered a change in their behaviour and that their social interaction skills had developed. They reported that they had developed from avoiding engagement to figuring out what was appropriate and what was not in terms of dealing with people of the opposite sex in the new context. For example, Ali learned how to talk with females and to invite them to lunch; Salem’s behaviour changed in relation to kissing females on the cheek and shaking hands with them, and Zahra learned how to set her own boundaries. The third aspect was development in perceptions of gender roles, with regard to the value of gender segregation, and about mixing between the sexes. Many indications in the participants’ descriptions suggested that their perceptions of the value of gender segregation and about female and male roles and relationships were altered.

In relation to the theoretical framework and the concept of experience that I highlighted previously (in chapter 2), the participants’ descriptions are consistent with the position from
which the transitioning experience was seen. Specifically, it supports the assumption that the mediated constructed experience is what actually influences Saudi international students to develop and learn from the transitioning experience.

The ZPD assumption also allows making more of the described experience because it is assumed that Saudi international students participate in a broad range of joint activities and internalise the effects of working together; and they acquire new strategies and knowledge of the world and culture. The ZPD reflects socioculturalists’ belief that the process of learning can potentially prompt psychological development and that learning can lead to development. When people solve problems that are beyond their developmental capability with the assistance of other more experienced peers or educators, the results demonstrate their potential psychological development better than if they try to solve such problems independently (Levykh, 2008). Therefore, the described development might influence the interaction that Saudis have with each other and with other Muslim students who share the same perspective in relation to interactions with the opposite sex.

In reference to the literature of cross-cultural psychology, developing a perspective of cross-cultural experience has been acknowledged (e.g., Sam & Oppdal, 2011; Sam & Berry, 2006). The fundamental premise underlying this perspective is that cultural context and environment significantly contribute to a human's development. Therefore, moving to a new culture and environment potentially would add to a human’s development. This assumption is clearly identified from sociocultural theory, as psychological development and social and cultural context are brought together (e.g. Rogoff, 1999; Wertsch, 1984; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992).
Although the term ‘development’ has appeared in the literature to be associated with changes encountered during the stages of a person – the biological, physical, and psychological growth in the lifespan (i.e. from infancy, childhood, and adolescence to adulthood) – it is used here in a broader sense to signify the changes that are considered positive, forward-looking, and progressive from the participants’ perspective. The use of development in the context of the research findings is relevant because it reflects a central conceptual issue. As stated in chapter 2, the experience in general and the transitioning experience in particular in the context of this investigation are considered as mediators of learning. This means that the transitioning experience can be identified with the person’s development (Dewey, 1998). Further, from this perspective, the ‘developing, not only physically but intellectually and morally, is one exemplification of the principle’ of educative experience (Dewey 1998, p. 28). Significant indications were found to support the theoretical assumption that dialectical influences occur between how international students make sense of themselves and the formation of the cross-cultural transitioning experience.

This part of the findings fits with the concept of experience introduced in the second chapter, which relates to how the human experience is a consequence of a person’s subjective action combined with the judgment of the consequences of that action within an environment (Dewey 1985; Glassman, 2001). Dewey’s (1985) perspective of the dynamic relation between aspects of experience can shed light on the dialectical influences. As Dewey stated, the experience begins with ‘something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after’ (p. 27). To a large extent, this exploration demonstrated that students’ judgment of the interaction with the challenges they faced and the judgment of the changes they encountered influenced their final well-being and positive adjustment.
Linking to this perspective, Gill’s study (2007) suggested that the cross-cultural transitioning experience reflects an intercultural learning process, and the adaptation process takes place alongside the reflection process that newcomers encounter during their experience in an unfamiliar context. The intercultural learning process accrues when the person attempts to make sense of the different situations and tries to fit into the new environment. Gill’s findings also supported the Dewey perspective of human experience. Gill noticed in his study that the process of learning was a dynamic continuing process that goes in a cycle, starting with every new experience as people go back and forth to reflect on their experience and perceptions. This concept can be seen clearly in the case of Zahra as she found that all the challenges she described from the beginning of her experience contributed to reshaping her personality in a positive way. The reshaping of Zahra’s personality reflected how the new experience of studying in a mixed-gender environment and in a new cultural context allowed her to learn how to manage her own affairs. This challenging experience allowed her to learn how she could navigate through the challenges.

There are similarities between the three aspects of development recognised in this study and those suggested by Ward and several colleagues in the ABC framework of cultural shock (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Searle, 1991; Ward et al., 2001). The framework involved three dimensions of the adjustment process: the (A)ffective dimension, (B)ehavioural dimension, and (C)ognitive dimension.

The first aspect of the affective adjustment was driven by the stress and pressure involved in the process of adaptation to an unfamiliar environment. The underlying assumption here is that transition is inherently stressful; and the participants, in order to reduce this stress, needed to develop coping strategies to deal with the stress involved in the exposure to a
mixed-gender environment. Ward et al. (2001) argue that when newcomers manage to reduce the stress and pressure associated with being in an unfamiliar environment, they have achieved psychological adjustment and wellbeing. In other words, the adjustment outcome is considered as a production of the stress and coping activities associated with a person’s affect and feelings. This aspect is consistent with the findings; and the participants, as stated earlier, revealed some changes in relation to their feelings of anxiety and concern at the beginning of their exposure to the mixed-gender environment. Expressions such as ‘pleasant experience’, ‘good experience’, and ‘marvellous experience’ reflect the development in their affect and demonstrate that the participants had successfully passed through most of the stressful period associated with being in the mixed-gender environment. The second dimension of the adjustment process is behavioural. This dimension, as Ward et al. (2001) proposed, reflects the social skills and interpersonal behaviour that participants need to acquire in order to adjust to the new environment. The findings contained indications that can be linked to this dimension. For example, participants had to learn how to approach the opposite sex in the new mixed-gender environment and to discover what was culturally and socially appropriate in the new setting and what was not. The third dimension of the adjustment considered the cognitive changes and how the participants identified with the new setting and the previous setting in terms of cultural identity and inter-group relations. Identity is a fundamental issue for the adjustment process. The issue of how students preserve their home and host cultures, and how they identify themselves in relation to these domains is an essential element of the adaptation process, and their self-perceptions potentially affect the adjustment. The participants’ descriptions also incorporated changes in their perceptions and in their practice associated with gender roles. For example, Khamees stated, ‘My view towards women was
changed from the negative side; I am now more daring in terms of raising my daughters in the future’.

Although the indicated development was associated with all three of the dimensions remarked in the ABC framework, the cognitive dimension was emphasised more in the participants’ descriptions. A possible explanation for this greater emphasis is the strong presence of moral and religious values in the culture of gender segregation and the rules prohibiting gender mixing in the Saudi culture. The emphasis on cognitive development appeared in various forms within the data, sometimes in the reflective criticism participants demonstrated in relation to their own cultural backgrounds as they reported their perceptions of the contrast, and sometimes when they talked about their attitudes toward gender mixing. In some cases, cognitive development was reflected when they talked about themselves and their identities.

Indications from all participants implied that the entire process of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment influenced the participants’ views and their attitudes toward both gender segregation and the practice of mixing the sexes. As one illustration, Ali did not see gender segregation as a religious practice and therefore did not think it represented his religiosity. For him, the segregation was only a cultural regulation that he needed to respect and appreciate, particularly when he would go back to Saudi Arabia, exactly as he respected the regulations of Australia. For Zahra, gender segregation was a representation of her weakness, and the new experience in a mixed-gender environment changed her perceptions of herself. She began to see herself as a strong girl, and she believed that she did not need to rely on gender segregation to protect herself, but rather she could rely on herself. Salem began to consider the segregation between genders as an odd practice, and, conversely, to perceive the
mixed-gender environment as the natural environment for human beings. His perceptions about the West changed, too, through the transition to the new environment. Khamees’ views about the role of females changed, and that was reflected in several of his statements that described how his home culture portrayed women and their role. The change was also reflected in his comments about his plans for the future of his daughter.

To a great extent, participants provided signs of changes in how they identified themselves as a result of their experience in transitioning to a mixed-gender environment. Zahra, for instance, identified herself as strong instead of weak, independent instead of dependent; and the males identified themselves as mature instead of immature, normal instead of odd or strange. They revealed that as a result of deep reflection on the value of gender segregation, their image of Saudi society had been affected. Their descriptions of the experience indicated that in order to manage their transition to the new mixed-gender environment, they exercised a different level of reflection about self, others, religion, and politics. For example, Ali reflected deeply on the religious value of gender segregation. His description revealed that he came to believe that mixing with females did not affect his religiosity. Therefore, he did not have strong religious concerns about the mixed-gender environment; thus, he found himself engaging with the transitioning experience to reach a positive adjustment.

6.3.1.2. Psychological gender complex

The second common aspect of the findings emerging from this investigation was the psychological complex participants had experienced in dealing with the opposite sex. This complex presented as a barrier that held the students back and placed restrictions on their engagement with the opposite sex, even when they wanted to interact. The descriptions of the transitioning experience downplayed some challenges. These challenges can be categorised
into two intertwined issues; the first was the social and cultural barriers, like those associated with dealing with the Saudi peers, and psychological barriers, like fear of males and/or females. All participants reported a concern in dealing with the opposite sex, and the transitioning experience appeared to look like a threat to the person's ird, honour, and affiliation in the wider community of Saudis.

Such aspects of the findings can be understood by revisiting the context of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. As presented in chapter 3, gender segregation is not merely a practice, but a practice with political, religious, cultural, and institutional force. Wahhabism as the national religion is the power behind these joint forces, which form what some of the participants referred to as a ‘complex’ about sex. The concept of ird, which is one representation of that complex, reveals how one’s dealing with the opposite sex can affect a person’s honour and affiliation with the rest of the group. Therefore, this complex seems to be inherited through gender segregation practice and its associated discourse and ideology.

In reference to the previous studies, this finding can be clarified more if we call attention to various analyses of the gender segregation discourse (Fanjar 1997; Jawhari, 2007). Fanjar has noted that the practice of gender segregation has created sex-based fear, and Jawhari has found that the current discourse in Arabic culture represents females as seductive and males as attackers. Such aspects were found in participants’ comments; for example, Khamees said in one of his statements that

the role of women and their mission was reduced to that of housewife (taking care of the husband, raising the children, giving birth, and cooking) .... The problem is that women have believed it; they have believed that they are weak, weak, weak .... On the other side, the man gets to live his life with less limitation. So the other half of the
community is unused because of the discourse of gender segregation. We came from a community that believes that mixing between sexes is forbidden for the sake of ird (honour, shame, and jealousy).

The participants' accounts most strongly emphasised the sex complex in terms of dealing with Saudi citizens in mixed-gender environments. This part of the complex appeared in the participants’ descriptions as stemming from confusion in relating to other Saudis of the opposite gender with whom they had occasion to interact. The question would arise: Is this person ‘a developed’ Saudi student who won't consider it an issue to deal with someone of the opposite sex, so would the person accept that and not be offended by being open with the other person? In other words, does the Saudi student with whom I need to interact identify more with gender segregation or with a mixed-gender environment? People who believe strongly in the value of the gender-segregated culture in Saudi Arabia might hesitate in conducting open relationships with Saudi international students from the opposite sex.

A relevant factor that seems more complex is that, based on the conceptual framework of the transitioning experience (as explained in chapter 2), Saudi students found it more difficult to deal with other Saudis of the opposite gender because of the ‘active self’ of other Saudi students (to use Bruner’s (1986) terminology), or because of the confusion coming from the ‘constituted mind’ (to use Al-Jabri’s (2011b) terminology). The Saudi self in the transitioning experience is deeply constituted in the Saudi context, and its constituting activity continues in the new environment. The other Saudi students are a ‘symbol’ and ‘sign’ that has been constituted in the Saudi context, which involves gender segregation and its cultural strictures; thus, the other Saudi students are potentially used by the active self to shape any interaction activities with other Saudi students. This assumption can draw on Bruner's conceptualisation
of the experience: ‘experience is more personal, as it refers to an active self, to a human being who not only engages in but shapes an action’ (Bruner, 1986, p. 5).

This particular aspect of the experience seems to be consistent with those in other studies, which have found that distance between the sexes for Saudis is maintained even in intra family contact (Hewitt & Alqahtani, 2003). Clerehan et al. (2012) showed that the male participant in their study who had been out of Saudi Arabia the longest recalled his confusion when he pointed out that, back home, gender ‘mixing’ was culturally taboo, and a woman’s smiling meant sexual attraction. Such aspects were also reported by the participants of this study, like Khamees and Salem. Flaitz (2003) stated that having a teacher of the opposite sex is a major hurdle that Saudi students must overcome. Both Shaw (2010) and Al-Shedokhi (1986) reported the same issue, indicating that Saudi males have an issue interacting with women.

The psychological complex appeared to unite fear and threat. In addition the challenges Ali experienced were not associated with mixing with the other gender, per se, but rather from his previous experience of gender segregation. The challenges were depicted as a result of the cultured psychological complex that he called the ‘woman complex’.

The presence of religion in gender segregation makes it challenging for some students to reflect on its religious side. However, unfortunately, the study did not provide a clear indication of the role of religion in the adjustment outcome, as might be expected from Ali’s account. Ali’s description indicated that his religious background seemed to have inculcated a great deal of his religious consideration about gender segregation and mixing. Ali had received sufficient religious study by way of comparison with the other participants, as described in his biographical information. Therefore, Ali seemed to be reflecting on the
religious value of gender segregation in his description. This reflection and the changes he was experiencing made him feel that he was developing and maturing, which led him, in the end, to adjust positively to the mixed-gender environment and attain a satisfactory level of well-being in such an environment which made him to consider that time of his life as a golden time. The findings from Ali’s description strongly suggested that his acquired changes in the religious value of gender segregation and his level of positive adjustment were associated. As the religion aspect was important for Ali, his positive adjustment and well-being seemed to be associated with the feeling that his religiosity was not negatively affected by engaging in a mixed-gender environment. For all study participants, critical reflection seemed to be one of the main mechanisms of change, at least on the cognitive level, which led to overall satisfaction and an experience of personal development.

6.3.2. Individuals’ aspects

As mentioned, the transitioning experience was shown to have appeared on two levels in the descriptions: common features and individual features. These features were presented in the table and are summarised in three individuals’ aspects of the experience after eliminating repetitive and overlapping aspects.

- Engaging with the Australian Community: The investigation downplayed that it was of great importance to some of the participants (specifically, Ali and Salem) to engage with the new society. Engaging with the Australian community was a strong motivation in the adaptation process. This aspect has been noticed recently by Gresham and Clayton (2011). They found that Saudi international students have a motivating desire to learn more about Australian society and to engage and integrate with them. They also reported that Saudi students tend to share aspects of their culture
and to develop friendships. Such motivation, according to their study, influenced by the Arabic culture values ‘affiliation to, and membership in, large social networks that involve trusted relationships’ (p. 366). I could add, based on my personal experience as a Saudi international student that this motivation might also tie in with the information about the Australian community presented to Saudis through the media. Perceptions of Australia as an open laid back, multicultural society were attractive to us and we wanted to explore this environment.

- **Support and pre-departure course:** Some of the participants acknowledged the role of support. Two kinds of support were employed to assist Saudi students in the early stages of their transitioning. The first was social support, as indicated by Zahra and Salem, and the second was professional support in the form of a pre-departure course, as Zahra remarked. The role of social support from others who were the same gender was significant in showing Saudi international students that they could overcome the challenges. This finding agreed with those of Gresham and Clayton (2011), as they found that the majority of Saudi students who participated in the Community Connections Programme conducted at the University of Newcastle in Australia were single males, seeking contact with fellow male students of a similar age because they found such engagement was supportive in terms of reducing the early challenges of the new environment. Zahra also reported the significant role of Emirati girls and the Chinese girl in her experience. Salem also described with great appreciation the support of his first home stay, who involved him in such social occasions as her wedding. The professional support was considered useful in Zahra's account. From this particular aspect, preparation and orientation courses are useful in terms of supporting the learning process of the new setting. In terms of learning about the
cultural, social, and political roles of the new environment, the behavioural-based
social skills are central. The literature has reported the significance of support for
international students socially (e.g. Al-Nassar, 1982; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002;
Yusoff, 2011) and professionally (e.g. Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Pedersen, 1991;
Sandhu, 1994). In relation to Saudi international adjustment, Al-Shedokhi’s (1986)
study showed that participating in pre-departure orientation programmes was
associated with facing fewer adjustment problems.

- Previous experience: As indicated in Salem’s description, previous experience in
travelling to mixed-gender countries appeared to be a factor that reduced the shock of
exposure to a new mixed-gender environment. Such factors have been reported in
different research projects (e.g. Abe et al., 1998; Black, 2011; Klineberg & Hull IV,
1979; Martin, 1987).

6.4. Conclusions

Three main conclusions sum up the findings of this research: the contribution and
implications of the study; discussion of the limitations of the methodology employed and
suggestions for further research.

6.4.1. Contribution and implications

According to Sokolowski (2000), phenomenology as a research approach to understanding
the human experience is not only a philosophical and theoretical attempt, but also can be a
key to opening the door for those who wish to practice the phenomenon (Sokolowski, 2000).
Therefore, I can draw two conclusions in relation to the contribution and implication of the
findings: the first is that these findings may contribute to the theoretical perspectives
underlying the field of cross-cultural psychology, and the second is that they have possible implications for practice in that field.

6.4.1.1. Theoretical contributions

Theoretical contributions are driven by the conceptualisation of experience and transitioning experience as presented in chapter 2. A significant feature that can be noticed is the universality of the conceptualisation. This claim is made on the basis of diversity and commonality, which involve the theoretical orientation of the conceptualisation. It is at once diverse, being rooted in perspectives that have been developed in different regions and within various disciplines, and at the same time homogeneous and universal in terms of the theoretical assumptions that span the diverse perspectives. The provided conceptualisation was influenced by the Eastern perspective of the Russian thinkers (Vygotsky and his followers), Western thinkers (Bruner and Dewey), and a Middle Eastern thinker (Al-Jabri). The overlapping perspectives have been developed within various disciplines: Vygotsky's and Bruner’s in psychology, Dewey’s in philosophy and education, and Al-Jabir's in philosophy.

All of these perspectives have emphasised the role of culture, history, and society in the individual psychological condition and development, as well as the role of individuals in mediating and internalising culture, history, and society. The key theoretical implication is based on the argument as summarised in the following points:

In order to analyse psychologically how the factors and variables control the cross-cultural adaptation of international students who are coming for a relatively short period to interact with a new and unfamiliar context, both home and host contexts need to be analysed together. Examining the cross-cultural experience is seen as an examination of identity with all its
components (e.g. values, beliefs, personal characteristics, and skills), as well as an examination of the surrounding context (Daniels, 2005). In other words, the adaptation process is a result of the reciprocal interaction between the person’s identity (both personal and collective identity) and his or her context; and all these components need to be examined and considered to analyse the experience ‘objectively’.

Analysing both contexts together is a very complex and sophisticated task that cannot be resolved in a short period, as the social context is not stable in nature, and is dynamically changing according to human development and transformation, which are dialectically informed by the developing and dynamically changing social context.

Based on these former arguments, focusing on observing the transitioning experience itself according to the ‘meeting’ phenomenon, as Rizvi (2012) conceptualised from a sociological perspective, potentially assisted in yielding phenomenologically based knowledge that can be reachable in that particular complex context. It could be argued also that such phenomenologically generated knowledge can be more informative and practical than analytical knowledge that is based on hypotheses. Basically, the knowledge we acquire from a consciously observed phenomenon is more practical for understanding international students’ needs, and it has the potential to provide advice based on lived experience.

The research findings supported arguments concerning the role of meaning making in shaping mediated experience in terms of how individuals undergo their life course (Bruner, 1990). The adaptation process and the achievement of positive adjustment to the environment all rely heavily on first hand individual meanings. Therefore understanding the meanings projected by international students is an essential starting step in gaining awareness of what their needs look like. In addition, contributing to the construction of these meanings,
particularly the meanings associated with the host context, is an advanced step in the path of assisting students' adjustment to a mixed-gender environment. Such a contribution can be achieved through institutional engagement in the ZPD of Saudi internationals. Media and technology arguably can have a significant role.

Gender segregation as a cultural practice has contributed to the fabrication of the Saudi cultural identity and it is not merely a practice or regulation that is easy to get rid of. For some Saudis, the transition from gender segregation to mixed gender might be like transitioning from one religion to another.

6.4.1.2. Potential practical implications

The findings of this investigation can generate practical recommendations with implications for three parties: the students themselves, international education providers, and Saudi scholarship providers.

For Saudi students, the findings have provided insight into the essence of the transitioning experience that they will encounter or have encountered. Considering the identified essential aspects of the experience, these findings are applicable for Saudi students in terms of understanding the nature of their experience and increasing their awareness about the transition to a mixed-gender environment. The findings also suggested that a positive adjustment can be reached according to student levels of stress control, skills, and knowledge acquired, and that students should maintain a positive reflection process. Such a recommendation would support Saudi students in adjusting positively and in navigating their adaptation journey successfully and peacefully.
The study findings also can contribute to the development of international students' environment, and it raises some recommendations that may be productive for international education providers in improving their institutional practices. Two workshops have been developed for university staff that involve Saudi international students (Appendix 5). Understanding the nature of the issues encountered by Saudi international students in relation to gender can help students to avoid harmful experiences. The findings may also be useful for improving the materials of the orientation course to include ‘mixing genders’ as an aspect of introducing Arab and Saudi international students to the culture. The study recommended that in order to support students’ psychological adjustment as introduced in the findings of this research, collective informal gender-based activities should be provided for international students from different nationalities that can reduce the stress associated with the transitioning experience in the beginning.

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) it is impossible for individuals to arrive at definitive understandings of other cultures; ‘the basis for success’ with regard to cultural adjustment is derived from an understanding of our own culture and our own expectations about how people in another culture think and act. Therefore, the study provided a recommendation for the Saudi scholarship providers to take into consideration any sensitive issue in the Saudi culture that may hinder students from achieving their goals, such as the issue of gender-segregated culture. Saudi students would benefit from being sufficiently prepared to study in a mixed-gender environment. They need to know more about the differences between the Australian and Saudi Arabian social and gender culture. Therefore, the study urges the scholarship programme to provide a pre-departure course that focuses on the intercultural competence and social skills relevant to a mixed-gender environment. Issues like flirting and abusing should be introduced to the course. The first Saudi international
students can derive the benefits of an orientation course that focuses on the behavioural skills introduced in the findings of this study.

6.4.2. Comments on the research methodology and its limitations

6.4.2.1. Brief reflection

The phenomenon of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment has received little attention in the literature of cross-cultural psychology. Therefore, it was motivational and exciting, as well as challenging and difficult to conduct a project in such circumstances. It was motivational as the project is going to reduce some gaps in the field, and it was challenging as so many directions could be taken and so many aspects focussed upon, which at first confused me as to which direction I should go and which upon which aspect I should focus. I started by thinking of a more positivist and educationalist approach; I decided to study the variables that affect the academic adjustment of Saudi international students in higher education. The first stage of reviewing the literature showed me that such a topic might be very interesting for international educational providers and might draw their attention to some independent variables that might be considered in the internationalisation activities of the curriculum. However, I also realised that even though it is a professionally and academically interesting topic, I was not personally very interested in it. I often remembered my own experience in being in a new and unfamiliar environment, and particularly how I coped with the issue of a mixed-gender environment, and I was more fascinated by understanding my lived experience. However, at that stage, I was not too confident in conducting a very subjective study, and I was not familiar with autobiographical research.

After six months of confusion and looking for an approach that was interesting to me personally and academically, and that I could learn within 3.5 years, I arrived at the idea of
conducting a phenomenological study about the lived experience in a mixed-gender environment. The power of phenomenology has attracted me as it is an approach that can rigorously address inter-subjective research. It is also a flexible and inter-disciplinary approach, as it draws on psychology, sociology, history, and anthropology.

With all the confusion I had in that journey, I learned that in order to conduct personally and academically effective research, I needed to maintain several attitudes: 1) be open to knowledge and to the consideration that any apparent knowledge is valuable in nature, 2) to be reflective and flexible in conducting the research, and 3) to respect and appreciate the ethics and integrity of others involved in the research setting, regardless of whether or not I agreed with them.

6.4.2.2. Recognisable limitations

First, I considered that most studies about Saudi international students’ transitioning experiences have been conducted quantitatively by testing hypotheses and analysing variables (e.g. Al-Banyan, 1980; Al-Nassar, 1982; Shabeeb, 1996). Therefore, because this study took another approach to examine the transitioning experience, it could be in a strong position to construct the topic methodologically. However, the limitations of the findings relate to the complexity involved in the nature of human experience itself, as it involves many intricacies that cannot be analysed or explicated without the effort of the individual. Each participant had a different background, different abilities, a different situation, and different circumstances, and certainly different and unique immediate experiences. Immediate experience is mediated by extremely complex factors involving the history, culture, and personality of the individual. Therefore, the mediated experience is complicated, too. In addition to that, the mediated experience is expressed by language which can be difficult to
interpret and can be interpreted differently from one person to another. Researching for commonalities inside all of these multifaceted phenomenon means differences will impose limitations simply because the project is complicated. This was at the level of the research topic and the nature of lived experience.

Drawing upon those limitations, another limitation occurred at the level of the research approach. The research approach was limiting because it deals with what Smith et al. (2009) call a double hermeneutic: that is, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants, who, in turn, are trying to make sense of what is happening to them. This double interpretation limits the objectivity of the findings and therefore generalisation of the findings. According to Smith et al. (2009), the phenomenological approach, as an interpretive qualitative approach, can carry two interpretative positions: reconstructing the original experience of participants ‘in its own terms’ which is the first level of interpretation, as well as applying the ‘theoretical perspective from the outside’ in order to explore the described experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36).

This inter-subjective interpretation has provided in-depth insight into the experience of these Saudi students. The utilised approach was inter-subjective and therefore, to some extent, limited. In identifying features of the participants’ experience I focused on aspects of the research question that I could consciously relate to while also adopting the bracketing mode to capture the essence of the described experiences. In addition, the research was directed so that it was not seeking any kind of generalisation but was interested in exploring the common and essential meaning, which constituted the transitioning experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). This study offers deeper insight and a better understanding of the
transitioning experience as lived by Saudi international students in a mixed-gender environment.

6.4.3. Suggestions for further research

Like most phenomenological studies, the investigation has revealed more questions than answers (Barnacle, 2001). In these final words, I suggest some possible directions for further research:

- The two aspects of the phenomenon (the developing aspect and the psychological complex concerning the opposite sex) could be examined with another group of participants to see if they are as consistent as they appeared within the collected data.

- Examining a group who has returned to a gender-segregated environment after the transitioning experience should shed more light on the phenomenon.

- Using a feminist perspective to examine the Saudi female experience could provide insight into the female experience as the phenomenon of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia appears to be attached to the female social role.

- Investigations from different perspectives – sociological, psychological, and theological – might be informative for understanding the influence of the transitioning experience on a person according to his or her religious affiliation.

- In the light of changes occurring in Saudi Arabia itself, a study could be done on the influence of a large group of international students who are getting their
education in a mixed-gender environment on the direction of Saudi social movements.

- The above research suggestion could lead to an investigation of the influence of the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment in relation to individual perceptions and attitudes toward Wahhabism or the current religious discourse in Saudi Arabia.


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APPENDICES
Appendix 1: Ethics approval

Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee

16 September 2009

Mr Ahmed Alhazmi

Dear Ahmed,

Re: Human Research Ethics Application – Register Number HREC-B-2000029-06/09

The Chair of the Design and Social Context College Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee, A/Prof Heather Fehring has given approval to your amended ethics application entitled “How Saudi international student experiences adjustment to Gender-Mixed culture to Australia: a phenomenological study”.

I am pleased to advise that your application has been approved as Low Risk (Risk Level 2) classification by the committee. This approval will now be reported to the University Human Research Ethics Committee for noting.

This now completes the Ethics procedures. Your ethics approval expires in 30 November 2011.

Please note that all research data should be stored on University Network systems. These systems provide high levels of manageable security and data integrity, can provide secure remote access, are backed on a regular basis and can provide Disaster Recover processes should a large scale incident occur. The use of portable devices such as CDs and memory sticks is valid for archiving, data transport where necessary and some works in progress. The authoritative copy of all current data should reside on appropriate network systems; and the Principal Investigator is responsible for the retention and storage of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

You are reminded that an Annual/Final report is mandatory and should be forwarded to the College Ethics Subcommittee Secretary by mid-December 2009. This report is available from: URL: http://www.rmit.edu.au/hrec_apply

Should you have any queries regarding your application please seek advice from the Chair of the sub-committee Associate Professor Heather Fehring on (03) 9925 7840, heather.fehring@rmit.edu.au or contact Cheryl de Leon on (03) 9925 2974 or email cheryl.deleon@rmit.edu.au

Yours sincerely,

CHERYL C DE LEON
Secretary
DSC Human Research Ethics Sub-Committee

cc: Dr Berenice Nyland, School of Education
Appendix 2: Invitation letter for participation

- **Objectives:**
  - You are invited to participate in the doctoral programme titled "Teaching the Teacher of the Future," which is jointly sponsored by the School of Education at RMIT University, Bundoora campus, and the Faculty of Management and Information Technology, Bundoora campus.

- **Invitation Details:**
  - **Location:** Bundoora campus
  - **Date:** 12th to 14th of April
  - **Contact:** Email: [School of Education, RMIT University, Bundoora campus](mailto:info@rmit.edu.au)
    - Building 220, level 2, Room 38
    - Tel: (03) 99257708

- **Requirements:**
  - A letter of commitment indicating your interest in participating in the programme.

- **Deadline:** April 10th.

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**Note:** This letter is in Arabic, and it is suggested to have a bilingual version for better understanding.
Appendix 3: Plain language statement of the study

Dear Saudi International Student, Asslam Alycom

I am Ahmed Alhazmi a PhD candidate at RMIT University, College of Design and Social Context, School of Education. I am conducting a PhD research regarding the adjustment of Saudi international students in Australian universities. The title of my thesis is “a phenomenological study of how Saudi international students experience living and studying in gender-mixed society. My senior supervisor is Dr Berenice Nyland.

This study is being conducted as there is an increasing number of Saudi students who undertake their studies at Australian universities, and there is a lack of literature that focuses on Saudi students international experiences. There are three identified proposals for this study:

- To explore the experiences of Saudi international students in regards to their living and studying in a Gender-Mixed society.
- To examine the influence of a preparation course offered by the Saudi government to support the adjustment experiences of Saudi international students.
- To investigate how the experience of living and studying in Gender-Mixed society may impact individual cultural identity.

The major question of this study is how Saudi international students experience living and studying in a Gender-Mixed society?

Based on the phenomenological philosophy, I need 12 participants assisting me to explore the phenomenon of transition from gender-segregated society to gender-mixed society. Participant is going to assist me to draw the essence of his experience regarding this phenomenon, which helps in terms of understanding how Saudi students shift from gender-segregated society to gender-mixed society. To gather required data, multiple in-depth interviews (from 1 to 4 based on the participant’s engagement) are required with postgraduate students and undergraduate students, as well as males and females. Each interview will take approximately one hour. Participant is going to tell me about his experience regarding adjustment with mixed gender environment.

I invite you if you are interested to agree to be part of the project. You can change your mind at any time before it is finished. You have the right to withdraw from participation in this project at any time and, further, to request that data arising from your participation will not be used in the research project.

Any questions regarding this project may be directed to:
The researcher: Ahmed Alhazmi. RMIT University, School of education, Bundoora West Campus, Building: 220 Level: 2 Room: 38 Tel : (03) 99257708, Or

• The research supervisor: Dr. Berenice Nyland. RMIT University, School of education, Bundoora West Campus, Building: 220 Level: 4 Room: 17 Tel: +(61 3) 9925 7805 Email: berenice.nyland@rmit.edu.au
Signed:

Ahmed Alhazmi

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. Details of the complaints procedure: http://www.rmit.edu.au/governance/complaints/research
Appendix 4: Consent form of participation

RMIT HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Prescribed Consent Form For Persons Participating In Research Projects Involving Interviews, Questionnaires, Focus Groups or Disclosure of Personal Information

COLLEGE OF
SCHOOL/CENTRE OF
Design and social context
School of Education

Name of participant: ____________________________

Project Title: How Saudi international students experience living and studying in gender-mixed society

Name(s) of investigators: Ahmed Alhazmi

Phone: ____________________________

1. I have received a statement explaining the interview/questionnaire involved in this project.
2. I consent to participate in the above project, the particulars of which - including details of the interviews or questionnaires - have been explained to me.
3. I authorise the investigator or his or her assistant to interview me or administer a questionnaire.
4. I give my permission to be audio taped/photographed ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. I give my permission for my name or identity to be used ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. I acknowledge that:
   a) Having read the Plain Language Statement, I agree to the general purpose, methods and demands of the study.
   b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
   c) The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching. It may not be of direct benefit to me. The privacy of the information I provide will be safeguarded. The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law. If I participate in a focus group I understand that whilst all participants will be asked to keep the conversation confidential, the researcher cannot guarantee that other participants will do this.
   d) The security of the research data is assured during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to RMIT in the form of a PhD thesis, possible conference presentations and journal publications. Any information which may be used to identify me will not be used unless I have given my permission (see point 5).

Participant's Consent

Name: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________

(Participant)

Name: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________

(Witness to signature)

Where participant is under 18 years of age:

I consent to the participation of ____________________________ in the above project.

Signature: ____________________________ (1) ____________________________ (2) ____________________________
(Signatures of parents or guardians)

Date: ____________________________

Name: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________

(Witness to signature)

Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed.

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. Details of the complaints procedure are available at: http://www.rmit.edu.au/governance/complaints/research
Appendix 5: List of the study contribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parts of this thesis were presented in following forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publications</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conference Presentations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workshops</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed Alhazmi and Karen Dellar : Understanding Students from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf - 25 and 29 October 2010 organised by Study and Learning Centre in RMIT university for professional and academic staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Awards</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 6: ISANA Bursary certificate

ISANA International Education Association

This is to certify that

Ahmed Alhamzi

received the

AEI bursary

for the paper “Saudi international students in Australia and intercultural engagement: A study of transitioning from gender segregated culture to a mixed gender environment.”

1st December 2010

Danielle Hartridge
ISANA President

Colin Walters
AEI International Group Manager
Appendix 7: Certificate of professional editorial work

CERTIFICATE OF ENGLISH EDITING

To whom it may concern

This document certifies that the paper with the provisional title WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO BE IN A MIXED GENDERED ENVIRONMENT? to be submitted by Ahmed Alhazmi has been edited to ensure that the language is clear and free of errors. The logical presentation of ideas and the structure of the paper were also checked during the editing process. The edit was performed by professional editors at Editage, a division of Cactus Communications. The intent of the author's message was not altered in any way during the editing process.

The quality of the edit has been guaranteed, with the assumption that our suggested changes have been accepted and have not been further altered without the knowledge of our editors.

Nikesh Gosalia
Vice President, Author Services, Editage

Editage, a division of Cactus Communications, offers professional English-language editing and publication support services to authors engaged in over 500 areas of research. Through its community of experienced editors, which includes doctors, engineers, published scientists, and researchers with peer review experience, Editage has successfully helped authors get published in internationally reputed journals. Authors who work with Editage are guaranteed excellent language quality and timely delivery.
Appendix 8: Interview guide

المحررة

- عندى سوالان عن تجربتك الشخصية:

- السؤال الأول عن البداية والثاني عن الوضع الحالي .. ولكم كالمجردة في تجاوز ما شئت منها أو عدم تسجيل ما لا ترغب

- كيف يمكن أن تصف تجربتك المتنوعة من بينة لين فيها اختلافات إلى بيئة مختلطة

- برائك ما هي الأسباب التي جعلتك تزور تجربتك بهذا الشكل

- أنت متزوج أم عزباء

- هل لهذه الحالة دور في تشكيل تجربتك ...

- هل كونك نشأ في عائلة محافظة دور في تشكيل تجربتك

- برائك لماذا بعض الشباب والشابات في أستراليا يجذب صعوبة في التأقلم مع هذه البيئة المختلطة

- هل وجدت صعوبة في البداية في التعامل مع الجنس الآخر ...

- لمدة...

- هل كون الواحد منا قليلاً حكراً أثر في تشكيل ملامح تجربتنا في هذا المجتمع المختلط

- بالنظر لواقعنا الاجتماعي كيف ننظر الناس إليكم ...

- هل يحديك منديم أم لا

- هل هناك تردد عندنا تعامل مع الجنس الآخر

- هل تعامل مع الجنس الآخر إذا كان سعودياً تعامل مع الأسترالي أو طالب دولي آخر

- كيف لو كان عربياً ولم يكن سعودياً

- لمدة ...

- كيف يمكن أن تصف أنت شاب سعودي من بيئة إلى هذه البيئة المختلطة.

- هل ترى أن المتعين بحاجة إلى دعم بخصوص التعامل مع البيئة المختلطة

- ما هي مبادئ الحblend في المجتمع المختلط بالنسبة للسعودي

- هل يمكن أن تكون تجربتك على هذا المجتمع المختلط، 항ك، بالسبب الآخر ايجابياً للشابة السعودية

- هل تصورنا السائد عن المرأة وعن الرجل يؤثر في تفاعلكنا كسعوديين مع الجنس الآخر أثناء عيشنا في أستراليا.

- لمدة ...

- دورة الإعداد هل ناقشت مثل هذا الموضوع

- هل ترى أموراً مفيدة من ناقشت

- هل الإذاعة السعودية تدعم الشباب في تأقلمه مع المجتمع المختلط

- كيف يمكن أن تساع في تأقلمه مع الجنس الآخر في المعهد

- هل كنت تفضل أن يدرس رجل أو امرأة

- في رأيك هل الحب والشابة يشكلان عام يدعم ادمامهم وتقبلهم أم انتقاداتهم

- ما هي أكثر العواصم التي تؤثر على تجربة المبتعد

- هل هي العواصم المزدوجة

- أم الاجتماعية كونه من قبلة معينة أو في طبقة اجتماعية ما

- أم أن مستواك العلامي له دور

- كيف ترى الشاب السعودي الذي يتعامل مع الجنس الآخر بانتهاء

- كيف ترى الشابة السعودية التي تتعامل مع الجنس الآخر بانتهاء

- هل للحجاب دور في تحدة ميزان التعامل بين الجنسين ...

- ما رأيك في الاختلاف بشكل عام

- هل تصل التعامل مع شخص من نفس جنسك أم مختلف

- لمدة ...

- في لقاءات السعوديين العائلة هنا هل تجتمعون مختلطين الرجال والنساء

- لمدة ...

- كيف شتى:

- في القمة بعائشة ليست سعودية

- لمذا؟?

- لمذا ممارس السعوديين الفصل بين الجنسين هذا

- برائك عندما يختار له بحاص صعوبة ما؟

- هل تجب أن يرتكب مستوصفات العبد奥地利 وأن يصحبها شخص من الجنس الآخر

- متزوج

- أعجب

- لمدة ...

- كيف يمكن أن يؤثر تجربتنا مع الاختلاف في تصورنا عن أنفسنا

- في بناء قلقنا.