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Exploring the first-year experiences of international students in a multicultural institution in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the factors reported by first-year international students which helped or hindered their experiences of transition to a multicultural higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. Descriptive phenomenology was used to portray participants constructed and co-constructed views, formed through their individual and social experiences of transitioning to international higher education. Six focus group interviews were used to collect data from international students to access a wide variety of nationalities. The qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive approach. Three themes emerged as being significant to their transitional experiences: students' experiences of freshmen orientation, their academic experiences, and the institutional environment. Researching international students' experiences of transitioning to higher education in the United Arab Emirates, and even generally in the Middle East, constitutes an original context. The context of this study also offers originality because the international students are in the majority rather than the minority.

Keywords: International Students, First Year Experience, Transitioning, Multicultural Higher Education, United Arab Emirates

First-year international students (FYIS) struggle globally (Murphy et al., 2002; Robson, 2011; Wu et al., 2015). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a larger

study has been conducted examining through phenomenological work the experiences of both students and faculty during the international students' (IS') transition to higher education (HE) (Qiqieh, 2021). In the present study, an international student is a student of non-UAE nationality who has either moved to the UAE specifically to study in the institution or moved to the UAE 1 year before the research was conducted and is undertaking their first year (FY) of HE. Also, HE refers to the first academic degree (i.e., undergraduate university degree) a student pursues after high school completion. Utilizing data from a larger study and a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study will explore students constructed and co-constructed views of their individual and social experiences transitioning into HE as FYIS. For this study, transition experiences refer to IS' living and learning experiences in the host country. Transition experiences may also include how the academic institutions recognize the academic and socio-cultural factors influencing IS' adjustment process to serve them better and improve their adjustment experiences (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Whilst these experiences are important for all students, in this study, we focus exclusively on IS within the institution. The following research question guides this work: How do IS describe their experiences of factors which helped or hindered their FY of studying in the UAE?

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature revealed different aspects of IS' challenges while transitioning into higher education institutions (HEI). The challenges included integration issues due to social and cultural difficulties (Wu et al., 2015), teaching and learning challenges encountered due to the increasing diversity of IS (Robson, 2011), and language barriers (Wu et al., 2015). Murphy et al. (2002) noted that some IS are not emotionally, psychologically, and socially prepared for life in a new environment and culture, which requires special orientations to address specific challenges of international transition to HE.

International Students Integration

According to Jibreel (2015), the goal of IS is to belong to their new environment and reduce their feelings of distress and loneliness; however, failing to form social relationships with other people in the host culture could influence students' adjustment. Wilcox et al. (2005) found that aspects related to social support in the academic side can either facilitate or hinder FY students' "quest to develop workable and supportive friendship networks" (p. 716) and are major factors in their decision to stay or leave the institution. Tran (2020) noted that successful integration of IS depends on the empathy faculty and students in the host institution display towards them and on how faculty help other students understand the particular challenges of transitioning to HE as an IS. Also, Robson (2011) revealed that the institutions that aim to internationalize work on addressing the teaching and learning difficulties that would increase due to the multicultural student population. Thus, they tend to have a more engaging,

inclusive, and relevant curriculum for all the students (Robson, 2011). Mesa et al. (2015) pointed out that high-quality teaching and learning strategies represented in various interactive and collaborative methods can also play an important role in IS retention.

English Language Proficiency

Language proficiency plays a crucial role in IS academic achievement and social and cultural adjustment (Da Cunha et al., 2017). The author of the *English Proficiency Index* (Education First, 2015) reported that "regions are still the strongest predictor of English ability" (p. 4). For instance, adults in North Africa and the Middle East had very weak English compared to those from other regions (Education First, 2015). Therefore, the region from where the IS originates may affect their English language abilities. Da Cunha et al. (2017) also noted that IS' proficiency level might vary when introduced to new content they were not exposed to before due to difficulty adapting to language differences. While English is the medium of instruction for most undergraduate programs in the institution where the study took place, English is not the first language for many IS. Thus, the English Language proficiency level might be diverse based on students' educational and cultural backgrounds, thus limiting some of them to grasp fully new content compared to others.

International Students Orientation

Sullivan (2021) illustrated that orientation programs are fundamental for FY students' transition experience, enrollment decisions, and success and influence their persistence and retention. Therefore, orientation programs need to be extended throughout the academic year to meet students' goals and expectations and to support their understanding, emotional well-being, and happiness during their transition experiences (Sullivan, 2021). Mann et al. (2010) highlighted the need to tailor the components of the orientation program to the needs of various populations of students, such as IS, to assist each group with specific information that can address their unique transition needs. These components include students' physiological needs, such as living on campus; safety needs, such as campus policies; belonging needs, such as campus activities; esteem needs, such as academic integrity; and self-actualization needs, such as career planning information. Online orientation programs are also as important as in-person programs, as they help create a sense of belonging for incoming students and meet their different needs (Murray, 2022). For example, they are vital in providing valuable information for IS, such as pre-departure orientation information, which is essential for their transition into the host institution and new country (Murphy et al. 2002). In the institution where the study took place, FY students are required to attend first-year experience (FYE) sessions that introduce them to their new environment during the second week of their first semester of study. In those sessions, students receive orientation about several aspects, such as advising and registration, library facilities, safety and security, and students' rights and

responsibilities. Also, FY students are required to take a course in their first semester of study at the institution in which they are introduced to the academic skills needed for their academic success, such as self-management, research techniques, and academic integrity.

Gap in the Literature

The literature on this topic is predominantly from Western countries, where IS are in the minority within a given institution. The very different context in which internationalization is experienced in many private institutions in the UAE highlights a gap in the current discourse. In one study, we could find, Cruz et al. (2022) surveyed IS (i.e., students who do not have Emirati citizenship) along with home students in a federal institution in the UAE where there is a dominant 'home-student' population. However, our study explores IS experiences who form the majority rather than the minority in the institution. In addition, in this study, we included the IS who moved to the UAE specifically to study in the institution or moved to the UAE 1 year before the research was conducted. Therefore, the IS is someone whose previous education experiences were outside the UAE. IS are also from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds. Hence, the differences in their prior learning and educational experiences, expectations, and needs can be extensive and might significantly impact their first-year (FY) transitioning experiences. Therefore, we were motivated to explore the FYE of IS to enhance the transition period for future IS and help promote their retention.

METHOD

This study was undertaken in the main campus of a large private, multicultural HE institution in Abu Dhabi, the UAE capital city (referred to throughout as the 'institution'). The institution has received national accreditation from the UAE Ministry of Education and international accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Some of its programs have also attained accreditation from international professional bodies. Also, according to the World University Rankings (QS Top Universities Rankings, 2018), the institution was ranked 10th globally for its IS percentage (population) in 2018. Moreover, the institution offers gender-segregated education at the undergraduate level on its main campus and has gender-segregated dormitories, in two separate areas, for male and female students.

Ensuring the needs of IS are being met was a vital part of the retention strategy at the institution. Student retention is a key indicator for the institution's overall ranking and for helping prospective students to choose which institution to study in. Also, striving to improve the experiences of IS is of value to the individuals involved and to the institution's viability as a business, aiming to attract increasing numbers of IS. Although the institution retained 81% of students during the academic year (AY) 2017-2018 when we collected the data, there is always a desire to improve this. Also, while the institution collects quantitative

data such as IS' enrolment ratio, gender, and nationality, there is a lack of qualitative data that can illuminate IS' FYE of transitioning.

This study used descriptive phenomenology to explore participants constructed and co-constructed views of their individual and social experiences when transitioning to this institution. According to Qutoshi (2018), descriptive phenomenology is used when researchers want to manifest a phenomenon by exploring and describing individuals' subjective lived experiences. For this work, descriptive phenomenology was the correct choice in methodology, due to the need to understand better the factors influencing the transitioning of IS, especially that the institution's quantitative data were insufficient to describe the whole picture of the transition experiences of IS. Moreover, highlighting participants' voices using descriptive phenomenology adds authenticity to the study and complements the quantitative data to provide a comprehensive picture, from which the institution can plan to promote retention and improve student experience.

The total number of undergraduate students enrolled in the institution when data was collected during the AY 2017-2018 was 4,720. According to the same year's records, IS represented more than 70 nationalities and comprised 67.92% of the institution's undergraduate population. Also, the FY undergraduate IS represented 44 nationalities and were making up almost two thirds of the FY undergraduate students at the institution. Male IS constituted 63.89% of all FY male students, and female IS comprised 64.03% of all FY female students. The high ratio of IS in this institution validates the need to understand their FYEs.

For the inclusion criteria of sample selection, we used a combination of criterion and maximum variation of purposive sampling. We included the undergraduate IS in the institution's main campus who moved to the UAE to join the institution and those who had moved to the UAE one year before their enrollment. Thus, all the participants' previous education experiences and ways of life were outside the UAE. Therefore, all those FYIS who met the criteria were invited to participate in this study.

We used focus group (FG) interviews to access a wider variety of FYIS nationalities. According to Collins et al. (2007), choosing a diverse range of participants maximizes "the range of perspectives investigated in the study" (p. 272). Also, bringing participants together in FGs can help generate new and valuable discussions on similar topics and enhance the validity of the collected data (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009). Furthermore, because the education in the undergraduate programs is gender-segregated, we ensured that each FG included IS of the same gender. We also clustered two students of the same nationality in each group to ensure that the students from each nationality would not feel isolated in the FG and be motivated to talk more openly when there were other participants of the same nationality. According to Gill et al. (2008), participants in the same FG might be motivated to interact freely with other participants when there are other participants of the same nationality.

One male and one female academic mentor (who volunteered at the institution's Support Centers) volunteered to recruit participants. We wanted to keep distance between us as researchers and the participants, to mitigate against

possible power imbalance influencing their decision to participate. The male mentor recruited the male participants, and the female mentor recruited the female participants. The two academic mentors distributed recruitment posters among the FYIS and provided participant information sheets. After completing the recruitment, we communicated with the participants through email to share the consent forms and schedule their participation. Thus, six FGs (three male and three female groups) made up of 40 participants and ten nationalities were conducted. FGs distribution as per gender, number of participants, and nationalities are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Groups (FGs) Distribution as per Gender, Number of Participants, and Nationalities

Number of FG per gender	Number of participants per FG	Nationalities
Male FG 1	6	Nigerian, Indian, Egyptian
Male FG 2	8	Pakistani, Jordanian, Egyptian, Palestinian
Male FG 3	8	Indian, Yemeni, Nigerian, Jordanian
Female FG 1	6	Palestinian, Egyptian, Indian
Female FG 2	6	Sudanese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi
Female FG 3	6	Palestinian, Cameroon, Jordanian

Before meeting with each FG, we ensured the participants understood the purpose of the study and had signed the consent form, and we reminded them that the meeting would be audio recorded. Also, additional prompts were provided when necessary to ensure that the participants understood the questions and stimulated the discussion among them. To comply with research governance requirements, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Board at the institution where the study took place and the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Liverpool, where the lead author was a doctoral candidate.

We used an inductive thematic analysis approach to data analysis based on the six-stage process of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis approach started with transcribing the data, which helped familiarize us with the "depth and breadth of the content," as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.16). Then we read the transcribed data several times to understand the participants' perspectives regarding their FY experiences and to identify the codes (i.e., words, phrases, and statements) that were used repeatedly by them. The verbatim quotes of the six FGs were given identifiers by group and gender: Three male groups (i.e., MG1, MG2, MG3) and three female groups (i.e., FG1, FG2, FG3). After that, we imported the coded content into NVivo software version 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018) into containers called *nodes.* However, going

through these codes several times helped to understand the connection among them to create larger nodes called categories. This resulted in sorting the relevant data into eight categories that were then grouped under three broad themes. Finally, a cross-case analysis was also used as an audit trail, validating the data's thematic analysis and adding rigor to the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the core themes that emerged from the data analysis of the six qualitative FGs with IS. The three themes reflecting the participants' perspectives of experiences that influenced their transition period are: 1) experiences of freshmen orientation; 2) academic experiences; and 3) the institutional environment.

Students' Experiences of Freshmen Orientation

All participants shared their perspectives about the FY student orientation week that occurs at the institution in the second week of their first academic semester. During this week, the institution provides the FY students with information about the institution and its different departments, such as Registration, Student Affairs Department, Academic Integrity Office, Library, IT, Advising, etc. While a few participants found the "orientation week sessions were helpful" (FG2), most participants raised two main concerns about the orientation week; the timing of the orientation and the quality of information presented in the orientation.

Most participants in all FGs argued against delivering the FY orientation in the second week of their first semester, as the institution's environment was entirely new to them. Therefore, they considered that more information in the first week, or even before they arrived, could have helped them prepare themselves better for the institution's standards and life in the UAE.

> The orientation should have been done in the first week rather than in the second week after the semester began. This made it hard to understand the working environment of the university. (MG1)

> Having the orientation in the first week or even before would be helpful. However, after 2 to 3 weeks was meaningless because I already knew everything from the girls whom I met during registration. (FG1)

> Before I left home, I checked the university website but did not find any orientation; thus, I had to explore everything myself when I arrived. (MG3)

Habtemariam (2017) argues that IS need to receive orientation when they first arrive at an institution, whilst Mann et al. (2010) suggest this is better before their arrival on campus to learn about its academic and social aspects. However, there

are sometimes delays in obtaining visas or travel documents, and students' arrival may be delayed. For this reason, some institutions, including this one, have moved orientation to the second week. In this regard, Murphy et al. (2002) suggested using the Web to "overcome spatial boundaries" (p. 38) (i.e., overcome being in different locations), making it feasible for students to go through the online orientation before leaving their home countries; thus, avoid time and location constraints. Therefore, whereas the web-based orientation seems to be particularly useful for IS unfamiliar with the new learning environment, there was no web-based orientation available in this institution for students.

Participants also considered the information presented during the orientation week as redundant and repetitive as they studied the same material during the first week of a course called "University Study Skills" (UNS). The UNS course is required for all students in their first semester of study at the institution. Instead, participants wanted the institution to focus on other aspects during the orientation week, such as how to adapt to the new cultural and social environment in the UAE and the institution. Participants reported that they only learned about these aspects through their own experiences.

> There was no orientation about the socio-cultural boundaries here. My friends who live with me in the dormitory told me about them. (MG1)

> I skipped the first-year orientation as I found that the things being told there were similar to what was being taught in the UNS course I was taking at the same time. (MG2)

Hendrickson et al. (2011) expressed that those students who study in another country need social support and intercultural preparation because they will confront many communication difficulties upon arrival at an institution. The participants in this study did not feel they received social support and intercultural preparation, whether on the institution's website or upon arrival. Habtemariam (2017) noted that the orientation programs provided to IS also need to be well designed because they significantly affect students' engagement with their new community. Orientation programs also improve IS' first impression about an institution's educational structure and reduce any miscommunication or misunderstanding, thus helping IS quickly adapt to their new environment (Güvendir, 2018). This links to the data presented by the participants about the orientation being poorly designed as it lacked several aspects, they considered important to them, such as the adaptation to the new cultural and social environment in the UAE and the institution.

Academic Experiences

This theme presents the aspects the participants focused on and found affected their academic experiences inside the classroom. The theme presents the following categories:1) faculty-adopted teaching strategies; 2) group work

challenges, including language barriers; and 3) the participants' perspectives on assessments and the effectiveness of feedback on assessments.

Teaching Strategies

Most participants remarked about the support they received from the faculty teaching them in regard to being "very understanding and trying to help the students through facilitating the subject they teach and reducing the burden on them" (MG2). Participants also commented on the support they received from faculty members in their transition experiences.

> One of the most important things was the faculty members. They sat us down for the first two weeks and helped us navigate the online portals we use. (MG3)

> The faculty are very helpful because they know how to deal with first-year students. They know that these students are probably changing their environment and coming to a new one, and they try to help them adjust. (FG3)

However, participants wanted to be more involved in more interaction in the classroom and have different preferences regarding the way they learn. They argued against the lecturing strategies some faculty members adopted, which resulted in students passively receiving information. Those faculties used one way of communication to deliver content and instructions, which might not necessarily ensure student participation or engagement. For instance, while a few participants noted that sometimes PowerPoint Presentations (PPTs) are helpful, most participants agreed that some faculty relied entirely on using PPTs instead of focusing on activities that emphasize students' active learning. Instead, all participants preferred student-centered approaches that focus more on interactive teaching and learning styles.

> When I was taught in high school, the student did research work and then presented; therefore, I found the slides boring. I would like to see more practical things rather than just going through the theory. (FG3)

> Students should be given a chance to speak out, and there should be communication which is a key to learning. (FG2)

Felder and Brent (2009) noted that faculty commit a major mistake with their overwhelming use of PPTs because they make the students less motivated and the class dull. Thus, non-stop lecturing would lead to little learning and reflect the faculty's failure to deliver diverse instructions. Instead, faculty need to use discussion, group work, visuals, videos, and multimedia activities (Felder & Brent, 2009).

Group Work Challenges and Related Language Barriers

All participants highlighted the importance of group work activities in helping IS learn and engage with diverse nationalities in the classroom. However, many of them pointed out that inadequate language proficiency for some IS, particularly from Arabic and South Asian countries, was a major issue impacting the effectiveness of group activities and tasks. The participants also noted that some IS used their native language during group discussions, even though other members in the same group did not.

> I find a couple of girls talking in Arabic when grouped with me, although I do not speak Arabic. I think they find comfort in using their language as they need to make an extra effort to communicate in English. I also find some students talking in Hindi or Urdu. (FG3)

While English is the medium of instruction for most undergraduate programs in this institution, English is not the first language for many IS. Thus, the English language proficiency level appears to be diverse, based on students' educational and cultural backgrounds, thus limiting communication with other students during in-class group discussions and activities. According to Burns et al. (2012), every group work that involves students from cross-cultural groups brings many difficulties to IS and domestic students. This includes factors such as "unequal language skills, different understandings of the meaning of silences, politeness, the context of communication, hierarchy and collectivism" (Burns et al., 2012, p.1).

For the students to be admitted at this institution, they need to submit evidence of their English language proficiency; at least 5.0 in the International English Language Testing System [i.e., IELTS] or an equivalent score in the Test of English as a Foreign Language [i.e., TOEFL]. However, many participants noted that these tests scores do not accurately reflect the actual English abilities of the students. According to Andrade (2009), many IS (who are non-native speakers of English) provide evidence of their English language proficiency when admitted to HEI in the United States; nevertheless, they struggle with the demands of English. Such language difficulties might lead to problems in forming intercultural friendships and undertaking group work (Medved et al., 2013). It is interesting to note that the participants in this study referred to other students who had poor English language proficiency and how that made it difficult for them to learn together. This might indicate that either the participants did not wish to talk about their language deficiency or that students with low proficiency did not take up the offer to participate.

Another aspect all participants highlighted in relation to group work activities was that the faculty allowed them to self-select the groups they wanted to work with. However, many found this strategy ineffective and could cause challenges, especially as it enables students of the same nationality to group up together. Instead, the participants wanted the groups to be assigned by faculty to give

students of different nationalities equal opportunities to get to know each other and work together in groups.

> Because some students of the same nationalities group up together, it is hard for me to get acquaintances or mingle with them because they just focus on working together in one group. (FG3)

> As a first-year student, I found it hard because I did not know anybody in the class. All the friends grouped, and I did not know who to go to. (FG2)

According to Crose (2011), when IS work with other students of diverse cultural, educational, and social backgrounds, it will help them improve their knowledge and interaction skills and foster their cultural awareness. However, Theodoridis (2015) remarked that faculty might encounter challenges when teaching students of multicultural backgrounds because students of similar cultural and educational backgrounds would rather work together. This can undermine the objective of an international classroom in supporting students to advance their interactive learning, opening up to others, and interacting with them (Theodoridis, 2015). In addition, Strauss et al. (2011) noticed that students would prefer to be working in groups that are homogeneous in language and culture. This justifies why many participants in this study were concerned about selecting group members and highlighted the faculty's central role in constructing and managing groups. Whilst many studies have shown similar challenges when IS are a minority, it is interesting to see that even when they are the majority, because they are not a homogenous group, they too discriminate against IS from other countries to their own.

Assessments and Feedback Issues

The participants presented their perspectives on assessment challenges, particularly when faculty members teach different sections of the same course. They also highlighted the importance of faculty providing feedback on assessments and using a standardized grading rubric when teaching the same course.

Assessments. Most participants asserted that faculty were inconsistent when teaching the different sections of the same course, which had the same syllabus and common final examinations. Some faculty did not fully cover the course content or link it together as per the course syllabus. Thus, the participants perceived this inconsistency as significantly affecting their completion of course assignments and preparation for common final examinations.

> Despite the similarity in course syllabi and content, the different instructors teach different things in classes and give different assignments. (FG1)

> Since we have a common final exam given by all the instructors, all other assessments should also be common. We need to have consistency. (MG3)

The Course Coordination Policy at the institution stresses that faculty members teaching the same courses need to design the common course materials comprehensively as per the syllabi, have them approved by the program for the semester, and collaborate in developing a set of standardized assessments, including the common final examinations. Additionally, there was an expectation that faculty teaching the same course would attend regular meetings held by the course coordinator, to raise any issues and suggest any improvements they might have about the syllabus.

In this regard, Felder and Brent (2009) insisted on faculty creating lessons that cover the content as per the course syllabus and design effective course learning outcomes that are coherent, clear to students and can form a base for fair assessments. According to Erhardt (2018), making major changes in the syllabi beyond the first week of a course is similar to a "breach of contract" (para. 2) because it is unfair to make last-minute major changes in the syllabus and "force students into a learning environment that they did not sign up for ... These actions can alienate students" (para. 4). Therefore, all changes in the syllabus need to be finalized before the start of a semester to ensure students are not affected.

Feedback on Assessments. Many participants discussed their views about the feedback faculty give on assessments. One of the aspects that many participants raised was about faculty who did not show students their examination papers after grading them. For instance, one participant stated that "some instructors do not show us the examination papers that we did. However, I want to know about my mistakes and learn from them" (MG3).

Even though this might be a standard practice in some HEI, it did not meet the students' expectations. It could also be that faculty members did not communicate clearly to the students the procedures at the institution in this regard. Poulos and Mahony (2008) emphasized the importance of feedback on students' adjustment into their FY of study, especially since they have not yet adapted to university life compared to the school system. Therefore, students often find the feedback helpful to their learning process and become more accustomed to their new learning environments.

All participants agreed that faculty members who teach the same course need to use a common standardized rubric. For example, one participant remarked that "there is an entirely different grading rubric from one instructor to another even for the same course (MG2), while another suggested that "all instructors teaching the same course should have the same grading rubric because it is unfair when every instructor for the same course had his rubric" (FG1). In this regard, Green (2012) revealed that rubrics are "performance indicators or scoring guides that specify criteria for evaluating student work" (p.14). Also, Reddy and Andrade (2010) noted that undergraduate students consider rubrics an essential instrument

that helps them understand their work's objectives and have more standardized and transparent grading.

Institutional environment

This theme presents the participants' views on the influence of what we have termed the "institutional environment', on their experience of transitioning to international HE. The theme covers their perspectives on the socio-cultural factors and institution's rules of student gender segregation at the undergraduate level.

The Influence of Socio-cultural Environment

Most participants had not faced any major cultural issues due to cultural diversity in their FY of study. For example, one mentioned that "there might be cultural differences, but we do not go that way as our relationship with the instructor and other students is just for a semester, and we focus on the studying aspect" (MG1). However, participants in two groups pointed to some cultural issues they encountered in one of their FY courses.

> Sometimes, the Society course instructor talks about the culture as part of a lesson. The instructor gives an example of another culture and thinks it is funny. The instructor and other students in class laugh it off, which can be offensive sometimes. (FG3)

> A faculty should keep their opinion neutral when teaching about a nationality rather than saying something that would make other nationality people feel bad. (MG1)

Therefore, participants in these groups recommended the institution ask faculty to take a training course on how to teach students from multicultural backgrounds because "… some instructors have teaching skills but lack proper communicating skills" (MG1). In this regard, Crose (2011) emphasized that faculty should be mindful of their students' diverse cultural differences and provide equal learning and engagement opportunities to all students. According to Kahn and Agnew (2017), international education necessitates developing "approaches and instructions" that focus on "collaborations, plurality, interconnections, networks, and engagement with the world" because IS are laden by their prior cultural and social experiences when they come to their new environment (p. 60). Thus, IS should be provided with opportunities that consider their assumptions and biases, reflect on their needs, and introduce them to the host country and institution's standards and norms.

Significance of Social Engagement and Barriers

All participants were enthusiastic about engaging with students of other nationalities, including the domestic students. However, the participants pointed to the limited number of social activities outside the classroom at the institution. In this regard, Glass (2012) found that IS who engage in social and community activities with students from diverse cultural backgrounds have a greater level of learning, development, and sense of inclusion. That could justify why the participants in this study wanted the institution to provide them with more opportunities outside the classroom that might help them "to know students of different nationalities and get to know about their cultures" (MG1), thus advancing their transitioning and learning experiences. Nonetheless, many participants also stressed that classroom activities were a good way to socialize with students from other cultures, providing they were facilitated effectively. For instance, one noted, "I could not make many friends on campus itself, and the only friends I made were the ones who were my group partners in course projects" (MG2).

Gender Issue

Most participants emphasized their respect for the gender-segregated rules implemented at the institution's undergraduate programs. However, their only concern was that the institution did not communicate this information to IS before registration or post it on its website. One participant stated, "I was not informed earlier that the university is segregated. It was not also mentioned on the university website" (MG1).

To ensure the accuracy of the information provided by the participants, we checked the Student Handbook and the Undergraduate Students Catalogue for the AY 2017-2018 (the time of the study). However, we found that both documents were no longer available on the institution's website. Thus, we checked the Student Handbook and the Undergraduate Students Catalogue for the AY 2018-2019, where we found that both documents only referred to gender segregation in student dormitories. However, there was no reference to the Gender Segregation Policy of the undergraduate education system at the institution. All applicants need clear information about the Gender Segregation Policy before admission to reduce any potential misunderstanding. Whilst students living in the UAE may already have knowledge of this policy, those coming from outside the region are much less likely to expect gender segregation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

We consider our research findings to be useful beyond this institution, particularly as many private HE institutions in the UAE and the Gulf region have similar profiles. From the information gleaned in this study, we recommend the institution provide on its website accurate information pre-admission to support better the IS population, including important information about gender segregation and the

cultural and social life in the institution and the UAE. Also, the institution should provide future IS with a more effective and timely orientation that meets their needs upon arrival. The orientation should be held immediately after enrolment or in the first week and focus on on-campus social activities and cultural diversity at the institution and in the UAE. Furthermore, the institution should provide faculty with sufficient knowledge about the cultural differences of IS and offer them workshops to help them teach and communicate with students of different nationalities more effectively. For example, the workshops should focus on helping faculty create an inclusive learning environment valued by all students and responding to their needs. That might include providing professional development workshops to help faculty deal with multicultural groups and manage group allocation.

Moreover, the institution should ensure that all faculty members adhere to the Course Coordination Policy and facilitate more effective management of courses with common final examinations. Also, the institution should provide students identified as having English language problems with training courses to help them improve their language skills. Finally, the institution should have more gatherings and co-curricular and extracurricular activities to help students of different cultural backgrounds communicate and mingle more effectively.

We also recommend faculty members who teach IS be more mindful to the cultural differences among their students. They should also design practical classroom activities that involve all students regardless of their backgrounds. In addition, faculty members should provide feedback when evaluating students' work and use standardized grading rubrics.

LIMITATIONS

The institution where the study took place constantly updates its website, so some of its quantitative data, such as retention, multinationalism, and enrolment, are changed continuously; thus, older versions of information from the period of this study could not always be found. The other limitation we recognize is that students with low English proficiency may not have volunteered to take part in this study as it was carried out in English.

CONCLUSION

Many of the concerns of IS in this study were similar to those generally raised by FY students in other contexts who were transitioning to HE. The study found that faculty members significantly played a positive role in IS transition to their FY of learning. Also, classroom activities were a good way for IS to socialize with students from other cultures, providing these activities were facilitated effectively. In contrast, several factors hindered the FY experiences of IS, including the teaching strategies adopted by some faculty members, which lacked active and experiential learning experiences that can promote student integration. Also, courses with common final examinations were hindering because faculty used different teaching materials, assessments, and grading rubrics. In addition, most

IS were dissatisfied with the timing and content of the students' FY orientation week because it did not offer timely and needed information about the institution or the host country's culture. While many HE students express dissatisfaction with orientation programs, this takes on additional significance when one is new to the country and culture.

From the findings of this study, we can see that language difficulties affect not only students with low proficiency but also those learning alongside them. More specifically for IS is the language difficulties that can negatively influence experiences inside the classroom. Whilst incidences of discrimination were very low in this sample, there are indications that some faculty are not always culturally sensitive.

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