

A Literature Review of the International Student Experience in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

This study aimed to explore the experiences and challenges of international students studying at Saudi higher education institutions through a systematic literature review. The current paper identified 16 studies that met the selection criteria for published scientific literature established by this study. The study's most significant findings are that international students in Saudi Arabia report high levels of satisfaction with their lives and overall academic experiences. Most of these students receive scholarships funded by the Saudi government, which represents a powerful motivation for studying in the Kingdom. There is a high level of satisfaction with the educational services provided by higher education institutions. While international students generally face moderate psychological and social challenges, they express satisfaction with university services. For international students who are not Arab, language barriers present the primary challenge to their social integration and create significant academic obstacles.

Keywords: *international students, higher education in Saudi Arabia, internationalization of education, challenges facing international students, experiences of international students*

Introduction:

In recent decades, the number of international students in higher education institutions has increased significantly, approaching 7 million. English-speaking countries are the primary hosts for these students, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia being the largest countries with non-citizen students enrolled in their universities (UNESCO, 2024). The presence of international students in host countries brings numerous benefits to the students and the countries themselves. Many students seek educational institutions superior to those in their home countries, which provides them with greater opportunities to enhance their knowledge, skills, and experiences. This, in turn, opens doors for a better future. Additionally, some international students aspire to emigrate permanently, and studying abroad is one pathway to achieving this goal. Countries, communities, and colleges that welcome international students achieve various objectives. The presence of these students enhances cultural diversity, fostering a more open society that embraces different cultures. Hosting international students also provides significant educational benefits and opportunities for sharing experiences (Al-Bassam, 2015; Akanwa, 2015; Kelly, 2012; López et al., 2019; Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007). Furthermore, countries that host international students attain important economic goals. For instance, the contribution of international students and their families to the United States GDP has reached \$43.8 billion in 2023 (The Institute of International Education, 2025).

Governments and higher education institutions worldwide seek to attract international students for various purposes in Arab countries. Among these countries is

Saudi Arabia, which launched the Study in Saudi Arabia initiative in light of Vision 2030. One of its goals is to internationalize higher education in Saudi Arabia and attract international students to Saudi universities (Ministry of Education, 2025). Historically, Saudi higher education institutions have hosted international students since the country's inception. The goal of hosting international students in the Kingdom was to develop human capital in friendly countries by contributing to the development of non-local students' skills and knowledge so that they could contribute to the development of their homelands. Most international students in Saudi Arabia, from its beginning until now, are students on scholarships funded by the Saudi government (Albeshir, 2024).

Statement of Problem:

International students in higher education institutions experience different challenges than local students. These students often face more significant cultural, psychological, social, and financial difficulties than their local counterparts (Albeshir, 2019; 2022; Akanwa; 2015; Gautam et al., 2016; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Oduwaye et al., 2023; Smith & Khawaja, 2023). Saudi Arabia is currently seeking to become a regional hub for international students. The Study in Saudi Arabia initiative was launched to attract international students and make Saudi higher education institutions multicultural, contributing to local and global growth and prosperity (Ministry of Education, 2025). To attract more international students, there is a need to analyze the realities, experiences, and challenges that non-local students encounter in Saudi Arabia. This understanding will help develop educational and non-educational services that enhance the student experience

for international learners(Albeshir et al., 2025). This study aimed to review the experiences and challenges faced by international students in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia through an analysis of published academic literature. This study is significant because it is the first to apply a systematic literature review methodology to reveal the realities and challenges international students face in Saudi Arabia. The analysis furthermore aimed to provide officials with a clearer understanding of the realities and challenges faced by international students, ultimately enhancing the services available to this group of students.

Study Objectives:

- To learn about the history of international students in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia
- To discover the experiences of international students in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia
- To understand the challenges faced by international students in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia

Research Question:

What are the realities, experiences, and challenges faced by international students in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, as revealed through a review of published literature?

A brief overview of the growth of international student numbers in Saudi higher education institutions:

Formal education in Saudi Arabia has witnessed an unprecedented leap in the last few decades. The Saudi government believes in the significance of human resources in achieving renaissance and community well-being. Therefore, anyone following the history of formal

education in Saudi Arabia will discover that since the country's founding, the Saudi government has taken the initiative to open and fund schools. The first Directorate of Education was established in 1926 and later developed into the Ministry of Education, which is approaching its centenary (Ministry of Education, 2024). The government has succeeded in convincing large segments of the population of the importance of education, although this persuasion has often been difficult. A prominent example of this is the issue of the beginning of formal education for women.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has achieved tremendous accomplishments in various educational fields, including higher education (Albeshir, 2024). The College of Sharia in Makkah Al-Mukarramah was the first higher education institution in the country, established in 1949. Several colleges followed, and 1957 the first university in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf region, King Saud University, was established. The establishment of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia was preceded by educational missions for citizens to study abroad for university studies. The first official educational mission abroad was to the Kingdom of Egypt, the Arab Republic of Egypt. The mission consisted of 14 male students, and Saudi educational missions abroad have not ceased until now (Al-Salman, 1999).

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed significant events in the history of higher education. They saw the establishment of Sharia and Teachers Colleges in Mecca, the Sharia and Arabic Language Colleges in Riyadh, and the founding of the country's first university, King Saud University. Government educational institutions have hosted

international students since the country's earliest months of higher education. Historical sources indicate the presence of international students in the first batches in the first half of the 1950s at the Sharia College in Riyadh, which today is Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. Three international students were also present in the first batch to study at King Saud University in 1957, which consisted of 21 students, all of whom were male. In 1961, 15 students out of 21 graduated from the first class of the newly established university. Two of the first class of graduates were international students, and they were from the African continent, specifically from Malawi. The first international student was Abdullah Al-Hajj Nasri, who obtained a bachelor's degree in history, while the second student was Ahmed Tayeb Abdel Raouf, who obtained the same degree mentioned above (Imam University, 1982; King Saud University, 1987).

Saudi higher education institutions have witnessed the presence of international students since the first half of the 1960s. The first international students were at the College of Sharia in Riyadh, the precursor to Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. After extensive research and a review of historical sources and graduate records from the early years of government higher education institutions, Dr. Saud Al-Bishr believes that a student from Pakistan named Muhammad Sharif graduated with the second class of the College of Sharia in Riyadh in 1958. This student is likely the first international graduate from a Saudi higher education institution and the first international student accepted into the Kingdom's higher education institutions, which began in 1949 with the establishment of the College of Sharia in Mecca. The book issued by Imam Muhammad

ibn Saud Islamic University, entitled "A Guide to University Graduates 1376 to 1401 AH," states that the College of Sharia in Riyadh, which—along with the College of Arabic Language, the Higher Institute of the Judiciary, and other scientific institutes—was the nucleus of the university's founding, was founded in 1953. The first class graduated around 1957. Twenty-two students, all male citizens, graduated from the first class.

The following year, 20 students also graduated from the university, including one student from Pakistan named Muhammad Sharif, also known as Muhammad Sharif Pakistani. He ranked 16th out of 20 students in the class. The third class of the College of Sharia also graduated an international student, Saaduddin Ahmad, from India in 1958. In 1959, a Pakistani student named Abdul Karim Murad graduated from the College of Sharia. Many Saudi higher education institutions have witnessed the presence of international students since their inception. For example, three international students in the first group were accepted at King Saud University in 1957 out of 21 male students. This means that international students represented more than 14% of the total enrolled student population, a significant percentage compared to a fledgling public university (King Saud University, 1987). Historical sources indicate that the university's first class of 15 students graduated in 1961, including two international students. The two international students studied history from Malawi, an East African country that was under British occupation. According to the source, 15 students from the College of Arts, specifically from the history and geography departments, successfully graduated, representing the university's first class of graduates in 1961

(King Saud University, 1987). The number of students graduating from the Geography studies was seven, all citizens.

In comparison, eight students were graduating from the History major that academic year, two of whom were from the Republic of Malawi. The first international student, Abdullah Al-Haj Nasri, obtained a bachelor's degree in history, and his grade point average was good. He was ranked sixth out of eight among his classmates, while the second student was Ahmed Tayeb Abdel Raouf, who obtained the same academic degree mentioned above. His grade point average was acceptable, and he was ranked last among his classmates (King Saud University, 1987).

The number of higher education institutions increased in the 1970s, and international students increased. The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions in 1970/1971 reached approximately 8,492 students, of whom 691 were female. The total number of international students was 1,404, meaning that non-Saudi students constituted 16.5% of the total number of students enrolled in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia in that academic year. Most international students were male, with 1,227 male students and 177 female students, meaning that female students constituted approximately 13% of the total international students in the country. Most international students were from Arab countries, with 1,033 Arab international students compared to 371 non-Arab students. Arab students constituted approximately 64% of the total number of non-local students. International female students from Arab countries also constituted the majority of international students, with 175 female students compared to two non-Arab female students (Ministry of Education, 1972).

Since the launch of Saudi universities, all international students have received scholarships from Saudi colleges. The government funds public universities to host international students. These scholarships include numerous benefits, including a monthly salary, annual tickets, free housing, and free medical care. In other words, international students do not have a significant economic impact, unlike Western countries, where the presence of international students brings in significant amounts of money. This is due to international students paying higher tuition fees than local students.

Furthermore, these students and their families invest significant amounts of money in services they need while living and studying in Western countries, such as housing, food, health insurance, and other services that directly and indirectly impact the gross domestic product. For example, in the United States, international students have contributed more than \$40 billion to the local economy and generated numerous jobs. However, the situation is different at Saudi universities, as the main aim of hosting international students is to help developing countries by developing human capital.

International student enrollment in Saudi higher education institutions has increased over the past decades. According to the latest statistics, the number of international students in higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2021 reached 64,874, of whom approximately 47,000 studied at public universities, while the remainder studied at private higher education institutions. According to the Ministry of Education, most international students studied at public higher education institutions, with 46,723 international students studying at

public universities in 2021. Female international students constituted approximately 37% of the total international students at public universities that year, totaling 17,417. The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions reached more than 1.2 million, and the percentage of international students in public higher education institutions was estimated at approximately 3.82% for that year (UNESCO, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2022).

King Abdulaziz University was the most prominent university hosting female international students, with 3,288 students at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah in 2021. Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University came in second place with 3,147 female students, followed by Umm Al-Qura University with 1,485 students, and King Faisal University with 1,391 international students. King Saud University was the fifth largest institution, with 1,263 non-local female students in 2021, followed by Taibah University, with 698 students. Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, the only public women's university, had 599 international female students for that academic year.

In the 2021-2022 academic year, Students from Yemen constituted the largest group of non-citizen students in higher education institutions in the Kingdom, with 14,620 students. Students from the Syrian Arab Republic constituted the second largest group of international students in Saudi universities, with 6,558 international students. Students from occupied Palestine were ranked third as the largest group of international students for that academic year, with 4,628 students. Students from the Arab Republic of Egypt were ranked fourth as the largest

group of non-citizen students in higher education institutions, totaling 3,369. Students from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan were ranked fifth as the largest group of international students, with 2,186 students (UNESCO, 2024).

Students from Indonesia constituted the most significant number of non-Arab international students at Saudi higher education institutions, with 2,001 students. Students from Pakistan constituted the second largest group of non-Arab international students, with 1,640 international students. Students from India ranked fourth as the largest non-Arab international students, with 1,424 students. Students from Afghanistan ranked fourth as the third largest non-Arab international students, with 1,301 students. Students from Nigeria ranked fifth in this classification, with 1,231 students. Students from Bangladesh ranked sixth as the largest group of non-Arab international students, with 1,190 students. Notably, Arab and Muslim international students constitute the majority of international students at Saudi higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2024).

Methodology:

The study utilized a systematic literature review methodology to investigate international students' experiences, challenges, and history in Saudi higher education institutions. Several criteria were established for selecting the literature:

- The focus must be on exploring the experiences, challenges, and historical context of international students in Saudi Arabia.
- The study should be scholarly and published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

- The literature must be accessible through specific search engines, including ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Dar Al-Manzouma, and ResearchGate.
- The publication date should range from 2015 to June 2025.
- The study must be available in either Arabic or English.

Results:

The present study found 16 articles published on international students in Saudi higher education from 2015 to June 2025 according to specific criteria:

- The focus must be on exploring the experiences, challenges, and historical context of international students in Saudi Arabia.
 - The study should be scholarly and published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.
 - The literature must be accessible through specific search engines, including ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Dar Al-Manzouma, and ResearchGate.
 - The publication date should range from 2015 to June 2025.
 - The study must be available in either Arabic or English.
 - Among the existing 16 articles with the aforementioned criteria, the majority were quantitative studies using questionnaires, followed by those used diverse methods
- Except four articles:
- Almutairi (2020)
 - Alasmari (2023)
 - Albeshir et al. (2024)
 - Albeshir et al. (2025)
 - and Alasmari (2023), Albeshir et al. (2025), Almutairi (2020) employed qualitative methodology

, and AlAlbeshir et al. (2024) adopted a historical perspective. Of the 15 articles included, all were published in Arabic except for three papers: Albeshir et al. (2025) , Alasmari (2023) and Alasmari (2023).

- Al-Bassam (2015) conducted a study entitled "The Difference in Spatial Trends of Foreign Scholarship Students at Qassim University" in population geography. This study addresses the differences in spatial trends of foreign scholarship students at Qassim University in terms of geographical distribution and demographic, economic, and social characteristics, as well as the reasons for choosing Qassim University over other universities in the Kingdom. It was based on a survey sample consisting of (232) questionnaires during the first semester of the 2014 academic year, distributed to (448) international students. The study used the descriptive analytical approach. The study showed that the continent of Asia comes first in terms of the number of foreign scholarship students at Qassim University and that the majority of them were from China. Among the reasons for choosing Qassim University over other Saudi universities is the presence of multiple Sharia circles in the cities of Qassim that can benefit from it. The study's results revealed a difference in the practical situation and the amount of the monthly reward that the student receives from the university, and both significantly impact the reasons for choosing Qassim University over other Saudi universities. The study recommended reconsidering the selection of students, focusing the university on one city, and intensifying studies in this field, especially by specialists.

- Al-Luqmani (2019) conducted a study to identify the self-concept level among intentional students at the Islamic University of Madinah. The researcher used the descriptive approach. The research sample consisted of (584) students. The study concluded that the level of self-understanding among scholarship students was at an average level across all scale dimensions, except for the social dimension, which was at a high level. The study revealed no statistically significant differences in the total score according to the continent variable, while there were differences in the academic dimension according to the continent variable. The study also revealed statistically significant differences in the total score of the scale and the dimensions of emotional, social, and academic, according to the academic average variable. The differences were in favor of students with excellent grades. The study recommended the need to focus on raising the level of self-concept among university students through specialized courses for students or faculty members so that they acquire self-enhancement skills. It also recommended that the university comprehensively study different peoples' characteristics and cultural patterns.
- Almutairi (2020) published a study in English. This study sought to explore the experiences of global students at a Saudi university to understand the challenges they face during their studies. The study employed a qualitative methodology and interviewed 16 international students and 10 academic leaders. The study found that some international students experienced more culture shock than others, particularly non-Arab international students who faced language barriers.

Additionally, female students encountered greater challenges than their male counterparts.. At the same time, the academic leaders and faculty members in this study seemed to understand the experiences of international students.

- Al-Shawawra (2020) conducted a study to identify the level of services the Islamic University of Madinah provides from the students' perspective. The researcher used a descriptive-analytical approach and developed a questionnaire to collect information. 816 students from various majors and colleges at the university participated in the study, most of whom were international students. One of the study's most notable findings was high student satisfaction with the quality of teaching and library services. In contrast, student satisfaction with assessment and academic advising services was moderate. The study found statistically significant differences in academic level variables, with undergraduate students' average evaluations of the teaching process being higher than graduate students. There were also statistically significant differences regarding the quality of library services between undergraduate and graduate students, as graduate students, especially those at the doctoral level, benefit more extensively from the services provided by the university library and its facilities than other academic levels
- Al-Qarni (2021) conducted a study evaluating the student housing services provided by Umm Al-Qura University and proposing a vision for improving them based on international experiences. The research method used was descriptive and analytical, with a sample size

of 104 male international students. The study used a questionnaire as a research tool, and the results showed that the housing management received high student satisfaction. The research also identified students' need for open dialogue meetings with the housing management, exchanging experiences, transferring expertise, and listening to different viewpoints through recreational trips and tours. The study also revealed the availability of housing spaces for various student activities. Among the most important findings were the need to build additional housing units, consider increasing the size of apartments and rooms when designing, and establish public gardens around student housing to increase the oxygen level and provide an outlet for students' leisure time. The study also recommended establishing communication channels between students and the student housing management after graduation from the university to benefit from multiculturalism through language courses and cultural exchange programs.

- Al-Harthi (2021) conducted a study to identify the educational challenges facing international students at the Islamic University in Medina from their point of view. The study sample consisted of (460) students. The researcher used a questionnaire to detect educational challenges (prepared by the researcher), which consists of (ten) dimensions: the study system, faculty members, curricula, tests, student guidance, administrative system, public services, students, university library, and electronic technologies. The descriptive analytical approach was also used, and the results showed that the level of educational challenges facing international

students studying at the Islamic University was high, with a percentage of

- The study conducted by Al-Namlah and Al-Suhaibani (2021) aimed to assess the psychological and social adjustment levels among international scholarship students at Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. It also sought to examine how various factors—such as the students' nationality, the number of years they have lived in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, their academic level, and their field of study—impact their level of adjustment. Additionally, the study investigated which dimensions (psychological, social, or academic) most influence their adaptation. The sample consisted of 107 students selected through simple random sampling. A descriptive survey approach was employed, and the researchers developed an adjustment scale to gather data. The results indicated no statistically significant differences in the psychological and social dimensions related to the number of years of residence in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, there were no significant differences in the social and academic dimensions based on specialization. However, a statistically significant relationship was found in the psychological dimension favoring students specializing in the Quran and Sunnah. The academic dimension emerged as the most influential factor affecting the students' adjustment level.
- Alasmari (2023) conducted a study titled "Challenges and Social Adaptation of International Students in Saudi Arabia," published in English. The researcher aimed to explore the difficulties international students face while adapting to university life in Saudi Arabia. This qualitative research, based on the social adaptation

framework, examines in detail the problems experienced by international students during their enrollment at Al-Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. Utilizing purposeful sampling, 20 male non-Arab international students participated in semi-structured interviews. The study found that all participants encountered language barriers on campus with their instructors and classmates and off campus with the general public. Additionally, international students experienced culture shock due to differences in lifestyle, religious practices, and the languages spoken in Saudi Arabia. Participants reported feelings of depression, nostalgia, stress, loneliness, and homesickness. However, they viewed the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia as having high standards, a solid educational system, democratic procedures, opportunities for critical analysis, and access to the latest technology. Orientation sessions, preparatory classes, and support from foreign office staff helped international students better understand and adapt to their new environment. Ultimately, the students were satisfied with their experiences in Saudi Arabia.

- The study conducted by Al-Tar (2023) aimed to explore the current mental image of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its citizens. It focused on identifying the sources and factors that shape this perception among a random sample of 366 male and female international students from six major public universities in Saudi Arabia. The findings revealed that the international students held a positive view of Saudi Arabia, which was categorized into five main dimensions following an exploratory factor analysis. These dimensions included

economic superiority and international reputation, the quality of life for Saudi citizens and the attractiveness of the Saudi environment, digital governance, social and political progress in Saudi Arabia, institutional excellence, and a moderate cultural approach. Additionally, the study identified three primary factors that influence this mental image: the role of various media outlets, personal and direct communication, and the impact of Saudi Arabia's political and humanitarian positions. Notably, the results indicated that individual factors or demographic characteristics did not significantly affect the dimensions of the mental image.

- Albeshir (2023) conducted a study to identify the evaluation of the quality of university services at King Saud University from the perspective of international students in the College of Education. The researcher used the descriptive-analytical approach as a methodology for the study and a questionnaire as a tool for collecting information. The study sample consisted of 93 male international students from various academic levels and specializations in the College of Education. Among the most important results of the study was a high level of international student satisfaction with university services before arriving in the Kingdom. The results also indicated a high level of international student satisfaction with the quality of public facilities and a high level of international student satisfaction with the quality of services provided by the International Student Administration. The study results also indicate a high level of international student satisfaction with the quality of the educational environment and facilities, as well as a high level of international student satisfaction with

academic services. The study found that international students are delighted with university services at King Saud University.

- Al Guidi (2023) aimed to investigate the differences in cultural intelligence and cognitive flexibility based on two variables: the duration of cross-cultural experience and the level of proficiency in a second language. The study utilized a descriptive, comparative approach, surveying 836 Saudi students on scholarships in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and Singapore, as well as international students at Saudi universities. The tools employed in this study included the Cultural Intelligence Scale and the Cognitive Flexibility Scale. The findings indicated significant differences in cultural intelligence based on the length of experience among scholarship students, with those residing for more than seven years showing higher cultural intelligence. In contrast, among international students, those who had resided for less than one year exhibited greater cultural intelligence. However, no differences were registered in cognitive flexibility based on scholarship students' experience duration. In the case of international students, differences in cognitive flexibility were found, favoring residents who had been there for less than one year. Additionally, there were notable differences in cultural intelligence based on the level of proficiency in the second language for both groups, with higher linguistic competence associated with increased cultural intelligence. On the other hand, no significant differences in cognitive flexibility were observed among the scholarship students according to their level of

second language proficiency. In contrast, differences were evident for international students, favoring those with higher language competence.

- Albeshir et al. (2024) conducted a historical study examining the development of international students at King Saud University. Founded in 1957 in Riyadh, King Saud University is the first university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the entire Arabian Peninsula. This study aimed to explore the realities of international students at King Saud University during the second half of the twentieth century, specifically from the university's inception in 1957 until 1999. The findings revealed that international students significantly impacted the university throughout the twentieth century; notably, there was no academic year without international students since the university's establishment. In the university's early years, admissions were restricted to male students, with female students being admitted for the first time in the fifth academic year. In its first year, the university had three international students, and the first graduating class in 1961 included two international students. A notable aspect of this research was the presence of female international students in the second year of female admissions, which began in 1962. Additionally, the study found that international students were first admitted to the master's program in 1979, with 50 students, including nine females. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the number of international students at King Saud University fluctuated significantly. Initially, their numbers increased from 1957 but began to decline rapidly in the last decade of

the century. The 1980s were regarded as the golden age for international students at King Saud University, characterized by their peak numbers and a high proportion compared to local students. However, the 1990s saw a sharp decline in international students. Moreover, the study indicated that most international students in the twentieth century were from Arab countries and that male international students outnumbered females. The analysis also discovered that most intentional students pursued humanities and social Sciences, with the College of Education being one of the largest colleges at King Saud University hosting these international students during the latter half of the century.

- Aldayel and Alomari (2024) conducted a study to identify the reality of implementing cultural diversity management at King Khalid University (KKU) from the perspective of international students by focusing on the application of cultural diversity management (internal, external, and organizational). A questionnaire was employed to collect data and information, and the sample was 330 non-local students. The study found that the degree of implementation of cultural diversity management at KKU from the perspective of international students was generally moderate. The internal dimension ranked first at a moderate level, followed by the organizational dimension in second place at a moderate level, and the external dimension ranked third at a moderate level.
- Albeshir (2024) aimed to identify the quality of services provided by King Saud University from the perspective of international students. The researcher used a

questionnaire to collect data for the study. The study also utilized a descriptive and analytical approach, and the study sample consisted of 184 international students studying at King Saud University. The study found that international students' satisfaction with the quality of general services was very high, as was their satisfaction with academic services. International students' satisfaction was also high in the following dimensions: quality of the educational environment, university facilities, and social and health life. Overall, satisfaction with all five study dimensions was high. The study results indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the responses of the study sample members regarding the evaluation of university services, attributed to the variables (mother tongue, age, academic stage, and college), while there were no statistically significant differences attributed to the variables (gender, continent, length of residence in Saudi Arabia, and academic grade).

- Al-Zahrani's study (2024) aimed to analyze the migration intentions of non-Arabic-speaking international students at King Abdulaziz University by surveying their demographic, socioeconomic characteristics, and spatial preferences. The study relied on an inductive approach and statistical analysis (logistic regression and chi-square) on a sample of 200 international students from 26 countries. The results showed that 57% wanted to return to their countries, especially those studying humanities. The primary motivation was to spread the Arabic language and Islamic law, while the rest preferred to remain in Saudi Arabia or migrate to another country in search of jobs

and improved income. The study also showed that marital status, type of specialization, and place of birth are among the most prominent factors influencing migration intentions. The study recommended reconsidering admission and scholarship policies for international students, focusing on spreading the Arabic language and moderate Islamic values in their countries.

- Albeshir et al. (2025) published a study in English aimed to explore the motivations behind international students' decisions to attend public universities in the country. A qualitative approach was employed using interviews as the primary data collection method to address the research question. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 male international students attending a public university in Saudi Arabia. The study's findings revealed that the primary factor attracting international students to public universities in Saudi Arabia is the educational scholarship program funded by the Saudi government. This program provides various benefits to international students, including free tuition, a monthly stipend, free housing, and additional advantages. Additionally, the study pinpointed other appealing aspects, such as factors related to the Islamic religion, the Kingdom's positive global reputation and humanitarian role, and the overall quality and advancement of higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Discussion:

Attracting international students of different nationalities, specialties, and services is one of the promotions Saudi universities have taken pride in over the past decades. This has encouraged several researchers to

investigate the reality of their lives and determine the nature of the challenges they face, their satisfaction levels, intentions for the future, views toward the Kingdom, and adaptability concerning the university environment. These studies have shown several converging and diverging findings that enrich the policies to attract global students and enrich their experience.

In terms of the satisfaction of international students with university services, several studies have shown that satisfaction was generally high with all services provided by the university, including quality of teaching, administrative services, university facilities, housing, library, and related academic services (Al-Shawawra, 2020; Al-Qarni, 2021; Albeshir, 2023; Albeshir, 2024). Albeshir (2023) also found customer satisfaction with services before and after students' arrival at the College of Education at King Saud University, namely treatment at public facilities, management of international student affairs, and learning environment. On the other hand, there are several other services (e.g., academic advising, assessment methods, etc.), as revealed by some studies, for which students' satisfaction is moderate (Al-Shawawra, 2020).

A study conducted by Al-Harthi (2021) revealed several educational, social, and psychological obstacles confronting international students. These challenges relate to the study system, examination, curricula, public services, and academic counseling. Furthermore, Alasmari (2023) also indicated that non-Arab international students face severe persisting with language and communication obstacles as well as other problems, such as culture shock, alienation, depression, and homesickness. This makes their

entire experience a bad one. Nonetheless, most students expressed high satisfaction with the quality of education provided to them and the academic support they receive in the Kingdom.

Al-Namlah and Al-Suhaibani (2021) covered psychological, social and academic adjustment. Their findings revealed academic adjustment to be the overall predictor most affecting. At the same time, there was no significant difference in their psychological or social adjustment based on years of stay or specialization except for the Quran and Sunnah students, who showed a higher psychological adjustment. Specialization and religious values are found to be contributing to stability and belonging.

Concerning the reasons for selecting universities in Saudi Arabia, Albeshir et al. (2025) indicated that the Saudi scholarship was the main factor behind selecting Saudi universities among international students due to its package, including full tuition fees, monthly stipend, free accommodation, and health services. Students mentioned other reasons for studying in the Kingdom, including the King's Educational system, religious values, humanitarian function, and the chance for personal growth. Al-Bassam's (2015) study findings indicated that geography and the educational circles in the Qassim region were another direct cause for some students to select Qassim University instead of any other position in the university.

Regarding post-graduation movement intentions, Al-Zahrani (2024) found that 57% of non-Arabic-speaking students, specifically humanities students, wished to return home to spread the Arabic language and Islamic values. On

the other hand, some students wished to stay in Saudi Arabia or move to foreign countries to earn a living. Marital status, field of specialization, and place of birth were observed to impact migration intentions.

Concerning the Kingdom's public image, Al-Tar (2023) discovered that international students display an optimistic perception of Saudi Arabia based on five key dimensions of economic and international reputation, quality of life, digital governance, social and political progress, and cultural moderation. The image of Saudi Arabia was found not to be significantly associated with the perception of the Kingdom among 19% of the respondents who had an average attitude towards Saudi Arabia and 62% who had a neutral perception of the country.

Al-Guidi's (2023) research also focused on cultural intelligence and cognitive flexibility. Findings indicated that international students who have stayed overseas for over 7 years tend to have higher cultural intelligence. In contrast, those who have stayed for less than a year have higher cognitive flexibility. Language ability was also associated with sociocultural intelligence, but it had a weak effect on the cognitive flexibility of Saudi scholarship students.

In the area of cultural diversity management, according to Aldayel and Alomari's (2024) study, the level of cultural diversity practice by King Khalid University was average, as perceived by international students. The internal dimension was the one that ranked first, followed by the organizational dimension, and finally, the external dimension, thereby reflecting the necessity of increasing external policies aimed at cultural diversity.

Historically, Albeshir et al. (2024) study looked into the history of international student presence at King Saud University from its establishment in 1957 to 1999. It was evident that the university was open for business at all times in the time frame; the 1980s was the high tide mark regarding the intake of international students. However, international student enrollment fell quite dramatically in the 1990s. The study revealed that based on Arab students, the most significant percentage of them, in general and from the point of view of the discipline, were connected with the humanities, especially in the Faculty of Education.

The literature review on international students in Saudi Arabia revealed several key findings:

- International students in Saudi Arabia report high levels of satisfaction with their overall lives and academic experiences.
- The majority of these students receive scholarships funded by the Saudi government, which is a major motivation for them to study in the Kingdom.
- Most international students come from Arab and Islamic countries.
- There is a significant level of satisfaction with the educational services provided by higher education institutions.
- While international students generally face moderate psychological and social challenges, they express satisfaction with university services, including housing, food, and support from the international student administration.
- For non-Arab international students, language barriers are the primary obstacle to social integration and pose considerable academic challenges.

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