

# International Students in Crisis Times: Exploring the Experiences of International Students Studying in Saudi Arabia during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the experiences of international students studying in Saudi Arabia during the Covid-19 pandemic. By focusing on a sample of international students, the researcher generated data through semi-structured individual interviews with the participants via Zoom due to Covid-19 circumstances. Although the researcher sent more than 100 invitations to international students to participate in this research, either via e-mail or WhatsApp, only 12 male international students studying at different universities in Saudi Arabia agreed to participate. The overall findings of this research revealed three themes that emerged from the interviews: the challenges of international students, their benefits and, support services offered to them in Saudi Arabia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The challenges include educational, economic, technical, social, health, and religious challenges. The benefits include educational, economic, technical, social, and religious benefits. The various support services offered to international students include support from universities, community charitable institutions, and individuals. Finally, implications of the findings and directions for future research are provided.

**Keywords:** International students, Saudi Arabia, Covid-19 pandemic, Scholarships

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 outbreak and the consequent of border closures and curfews have undoubtedly significantly impacted education in many parts of the world. Hence, many countries changed the mode of education from normal physical classroom attendance to online learning using different platforms, such as Blackboard, Moodle, Zoom, WebEx, and others (Crawford et al., 2020). It is expected that this unexpected quick transition would have both negative and positive impacts on governments and societies as a whole, and those working in the educational field in particular, such as administrators, teachers, and students.

Therefore, the pandemic has created many research rooms for researchers, especially on students, either local or international, to explore their experiences of learning during this crisis time. In the pre-pandemic era, Knight (2015) stated the importance of focusing on international students' experiences of learning and cultural living and what happens on campuses and classrooms for the sake of real internationalization. If this focus is significant in normal conditions, then exploring the experiences of international students in abnormal circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, is vital not only for internationalization itself but also primarily for humanitarian work to help them adapt to these new conditions.

During the pandemic, international students were subject to different challenges that might not be experienced by domestic students, such as travel bans, visa restrictions, racism, xenophobia (Zhang-Wu, 2020), financial hardships, anxiety about their health and future, the safety of their

families, loneliness (Bilecen, 2020; Jeffrey, 2020), starvation, homelessness (Gallagher et al., 2020), communal hate crimes (Anandavalli et al., 2020), racial discrimination, and mental health issues (Litam, 2020; Wen et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Consequently, such challenges and others need to be explored in-depth to provide multiple types of support to international students. Otherwise, with the lack of support services and facilities, such challenges might negatively affect students wishing to study abroad. Thus, the pandemic is decreasing international students' mobility and shifting the mobility flow of students. Mok et al. (2021) examined how students in Mainland China and Hong Kong conceived overseas study plans against the Covid-19 crisis. Among the 2739 respondents, 84% showed no interest in studying abroad after the pandemic. Moreover, the 16% who aimed to continue their studies abroad

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did not prefer the US or the UK to Asian regions such as Japan and Taiwan.

Thus, exploring the experiences of international students during the crisis is an interesting and timing topic that still has many research rooms—most importantly, international students who are studying in non-Western countries, such as Saudi Arabia. The researcher was an international student in Australia for six years. After returning to Saudi Arabia, he engaged with some international students by teaching them and supervising others in their master theses. He noticed that his international students were having some challenges that deserved special attention to overcome and provided them with suitable supports. Consequently, the idea of this research was conceptualized. However, there might be questions about international students in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the next section will provide such interesting information.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA

For sponsoring its qualified citizens abroad, as international students, to return later to serve the country, the literature has revealed that Saudi Arabia has a high level of engagement with international education. The Saudi scholarship program is considered one of the world's largest scholarship programs funded by the government, including multiple majors and stages of diploma, bachelor, master, and Ph.D. (Alsulami, 2020). According to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics (2020), the number of Saudi international students exceeded 112,565, both male and female students. However, a little-known fact is that Saudi Arabia hosts thousands of international students in Saudi Universities. Saudi universities have a long history of hosting international students, which started in 1962 when the Islamic University was established in Madinah (Islamic University, 2020). Over 72,000 international students have been granted full scholarships to study in Saudi universities in the last decade. In 2021, there were more than 46,227 international students from different continents that studied in some Saudi universities, such as Islamic University (20600 students), Umm Al-Qura University (6832 students), King Saudi University (5198 students), King Abdul Aziz University (5049 students), Imam Muhammad bin Saud University (4995 students), and Qassim University (3553) (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2021).

Adding to the educational services and benefits from universities' facilities that all students receive, international students are provided with free education, free housing for single students, a monthly stipend of 850 Saudi riyals per student equal to 226 US, a free annual round-trip ticket granted for annual vacation, free educational books, free treatment at the university's medical center or government hospitals, and meals at a discounted price in universities' restaurants. However, scholarship financial regulations do not cover some projects. Nonetheless, universities cover these projects by

synergizing with some donors, such as a hostel project that aims to provide furniture for married scholarship students and their families (Alsulami, 2020; Islamic University, 2021; Umm Al-Qura University, 2021). Thus, it seems interesting to explore the experiences of international students in Saudi Arabia during the crisis due to the advantages of other international students in other countries. Additionally, the knowledge gaps in these particular groups are discussed in the following section (Section 3).

Regarding Saudi Arabian educational responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, on the March 8, 2020, the Ministry of Education suspended attending to all academic buildings, including schools, colleges, and universities. This was during the mid-semester of the second semester of the year. Following the announcement, the mode of schooling in Saudi Arabia changed to online for both general and higher education. For general education, T.V. channels such as the eye channel were used alongside other platforms like Microsoft Teams before establishing a special platform for education called my school platform. As for higher education, universities provided several platforms, such as Blackboard, WebEx, and Zoom, for transferring educational materials. Thus, it is noteworthy that the educational process did not stop in Saudi Arabia due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2020).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While reviewing the literature about the experiences of international students, it was clearly seen that no study was conducted to explore the experiences of international students in Saudi Arabia during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the researcher found some studies conducted in different countries on other international students that covered various topics on the experiences of international students during the epidemic.

For instance, researchers conducted some studies in China (Demuyakor, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020), Cyprus (Hassan et al., 2021), Russia (Novikov, 2020), Canada (Firang, 2020; Hari et al., 2021), Indonesia (Susanto et al., 2020), and Thailand (Nurfaidah et al., 2020). These studies were conducted on international students in general or on specific characteristics of international students. To elaborate, studies (Demuyakor, 2020; Firang, 2020; Hari et al., 2021; Nurfaidah et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020) have been conducted on international students in general. However, the samples of other studies were from specific types of international students, such as international medical and nursing students from low-and middle-income countries (Li et al., 2021), international students of English as a Second Language (ESL) (Hassan et al., 2021), and international first-year university students (Novikov, 2020).

These studies covered the experiences of international students during the Covid-19 pandemic from different angles,

such as exploring the experiences of international students during the Covid-19 pandemic in general (Hari et al., 2021; Nurfaidah et al., 2020), investigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international students (Firang, 2020), and exploring ways of improving adaptability (Novikov, 2020). In addition, other studies looked at the quality of online learning (Demuyakor, 2020; Hassan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021), mental health status (Wang et al., 2020), and emotional geography (Susanto et al., 2020).

If international students usually experience some challenges while studying abroad before the pandemic, these challenges increased during the pandemic. For instance, Firang (2020) drew a conclusion based on media sources and the author's interaction with international students on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international students in Canada.

The researcher concluded that international students were more vulnerable during the pandemic. Similarly, Hari et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore the experiences of international students living in Canada during the pandemic. By interviewing 13 international students in Ontario from April to June 2020, the researchers found that the participants faced increased challenges that generated anxieties about their future. They depended on their families for support.

As many countries closed educational institutions and transferred learning remotely, some literature investigated the experience of international students with online learning (e.g., Demuyakor, 2020; Hassan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). For instance, Demuyakor (2020) surveyed a sample of Ghanaian international students in China to investigate their level of satisfaction with online learning in higher educational institutions in Beijing. The researcher found that the majority of the sampled international students were satisfied with the online program. However, the sampled students reported the high cost of buying the Internet and poor Internet connectivity within the dormitories as challenges. However, another study conducted by (Li et al., 2021) on international medical and nursing students from low-and middle-income countries showed the opposite concerning the level of satisfaction with online learning. The researchers found that only 36.5% of the students were satisfied with online education. Furthermore, Hassan et al. (2021), in their studies on international students in Cyprus, found some challenges experienced by international students, such as inadequate knowledge of technology and technical issues such as poor internet connectivity, inability to upload large files, and loss of passwords.

The literature has also shown studies that focused on international students' mental and emotional aspects during the pandemic (Wang et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2020). For example, a study was conducted by Wang et al. (2020) to investigate the mental health status of international students

from Changsha city, China. The findings showed that the prevalence of depression was 59.4%, and the prevalence of anxiety was 37.8%. Moreover, Susanto et al. (2020) explored the emotional geography of 25 international students from 12 countries in learning Bahasa Indonesia for foreigners virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings showed some negative feelings, such as confusion, anxiety, and shock. However, the findings also showed some positive feelings experienced by the participants, such as intimacy, safety, happiness, seriousness, and success.

In fact, the positive findings of previous studies showed that the experiences of international students during the pandemic are not always negative. Instead, some bright sides are found requiring exploration to fairly consider the issue under examination. For example, online education assisted some international students to be more social and formed friendships with local students. Sleeman et al. (2020) surveyed a sample of international students at an Australian university. The findings showed that using social media for learning connected international and local students socially. The results also suggested that the educational use of social network sites led many participants to add new classmates as profile friends. Similarly, Hassan et al. (2021) found that online education helped international students to be independent, collaborative, and flexible in learning. Moreover, Nurfaidah et al. (2020), in their exploration of the lived experiences of Thai international students during a virtual service learning (community service) program due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, found that such activities could build students' creativity.

Regarding the services and supports provided for international students during the pandemic, the researcher found little published information about some countries, such as Australia and Canada. For example, the Australian government did not support international students financially (Fronek et al., 2021; Karp, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020), and the Prime Minister (PM) of Australia, Scott Morrison, advised international students to "go home" if they were unable to fund themselves (Gallagher et al., 2020; Gibson & Moran, 2020). Similarly, Canada provided social and financial relief for the most vulnerable Canadians. However, international students were excluded from this support because they were considered non-permanent residents (Firang, 2020).

Having reviewed the most recent literature about the experiences of international students during the pandemic, the different gaps in knowledge about this topic that need to be filled can be clearly seen. The researcher believes that no study has been conducted to explore the experiences of international students in Saudi Arabia. Hence, it seems interesting to explore their lived experiences in an era of unprecedented uncertainties and challenges. Although most of the literature focused on one aspect of the experiences, either challenges or opportunities, this research will cover three important areas of

the experiences of international students during the pandemic, including challenges, benefits, and supports.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to answer the following research questions:

- What challenges did international students in Saudi Arabia experience during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What benefits did international students in Saudi Arabia get from the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What types of support services did international students in Saudi Arabia receive during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The researcher employed a qualitative methodology to answer these questions because it is suitable for the purpose and research questions (Creswell, 2014; Lichtman, 2013; Patton, 20015). In qualitative research, data must be in non-numerical forms, such as words, pictures, and sounds. The qualitative research approach focuses on the inductive component of the scientific method because it generally moves from bottom to top to generate a new hypothesis or theory based on concepts constructed directly from the collected data in one or more research studies (Johnson, 2014). For this study's purpose and research questions, the researcher used interviews with participants to collect data (Komar, 2014; Yin, 2014). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic issues, the researcher conducted interviews with participants via ZOOM.

The participants of this study were 12 male international students at different universities in Saudi Arabia. All the demographic information about the participants is shown in Table1. Although the researcher sent more than 100 invitations

to international students to participate in this research, either via e-mail or WhatsApp, only 12 male students agreed to participate. Therefore, if there is a lack of participation by female students, or if students from one university are more than other universities, then it is not intended for that. The purpose was to explore international students' experiences; the researcher was keen to include all experiences because this is, as the research believes, the first study that considers international students in Saudi Arabia. All participants were given a numerical code to protect their privacy.

The primary method of data analysis adopted in this research was "analytic generalization," following the principles of grounded theory, or "...an inductive approach for generating theories and explanations" (Johnson, 2014, p. 47). The raw data was coded inductively to draw out and describe ideas from the transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012). Following the argument of Stake (2005) that researchers should find the method that works best for them in data analysis, the analysis of the raw data comprised eight-step procedures (adopted from Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). These steps included transcribing the audiotape recording, re-listening to the interview recordings, re-reading the interview transcriptions, producing the coding, generating themes, revising themes, translating the key themes and findings, and finally producing the report.

## FINDINGS

Interviews with the participants showed that most international students were in Saudi Arabia from the beginning of the pandemic and did not go to their home countries. However, a few of them went to their countries and completed the first-

**Table1:** Demographic Information About the Participants

NO.	Name	Age	Marital status	Residence	Country	University name	Degree	Specialization	Number of years in Saudi
1	A	28	Married	Outside Uni	Gambia	Umm Al-Qura	Bachelor	Islamic Studies	6 years
2	B	36	Married	Outside Uni	Central Africa	Umm Al-Qura	Master	Islamic studies	8 years
3	C	25	Single	Inside Uni	Sierra Leone	Umm Al-Qura	Bachelor	Economic	4 years
4	D	29	Single	Inside Uni	Senegal	King Saud	Master	Applied linguistics	6 years
5	E	25	Single	Inside Uni	Yemen	Islamic university	Master	Computer science	5 years
6	F	40	Married	Outside Uni	Guinea	Umm Al-Qura	PhD.	Islamic studies	16 years
7	G	28	Married (but his wife is home)	Inside Uni	Guinea	Umm Al-Qura	Bachelor	Teacher preparation	7 years
8	H	31	Single	Inside Uni	Mali	Umm Al-Qura	Master	Economic	9 years
9	I	27	Married (his wife is home)	Inside Uni	Senegal	Imam Uni	Bachelor	Islamic studies	6 years
10	J	30	Married (his wife is home)	Inside Uni	Gambia	Umm Al-Qura	Bachelor	Islamic studies	6 years
11	K	30	Married	Outside uni	Burkina Faso	Umm Al-Qura	Bachelor	Applied linguistics	9 years
12	L	26	Married (his wife is home)	Inside Uni	Senegal	Imam Uni	Master	Islamic studies	7 years



semester study from September to December 2020. Therefore, it was interesting to explore more diverse experiences.

This study's findings showed that three major themes emerged that answered the main questions of this research: the challenges of, benefits of, and support services offered to international students in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic.

### **First, Challenges of International Students in Saudi Arabia During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The participants talked about several challenges they faced during the pandemic. The researcher classified these challenges into several categories: educational, economic, technical, social, religious, and health challenges.

#### ***Educational Challenges***

B, I, K, L, and D mentioned that they were unfamiliar with educational platforms, such as Blackboard, WebEx, and Zoom. The rapid transition from in-person education to distance learning without prior warning contributed to missing some lectures for some students. As I said,

I missed several lectures at the beginning because I was not used to the blackboard. I did not know how to use it because I was always present at the front of the class and approached the instructor, which helped me to understand well.

Since the participants were from different disciplines, as mentioned previously, some of them talked about the difficulty of some subjects that need more understanding, such as the mathematics course, as C said because he was studying economics:

I had difficulty understanding the course of the obligatory duties, as it is known to those who study Sharia that this course needs more attention, as it contains mathematical equations and the division of the estate of the dead. So, studying it from a distance was difficult, unlike when we attended the lecture, and the doctor explained using the board and asked questions directly to pass the knowledge (A).

One of the challenges is using the colloquial dialect in the explanation by some instructors, especially the Egyptian dialect. It is difficult to understand, especially with distance education and the lack of operation of the camera by some instructors. Before the pandemic, it was easy to guess the meaning through body language or ask the instructors directly. However, with distance education, the situation has become more difficult (H, I, J, and L). J said:

I feel like I am in class, but I am not because I do not understand what some instructors are saying; they use many colloquial dialects.

Some of the participants thought that some instructors lacked sufficient experience in teaching and explaining using educational platforms, as mentioned by E. Similarly, G said that the instructors did not use slides to explain, and some of them who used slides put everything on the slides and read from them without explaining. Instead, a large percentage of the instructors explained only by voice, as J said:

About 90% of the instructors do not open the camera and do not put a PowerPoint presentations, only teaching by voice.

Another challenge is pressure from some instructors to submit assignments quickly and not give them sufficient time (I and K). Also, study times were not specified, as some instructors did not adhere to the official schedules established and changed the times of lectures constantly, sometimes in the evening period, which caused confusion in the schedules (K). Finally, the students who traveled to their home countries during the pandemic and completed their studies from there faced the problem of buying books referenced by their instructors, as the books were unavailable in their countries (I and J).

#### **Economic Challenges**

One of the challenges that some participants talked about was the problem of high electricity bills paid by the students who lived outside university housing, such as A and B, as A said:

One of the challenges is the high electricity bill because my wife and I sit at home all the time due to the ban during the pandemic, compared to before the pandemic.

Some of the participants, such as G and I, talked about the problem of buying Internet cards to attend lectures. When I asked them whether the university provided free Internet inside the student's residence, they answered that:

The university provides free internet at the student housing, but the problem with the transmission to distance education was the pressure on the network, which caused the network to weaken. So, we had to buy open internet cards to follow the lectures without interruption (G).

Another economic problem that some international students faced was transferring money because they depended on their families. With the pandemic and the curfew, they faced the issue of transferring money from Saudi Arabia to their countries in Africa. I said:

I faced the problem of transferring money from Saudi Arabia to Senegal because such a transfer requires going to a specific bank, the Enjaz Bank and the other banks are closed, and I cannot leave the residence because of the ban.

## Technical Challenges

H spoke about the lack of electronic devices for many students, and even their phones were not smartphones. Therefore, they faced various technical difficulties. One of the most prominent of these difficulties is the lack of familiarity with smartphone programs in general and learning programs in particular. This was what B, E, G, H, J, and K stated. L said:

I had never heard of Blackboard, WebEx, and Microsoft Teams before the pandemic, and I do not know how to use them at all.

Some students experienced a challenge in attending lectures at the beginning of the pandemic and submitting assignments using electronic learning systems, which led some of them, such as A, to seek assistance from their friends. Others, such as B, J, and L, faced technical challenges while taking examinations via Blackboard and did not know how to overcome them to pass the examinations.

Furthermore, the participants were faced with Internet fluctuation and interruption, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. The network was weakening, especially at the peak time in the morning lectures at 8 am. This was mentioned by some of the participants who lived either inside university housing, such as H, K, L, and G, or outside such as A and B.

## Social Challenges

Most of the participants, such as C, F, G, H, I, and E, said that they were socially isolated due to movement restrictions. I said:

I am a social person by nature, and with the ban, I lost my social life because I used to go with my Saudi friends to camps in the desert outside Riyadh, especially in the winter, but that ban happened.

The findings showed that some international students experienced anxiety due to the curfew and the speed with which education shifted to remote learning. In addition, they were worried about their families in their countries and vice versa, especially after the spread of the news about the closure of the Great Mosque of Mecca. Therefore, they began to communicate widely with their families using social media (A, B, C, D, G, H, I, and K). This anxiety and fear were also prevalent among students inside the university housing, as H, a coordinator of student housing on campus, said:

In fact, I noticed anxiety and fear from students due to the quick procedures of shifting distance studies and the partial and total ban. It was not easy at first, especially with the emergence of some cases in a small number of housing students, which prompted them to allocate some apartments for the injured students. However, the presence of international students in the same residence contributed a great deal of reassurance, and the attention

they received from the office of the president of the university, the Dean of Student Affairs and some of the doctors, and their constant communication with them and reassuring them helped them to breathe and feel comfortable.

Another challenge mentioned by some of the participants who lived outside the university, such as A and B, was the problem with their wife and children, as they lived in a small studio comprising only one room. The presence of the whole family in one room was a challenge because it distracted their minds and did not allow them to focus during the online lectures.

## Health Challenges

Some participants talked about health challenges. For example, D talked about a health problem he faced due to the closure of the student housing clinic on the university campus. The university hospital only received Covid-19 cases, and he had asthma, which required him to go to the doctor to dispense some medicines. However, he could not do that until an online clinic was available, which was unavailable at the beginning of the pandemic. Another challenge, as E said, was the continuous lack of sterilizers and masks in the housing facilities, as they were not allowed to leave the housing due to the ban, and these tools expired quickly because of their frequent use.

## Religious Challenges

Some participants, such as A, B, E, J, and K, talked about some religious challenges, which were the problem of being unable to visit the mosques to perform the five daily prayers due to the ban and the closure of mosques in Saudi Arabia and the inability to go to the Quran memorization sessions in presence, but joined it later remotely. E said:

Some of the challenges are the inability to visit the Prophet's Mosque daily and the stopping of the bus service that delivers students daily to the Prophet's Mosque, which affected me psychologically.

## Second, Benefits of International Students in Saudi Arabia During the Covid-19 Pandemic

It appears that the period of the Covid-19 pandemic was not entirely negative for international students. Instead, there were some positive aspects. The participants talked about several benefits during the pandemic. The researcher classified these benefits into several categories: educational, economic, technical, social, and religious.

## Educational Benefits

Many of the participants talked about the abundance of time they had because of the ban and stay at home, which

enabled them to effectively study their books and watch some educational and historical films (D, F, G, K, L, and H). Thus, many of them participated in free scientific courses held remotely, whether in their specialization or outside of their specialization (B, G, I, J, K, L, E, and C). Also, D mentioned that he participated in international conferences in his specialization (applied linguistics) and that it was free of charge.

Among the educational benefits was teaching wives and children (B, K, and J). J said:

My wife does not understand the Arabic Language, and I have benefited from my long stay at home because of the pandemic by teaching her the Arabic Language and the Holy Qur'an. Also, I teach her and my children some morning and evening supplications.

### **Economic Benefits**

Many participants mentioned that they benefited financially from the pandemic. The most beneficial was saving of money, for several reasons, including providing the amount of car petrol because the study became remote (L and K) or because the amount of childcare for their children due to the pandemic and the closure of childcare, so he could save his money (A) or for another reason, as (C) said, they were expelled from university housing to free of charge hotels, and all services were provided to them free of charge; so, they did not have to pay—as would become clear in the third theme.

### **Technical Benefits**

All participants mentioned that they technically benefited from the pandemic period by getting to know many educational platforms they did not know before or had heard of by name, but did not practice their application, such as Blackboard, WebEx, Thames, Zoom, and others (A, B, C, D, H, I, J, and L). I said:

One of the advantages of this pandemic is that I became acquainted with the use of educational applications, so I did not know Blackboard or WebEx because I now spend a large part of my day during the pandemic using these applications for scientific purposes.

### **Social Benefits**

Some participants stated that they socially benefited from the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they became very close to their wives and children (A, K, and I). A said:

Before the pandemic, I used to spend most of my time either at the university or the library, but with the ban and stay at home, I got closer to my wife, and we sat together for a longer time.

Moreover, among the social benefits was meeting neighbors and friends within the same unit in the university housing, getting acquainted with their cultures, and exchanging conversations with them, which increased brotherhood and cooperation between them, as they were previously busy studying and did not meet much (E and J).

### **Religious Benefits**

Most of the participants opined that the period of the pandemic benefited them from the religious viewpoint, as it helped them to frequently read the Holy Qur'an, memorize it, and review the memorization of those who had learned. It also preserved supererogatory prayers such as Duha prayer and night prayers (B, C, E, F, K, and G). In addition, most of them participated in Virtual Quran memorization online, as G said:

During the pandemic, I joined the virtual Quran memorization courses and could memorize 20 parts of the Holy Quran, about 400 pages.

### **Third, Support Services Offered to International Students in Saudi Arabia During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

This research's findings showed that international students received several types of support and services during the pandemic. The researcher categorized them into three sections: support from universities, support from community charitable institutions, and personal support from some individuals.

#### **Supports from Universities**

The participants said that the universities held distance training courses on how to use educational platforms and published short videos on the university websites. They also posted videos containing information on how to avoid the coronavirus (E). The participants mentioned that Umm Al-Qura University distributed iPads to students (A, B, F, G, H, J, and K), but it seemed that the quantity distributed was not enough for all the students, as B said that he did not receive the device because the quantity was not enough for all the students. Umm Al-Qura University, Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, and Islamic University distributed financial sums to all international students, approximately 1500 RS per student (A, B, C, F, G, H, L, J, and K). C said:

I received a sum of money from the university, which went directly to my bank accounts during the Coronavirus pandemic. It had a moral impact on me, and I was happy with it.

Since the Internet was free for all university dormitory students and started to weaken during the pandemic due to too many users, D mentioned that King Saud University

provided an Internet facility in student housing, which helped them attend lectures without interruption. Moreover, there was great cooperation in deleting and adding some articles, as the participants mentioned.

All the participants mentioned that food was made free for international students in the university's restaurants during the pandemic, but before the pandemic, it was in symbolic amounts. E said:

Since I live in the student dormitory at the university, eating in the university restaurant before the pandemic was at very symbolic prices, but during the pandemic, all the basic meals such as breakfast, lunch, and dinner were provided freely.

As for Umm Al-Qura University, in the first three months of the pandemic, the university rented hotels and transferred all scholarship students who lived on the university campus to the hotels due to overcrowding in housing and fear of the spread of the virus among students, and each person had one room. All of this was at the expense of the university, and the students did not pay one riyal. Moreover, all the meals provided by the hotels were free, even coffee and tea, and free Internet (C, G, H and J). H added:

Perhaps this interest would not be found in our country if we were studying there.

### Support from Community Charitable Institutions

The participants stated that they obtained monetary help through community awareness offices. As stated by the students, the amounts were according to the students' marital status—married, single, or residing inside or outside the university dormitory. They varied between 500 and 1000 riyals (A, K, G, and J). K said:

Some brothers sent us news that the community awareness offices, in cooperation with the university, are distributing some money to the students; so, they sent us links containing information and bank account numbers, and we filled them out, and after a while, the financial amounts came into my account. Thank God.

Also, some of the participants said that they received food baskets containing sustenance, such as rice, sugar, lentils, oil, salt, and other things needed for cooking from charitable institutions free of charge. When I asked how the distribution was done, they said that the charitable institutions sent them a link to the WhatsApp groups, and they applied for those things, and they were delivered to them (A, B, F, K, and L).

The Preservation of Grace Association used to send us free food at home, which is food baskets (F).

### Personal Support from Some Individuals

The findings showed that the international students received support from several individuals. The most support mentioned by the participants was aid from their Saudi friends, as some transferred sums of money to their international students' friends without previous request (G, L, and J). J said:

A Saudi friend contacted me privately on the blackboard chat and said to me, "Send me your bank account so that I can transfer an amount of money to you." So, he transferred 1000 riyals to me, and after some months, he also transferred 500 riyals to me, and I knew of my international student friends who attended the same lecture with me, and we numbered four for whom he contacted and did the same thing.

Moreover, participant I mentioned payment of visa fees because he traveled to his country and the visa expired. Some participants said that their friends bought textbooks for them (A), helped explain the information and remember lessons online (B), and sent them food baskets (E). The participants also mentioned the moral support they received from their friends. According to one of the participants, their friends called them, talked to them, and were helpful to them during the pandemic (F).

Another support was the support from neighbors, especially for students who lived outside university housing. They received financial support from their neighbors (B and K).

A Saudi person comes with a loaded car full of sustenance (a benefactor) and distributes it to the international students. We really did not know him in person (B).

Support from my Saudi neighbors who live in the same building, where one day someone knocked on the door and gave me 1000 riyals without asking. On Eid another neighbor sent us meat (K)

Furthermore, the faculty members had a share in supporting international students. As F mentioned, the academic supervisor called him at the beginning of the pandemic and transferred an amount of 2000 riyals to him. In addition, J said that some teaching staff members contacted him to ask him and check on their conditions.

Also, among the supports was moral support from their fellow international friends, whether inside the university residence or outside the university. As B mentioned, they used to meet, read some books together, communicate with their friends who were far from them via video, and talk to them. G also met with his friends to perform prayers together. (D) said:

Psychological support: We pray and meet Senegalese students in the same residence.



## DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS

Overall, this study differed from previous studies regarding its comprehensiveness, as it covered various types of international students' experiences, including challenges, benefits, and support services. Thus, this study is essential, as it fills a knowledge gap in the literature. It also differed in its coverage of international students in the context of Saudi Arabia. It seems to be unknown in the literature, especially in the English literature, that Saudi Arabia is a destination for study for many international students. Moreover, it differs by including different disciplines and levels of international students, as shown in section 4. However, this study failed to present the voices of female international students in Saudi Arabia. Although the researcher tried his best and communicated with several centers in Saudi universities, he could not obtain agreement from female international students to be interviewed. For the researcher, this disagreement might be understandable due to cultural and gender limitations.

There were diverse challenges in this study that differed from other studies, including educational, economic, technical, social, health, and religious challenges. The researcher believes that no such results came out together in one of the previous studies.

One of the educational challenges mentioned was the explanation in dialects by some faculty members, which constituted an obstacle to understanding, especially considering distance education. Moreover, most faculty members explained by voice and did not operate the camera. Among the economic challenges mentioned by some participants was purchasing Internet cards to follow the lectures. Although the university provided free Internet for student housing, it was weakened by the pandemic and its frequent use. The students had to buy Internet cards on their own. These results, in general, parallel the results of other studies in that one of the challenges they faced was buying Internet cards Demuyakor (2020), which also showed that the Internet was weak in student dormitories. However, it was noticeable that the students did not suffer from real financial problems because they received monthly stipends from the university, and sums of money were given to them from various sources, according to the findings. The findings also showed that one of the challenges was the lack of familiarity with the technology and the educational platforms used, which caused the loss of some lectures, especially at the onset of the pandemic, and the problem of fragmentation on the Internet. These findings parallel the results of Hassan et al. (2021). Furthermore, the findings showed some social challenges that were not addressed in the literature, which is understandable because most international students lived within parallel groups from the same community of origin, as indicated by (Gomes, 2020). The results showed concerns from international

students at the onset of the pandemic, which is similar to what was mentioned by previous results (Hari et al., 2021; Susanto et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). However, the participants in this study were not worried about their future or their part-time jobs, losing them or fearing the interruption of support from them, as indicated by the literature. Instead, their concern was due to the conditions of the pandemic, the ban, and the change in the pattern of education. The participants were not dependent on their families for support, as shown by Hari et al. (2021). However, their parents in their countries depended on international students financially, which some participants mentioned. Among the challenges are religious challenges. The literature mentioned that the closure of religious centers during the pandemic caused problems, such as feeling lonely, for international students worldwide, especially those attending them. (Gallagher et al., 2020). However, this problem appears more in international students in Saudi Arabia because most of them are religious, and the reason for coming to Saudi Arabia was to study the Islamic religion, and they maintained, in my experience, attending the five daily prayers in mosques. So, closing mosques due to the ban caused their religious problems.

As for the results that focused on the benefits, the participants mentioned interesting things that would enrich the literature, as they were not mentioned before. The period of the pandemic and the ban had fruits and benefits that the participants in this study talked about, such as the educational benefits and the use of time to attend training courses and scientific conferences. As for the economic benefits, they reversed what most previous studies showed that the ban period caused financial problems for international students. In contrast, most of the participants benefited financially, and the ban caused them to provide financial help, as they mentioned. Regarding the technical benefits that they had through distance education, this result is similar to what was reached by a study (Gultekin, 2020), and through educational videos, how to take advantage of educational platforms to study in the pandemic. Also, the pandemic period was socially beneficial by relying on the virtual world to know neighbors and friends and proximity to the wife and children due to the ban. This result is similar to the study of Sleeman et al. (2020) and also the religious benefits that included memorizing the Qur'an, reviewing the memorization and attending virtual memorization classes and performing supererogatory prayers at home.

As for support services, the results of this study contradicted most of the results mentioned in the previous studies. Most of the results of the previously published studies confirmed that many universities did not give financial support to international students, but rather explicitly mentioned this on their websites (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Even during the pandemic, neither Australian nor Canadian universities

offered any financial support to international students but were excluded from support (Firang, 2020; Fronek et al. 2021; Karp, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). However, the results of this study showed the exact opposite. Saudi universities provided financial support, housing them in hotels, providing the Internet, and giving free meals. Additionally, support was given from charities, whether financial support or support in the form of food and livelihoods, and interesting stories about personal support and altruism made by neighbors and friends, and this is all understood following the principles of the Islamic religion that call for giving and cooperation among people.

### LIMITATIONS

The limitation of this research could be the small sample size of the participants (12 participants). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalizable. A qualitative research project is indeed a poor basis for generalization (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). The generalization in this study takes the form of advice to policymakers, international students, and researchers. Moreover, the data analysis concentrated on the emerging themes from the interviews rather than on detailed descriptions of each participant's experience. Therefore, the analysis technique might be considered a drawback for this research. Although such a technique for data analysis provided an overall clear structure of the findings, the participants' complete stories of their experiences were not explicitly addressed. Therefore, this limitation provides direction for further research to address it.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends conducting more studies on the experiences of international students in various countries of the world. Moreover, there is an urgent need to conduct more comparative studies between the services provided to international students in different countries to benefit from the different experiences. Furthermore, the researcher recommended conducting quantitative studies on international students in Saudi Arabia using a larger sample size so that the results can be generalized. Additionally, conducting studies on international female students to include their voices is recommended. Finally, studies should be conducted on administrators who are responsible for international students.

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