Sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences of Omani international students at a New Zealand university

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ABSTRACT

Promoting international student mobility is a key consideration in the internationalisation of higher education. Due to this attention, it has become increasingly important to understand international students' experiences. Previous research on international students' adjustment experiences has reported various issues and unique aspects depending on the context of their adjustment. However, there is a need for research on Omani international students in New Zealand to provide insight into what might affect students' academic, social, and cultural adjustment. This study explored how Omani students described their sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences and how they gave meaning to these from their viewpoints.

A qualitative phenomenological approach underpinned by an interpretive research paradigm was used to investigate the adjustment experiences of 12 Omani student participants. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews from January to September 2020 at one New Zealand university. Two rounds of interviews were held for each participant. During data collection, Omani participants were enrolled in bachelor degree programmes in Engineering, Education, Earth Science, and Management. NVivo 11 was used to assist in organising and analysing data from the interviews using a thematic approach.

Findings suggest that Omani students experienced adjustment as an interactive social, cultural, and academic experience. For most of them, their initial experience was facilitated by their homestay, attendance at language school, and participation in the Omani Students' Association. This triad of interactions and support meant Omani students felt happy and included in the local community. However, after this initial stage of comfort, many experienced negative emotions, such as homesickness, especially during Islamic holidays.

Omani students' sociocultural adjustment was made easier by them engaging in social interaction and seeking out friendships. However, they reported little interaction with host-national students; most interactions and friendships were with co-nationals and international friends. Omani students did not experience cultural distance as a barrier to their adjustment process despite the move from a Muslim-majority country to a Western country. Thus, overall, students reported being satisfied with their lives in New Zealand. They were conscious they had developed self-discipline and self-reliance, which they viewed as important in their successful adjustment.

Academic adjustment was promoted by interaction with other students in group work and academic support from their lecturers. Group work was reported as an opportunity to interact with degree programme classmates and make new friends, but six of the 12 students described difficulties interacting in group work. Interactions with lecturers were described as informal and positive for academic success.

Across both their social and academic lives, the participating Omani students identified their proficiency with English as a barrier to communication and adjustment. As a result, they were eager to improve their English levels to integrate into the host culture and community.

The U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) and the ABC model (Ward et al., 2001) were used as lenses to explain the above findings. The U-curve model describes the adjustment process as four stages: “honeymoon”, “culture shock”, “adjustment”, and “mastery”. The U-curve model was able to describe and explain the adjustment experiences of eight of the 12 students in this study in suggesting a honeymoon period on arrival. However, four students reported difficulty in terms of homesickness and loneliness upon arrival. This fits with the ABC model, which proposes that adjusting to a new culture can be initially difficult and stressful, but, over time, individuals can manage stress and learn the social skills needed for effective interactions, leading to adjustment. Hence, the study findings indicate the need for a model that allows for two different initial experiences and acknowledges that international students move through stages of adjustment. The culture learning process in the ABC model can explain the mechanism of moving between the stages of the U-curve model.

Findings have implications for Omani scholarship providers, future Omani international students, New Zealand policy makers, and New Zealand universities. They are advised to consider the importance of homestays in providing a comfortable, safe environment for students to interact with host nationals. It is also recommended that the value of having intercultural friendships and being open to other cultures is promoted to Omani students, as this can ease the adjustment process.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Study

This chapter introduces the study and my research interest related to the adjustment experiences of Omani international students in New Zealand. This study focused on the sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences of Omani international students pursuing higher education in New Zealand. It explored their experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences from their perspectives. I employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology and in-depth interviews to listen to Omani students' voices and explore their lived experiences.

I begin by setting out my interest in the study (Section 1.2), then provide some background related to international education in New Zealand (Section 1.3) and the adjustment experiences of Arab international students (Section 1.4). This is followed by a description of key concepts related to adjustment (Section 1.5), the study's significance (Section 1.6), aims and research questions, including the research design (Section 1.7). The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis chapters in Section 1.8.

1.2 The Researcher's Interest in the Study

As an international student in New Zealand, my experience began with intense excitement about coming to New Zealand, followed by feelings of stress and loneliness at some stages. During my first year in New Zealand, I was fascinated by the surrounding environment, the beautiful nature and weather, and the new lifestyle, which was utterly foreign to me at that time. However, the second year was marked by difficulty and challenges until I figured out ways to manage and adjust to a new lifestyle in New Zealand. I sought out many friendships with other international students to understand their diverse cultures and feel a sense of belonging and solidarity. It was mainly friendships and social support from international students that made life easier and sustained my motivation.

I travelled from Jordan to the University of Waikato, New Zealand, for my second master's degree in Applied Linguistics in 2016, before enrolling in my PhD degree in 2019. When I entered my first class in my master's degree, I was surprised to see that most of my classmates were Chinese international students, and, initially, I wondered how I would communicate with them. However, it was easy to interact with them. I developed many intercultural friendships

with most of them and shared my accommodation with two. My Chinese flatmates taught me how to cook Chinese food, which was quite an unfamiliar but exciting experience. We also celebrated traditional Chinese festivals, including the Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival. Thus, I became familiar with their social and cultural norms and ethnic food. In addition to learning about their specific culture, I also learned how similar I was to them, sharing many overseas experiences. During my initial experience at the university, interacting with others on campus was quite interesting, and students commonly showed a positive attitude and were keen to get to know others. Reflecting on my experience, I saw the university as a multicultural environment with people from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds through my interactions with students from diverse cultures.

My interest in researching international students' adjustment was inspired by two experiences. One was my personal experience as an international student in New Zealand. This experience involved adjustment to the sociocultural and academic life in New Zealand. Studying and living with multinational students allowed me to develop sociocultural competence and personal growth, through which I have become more open-minded towards respecting other cultures. Another experience that inspired me was working as a mentor and an English club tutor to newcomer international students studying the English language programmes at the English language school of the university during my master's study. This volunteer work gave me an opportunity to listen to their voices and support them in improving their cross-cultural and language adjustment in New Zealand. It also helped me gain insight into the most challenging issues international students may encounter, especially in their settling-in period. These experiences and interests motivated me to investigate the adjustment experiences of international students as part of my doctorate study.

My personal experiences as a Jordanian international PhD student in New Zealand served as motivation behind my desire to research the adjustment experiences of Arab students. As a researcher, it was easy for me to communicate with my Arab student participants because of our shared language and culture, which helped them feel more comfortable and open to sharing their experiences. They could also understand and reply to the questions more fully when I conducted the interviews in Arabic, which is their native language, given their relatively low proficiency in English.

Even though the participants and I shared the same language and culture, I was conscious that my position as a researcher might have the potential to introduce bias and preconceptions into

the research and might affect how the participants communicated with me and answered the interview questions. To address this issue, it was crucial to approach potential participants in an academic setting, such as the university library, and make an effort to create a positive environment and develop a rapport based on respect during the interviews.

I was specifically interested in undergraduate Omani students. I had developed an interest in the experience of this cohort of students because, during the time of data collection, the largest number of Arab students in the university were Omanis, and most Omani students in the university were undergraduates due to their scholarship programme.

1.3 New Zealand's International Education

Higher education has become increasingly internationalised in today's globalised world (Munusamy & Hashim, 2020). De Wit and Altbach (2021) note: "Internationalisation as a concept and strategic agenda is a relatively new, broad, and varied phenomenon in tertiary education, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, sociocultural, and academic rationales and stakeholders" (p. 28). This movement has led universities and educators to focus more on the internationalisation process (Vaccarino & Li, 2018).

Knight (2003) defines internationalisation as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (p. 2). Through this definition, Knight (2003) associates the process of internationalisation with improving higher education's international, intercultural, and global aspects, primarily by involving faculty members and students, and the integration of international approaches into teaching and research. Knight (2021) adds that the international and intercultural aspects of internationalisation should be integrated "into policies and programs in order to ensure sustainability and centrality to the mission and values of the institution or system" (p. 72). Aside from improving teaching and learning quality, internationalisation promotes and has seen an increase in international student mobility (Knight, 2021; Munusamy & Hashim, 2020). Developing student mobility has become a focus and a source of revenue for developed or receiving countries, primarily English-speaking countries (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). In addition, the sociocultural diversity of the receiving countries is enhanced by international students sharing their cultures (Shafaei & Razak, 2016b).

Torii et al. (2020) pointed out that "study-abroad is a key strategy for internationalisation of higher education" (p. 578). Fuelled by this vision, universities have become increasingly concerned with attracting more international students. In addition, studying overseas at a tertiary education institution has become increasingly popular, especially for students from Asian or non-English-speaking countries (Ng et al., 2017; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Yu & Shen, 2012; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Students who study internationally seek to learn a foreign language, primarily English, as well as obtain an international education experience (Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Vulić-Prtorić & Oetjen, 2017).

Similar to other Western and receiving countries, New Zealand actively seeks to promote its international education (Jiang, 2005). The Ministry of Education in New Zealand, in its policy and vision of international students, has put forward goals to increase the number of international students over a number of years (Budde-Sung, 2011). Its latest policy, the *International Education Strategy 2022–2030* (Ministry of Education, 2022), explains its vision as the following:

> This International Education Strategy enables international education to thrive and grow. It builds on New Zealand's quality education system and focuses on delivering good education outcomes for international students, global opportunities for domestic students and our educational institutions, as well as economic, social and cultural benefits for all of New Zealand. (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 4)

The strategy endeavours to revive New Zealand's international education sector after the COVID-19 pandemic caused the border closure in 2020. Thus, it focuses on two main areas: "Helping international education to build back and recover from the border closures that occurred as part of New Zealand's response to COVID-19, and to build a new future for international education" (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 16). These two areas go parallel with three main goals to achieve: "(1) Excellent education and student experience, (2) sustainable and resilient, and (3) global citizens" (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 5). The strategy indicates that the New Zealand government endeavours to provide high-quality international education by providing an excellent and safe educational environment and ensuring international students' satisfaction and positive experiences in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2022).

New Zealand is attractive to international students for a variety of reasons. Similar to the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia, a primary reason for students choosing New Zealand is to learn

the English language. New Zealand is also attractive for its world-class education system, campus diversity, and safe and beautiful environment (Ho et al., 2007; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Its highly-ranked universities add a further reason for choosing New Zealand as a desirable study destination (Universities NZ – Te Pōkai Tara, 2022).

During the last few decades, New Zealand's education industry has paid great attention to international students (Campbell & Li, 2008; Campbell & Zeng, 2006; Johnson, 2008). New Zealand's international education sector has proliferated and brought significant economic benefits to the country. In 2018, international education ranked fourth in the country in terms of revenues (Education New Zealand, 2018). According to Education New Zealand (2018), the country earned an estimated NZD1.1 billion through international student enrolment in 2017. Besides enhancing the country's economic growth, it is claimed that international education contributes to cultural diversity and global relations (Education New Zealand, 2018). As Jiang (2010) noted: "International students are an asset for New Zealand: they provide links all over the world, particularly with China" (p. 894–895).

The number of international students enrolled in New Zealand education was 125,392 in 2017 (Education New Zealand, 2018). The highest number of international students come from Asian countries, particularly China (32%) and India (16%) (Education New Zealand, 2018). Omani students were categorised as students from Middle Eastern or Arab Gulf countries and represented 5.9% of the total number of international tertiary students according to a recent report by the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2013). Consequently, considerable research has been conducted on Asian international students in New Zealand (e.g., Cao & Zhang, 2012; Holmes, 2008; Vaccarino et al., 2018), while fewer on Middle Eastern or Arab international students (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013; Bahiss, 2008; Yaghi, 2019). This study goes some way to addressing this gap.

1.4 The Adjustment Experiences of Arab International Students

As international students, several reasons motivate Arab students, including Omani students, to pursue higher education in Western countries, such as New Zealand. Some of these reasons include learning English, achieving a higher-status education degree, gaining international learning experiences, and acquiring professional skills for future careers in their home countries (Sherry et al., 2004; Sherry et al., 2010). Another motivation is that some Arab countries, such

as Saudi Arabia, offer scholarship programmes to encourage their students to study overseas (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2010, 2013; Shepherd & Rane, 2012).

Studying and living in a foreign country can result in positive or negative experiences for international students. Cultural differences between Arab-Islamic and Western cultures are one aspect that can negatively affect Arab international students' everyday lives (Rabia, 2017). Another aspect can be the difficulty of social integration and friendships with host nationals while studying overseas due to different social norms and interests between Arab students and their host peers (Yakaboski et al., 2018). Language barriers also affect many Arab international students (Mostafa, 2006; Rabia, 2017). Together, these cultural and linguistic issues influence Arab students' experiences while adjusting to and being a part of the host society (Mostafa, 2006; Ustundag, 2015).

In addition, Arab students, including Omanis, face difficulties in their academic journeys in Western countries, such as New Zealand, because the differences between the educational systems in Arab countries and Western countries are significant (Mostafa, 2006). The New Zealand education system is based on students' independent learning, highlighting the importance of classroom discussion and student-student interactions (Holmes, 2004). However, in most Arab countries, the teacher is the centre of the learning process and usually focuses on teacher-student interaction (Mostafa, 2006). Hence, in this study, I am interested in both students' sociocultural and academic adjustment to life in New Zealand.

1.5 Understanding Key Concepts

In this section, a definition of the key terms of the study is presented. These include adjustment, international and host-national students, and background of Omani culture and religion.

1.5.1 Adjustment and Related Concepts

The term "adjustment" has been used interchangeably with other terms, such as "adaptation" and "acculturation", to refer to the process of cross-cultural transition of sojourners[1] (such as international students) to the host culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). Even though neither adjustment nor adaptation is clearly defined (Bierwiaczonek & Waldzus, 2016), a number of

[1] "A sojourn is a temporary stay, and, therefore, a sojourner a temporary resident" (Ward et al., 2001, p. 21).

researchers have attempted to distinguish between the two (e.g., Schartner & Young, 2016; Young & Schartner, 2014). Schartner and Young (2016) state that adjustment includes the process that involves "the experience of change" due to living in a different cultural environment, while adaptation refers to the outcomes of the adjustment process (p. 374). Zhu (2016) distinguishes them as follows: "The terms adaptation and adjustment concern changes made at the individual level. The difference between these two concepts is that the former often refers to long-term residents or the endpoint of survival status, while the latter describes short-term sojourners" (p. 20). In this thesis, adaptation and adjustment will be used as interchangeable terms to describe the phenomenon experienced by Omani international students transitioning to a new social, cultural, and academic environment.

1.5.2 International Students and Host-National Students

In the context of this study, "international students" are defined as "students who travel to a country different from their own for the purpose of higher education" (Coles & Swami, 2012, p. 87). An international student usually must obtain a temporary student visa in order to study and live overseas. Other terms, such as "foreign students" and "overseas students", are also used to refer to the same type of students (Ward et al., 2001), but I am not using these terms. The term sojourner is also used to describe international students (Ward et al., 2001). Sojourners also commonly include tourists, refugees, diplomatic, military, and business people. That is, a sojourner refers to someone who travels overseas as part of their work or to fulfil a task and only stays for a limited period, as do international students who stay until they finish their studies, then return home (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Ward et al., 2001).

In this study, New Zealand citizens or permanent residents who live permanently and study in New Zealand universities are referred to as "host-national students". In the literature, "home students", "local students", and "domestic students" are also used to refer to the host students.

The terms "Omani students" and "Omani participants" are used interchangeably in this study to refer to the Omani international undergraduate students who were invited and agreed to participate in this study. During the data collection stage, all Omani student participants were enrolled in bachelor degree programmes at a university in New Zealand. The students had previously enrolled at an English language school and a Foundation Programme at the university as stipulated in their scholarship requirements from the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) in Oman.

1.5.3 Omani Culture and Religion

Definitions of culture vary, as the concept covers a variety of things and includes almost all aspects of people's daily lives. Samovar et al. (2010) propose that it can include elements such as history, religion, values, social organisations, and language. Chamberlain (2005) defines culture as "the values, norms, and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgments about their world" (p. 197). In this study, culture is taken to be related to a set of behaviours, ways of thinking, social norms and traditions, and dress codes that are influenced by religious beliefs.

Arabs comprise the majority of Omani people, and Arabic is their native language (Al-Maamari, 2016). Typically, values are deeply rooted in Arab cultures and are closely related to religion. Arab cultures are characterised by several religious values, such as morality, humanity, generosity, and honour, which are somewhat similar to other cultures around the globe. Arab individuals should adhere to and accept these values in their daily lives (Harb, 2016). As Chamberlain (2005) noted, the things people learn about their culture often cannot change quickly and influence their behaviours.

The Omani students who were participants in this study identified their ethnic background as being from Oman or the Sultanate of Oman. Oman is one of the Arab Gulf countries along with Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait. This group is referred to as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Culturally and religiously, these Arab Gulf countries are somewhat similar (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). However, Omani culture is distinct from other cultures in that "Oman has a very polite, civilised, gentle and attractive culture. Two of the peculiarities of Omani culture are silence and humility" (Yenigun et al., 2021, p. 681).

Omani people are strongly influenced by their Islamic Arab heritage (Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007). The Islamic culture is predominant in Omani society, and its norms and beliefs are connected with and driven by Islam. Most Omanis view their Islamic cultural identity as reflected in their way of life (Al-Maamari, 2016). Arab Islamic cultural values are reflected in the Omani family life, which emphasises the idea of strong family bonding, and "women and girls have limited freedom of movement and their interactions are often limited to their own gender" (Al-Barwani and Albeely, 2007, p. 135). Accordingly, Islamic principles regarding gender relations, conservativeness, and modesty govern Omani families and society.

Embracing their Islamic and cultural traditions, Omanis adhere to a unique national dress code, reflecting their conservativeness and modesty. Nowadays, Omani men and women continue to wear traditional attire (Yenigun et al., 2021). Omani males usually wear a *dishdasha* (a long robe with long sleeves, usually in white) and a hat (Alshabibi et al., 2022). As for Omani females, the dress code varies in style based on the region of Oman. However, "the vast majority of Omani women, regardless of region, age, or tribe, wear a black *abaya*, a loose hanging black outer garment, when in public" (Roche et al., 2014, p. 42). Omani women also wear the *hijab* (a headscarf). This practice stems from their Islamic and cultural norms and traditions, even though Omani law does not oblige veiling for women (Ahmed & Roche, 2018). Given that Omani women do not want to draw attention to themselves by wearing an *abaya*, and as part of adjusting to new surroundings, they tend to wear Western clothing when travelling overseas (Yenigun et al., 2021) but continue to cover their hair with the *hijab*.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant with regard to New Zealand-based research. Cross-cultural research on Middle Eastern or Arab-Muslim international students in New Zealand is minimal compared with research investigating other international students; for exceptions, see Alkharusi (2013), Bahiss (2008), and Yaghi (2019). These studies helped uncover some of the issues students face but did not primarily explore the adjustment experiences of Omani students. Therefore, this study hopes to gain more insight into this phenomenon and to uncover more aspects related to social, cultural, and academic adjustment.

This study is also significant because it will foster a deeper understanding and knowledge of Omani students' adjustment experiences in New Zealand. Understanding the lived experiences of Omani students will be helpful to newly arrived international students preparing to study in New Zealand. Specifically, this study will raise awareness of the importance of international students' sociocultural and academic adjustment, which could help them mitigate their adjustment challenges. Further, as this study explores the diversity of Omani students' experiences as one group of international students, it will offer a deeper and more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity that will be beneficial for university administrators, counsellors, and those involved with international education who are aiming to provide the best possible support services. This study could help the international education sector refine future policies and practices more generally. Insights into international students' adjustment

experiences are also expected to assist those concerned with international student mobility and the internationalisation of higher education in New Zealand.

1.7 Aims and Research Questions

This phenomenological study (Giorgi, 2008; Moustakas, 1994) aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Omani international students while pursuing higher education in New Zealand. It aimed to elicit Omani students' descriptions of and meanings they made of their adjustment experiences from their viewpoints. This study's spotlight was on the experiences of Omani students as international students faced with sociocultural and academic adjustment to a host culture that was different from their home culture in many ways. It sought to emphasise the richness of their adjustment experiences as international students in New Zealand.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1. How do Omani international students describe their initial experience in New Zealand?
> RQ2. How do Omani international students experience their sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand?
> RQ3. How do Omani international students adjust to academic life at a New Zealand university?

To make this happen, qualitative research and phenomenological semi-structured interviews were utilised. Twelve Omani students (eight males and four females) were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews (two rounds) to explore their lived experiences in New Zealand from sociocultural and academic perspectives. Those Omani students were studying for their bachelor's degrees at one university in New Zealand.

1.8 Outline of the Thesis

This doctoral thesis is organised into nine chapters. This chapter, **Chapter 1,** has introduced the researcher's interest in this study, international education as a context of this research, and the adjustment experiences of Arab international students, for example, concepts, including that of adjustment, have been explained, and the significance, aims, research questions of the research have been established.

Chapters 2 and 3 review the literature and theoretical frameworks relevant to this study. The literature review, Chapter 2, is devoted to cross-cultural adjustment research regarding sociocultural and academic perspectives and factors related to these two dimensions of adjustment. Chapter 3 presents the most widely used theoretical frameworks regarding models of adjustment: The U-curve model and the ABC model.

Chapter 4 introduces the methodological approach adopted in this study. The research design was qualitative and based on a phenomenological approach. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method, and focus groups were used as a point of reference. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, and NVivo 11 was used to organise and code the data.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 report the qualitative research findings. Chapter 5 describes Omani students' preparation to travel overseas and their initial experience in New Zealand. Chapter 6 presents the findings relating to the sociocultural adjustment experiences of Omani students. The last chapter of the findings, Chapter 7, describes Omani students' academic interactions and English language proficiency.

Chapter 8 discusses the findings from Chapters 5, 6 and 7 that directly respond to the research questions: Initial experiences, sociocultural adjustment, and academic adjustment. The theoretical foundation of this study is also discussed.

Chapter 9, the final chapter, summarises the key points of the study. The contribution and implications of this study are discussed. The study's limitations and suggestions for further research are also discussed. The chapter ends with my final reflection on this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature concerning the cross-cultural adjustment of international students in various contexts. The review begins by presenting the sociocultural and academic dimensions of cross-cultural adjustment (Section 2.2). This section is followed by a review of several factors that are found to be associated with positive or negative adjustment experiences, including length of stay (Section 2.3), English language proficiency (Section 2.4), friendships and social interaction of international students (Section 2.5), and cultural distance (Section 2.6). Then, an overview of students' academic interaction is presented (Section 2.7). After that, several studies on international students' adjustment to New Zealand are reviewed (Section 2.8). Finally, the chapter ends with identifying gaps in previous research that this study seeks to fill and the research questions that this study intends to explore (Section 2.9).

2.2 Adjustment of International Students

For international students to have a successful overseas experience and be satisfied in their host country, they are recommended to understand and adapt to the host country's society, culture, and academic life (Chien, 2016). However, international students often struggle with transitioning from their own culture to another one (Swami, 2009).

The following subsections review empirical research related to sociocultural and academic adjustments, followed by factors associated with international students' adjustment.

2.2.1 Sociocultural Adjustment

Sociocultural adjustment refers to the "ability to 'fit in' and negotiate the interactive aspects of the new culture" (Searle & Ward, 1990, p. 450). International students' comfort level with aspects of the host culture is also related to sociocultural adjustment (Rhein, 2018). That is, identifying and understanding the social and cultural aspects of the host culture allows international students to adjust socioculturally. Literature suggests different variables that predict international students' successful sociocultural adjustment. Ward and Kennedy (1992, 1993, 1999) found that host language proficiency, cultural distance, length of stay in the host

country, and social contact with host nationals facilitate sociocultural adjustment. More recent studies, such as that by Hirai et al. (2015), state that "the strongest predictors of sociocultural adjustment should be social relationships and cultural tools (e.g., language) that facilitate social integration" (p. 439).

Social interaction with host-national peers and engaging in community activities in the host country support international students and smooth sociocultural adjustment (Campbell, 2012; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Thus, social interaction plays a prominent role in international students' adjustment with many valuable benefits. First, social interaction offers opportunities to make new intercultural friendships with host-national and other international students. Second, social interaction provides a source of social and academic support, such as practising the host-country language and learning new academic and cultural norms and traditions (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Finally, social interaction has been found to help to improve the psychological well-being of many international students and decrease their feelings of loneliness (Nyandara & Egbuonu, 2018).

A successful sociocultural adjustment occurs when international students learn the norms and practices of the host culture and can interact appropriately with them (Ozer, 2015; Ward & Searle, 1991). Learning the social and cultural norms and successfully adjusting to the host culture is achieved through close contact with the host society and other nationality peers (Searle & Ward, 1990). In addition to maintaining effective social interactions with members of the host society, learning the host language is an effective strategy that leads to better sociocultural adjustment (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). More precisely, without learning the language skills of the host culture, it can be difficult to maintain relationships with host nationals and other international students (Wilson et al., 2013). Building friendship networks is central to international students adjusting well (Kashima & Loh, 2006). Ward and Kennedy (1993, 1994) found that interaction with host-national friends promotes sociocultural adjustment, while interaction with co-national friends boosts psychological adjustment. Conversely, in a study conducted by Kashima and Loh (2006) in Australia, social ties between Asian international students and host nationals did not influence their sociocultural adjustment but their psychological adjustment. Instead, English ability and the length of stay in Australia were found to improve Asian students' sociocultural adjustment.

To summarise, effective sociocultural adjustment of international students to their host country requires their ability to learn the social norms and traditions of the host country. This requires

international students to interact socially with host nationals to understand the host country's social and cultural aspects. Students also need to learn to be proficient in the host language.

2.2.2 Academic Adjustment

In addition to sociocultural adjustment, academic adjustment is another dimension of cross-cultural adjustment for international students (Schartner & Young, 2016; Yu, 2010). According to Yu (2013), sociocultural and academic adjustment are often interrelated; that is, sociocultural adjustment is influenced by students' academic results. For Schartner and Young (2016), academic adjustment is related to "adjustment to the specific demands of academic study, including styles of teaching and learning at the host university" (p. 374). As international students' primary purpose for travelling overseas is to achieve an academic degree and educational experiences (Rosenthal et al., 2007), they do give attention to adjusting to academic life (Meng et al., 2018). In this study, academic adjustment is related to interactions in academic life, including interactions between students and between students and their lecturers.

A number of studies on the academic adjustment of international students have focused on exploring the learning difficulties and adjustment challenges experienced by students (Cao et al., 2016; Wang & Hannes, 2014). For example, Wang and Hannes (2014), in their qualitative study of Asian international students' academic and sociocultural adjustment in Belgium, highlighted four academic difficulties experienced by Asian students, namely, "academic activities, academic resources, language barriers and time management" (p. 72). The authors explained that academic activities are challenging for Asian students because they need a lot of time to prepare and read. As for academic resources, the library facilities were convenient for Asian students, but they considered library hours should be extended. The Asian students also reported difficulty with the English language, such as understanding their lessons in English, and difficulty with the local Dutch language, when reading books in Dutch and communicating with host nationals. The last difficulty was related to time management; Asian students mentioned challenges in terms of allocating enough time for studying and managing their daily life tasks. In another study, Cao et al. (2016) investigated Chinese international students' acculturative stressors in six European countries and found that language barriers created challenges with academic integration, and everyday tasks became demanding because "many life tasks require direct face to face communication with local people" (p. 17). The authors stated that students' language barriers could lead to misunderstandings when communicating with the local people.

A few studies have examined the learning experiences and academic adjustment of international students at New Zealand tertiary institutions (Campbell & Li, 2008; Guan & Jones, 2011; Lee et al., 2013; Lewthwaite, 1996; Othman et al., 2021). Those studies have reported students' difficulties concerning English language obstacles and teaching style in New Zealand that requires learners to be more independent, which were found to be different from those in international students' home countries. In one study, Lee et al. (2013) identified several academic difficulties encountered by East Asian international students in New Zealand, namely, English language barriers in terms of writing skills, such as when completing assignments; different teaching styles; and academic content. Lee et al. (2013) further stated that, unlike the New Zealand education approach, East Asian students were more accustomed to memorisation as a learning strategy. Similarly, in a recent study on Malaysian international students in a New Zealand university, Othman et al. (2021) reported that the main challenges for Malaysian students were the language barrier, including difficulty in understanding the local English accent in the New Zealand classroom, and New Zealand's teaching style in which "students are expected to learn independently and be innovative" (p. 483). Othman et al. (2021) explained that the teaching style in New Zealand contrasts with the "spoon-feeding" learning approach used in some developing countries (p. 483). The researchers concluded that the New Zealand learning style (i.e., independent learning) was realised by the students as a benefit, not just a challenge.

Although most of the studies on academic adjustment reported difficulty for students integrating into their host country's academic life, some studies indicated that international students were able to adjust well to the new academic environment (Campbell & Li, 2008; Kukatlapalli, 2016). Asian international students in New Zealand, in a study by Campbell and Li (2008), reported positive learning experiences with high-quality support from university lecturers and support staff. Similar to these findings, in his doctoral research on Indian international students in New Zealand, Kukatlapalli (2016) stated that Indian students adjusted well to the academic environment and valued their experiences studying in New Zealand due to having high levels of language skills.

To summarise, academic adjustment might be associated with sociocultural adjustment for international students as the benefit goes both ways. Academic adjustment is found to be difficult for some students due to language barriers and different learning styles in the host

country. Generally, students find ways to adjust to the academic demands in the host country if they find a supportive academic environment.

The following sections present an overview of several factors that influence international students' adjustment, including length of stay, English language proficiency, social interaction and friendship networks, and cultural distance. There is ample research evidence that these factors positively or negatively impact international students' social, cultural, and academic lives in their host countries.

2.3 Length of Stay

Length of stay in the new culture has been identified as a factor contributing to international students' adjustment, with previous studies finding that students experience psychological and sociocultural difficulties upon arrival in a foreign country (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Research by Brown and Holloway (2008), in their ethnographic study of 13 international postgraduate students during their first 12-month academic year in England, concluded that the initial period was marked by culture shock, which caused feelings of stress, depression, loneliness, and homesickness. As noted by Vergara et al. (2010), international students in Thailand experienced higher levels of acculturative stress (e.g., language and academic difficulties, cultural change, and loneliness) during their first three months there. Similarly, a study conducted by Ayoob et al. (2011) examined acculturative stress and the length of stay among three groups of Kashmiri college students (i.e., those who stayed less than a year, one to two years, and two to three years) in Central India. They reported that the student group who spent less than a year struggled with health problems (e.g., anxiety and depression) more than the other groups.

On the other hand, the process of international students' sociocultural adjustment has been found to improve when their stay is longer in the host country (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Searle, 1991). A longitudinal study by Ward and Kennedy (1996) showed that Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand faced more difficulties during their first six months of sojourn in New Zealand, but these difficulties gradually declined during the second six months of their stay. After around six or more months of stay, Ward and Kennedy (1999) proposed that international students develop social networks and friendships that enable them to learn some of the social skills needed to adjust to the host culture. Vulić-Prtorić and Oetjen (2017) found that European international students in Croatia experienced

high levels of difficulty in their initial stay and gradually started to feel more comfortable and adjusted. From a different point of view, Schartner and Young (2016) suggested that a large number of international students face significant difficulties during the initial period of their stay because they lack social contact and the sociocultural skills needed in the host country.

To sum up, international students' adjustment improves as they spend more time in their host countries. Stress, anxiety, and homesickness are common problems faced by international students, especially at the initial stage of a sojourn. However, over time and after the development of social networks, these problems are overcome and adjustment is gained.

2.4 English Language Proficiency

This section presents literature about how the English language contributes to the social and academic adjustment of international students.

2.4.1 English in Social Life

One of the significant predictors of the sociocultural adjustment of international students in a host country is their proficiency in speaking the host-country language, typically the English language (Andrade, 2006; Campbell & Zeng, 2006; Gautam et al., 2016; Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Ozer, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In a qualitative study, Gautam et al. (2016) explored the lived experiences of six international students in the U.S. and found that the English language was identified as a major challenge for international students because it influenced social contact with their American counterparts. The relationship between English language proficiency and overall satisfaction with overseas experiences was also evident in the study of Mahmood and Burke (2018) of 880 international students in the U.S. They found that when international students had a higher level of English language proficiency, they were more likely to experience a smooth adjustment to U.S. culture. Further, Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006) found that the more proficient international students are in English and the more time they spend in the U.S., the fewer sociocultural and psychological adjustment difficulties they face. These results fit neatly with a study by Shafaei and Razak (2016a) on the importance of the English language ability of international students in Malaysia. English language proficiency helped them communicate with their host and other international peers and consequently influenced students' cultural learning and adjustment.

Research has discovered a strong relationship between international students' English language proficiency and establishing interpersonal relationships with host nationals (Andrade, 2009; Campbell & Zeng, 2006). Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) argued that a low level of language skills and, in particular, oral communication skills, impacted Japanese students' interaction with members of the U.S. as the host society. Further, Hendrickson et al. (2011), in their study of friendship networks of 86 international students at a U.S. university, found that establishing good relationships with host peers can be difficult when international students have limited language ability. In New Zealand, a study by Campbell and Zeng (2006) investigated Chinese international students' experiences in New Zealand. Thematic analysis revealed that Chinese students reported their English language proficiency created difficulty for them when interacting with New Zealand host friends. As a result, they sought friendships and social support from co-national and Asian students.

2.4.2 English in Academic Life

English language proficiency, especially when English is used as a medium of interaction in academic life, occupies a key position. That is, international students' English proficiency contributes to their academic performance and adjustment (Kukatlapalli, 2016; Novera, 2004; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). For example, low academic achievement was associated with a lack of English proficiency for international graduate students in the U.S. in a study by Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006). Further, the academic experiences of 25 Indonesian postgraduate students studying in Australia were explored by Novera (2004), who found that 23 of the Indonesian participants had issues with academic English, which impacted their academic achievement, particularly in areas including oral presentations and academic written skills. Interestingly, Novera (2004) found that English was more difficult for Indonesian participants in academic aspects than social aspects. In particular, five Indonesian students observed that conversing in social situations was not as challenging as giving oral presentations or participating in class. The same findings were reported by Park (2016), who found that academic adaptation was more challenging for international graduate students in the U.S. than social adaptation, as students were more socially adapted than academically. Park (2016) concluded that "although sociocultural adaptation does not seem to be problematic for the participants, it is necessary to carefully observe their adaptation with various angles – sociocultural, general academic and literacy-based academic" (p. 899).

More specifically, English language proficiency was found to influence international students' engagement in the classroom. Yeh and Inose (2003) stated that being proficient in English enabled international students in the U.S. to be more engaged and active participants in class. Conversely, when they are less self-confident about their English level, international students are more reluctant to participate in classroom discussions. This was also identified by Poyrazli and Grahame (2007), who said: "Students' difficulty in participating in discussions stems from their perceived inadequacy in English, fear of making mistakes while speaking English, and of potential ridicule from their classmates and professor" (p. 42). The same findings have been reported in New Zealand-based studies (Holmes, 2005). However, Campbell and Li (2008) identified that international students in New Zealand had difficulty in different academic aspects, including completing assignments or lecture comprehension, due to their English language limitations. In the same context, some Chinese international students in a study by Holmes (2008) reported that their lack of English speaking abilities limited friendship contact with New Zealand peers, so they opted to listen and be silent in academic settings.

Further, it has been found that academic writing is one of the most difficult skills international students face when it comes to English language-related issues. A longitudinal study by Evans and Morrison (2011) found that the ability to comprehend some vocabulary, listen to lectures, and academic writing style were among the difficulties faced by first-year international undergraduate students in Hong Kong. These researchers noted that undergraduate students might find the academic writing style in the university challenging because it is quite different from the style they used in secondary school. Similarly, Park (2016) revealed that a low level of English proficiency and academic writing was a major challenge that impacted international graduate students' academic adaptation to U.S. colleges.

To sum up, English language proficiency and communication skills are important for international students' academic and social adjustment. Having limited English language ability, international students may face adjustment problems. They are less likely to engage in social interaction and develop friendships with host nationals. In academic life, they may find it difficult to participate in classroom discussions and or complete assignments due to their limited English skills.

2.5 Friendships and Social Interaction of International Students

The value of friendship is evident in most studies of international students' transition experiences. Colak et al. (2019) pointed out that "friendships support the adaptation of students to higher education by increasing their sense of belonging, providing sociopsychological support and facilitating academic adjustment" (p. 1). However, friendship has various meanings across cultures, as it is tied to cultural traditions. As an example, Belford (2017) explained that "people in Chinese culture expect friends to perform helpful behaviours, whereas American friends expect friends to be good listeners" (p. 513). Chen (2006) pointed out that generally, a friend in American or Western culture is someone with whom one can socialise and enjoy a variety of leisure activities. It is important to be aware of the potential cultural differences between friendship groups and for students to be able to tolerate any disagreements that may arise as a result of these differences if one wishes to maintain friendships across cultures (Sias et al., 2008).

One of the earliest models that examined friendship development was Bochner et al.'s (1977) *Functional Model of Friendship Networks*. In their functional model, Bochner et al. (1977) categorised friendship networks of international students into three types: (1) a monocultural network, (2) a bi-cultural network, and (3) a multicultural network. A monocultural network consists of people from the same country (i.e., co-national friends). Its function is to observe and practise the home culture. In contrast, a bi-cultural network (i.e., host-national friends) also includes host-national students or teachers. Its purpose is to support international students in their studies and future career attempts. A multinational network is other international students' friends, and its function is recreational, and these friends provide companionship.

The following six subsections review literature related to types of friendships, friendships and social support, and interaction with homestays.

2.5.1 Friendships with Co-Nationals

Research has found that friendship with co-nationals (i.e., friends from the same culture or home country) is the most prominent type of friendship network for the majority of international students (Bochner et al., 1977; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Mrekajova, 2017; Pho & Schartner, 2021). Having co-national friends was seen to improve international students' satisfaction due to their role in providing social and emotional support (Maundeni, 2001;

Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Satisfaction with co-national friendships may enhance the psychological well-being of international students and, therefore, lead to better psychological adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999).

When faced with issues from the host community, many international students demonstrate their ability to form friendships with co-national and international students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Rhein, 2018). For example, Rhein (2018) found that discrimination made most Korean and Japanese international students in Thailand prefer to stay connected with their co-national and other international students. When international students perceive discrimination, they tend to enhance their social ties with home friends and other international students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Another possible reason why international students prefer to develop friendships with co-national and other international students more than host nationals, according to Gareis et al. (2011), is "the ability of international students to find solidarity within the community of compatriots and other international students" (p. 164).

In contrast, when international students interact more with their co-nationals, they may face difficulties in their sociocultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Ward and Kennedy (1994) found that sociocultural adjustment is particularly difficult for sojourners with less contact with host nationals due to their intense contact with co-nationals. Gareis (2000) points out that "a prolonged and exclusive reliance on home country support can have distinct disadvantages" (p. 70). The extensive reliance on co-national friendships may lead to negative consequences for international students, such as losing the opportunity to interact with host nationals (Glass et al., 2014). Additionally, international students who rely only on their co-national friends tend to find themselves communicating with their native languages and may, therefore, lack the opportunity to practise the English language in the host country (Gareis, 2000).

2.5.2 Friendships with Multinationals

As soon as they arrive in their host country, many international students desire to form intercultural ties (Hendrickson et al., 2011). A large number of international students have been found to be keen to have strong and intimate social ties with multinational students (i.e., other international friends) (Campbell & Li, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Wu & Hammond, 2011). Students' desire to have multinational friendships may be linked to the benefits they can obtain through them. Hendrickson et al. (2011), for instance, identified several benefits of

having multinational friends: (1) increases international students' awareness of different cultures and social norms different to the host culture, (2) promotes solidarity and a feeling of acceptance because of the similar experience of being international students in a new culture, and (3) provides opportunities for practising the language as most international students speak English as a second language.

As part of their adjustment process from their home country to a new cultural setting, leaving family and home-country friends behind, international students have encountered a number of academic and social obstacles (Cao et al., 2017; Meng et al., 2021). To mitigate these challenges, international students often seek to develop social networks with multinational students in order to get support and offer opportunities for fellowship and enjoyment in the host country (Meng et al., 2021). In addition, in contrast to friendships with host nationals, this type of friendship is often less difficult to form (Andrade, 2006; Campbell & Li, 2008; Gareis et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2018).

2.5.3 Friendships with Host Nationals

Cross-cultural adjustment research has indicated that effective relationships with host nationals alleviate sociocultural adjustment difficulties (Campbell, 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). A study by Zhang and Goodson (2011) found that sociocultural adjustment is promoted by English language proficiency and contact with host peers in the U.S. Developing intercultural friendships with host nationals facilitates the process of acquiring social skills or cultural learning of the host country that is required for successful sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990). Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) stated that making strong friendships with local communities enhances international students' cultural knowledge by facilitating learning of the social norms and customs of the host country. International students' language proficiency also improves through practising the language with native speakers (Wang & Hannes, 2014). Hendrickson et al. (2011) found that building good relationships with host nationals affects international students in the U.S. positively by making them happier and reducing their feelings of homesickness. Similarly, Talwar et al. (2022) indicated that making friends with co-nationals and host nationals can help international students in Malaysia feel less homesick.

2.5.4 Challenges of Friendships with Host Nationals

Many international students have been observed to be struggling to interact with host nationals (McFaul, 2016; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) found that the language barriers and different lifestyles between Chinese and British students made the Chinese students generally encounter difficulty in social interaction and establishing friendships with local British peers. An example of the differences in lifestyle, Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) stated that although Chinese students were pleased with the university accommodations, they complained about loud music and noises made by some British students, which made them relocate to live with their co-national students. The researchers indicated that "the lack of social consideration shown by some students can be particularly problematic for those brought up with different traditions and values" (p. 51). As a result, they limited their contact to co-national friends. Wu and Hammond (2011) reported the same results and found that the adjustment of East Asian students to British society was impeded due to low social interaction with the U.K. host nationals. Instead, the East Asian students in their study felt satisfied with their intercultural contact with other international students. Yu and Zhang (2016) conducted a qualitative study of Mainland Chinese students' adaptation to Hong Kong. In their study, Mainland Chinese students reported a lack of social interaction with Hong Kong students due to the differences in societal norms and lifestyles. The language barrier also brought another challenge to Mainland Chinese students, which impeded successful social interaction and communication with host nationals in Hong Kong.

A considerable body of research has shown that the development of intercultural friendships between international and host-national students is affected by cultural and language obstacles (Gareis, 2012; Li & Zizzi, 2018; Vaccarino et al., 2018; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). For example, Gareis (2012) recruited a sample of 454 international students in the U.S. and found that most of them were not satisfied with their intercultural friendships with the host American students. International students reported having difficulty making close American friends due to cultural differences, language barriers, and shyness. Li and Zizzi (2018) conducted a qualitative study on female Asian international students in the U.S. and found that, because of linguistic and cultural barriers, Asian students reported having minimal interaction with their American peers. Surprisingly, in their study of international students' friendship formation in the U.S., Sias et al. (2008) found that cultural differences and language barriers did not impact intercultural

friendships. They explained that the reason for this was that the international students were excited to learn about the diversity that existed in the cultures of other international students.

International students experiencing discrimination in the host country can negatively affect their social interaction and friendships (Novera, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Wu et al. (2015) noted that international students could not build friendship networks with American peers because they felt discriminated against by local American students on- and off-campus. Similarly, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) stated that South Asian and Middle Eastern students (i.e., Arabs or Muslims) were unsatisfied with their adjustment due to a lack of social interaction and discrimination compared with German students, who were satisfied with their friendship networks in the U.S. and reported successful adjustment. As a result, international students (but not all) who experience discrimination in the host country may negatively affect their social interaction and sociocultural adjustment.

Regarding Arab international students, Alazzi and Chiodo (2006) found that Jordanian international postgraduate students in the U.S. were unable to form successful social contact with their American host students due to different religious and cultural norms. On the other hand, the Jordanian students reported positive social interactions with co-national or other Muslim overseas students due to their shared religious beliefs and cultural customs. In a study by McDermott-Levy (2011), Omani female students in the U.S. only made an effort to interact with other international students, believing that it was easier for Omani students to approach them and that it was harder to build social connections with American students. Likewise, Yakaboski et al. (2018) reported that cultural and language barriers between Saudi graduate students and their American classmates made it difficult for them to form intercultural friendships. The authors also reported that contact was minimal between the two groups both in class and on campus.

In the New Zealand context, Zhang and Brunton (2007) found that Chinese international students' social interaction and forming friendships with New Zealanders were less than they anticipated before arriving in New Zealand. According to the authors, over half of the Chinese students reported limited engagement with local community activities (52%), as well as limited opportunities to make host-national friends (55%).

Additionally, in a study that focused on intercultural friendships between 136 Chinese international students and host-national students in New Zealand, Vaccarino et al. (2018) found

that cultural distance and the English language barrier hindered friendship formation between the two groups of students. Because of cultural differences, Chinese and New Zealand students had differing views on the meaning of friendship. In addition, Chinese students' low level of English hindered communication with New Zealand students, which in turn limited interactions and friendships between them. Similarly, another recent study by Vaccarino et al. (2021) on international Pacific Island students in New Zealand found that friendships between Pacific Island students and European New Zealand students were difficult to initiate due to different cultural perspectives. For example, compared to New Zealanders, Pacific Islanders treated their friends with a high level of commitment, and it was linked to supportive behaviour. Further, the English language was not revealed in their study as a major barrier, as the Pacific Island students tended to use English daily in their home country.

In addition to cultural and language barriers, studies have identified other factors that influence friendship formation with domestic students, such as low motivation or limited social interactions (Meng et al., 2021). In this regard, the study of Meng et al. (2021) uncovered that Belgian host students were not interested in communicating with Chinese international students and that the Chinese students were unable to find opportunities to interact with the Belgian domestic students. Their study also revealed that the Chinese students in Belgium preferred to socialise only with their circle of co-national friends, and they did not want to go beyond their co-nationals.

To sum up, research has focused on social interaction and friendships between international students and host-national students, with concerns related to this type of friendship. Given the challenges associated with this type of friendship, this study sought to shed light on the validity of intercultural friendships, and whether they were beneficial or harmful to the adjustment process of international students.

2.5.5 Friendships and Social Support

Research has emphasised the vital role of social support networks in international students' adjustment experiences (Jackson et al., 2013; Yusoff, 2011; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010). Lian and Tsang (2010) investigated Mainland Chinese students' social support in Hong Kong and found a strong correlation between social support from different sources (e.g., family, friends, and university support) and sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Likewise, in a study of sociocultural and psychological adjustment of international students from 35 nationalities at a

university in Denmark, Ozer (2015) found that social support facilitated sociocultural adjustment of international students and helped them to reduce their feelings of stress and increased self-esteem. Conversely, Boruah (2016) did not find a significant correlation between social support and international students' sociocultural adaptation in the U.K., but rather a relationship was found between international students' psychological distress and their sociocultural adaptation.

Social support from friends is found to be highly effective for many international students (Rabia & Karkouti, 2017). A qualitative study carried out by Rabia and Karkouti (2017) found that the cultural adjustment and academic performances of Arab international students in the U.S. were improved significantly by having sufficient social support from co-national and other international students. According to the researcher, "receiving help and assistance from other international students or friends from the same cultural background is the most effective form of friendship support" (p. 351). The researchers also emphasised that academic support (i.e., from lecturers and tutors) and family support were next in importance for Arab students.

Socio-emotional support can help to ease life and health problems. In a study of the relationship between social support and sociocultural adjustment at a Malaysian university, Yusoff (2011) found that international students' sociocultural adjustment was marked by social support from family and friends. The author also found that emotional support from a boyfriend or girlfriend, especially if he/she is also an international student, is valuable and associated with better adjustment experiences. According to Chavajay (2013), socio-emotional support and instrumental support (e.g., accommodation or transportation) from international students were of great value for a successful adjustment of international students to the U.S. culture.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of social support from host nationals to international students' adjustment to the host country (Chuah & Singh, 2016; Poyrazli et al., 2004; Ra, 2016). Poyrazli et al. (2004) found that international students who experienced inadequate social support from their U.S. peers were exposed to a higher level of acculturative stress. The same result was reported by Ra (2016), who found that social support from host-national friends was correlated with positive adjustment outcomes for Korean international students in the U.S.

2.5.6 Interaction with Homestay

A homestay is an accommodation option that allows international students to live with local families (Torii et al., 2020). Many benefits are associated with staying in a homestay for international students. According to Campbell (2004), "homestay provides a 'home away from home' for the students, providing them with not only board and lodging but friendship, support, and opportunities to practise the language and learn the culture through day-to-day communication" (p. 107). Hence, living in a homestay has the potential to contribute to students' overseas experiences in numerous ways.

Despite the importance of homestay to international students' overseas experiences, little research has been conducted on how it impacts their experiences (Back et al., 2022; Torii et al., 2020). Most studies on homestays focused on their role in learning the language and culture of the host countries (Back et al., 2022). In a study exploring the cultural transmission among Japanese students in the U.S., Torii et al. (2020) found that Japanese students valued their daily interactions with their host families as they helped provide a cultural understanding between Japanese and American cultures. Torii et al. (2020) also mentioned that Japanese students valued the close family environment in their host families, particularly their ability to share authentic food with them. Similar findings were reported by Jarvis and Mady (2021) investigating 13 teacher candidates studying in Quebec, Canada. According to the authors, the teachers reported being very satisfied with their homestay experiences, particularly in terms of the sense of the informal family atmosphere, improving their ability to speak French (their host language), and cultural awareness of Canada.

Further, homestay can be considered a valuable part of international students' initial experience, helping them feel comfortable in the new culture. In a recent study by Back et al. (2022), examining teachers studying abroad about their perceptions of homestay families in Peru, they found that homestays provided a valuable source of cultural and linguistic knowledge about the country, which made it easier for them to adjust to life there. The authors also noted:

> Host families were important sources of emotional support during the first "fish out of water" weeks of participant stays, when school placements and living environments were unfamiliar. As such, host families' initial contribution as cultural resources was to help mediate culture shock. (p. 8)

It is, therefore, assumed that living in a homestay is helpful for international students, as it offers a chance not only to learn the language and culture of the host country but also to alleviate the adverse effect of culture shock initially experienced, leading to a greater sense of satisfaction.

Homestays in New Zealand have been reported to provide varying degrees of satisfaction to international students. A national survey of 2,736 international students in New Zealand conducted by Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that while few international students reported restrictions during homestays, such as "difficult family members, lack of freedom or privacy, problems with food, and lack of communication with host family members" (p. 9), 56% of students reported being highly satisfied. The authors reported that the "relationship with homestay family" (p. 35) made 62% of them highly satisfied; however, "the cost" (p. 35) was associated with dissatisfaction among a few students (10%). In Ward's (2005) research, 83% of international students in New Zealand had no complaints about their homestay families. Similarly, Ho et al. (2007), in their report of 83 Chinese students in New Zealand, stated that most Chinese students were satisfied with their homestay experiences in their first three months in the country. A few of them, however, found homestays to be highly restrictive due to high costs, a lack of a sense of family atmosphere, being far from the university, and restrictions on friends' visits, resulting in them changing their living arrangements.

Although a homestay could be seen as a valuable opportunity for international students to interact with the host-national people, some studies reported limited or negative experiences of international students with homestays in New Zealand. Tanaka (2007) found that 29 Japanese students in New Zealand rarely interacted outside of the classroom with English-native speakers. The author found that Japanese students only interact with and practise English with their host families, even though it was limited due to their limited English skills and shyness. In the same vein, Zhang and Brunton (2007), in a study of 140 Chinese international students in New Zealand, reported that Chinese students could not have satisfying interactions with homestay families in New Zealand.

Campbell (2004) interviewed 40 Chinese students about their homestay experience in New Zealand and found that the students were generally dissatisfied with homestays and with their initial experiences in New Zealand, which highlighted the difficulties they faced during their accommodation in the homestay families, such as homesickness, frustration, and inability to learn the language. Campbell (2004), thus, concluded that the Chinese students did not

experience an “excitement stage” in their initial period in New Zealand, as suggested by Lysgaard (1955) and Oberg (1960).

It is, therefore, crucial to give more attention to student accommodation as part of international students’ overseas experiences. Sovic (2009) suggests that student accommodation at British universities can help establish good intercultural communication and connections if adequately structured and well-planned. Further, international students’ friendships are enhanced by shared accommodation, which leads to a better overseas experience, as noted by Sercombe and Young (2015)

As such, in this review of the role of homestay on international students’ experiences and satisfaction, it was found that living in a homestay was seen as a valuable source of support for students (i.e., language and cultural gain), especially during the initial period in the host culture.

2.6 Cultural Distance

This section presents literature concerning Muslim international students’ cultural and religious experiences in Western countries. The section consists of three subsections: the place of Islam in the experience of Muslim students, cultural distance and adjustment, and key aspects of cultural/religious differences between Muslim and Western countries.

2.6.1 The Place of Islam in the Experience of Muslim Students

The Western media has contributed to the stereotyping of Islam and Muslims, especially following the attacks of 11 September 2001 (Al Wazni, 2015). Abunab et al. (2017) pointed out that Muslim minorities around the world are treated differently from other groups, stating, “Unlike other minorities, the Arab-Muslims are stigmatised collectively given the frequently strong criticism, bordering on racist slander by the media and by popular culture” (p. 1709). The proposition is that their religious identities make them more vulnerable to criticism and prejudice than other minorities (Manson Mcginty, 2012). In a study on the cultural adjustment of Muslim students in the U.S., Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013) found that Muslim students’ interactions with their American counterparts were limited, isolating them from the university atmosphere and leading to a perception of discrimination.

New Zealand has been impacted by negative attitudes towards Muslims, manifested in the March 2019 mosque shooting by a shooter who was not a New Zealander. However, the

Christchurch mosque shootings were viewed as a terrorist attack that left the entire country in sorrow since the country had never seen this kind of violence before (Every-Palmer et al., 2021). The government's and New Zealanders' responses were supportive, encouraging, and empathetic to the local Muslim communities and victim's families (Anwar & Sumpter, 2022). New Zealand's Prime Minister at the time, Jacinda Ardern, spoke out against excessive violence against civilians or minorities and asserted that the country prides itself on being a multicultural and welcoming nation (Willis, 2021). The New Zealand community's and government's compassionate and supportive attitudes helped to mitigate the psychological damage and sense of loss of the Muslim communities in New Zealand.

2.6.2 Cultural Distance and Adjustment

The effect of cultural distance has been identified as a strong indicator of sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). According to Masgoret and Ward (2006), cultural distance refers to "the perceived similarities and differences between culture of origin and culture of contact" (p. 71). The more cultural distance, the less sociocultural adjustment to the host country (Swami et al., 2010). When international students experience more cultural differences between their home and host culture, they are more likely to encounter sociocultural adjustment difficulties (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). In this case, Searle and Ward (1990) suggest that international students need to acquire more culturally specific knowledge of the host country.

Research has given much emphasis to the negative impact of cultural distance on international students' sociocultural adjustment process (e.g., Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Kwon, 2013). A study by Swami (2009) investigated factors related to the sociocultural adjustment of Malaysian students to British society; the study compared Malaysian students (ethnic Malay Muslims) and Malaysian students (ethnic Chinese). The author found that ethnic Malay students perceived cultural differences and discrimination more than ethnic Chinese students did, which made the sociocultural adjustment of ethnic Malay students harder than for ethnic Chinese students. Swami et al. (2010) conducted another study among Malaysian students in Britain and reported similar findings in which ethnic Chinese students experienced better sociocultural adjustment than ethnic Malay students. According to the researchers, the reasons were that ethnic Chinese students experienced fewer cultural differences, had more opportunities to improve their English language proficiency and had more social contact with the British host nationals.

Similarly, in most studies on Arab students attempting to adjust to Western cultures, cultural and language barriers were identified as major challenges. For example, Mostafa (2006) reported that cultural distance and language barrier were major challenges for most Arab-Muslim students in Canada. According to Mostafa (2006), the cultural difference was related to different Islamic-cultural norms, values, and beliefs observed by Arab students in the Canadian culture. Likewise, Alqahtani and Pfeffer (2017) found that the acculturation and adjustment process for Saudi women students in the U.K. was difficult because of the difficulties in intercultural communication in academic settings and the lack of English language competence and cultural distance.

Further, research has found that some Arab international students experience culture shock (or cultural stress), leading to loneliness and homesickness. In their study of 100 Saudi students' adjustment in Australia, Alsahafi and Shin (2017) found that the Saudi students felt loneliness and homesickness due to cultural and religious differences and ways of living, especially in the first few months of their arrival. These authors also reported that the students' limited English language skills hindered their academic progress and adjustment to Australian culture. Nevertheless, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) investigated how 25 Saudi women students adjusted to American culture and found that 22 of the Saudi women students did not experience culture shock due to prior overseas experiences, but three did suffer from culture shock, loneliness, and homesickness. The authors noted that despite cultural differences, the Saudi women students reported overall positive experiences due to the social and emotional support they received.

Overall, Al-Hattami and Al-Ahdal (2014) pointed out that although cultural distance and language barriers do exist, Arab students focus on their academic life and leisure activities. Accordingly, the majority of the Arab international students in their study reported being satisfied with their overall lived experiences in the U.S. culture. Shepherd and Rane (2012) noted that Arab students in Australia seemed to be selective about what they perceived as positive or negative concerning the cultural values and norms of the host country. In other words, they only practised and believed in the host cultural traditions that matched their cultural or religious beliefs.

In New Zealand, Stuart (2014) conducted a qualitative study using thematic analysis to explore the cultural adjustment of young Muslim immigrants and found that the cultural barriers were perceived by participants, which led to difficulty adapting to the New Zealand way of life.

Stuart (2014) specified that "the place where cultural differences were the most evident was in comparison between their own lifestyles and those of young New Zealanders" (p. 33). Another study about the Muslim community in New Zealand was carried out by Shepard (2006), saying that the differences in lifestyles and visible identities are particularly evident in many, but not all Muslims are entirely different from Westerners, for example, in terms of women's dress codes, food culture, or alcohol consumption. On the other hand, the fact that New Zealand is a multicultural and welcoming environment has made the process of adjustment more likely to be a positive experience for many Muslims (Shepard, 2006).

Yet international students from similar cultural backgrounds can easily integrate into the host culture (Aydin, 2020). For example, Vulić-Prtorić and Oetjen (2017) found that European international students did not perceive significant cultural distance in Croatia, as they share approximately similar Western social norms and live in the European community. Further, Vulić-Prtorić and Oetjen (2017) identified several areas of cultural distance from the European students' viewpoints, which were more related to social life, for example, how international students develop friendships, how they engage in social interaction and spend leisure time, and how they select their food. The same findings were reported in a study by Aydin (2020) of international students in Turkey, who found that international students with similar cultural backgrounds to the Turkish culture had better social relationships with Turkish host-national students. As a result, Aydin (2020) concluded that "cultural similarities have decreased feelings of loneliness and exclusion among foreign students" (p. 393).

As such, when international students perceive a greater level of cultural distance from the host culture, they need more time to adjust and "fit in" with the new culture. Cultural differences are likely to initially result in international students having little social contact with the host community. As a result, they are less able or take more time to learn the social norms and cultural knowledge they need in their daily lives to adjust successfully to the host culture (Searle & Ward, 1990).

2.6.3 Key Aspects of Cultural/Religious Differences

This section reviews literature related to several aspects of the cultural/religious differences that Muslim and Arab students perceived while studying in Western countries, including the hijab, halal food, alcohol consumption, and Muslim holidays.

2.6.3.1 Hijab in Western Countries

Wearing the *hijab* (a headscarf) in some Western countries was found to impact Muslim women by making them exposed to discrimination (McDermott-Levy, 2011; Sheen et al., 2018). It has been suggested that this explicit bias against Muslim women who wear the hijab was due to the widespread Islamophobia in the West (Brown, 2009; Islam & Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). For example, female Muslim students on some Western campuses are treated differently due to their Islamic dress code. A recent study by Karaman and Christian (2020) uncovered that Muslim women college students in the U.S. were treated differently according to their racial identities and wearing the hijab. Their study found that the negative effect of wearing the hijab in the experiences of Muslim women students was explicit in a way that led to a feeling of being isolated in the classroom and avoided by other classmates.

Research has investigated the experiences of hijab-wearing female Muslim students and specifically their interactions with other international students on Western campuses (Brown, 2009; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Yakaboski et al., 2018). For example, the issue of interacting with non-Muslim students and campus life was investigated by Seggie and Sanford (2010), who reported that veiled students in the U.S. complained about "the looks and comments of other students while they are walking, eating in restaurants or chatting with people in different parts of the university" (p. 69). Their study indicated that hijab-wearing students avoided interactions or developing intercultural friendships with non-Muslim students, as most foreign students were unaware of the principles of Islam and the lifestyle of Muslims. In the same vein, McDermott-Levy (2011) indicated that the effect of wearing the hijab on Omani female students in the U.S. was visible in a way that influenced interactions with their U.S. classmates leading to a feeling of isolation and rejection.

Most research conducted in New Zealand about the Islamic dress code demonstrates that wearing a hijab is acceptable, as New Zealand is a multicultural community where religious diversity is tolerated (Ali et al., 2015; Pratt, 2010). This positive attitude towards the hijab appeared in the study of Pratt (2010), who observed that New Zealand culture welcomed women wearing hijab and that Muslim women's dress code had no influence on their experiences. The same findings were reported by Ali et al. (2015), saying that hijab-wearing Muslim women in New Zealand did not report negative experiences while performing physical activities in public. However, the two studies indicated that New Zealand society did not accept

women with full facial covering, as they thought the women were threatening to New Zealanders.

In the same context, a master's study by Bahiss (2008) reported that most female Muslim students made some modifications to their Islamic dress code and wore hijabs differently than they did in their home country to adapt to the new culture in New Zealand. Similarly, in a doctoral study of the intercultural communication experiences of Arab Muslim students in New Zealand, Alkharusi (2013) noted that the female participants "restyling their hijab in order to obtain a balance that moderates the dominant cultural influences and respects their identity requirements regarding dress" (p. 218). The same attitude was reported in another doctoral study by Yaghi (2019) exploring Saudi Muslim women in New Zealand; however, the reason for dress modification was that the "Saudi women made changes to avoid negative attention and suspicion" (p. 156). According to the author, Saudi women did not believe that their modified attire in New Zealand violated the Islamic dress code requirements.

2.6.3.2 Halal Food in Western Countries

International research on the experiences of international Muslim students in non-Muslim countries found that searching for *halal* food[2] was essential for Muslim students who follow their beliefs (Jamil et al., 2020; Midgley, 2009; Novera, 2004). Connected to this, international Muslim students generally complain about difficulty adjusting to food norms in the host culture, particularly in searching for halal food (Alakaam et al., 2015). Novera (2004) found that a lack of Muslim facilities and halal food impacted Indonesian Muslim students in adjusting to cultural life in Australia. In his study, the Indonesian Muslim students complained about not being able to find a place to pray at the university and not being able to find halal food. Thus, the students found it challenging to maintain their daily life Islamic practices. A study carried out by Alakaam et al. (2015) on dietary acculturation among 32 international students in the U.S. indicated that Muslim students found themselves changing their dietary behaviours and reducing their food consumption as a result of the difficulty in finding halal food both on- and off-campus. The authors added that religion was one major factor that influenced international students, particularly in the case of Muslim students, to change their dietary habits in order to adjust to the U.S. culture.

[2] Halal as a concept refers to Islamic dietary restrictions, which include food and drinks that they are permitted to consume (Ali et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Alkharusi (2013) reported several aspects of cultural differences that were found to impact Muslim students' experiences in New Zealand and concluded that "alcoholic beverages and non-halal food were the dominant factors that inhibited their social involvement and reduced their interaction with others" (p. 193). Similarly, Stuart (2014) reported that Muslim immigrants in New Zealand had difficulty finding "mosques, halal butchers, and Islamic schools" (p. 29). However, Stuart (2014) added that Muslims in New Zealand were flexible in terms of practising their religious beliefs, which was not seen to impact their adjustment to New Zealand culture. Noteworthy, these studies were conducted a decade ago in New Zealand when halal food resources may have differed from those available today.

Nevertheless, halal food does not seem to be an issue for some international Muslim students. In a study of Iranian international students in Scotland, Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) found that "the least cultural problems appeared to be on issues like finding food items they were used to" (p. 488). Midgley (2009), as part of a larger research project, investigated the experiences of two Saudi Arabian international students at an Australian university and found that one student carried deep Islamic beliefs and strict dietary regulations that meant he only consumed halal food, while the second student was more willing to adapt to the host cultural food in which he only avoided food that contained pork or pork by-products. Similarly, in his doctoral research, Midgley (2010) concluded that Saudi students in Australia showed adherence to their religious and cultural identities in terms of searching for halal food and that the difficulty of finding it was only faced by newly arrived Saudi students. According to the researcher, the Saudi community in Australia helped to supply halal food, which makes things easier for most Saudi international students.

2.6.3.3 Alcohol Consumption

According to Islamic dietary restrictions, Muslims are not allowed to drink alcohol (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). However, alcohol consumption is acceptable and considered a social practice in Western societies. For example, alcohol is served at some social events in Western universities (Chen et al., 2019). Often, drinking activities are considered a way of socialising and enjoying company among college students on Western campuses (Supski et al., 2017). According to Supski et al. (2017), "university students living in college used shared nights at the pub as a way of building relationships" (p. 231). In contrast, this drinking environment seems to be not a suitable place for Muslim students who have strong faith, as it contradicts the principles of Islam (Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

The host country's drinking habits may impact international Muslim students, causing them to feel uncomfortable when socialising with others (Chen et al., 2019; Possamai et al., 2016). In Novara's (2004) study, behaviour around the drinking of alcohol and a lack of interesting topics make social interaction and friendships difficult between Indonesian Muslim students and Australian host-national students. Closely related, Possamai et al. (2016) surveyed 324 international Muslim students to explore their religious experiences at an Australian university and found that half of the participants reported being dissatisfied when attending social events at the university that included alcohol. To address this issue, Ali and Bagheri (2009) suggested offering alcohol-free activities that could provide a healthier atmosphere on campus for Muslim students to socialise with other international and host-national students.

2.6.3.4 Muslim Holidays in Western Countries

All Muslims celebrate two official religious holidays yearly, *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha,* and these are observed according to the Islamic lunar calendar (Anwar, 2007; Chen & Tabassumb, 2019; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Eid al-Fitr comes at the end of the holy month of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha comes after the rites of pilgrimage or Hajj (Chen et al., 2019). Muslims must fast during the holy month of Ramadan from sunrise to sundown; they are not allowed to eat or drink during daylight hours (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). In some situations, the time of breaking the fast (i.e., sundown) happens during classes, and, as a result, Muslim students either have to fast extra time or skip their lectures (Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Research highlights that a large number of Western universities do not formally recognise and do not incorporate Muslim festivals into their academic calendar (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Chen et al., 2019). Seggie and Sanford (2010), in their study at an American university, found a lack of knowledge about Muslim holidays and Ramadan on campus. Occasionally, the time of these religious holidays may conflict with the students' lectures or exams. This way, Ali and Bagheri (2009) stated that Muslim students would either skip their Islamic celebrations to fulfil their academic requirements or choose to celebrate their Islamic holidays at the expense of their academic achievements. A possible way to support Muslim students to make a balance between celebrating religious holidays and attending classes was suggested by Anwar (2007), in that the university should recognise the Islamic holidays for all students. This would enhance the satisfaction of Muslim students when feeling welcomed and included in the campus climate and "give students of other religious denominations a chance to share this festival with their Muslim friends and encourage greater understanding of another faith" (Anwar, 2007, p. 70).

The following section reviews literature related to international students' academic interaction.

2.7 Students' Academic Interaction

This major section presents relevant studies about international students' interaction in academic settings, including language school, group work, relationships with lecturers, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and students' interaction.

2.7.1 Language School

English is considered a major barrier for many international students, particularly those from non-English-speaking countries (Campbell & Li, 2008; Campbell & Zeng, 2006). Thus, many universities require international students to start at a language school when their IELTS scores are below the requirement for enrolment into degree-level programmes. A language school (or English language centre) is designed mainly for international students with English proficiency below the university English language requirement. It is primarily intended to provide academic support for students and a pathway to university degrees. Therefore, it is assumed that language schools would be considerate of international students and a valuable source of support (Skyrme, 2007), especially for newcomers who use language schools as an entry point to their overseas academic experiences in the host country.

The learning environment at language schools may be less difficult for international students than in tertiary education (Ho et al., 2007). Ward (2005) highlighted teachers' supportive role in language schools, noting: "The teachers showed a high commitment to treating all students as individuals, to assisting in their pastoral care (through well-constructed support systems), and to facilitating their adaptation to New Zealand" (p. 89). There also may be some exceptions, however, for international students. In an examination of international students' life satisfaction levels in New Zealand, Ward and Masgoret (2004) pointed out that "students in language schools were less satisfied than those in secondary and tertiary institutions" (p. 10). Similarly, Zhang and Brunton (2007) noted that Chinese students in New Zealand dislike staying in a language school for long periods of time, as they become less satisfied after a year.

As international students move to undergraduate studies, the transitioning experience from a language school to undergraduate studies could be challenging for some international students, as they experience a different learning environment than in a language school. Ho et al. (2007)

found that despite their thought that language school took a long time, Chinese students in New Zealand rated their language school teachers highly. The authors noted that Chinese students had difficulty transitioning to tertiary education after finishing language schools because of the different learning styles in New Zealand. In New Zealand universities, student-centred learning is new to Chinese students, so they need to adjust to this new approach. Similarly, in a study by Campbell and Li (2008), Asian students in New Zealand find it challenging to adjust academically. During undergraduate studies, the independent learning style in New Zealand universities was difficult for Asian students, as they realised that lecturers would expect them to gain knowledge independently.

2.7.2 Group Work

In their book *Designing Group Work*, Cohen et al. (2014) identify group work as a classroom strategy that refers to "students working together in a group small enough so that everyone can participate on a clearly assigned learning task" (p. 1). It is expected from group work that students can interact and complete a task-based group to attain positive academic and social outcomes. The group members must communicate and exchange ideas to accomplish group work tasks. Therefore, interaction in group work is essential for successful academic and social outcomes and for motivating students to be involved and work as a team (Cohen et al., 2014).

Group work and its relevance to cooperative learning have been proven to boost students' academic and social achievements (Baines et al., 2009; Slavin, 2014). Unlike individual learning in classrooms, cooperative learning groups have been observed to be effective in improving students' language ability and social relationships, indicating interaction (Cohen et al., 2014; Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). Engaging in cooperative group work helps develop language and communication abilities, particularly for ESL (English as a Second Language) students. Interaction via cooperative tasks and activities provides opportunities for ESL students to practise the English language while communicating with each other to fulfil the group's goals (Cohen et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the benefits of cooperating may be extended to the social relationships built through group interaction after group tasks are completed (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Li & Campbell, 2008). Li and Campbell (2008) found that Asian students in New Zealand valued their participation in group work, as it was an opportunity to make new friendships, which persisted even after finishing the group tasks. Similar findings were reported by Johnson and

Johnson (2009), saying that positive interactions and communication among group members can foster friendships that, in some cases, can extend beyond academic to social contexts. This can happen, according to Johnson and Johnson (2009), when group members encourage and support one another and work as a team to achieve the group's goals. In other instances, if the main focus was more on individual work or competitive work, the friendships might end once group tasks are completed.

Cooperative learning practices have been found to effectively improve peer relationships as well as students' psychological and social adjustments (Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). Unlike individual or competitive endeavour, working cooperatively was found to play a significant role in raising the quality of social relationships as well as helping to create an environment of social support. Further, positive cooperation is seen to enhance students' self-motivation to attend their classes, participate in social activities on campus, build social networks, and integrate into academic life (Johnson et al., 2007).

Further, many students in group work prefer to work with friends (Strough et al., 2001). They believe communication and interaction within the group will be easier and more comfortable if group members are friends. The ability to share common interests is more likely to exist among friends, making achieving group goals more attainable. Conflict and disagreement among group members due to different opinions and ideas are also decreased if group members are friends, as they attempt to keep their friendship ties (Gillies, 2007). Jehn and Shah (1997) pointed out that, unlike an acquaintance (non-friends) group, a friendship group was characterised by positive interactions, voluntary connections, and deep ties. With these features employed in group work, friendship groups could lead to productive results and high levels of group work performance (Jehn & Shah, 1997).

Although friendship is vital in individuals' social and academic lives and their essential role in providing social support is obvious, working with friends in group work may not always be productive in some situations (Cohen et al., 2014; Gillies, 2007). For example, Cohen et al. (2014) suggested that group members should not be friends; this would impact the quality of work, as interactions may turn out to be a form of socialising or having fun rather than functioning as a team towards achieving the group goals. In a study carried out at a Canadian high school on the effect of students' preferences in choosing their friends as study partners in group work, Mitchell et al. (2004) found that selecting group members was difficult for some students, and it was seen to impact group performance.

Nevertheless, group work has been found to sometimes lead to a negative academic experience for some students (Baines et al., 2009; Pauli et al., 2008). For example, some students involved in group work may sit passively or simply rely on others to do work. In this situation, students may engage in a dialogue that is not related to group tasks and, thus, interrupt other group members from completing their group tasks (Baines et al., 2009). In this respect, Pauli et al. (2008) identified four issues that lead to poor group work, namely, "lack of group commitment, group fractionation, task disorganisation, and storming" (p. 47). These issues create a conflict or lack of communication among the group members, which may impact the group work performance or failure to achieve the group goals.

In addition, the evidence found in the literature indicates that language difficulty is one factor that adversely affects the engagement of international students in multicultural groups (Clark et al., 2007; Li et al., 2010; Popov et al., 2012). Clark et al. (2007), in a study of Chinese students in New Zealand, identified several issues that lead Chinese students to encounter some difficulties related to interaction in group work, namely, language barriers, cultural differences, and their fear of being not treated equally in group assessment. Likewise, Li et al. (2010) interviewed 13 Chinese students studying at two universities in Australia about their group work experience and found that language barriers reduced their level of interaction in multicultural group work. The researchers reported that unlike in group work that includes all Chinese students, Chinese students prefer to listen and remain silent when engaging in multicultural group work because they feel embarrassed to commit mistakes due to their low English abilities. Connectedly, Popov et al. (2012) suggested that "it is important to encourage all group members to actively listen to one another and promote the idea that a lack of English proficiency does not indicate a lack of competence in a subject matter" (p. 312). That is, even though efficient communication in group work requires good language ability, working collaboratively and helping each other might also lead to success.

2.7.3 Student-Lecturer Relationship

One type of interpersonal relationship evident in tertiary classrooms is the relationship between students and lecturers. The student-lecturer relationship has been examined in many studies due to its influence on the learning process and students' academic results (Abdulrahman, 2007; Giles, 2009; Uleanya, 2019). A positive and friendly student-lecturer relationship was linked with better academic achievements of students (Adeyele & Yusuff, 2012; Yunus et al., 2011). At a Saudi Arabian university, Abdulrahman (2007) explored Saudi students'

perspectives on their relationships with lecturers and observed that 61% of Saudi students were content with their positive relationships with lecturers. The Saudi students also identified that this good relationship was enhanced by academic success, and lecturers offered help outside the lectures. On the contrary, in a recent study conducted at two universities, one in South Africa and another in Nigeria, Uleanya (2019) stated that the majority of students (71% of the South African and 86% of the Nigerian students) complained that their relationships with lecturers were poor. The researcher reported several factors that led to the poor student-lecturer relationships, namely, "students' personalities, their interpersonal relations skills, students' perception of lecturers, lecturers' perception of students and university policies" (p. 356).

Research has identified several factors associated with the quality of student-lecturer interaction and relationships. Fitria and Koentjoro (2020) identified five factors from students' viewpoints that lead to an effective student-lecturer relationship, including "informal, flexible, reciprocal, objective and respects each other" (p. 5). According to the authors, the informal relationship between students and lecturers allowed students to speak and laugh with their lecturers outside of class in a comfortable environment. Furthermore, engaging in informal conversations with lecturers was found to reinforce students' motivations leading to better academic performances (Komarraju et al., 2010). Another aspect related to informal contact between students and lecturers was discussed by McDowell and Westman (2005), which is how to address faculty members by students (i.e., by first name or by formal title). The researchers found that, in contrast to calling faculty members by formal titles, when lecturers allow students to address them by first names, students feel increased friendliness, approachability, and mutual respect.

Another factor that influences the quality of the student-lecturer relationship is whether the lecturers are approachable or unapproachable to students (Denzine & Pulos, 2000). In exploring the students' views on U.K. higher education, Stephen et al. (2008) indicated that students related keeping connected to faculty members and the university to the lecturers' approachability. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) concluded that "approachable lecturers and tutors who answered students' questions promptly, and clearly communicated expectations with regard to assignments, were described as very helpful for students' success in learning and adjusting to university" (p. 378).

A further important factor that enhances the quality of the student-lecturer relationship is supportive behaviour (Fitzmaurice, 2008; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). In most cases,

interactions between students and lecturers have a support-seeking character that may be maintained to influence favourable results for students (Komarraju et al., 2010). The support-seeking behaviour was found in a study by Fitzmaurice (2008) in which lecturers had a strong desire to support students in their learning process by providing a positive learning environment and helping students by offering a wide range of learning opportunities.

2.7.4 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Students' Interaction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been observed to impact almost all facets of people's psychological, social, and academic lives (Ali, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is visible in education, as academic institutions have been forced to close their campuses, and, consequently, they have shifted to studying remotely from home and utilising online learning (Noori, 2021). Online classes or e-learning have replaced face-to-face teaching and physical contact (Ali, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020). This highlights the essential role of digital technology in education, as many universities have started to integrate, for example, Zoom video conferencing and Moodle into the teaching-learning process. However, it was noted that university staff (e.g., lecturers and technicians) complained about the change to online learning, claiming that it puts more pressure on them (Thatcher et al., 2020).

Research on the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 on students' learning in higher education revealed positive and negative academic experiences concerning the shift from face-to-face lectures in a classroom to online studying (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Idris et al., 2021; Martín Ayala et al., 2021; Noori, 2021). For example, Idris et al.'s (2021) study reported positive experiences of students, saying that the abrupt move to online learning due to COVID-19 did not impact the experiences of the majority of undergraduate students in Brunei, as well as being more autonomous learners. In another study of undergraduate students at a Spanish university, Martín Ayala et al. (2021) carried out a comparison of students' academic performance when studying face-to-face versus after shifting to online learning and found no significant changes in academic results between the two teaching approaches. Cameron et al. (2022) surveyed 147 students at two universities in New Zealand. The researchers found that academic support and video recordings of lectures during online teaching and studying from home were very satisfying for students. Despite this, the lockdown experience was characterised by anxiety and frustration among students, and 59% reported experiencing a high workload after the transition to online classes.

To sum up, all aspects of people's lives were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, not only education. Due to this, face-to-face learning shifted to online learning. Students' experiences were either positive or negative, according to research. Some students were satisfied with their online teaching, while others were not due to some issues with online learning and experiencing negative emotions.

The following section reviews empirical research findings related to international students in New Zealand in the context of this study.

2.8 Research on International Students in New Zealand

International students in New Zealand are from diverse cultural backgrounds; thus, they need to adjust to New Zealand life to have a satisfying overseas experience (Campbell & Zeng, 2006). Previous research on international students' adjustment has reported various levels of adjustment to life in New Zealand (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008; Campbell & Zeng, 2006; Selvarajah, 2006; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). These studies have found that students' adjustment and life satisfaction are affected by cultural and linguistic issues, as well as an unexpected barrier to mixing and making friends with New Zealand students. These issues associated with international students' adjustment experiences are of vital interest in this study.

Research on international students' adjustment in New Zealand has given much attention to Asian international students (e.g., Selvarajah, 2006; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Most of these studies have found that Asian students face challenges adjusting to New Zealand's Western host culture due to language barriers, different educational systems, and cultural distance between the Asian and Western countries (Campbell & Li, 2008). Selvarajah (2006), in a study of 110 Asian postgraduate students at a university in New Zealand, found that the Asian students encountered difficulty as they had different educational goals than the New Zealand host students. For example, "to improve communication skills" (p. 150) was one educational goal of the Asian students, but the New Zealand students did not support this goal. According to the researcher, these difficulties emerged from the cultural distance and English language barriers experienced by Asian students in New Zealand. Johnson (2008) noted that international students faced "social changes" (p. 239) in New Zealand as they started to live independently and without the social support networks that they used to have in their home countries. Another difficulty reported by the researcher was that international students often face difficulty using English on- and off-campus if they are ESL learners. These challenges could negatively hinder

the sociocultural adjustment process, considering the language and cultural barriers, lack of social support networks, and different educational systems.

In another study in New Zealand, Campbell and Zeng (2006) investigated Chinese students' adaptation in New Zealand. Their findings align with previous literature (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Lewthwaite, 1996; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) that Chinese international students' adaptation was associated with language proficiency and family support in China and co-national friends. The language barriers hindered communication and forming relationships with host nationals; instead, contact was limited to co-nationals or other Asian students. Likewise, Campbell and Li (2008) found that most Asian students in New Zealand prefer to contact co-national peers. They revealed having problems communicating with New Zealanders due to the cultural gap that is found between the Western and Asian cultures. One student in their study reported that although she had been in New Zealand for more than three years, she still could not make any relationships with local peers; instead, her friends were only co-nationals.

Arab international students, including Omanis, add a particular diversity to consideration of the experiences of international students in New Zealand. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on their adjustment experiences. Among those few studies, a master's thesis by Bahiss (2008) reports on a small-scale qualitative approach based on interviews to investigate Muslim female students' adjustment to New Zealand universities. Bahiss (2008) found that the language barrier prevented female students' engagement in classrooms and making friendships with host-national peers. Further, participants described the need for university staff to develop an understanding of Islamic cultures, as it was suggested this would help the female students in better sociocultural adaptation. In his doctoral study, Alkharusi (2013) interviewed 45 Arab Muslim participants from Gulf countries, including some from Oman, studying at New Zealand universities, to examine their intercultural communication experiences. According to the researcher, participants were strongly affected by their cultural and religious values and beliefs, which were reflected in their daily lives and practices. For example, participants described that they did not participate in social activities against their cultural beliefs. In another doctoral study on the acculturation of nine Saudi Arabian mothers negotiating their identities and parenting in New Zealand, Yaghi (2019) found that Saudi mothers' identities and roles as mothers were renegotiated and changed due to the change in the environment. According to

Yaghi (2019), Saudi mothers were open to some aspects of the host culture as long as they did not contradict their Islamic identities.

Accordingly, studies relevant to the current study have identified essential issues in the cross-cultural adjustment of Arab or Omani students. This study has been conducted with an open attitude towards the experiences of Omani international students in New Zealand that investigates their adjustment experiences, whether positive or negative, from their viewpoints.

To sum up, most research in the New Zealand context has given attention to Asian international students and reported various levels of adjustment, including their difficulties in communication, interactions, and forming friendships with New Zealanders due to cultural and language barriers. As a result, their social support networks in New Zealand were only limited to co-national friends and families. However, limited research examining the adjustment experiences of Arab or Omani students in New Zealand is found (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013; Yaghi, 2019), most of which focuses on cultural and religious identities and religious aspects.

2.9 Identifying Gaps in Previous Research

In the literature, most studies have examined international students' psychological and/or sociocultural adjustment in different contexts. Generally, Asian, Arab, and Muslim international students encounter more challenges than European or North American students while adjusting to life in Western countries due to language and cultural barriers in which different lifestyles, values, and social customs do exist. During their stay in the host culture, some Arab-Muslim students may also experience culture shock, resulting in loneliness and homesickness. Many international students with limited language abilities and perceived cultural distance can face difficulty establishing friendships with host nationals and may feel socially isolated. Consequently, they seek contact with co-national peers, which would promote psychological adjustment but not sociocultural adjustment.

Through my search of the literature on the cross-cultural adjustment of international students, I was unable to locate extensive studies primarily examining Omani international students' adjustment experiences, especially in New Zealand. Most research in the New Zealand context has investigated Asian students and revealed negative experiences, such as language barriers, different educational systems, and cultural distance. Most studies on Omani students' sociocultural and academic experiences have focused on countries other than New Zealand.

There is a scarcity of research considering the experiences of Omani students in New Zealand. Among these few studies, are Bahiss (2008), Alkharusi (2013), and Yaghi (2019). Together, these studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of Arab and Muslim students in the New Zealand context. Conducting more in-depth studies on the experiences of these students has the potential to reveal important aspects and improve our understanding of their needs.

According to what is stated above, given the different challenges of each place, the need for this kind of research to fill the gap in the literature is imperative in order to take a general and comprehensive overview of the experiences of social, cultural, and academic adjustment of this diversity of international students while pursuing their higher education in New Zealand. This research investigates Omani students' academic and sociocultural adjustment experiences in light of the distinctive elements of this cohort. New Zealand's internationalisation of higher education would benefit from more research focusing on the diversity of international students (i.e., Omani students) rather than Asian students, who have been heavily studied. The current study hopes to add another perspective and uncover more aspects of the adjustment experiences of Omani students.

In sum, with these gaps in the literature on adjustment in mind, this study aimed to gain insights into two dimensions of adjustment, specifically the processes of sociocultural and academic adjustment to New Zealand life as well as the initial experiences of students with the hope of contributing to the literature on the cross-cultural adjustment of international students. This study explored three research questions as follows:

RQ1. How do Omani international students describe their initial experience in New Zealand?

RQ2. How do Omani international students experience their sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand?

RQ3. How do Omani international students adjust to academic life at a New Zealand university?

The next chapter reviews the most well-known adjustment models and describes this study's theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that underpins this study. This study focuses on the adjustment experiences of Omani international students studying at a New Zealand university. In light of this, this chapter reviews two well-known and widely employed classical and contemporary models used to describe the cross-cultural adjustment process. These are the U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) and the ABC model (Ward et al., 2001). The U-curve model, outlined in Section 3.2, identifies four stages in the adjustment process: "honeymoon", "culture shock", "adjustment", and "mastery". Several studies using the U-curve model are reviewed in Section 3.3. In Section 3.4, the ABC model, which depicts the adjustment process as involving both the psychological and sociocultural dimensions, is described along with the three theories associated with it: "stress and coping", "culture learning", and "social identification". Finally, a rationale for utilising the theoretical framework is presented in Section 3.5.

3.2 The U-Curve Model

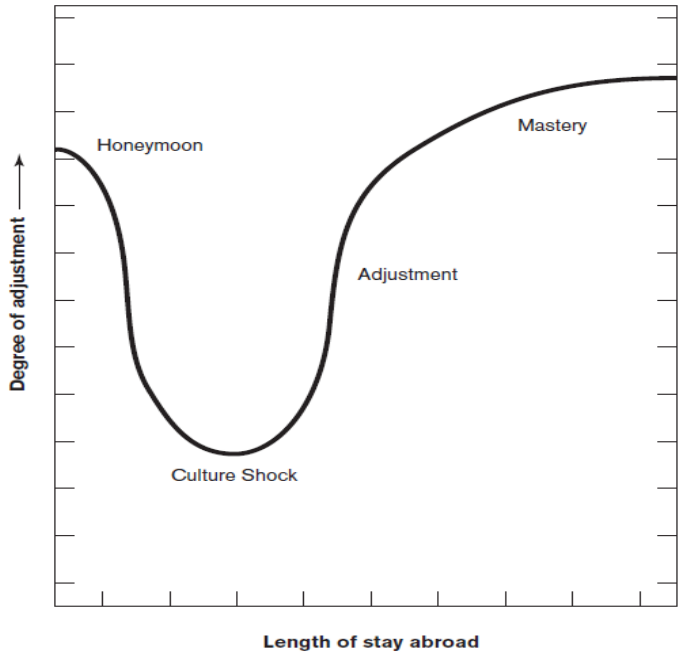
The U-curve model is a well-established and widely used classical model of cross-cultural adjustment. Originally, the U-curve model was derived from Lysgaard's (1955) study, which explored Norwegian Fulbright scholars' cultural adjustment in the U.S. He stated: "Our data, then, seem to give evidence of certain stages of adjustment, characterised by good initial adjustment, followed by an adjustment 'crisis', after which good adjustment is again achieved" (p. 49). According to Lysgaard (1955), the adjustment process is illustrated as a U shape in three stages: Initially, sojourners feel optimistic with this lasting around six months. However, this feeling declines over six to 18 months and is replaced by negative feelings of unhappiness, loneliness, and not feeling a sense of belonging to the host culture. At around 18 months, the adjustment curve progresses upward as sojourners begin to feel integrated into the new culture, develop friendship networks, become satisfied with their lives, and gain self-confidence in the new culture.

Later, the three stages of adjustment, as proposed by Lysgaard (1955), were given various names by other researchers (Jackson, 2014). For example, the notions of "honeymoon" and "culture shock" were introduced by Oberg (1960) in his theory of "culture shock", which is

closely related to the U-curve model and is widely used for describing the process of cross-cultural adjustment. Oberg (1960) also extended the U-curve adjustment process from three to four stages (see Figure 3.1): These four stages are: (1) “honeymoon”, (2) “culture shock”, (3) “adjustment”, and (4) “mastery”.

Figure 3.1

The U-Curve Model of Cross-Cultural Adjustment



Note. From *Introducing language and intercultural communication* (p. 203), by J. Jackson, 2014, Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315848938 Copyright 2023 by Taylor & Francis Group.

The first stage is the “honeymoon” (initial excitement). It starts upon arrival in a new culture. Oberg (1960) stated that this initial stage lasts from a few days to six months. In this stage, newcomer students feel a sense of excitement and admiration for the new cultural environment and host-national people. The new cultural environment initially captures students’ imaginations and makes them feel impressed and fascinated. They feel that many aspects of the new culture appeal to them. However, students’ relationship networks are not fully developed and still forming during this stage. As Lysgaard (1955) described: “Social contacts are still somewhat accidental, superficial and segmental, concerned with specific and limited situations which do not involve the total personality. One is not yet deeply involved in any

special friendship group" (p. 50). In other words, students' relationships are still limited and largely spontaneous; they are not engaged in close relationships.

The second stage is "culture shock" (crisis or hostility). This stage is characterised by negative feelings of stress, anxiety, and frustration due to the challenges and difficulties students face after the positive feeling in the first stage. Mudhovozi (2011) added and explained that "culture shock can be expressed through homesickness, irritability, hypercritical thoughts, sadness, fear and frustration. This may happen because the language, food, situations of daily life and the way things look are not what you are used to" (p. 293). Oberg (1960) stated: "Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 177). The most commonly reported cause of culture shock is students being overwhelmed by unfamiliar aspects of the host culture, leading to anxiety (Leong, 2015; Mudhovozi, 2011). Therefore, students feel overloaded with cultural differences during this stage and become uncomfortable in the new cultural setting (Abrams, 2020; Pacheco, 2020).

The third stage is "adjustment" (integration or recovery). In this stage, students begin to recover from culture shock symptoms. They become familiar with the new culture and begin to feel at ease and integrated. Oberg (1960) asserts that during the adjustment/recovery period, students develop the potential to cope with the cultural and linguistic difficulties of the host culture, and thus begin to feel confident in the new culture. Through this, the cultural differences and language barriers they had previously encountered become understandable to them, and they are no longer bothered by them (Jackson, 2014).

Oberg (1960) suggested two possible ways for recovery: (1) Social contact with host nationals and (2) learning the language of the host country. These two processes are connected because they involve social interaction with host nationals, which also supports learning the language. Oberg (1960) concluded that the process of recovery needs time, and "a great deal is gained by having the source of pain explained, some of the steps towards a cure indicated, and the assurance given that time, the great healer, will soon set things right" (p. 182). In other words, Oberg assumes that for students to recover, they need to identify what makes them unhappy and uncomfortable and accept that the adjustment process takes time. Lysgaard (1955) explained that the recovery stage is triggered by the ability to develop friendship networks and feel included in a social community. Recent studies have also demonstrated that recovery is achieved through social interaction and developing friendships with host nationals, and social support (Jamal & Wok, 2020; Tuerxun et al., 2020).

The final stage, according to Black and Mendenhall (1991), is “mastery” (adaptation or acceptance). After successful adjustment or integration, a feeling of being accepted or having adapted to the new environment is experienced. Students become more comfortable conversing in the host language, better understand cultural norms and practices, and are able to expand their intercultural friendships and social support networks (Abrams, 2020). Eventually, after learning to adapt to their new environment, they become more independent and confident (Jackson, 2014).

3.3 Research on the U-Curve Model

A number of empirical studies have utilised the U-curve model to examine the adjustment experiences of international students, thereby indicating its relevance (e.g., Jamal & Wok, 2020; Liang, 2019; Mardhiyyah et al., 2022; Larasati et al., 2021; Tuerxun et al., 2020). These studies have confirmed that the U-curve model represents student experience, in that most, if not all, students experience an initial honeymoon stage when adjusting to a new culture. For example, in her doctoral study, Liang (2019) explored international students’ intercultural adaptation at a U.K. university. Liang (2019) concluded that “although international students experienced adaptation problems (i.e. homesickness, adapting to new learning environment, and language concern) throughout their stay, they tended to experience feelings of excitement at the beginning of their sojourn” (p. 184). In a recent study, Larasati et al. (2021) found that international students in Indonesia initially experienced a honeymoon stage because of the country’s welcoming culture and people. Similarly, in a study at a Malaysian university, Mardhiyyah et al. (2022) found that international students’ motivations to engage in the new culture led to their feelings of enthusiasm initially. Thus, it appears that international students’ motivation and a welcoming context can contribute to their excitement upon arrival in the host country.

After the initial stage of a honeymoon, Tuerxun et al. (2020) reported that a hostility or culture shock stage of adjustment was experienced by Muslim-Chinese students in Malaysia. The challenges they faced included language barriers, financial problems, and feelings of homesickness and loneliness. These authors explained that the hostility stage occurs when students begin comparing aspects of the host culture (such as the food or weather) with their home culture, which they had initially found fascinating but now did not.

Jamal and Wok (2020), in their study of 203 international students at a Malaysian university, added that international students did not experience culture shock at the same level as each other. They stated that there are often varying degrees of difficulty integrating into the new culture and interacting with host nationals "depending on the upbringing of the individuals and their social circle" (Jamal & Wok, 2020, p. 57).

In a phenomenological study, Aisha and Mulyana (2020) interviewed six female international students in the U.K. and found that the students' experiences were consistent with the stages proposed by the U-curve model. In their comments on the adjustment stage, the authors stated: "To be academically successful in their academic environment in particular and in their new cultural environment in general, the international students require intercultural competence that will facilitate their adaptation in the new country" (p. 110). Aisha and Mulyana (2020) explained that the development of intercultural competence and the ability to cope with the difficulties students face in the new environment determine their recovery from culture shock and the ability to adjust well.

According to Abrams (2020), some students do not experience the four stages or do not experience them equally. For example, O'Dea (2022) interviewed 12 Chinese students in the U.K. and found that the students went through the first three stages proposed by the U-curve model; however, 10 out of 12 students failed to reach the final stage of mastery due to difficulty adapting to higher education and social life in the U.K. Likewise, Muslim-Chinese students in Malaysia in Tuerxun et al. (2020) reached the fourth stage of adjustment when they "felt at home" (p. 76). Tuerxun et al. (2020) concluded that "although not so many of them managed to feel completely at home after their relatively short stay in Malaysia, some participants had accepted Malaysia as their second home" (p. 76).

Although it is widely used and popular, the U-curve model has been subject to criticism based on some study findings. For example, Black and Mendenhall (1991) critiqued the U-curve theory, as it lacks an explanation of "how and why individuals move from one stage to the next. For example, there is little theoretical discussion of why the honeymoon phase emerges or what factors might tend to exaggerate or limit it" (p. 232). Additionally, other studies found that the honeymoon stage does not exist, but, instead, major difficulties are faced immediately upon arrival in the host country (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Chien, 2016; Hirai et al., 2015; López, 2021; Schartner, 2014; Ward & Kennedy, 1996; Ward et al., 1998). Ward et al. (1998), in their study of Japanese students' adjustment in New Zealand, found evidence to reject the

U-curve model. Ward et al. (1998) reported that the challenges were found to be highest upon arrival and, then, eased after four months of sojourning, following a learning curve. Chien (2016) found that the U-curve model did not represent the academic and sociocultural adjustment experiences of 22 out of a total of 26 international postgraduate students at a U.K. university. Chien (2016) explained that European or American international students did not follow the U-curve pattern because they shared cultural similarities with British culture and did not report difficulty in English. López (2021) clarified that the first four weeks of arrival to the U.K. were the most difficult and stressful times for Mexican postgraduate students. Accordingly, acceptance or rejection of the U-curve model can be broadly affected by factors related to international students' cultural background, language, and expectations.

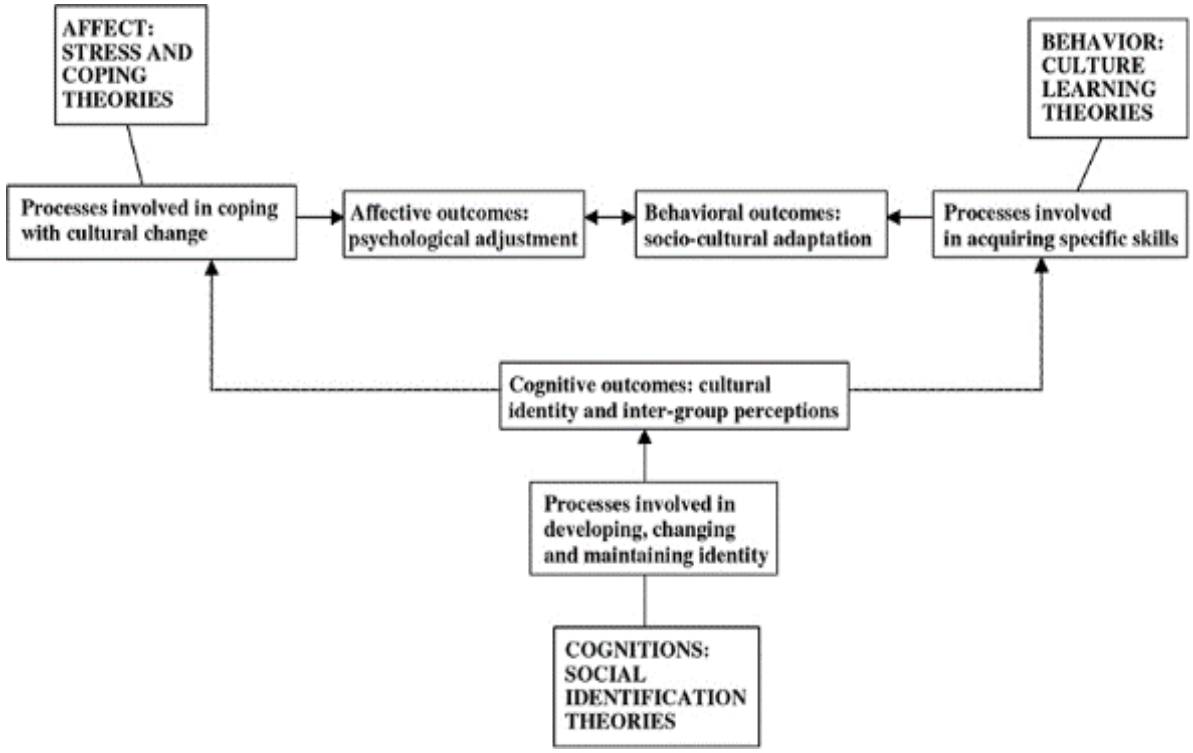
The ABC model (Ward et al., 2001) is another model that is often used in research into cross-cultural adjustment (O'Reilly, 2015; Sarmiento et al., 2019; Yue & Le, 2012). This model goes beyond describing emotional reactions, such as culture shock, and considers adjustment as a process that begins with difficulties and then follows a learning curve that can lead to either positive or negative adjustment (Ward et al., 2001).

3.4 The ABC Model of Culture Shock

The ABC model was developed by Ward and colleagues (Ward et al., 2001). This model proposed that sojourners' adjustment includes Affective (A), Behavioural (B), and Cognitive (C) components arising from the experience of entering into a new cultural setting (see Figure 3.2). According to Ward et al. (2001), these three components refer to "how people feel, behave, think and perceive when exposed to second-culture influences" (p. 267). Each of these components is involved in intercultural contact and leads to eventual adaptation to the new culture, or not (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2013, Ward et al., 2001).

Figure 3.2

The ABC Model of Culture Shock



Note. From *The psychology of culture shock* (2nd ed., p. 274), by C, Ward, S. Bochner, & A. Furnham, 2001, Routledge. Copyright 2023 by Taylor & Francis Group.

The first component of the ABC model, which includes affective aspects, focuses on the psychological well-being of sojourners (Ward et al., 2001). It encompasses "stress and coping" theory and draws upon early psychological approaches (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The proposition is that sojourners develop suitable coping methods to manage stress in the new situation (Ward et al., 2001; Yue & Le, 2012; Zhou et al., 2008).

The second behavioural component draws on "culture learning" theory (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). It describes the sociocultural dimension of adjustment (Ward et al., 2001). In culture learning theory, sojourners' intercultural contact may be challenging due to them not knowing and practising the social skills relevant to the host culture (Yue & Le, 2012). Thus, culture learning theory focuses on the importance of learning appropriate social skills in order to overcome any social and cultural difficulties that might arise as sojourners encounter a different environment (Ward et al., 2001; Ward & Szabó, 2019). According to Masgoret and Ward (2006) and Wilson et al. (2013), it is by learning the language, building social support networks,

and increasing their social interactions in the host culture that sojourners acquire social skills involved in being culturally competent. This then means they are able to interact effectively in the new environment.

Finally, "social identification" theory is the focus of the cognitive component. This draws on work on "social identity theory" (e.g., Phinney, 1990). Social identification theory primarily deals with negotiating the concept of self and identity during a cross-cultural transition (Ward & Szabó, 2019). Specifically, it is about how sojourners see themselves and their connection to people from their own culture and other cultures (Ward et al., 2001; Yue & Le, 2012).

Despite being considered a comprehensive model, the ABC has several weaknesses (Zhou et al., 2008). For example, Zhou et al. (2008) explained that conceptualising and applying the ABC model is difficult because it encompasses three components (i.e., affect, behaviour, and cognition), and three theories (i.e., stress and coping, culture learning, and social identification). Zhou et al. (2008) also argued that the ABC model was not developed specifically for international students but addressed the needs of cross-cultural travellers, such as immigrants and refugees. In light of this, this study is given a greater emphasis on the U-curve model.

3.5 Rationale for the Study Theoretical Framework

All through the reading I have done about the models of adjustment, the U-curve and the ABC models have been the most used. To reiterate, the U-curve model suggests that students experience a honeymoon (exciting) initial period, followed by culture shock, and that they eventually become comfortable with the host culture, although not all reach all stages. In contrast, the ABC model acknowledges that the initial adjustment period might not be a honeymoon, as individuals might experience significant difficulties before learning to adjust to the new culture. Research using the U-curve has also found that most but not all students experience an initial honeymoon stage. Considering this, I draw on the U-curve and ABC models in order to acknowledge that some people may, and others may not, experience an initial honeymoon period. My goal in this is to ensure I am open to different findings regarding students' adjustment experiences.

My research questions focus on sociocultural and academic adjustment (see Section 1.7 and Section 2.9). The U-curve and ABC models both emphasise the behavioural aspects of

adjustment. The U-curve model describes language proficiency, social networks, and interactions with a wider group of people as important for adjustment, while the ABC model emphasises that these factors are central to learning social norms and skills of the new culture, leading to adjustment. That is, both models give importance to these factors when examining adjustment. Thus, the U-curve and ABC models complement each other and so within this study, I foreground the U-curve model.

The U-curve model is prioritised in this research because it provides a holistic overview of the adjustment process. In advocating for the U-curve model, Mulyana and Eko (2017) argued: "Regardless of some scholars' critiques on the U-curve accused of being simplistic and reductionistic, we assume that this theoretical model of cross-cultural adaptation is still useful" (p, 147). Similarly, Aisha and Mulyana (2020) pointed out that "this theoretical model of cross-cultural adjustment is still beneficial" (p. 104). In addition, O'Dea (2022) pointed out that the U-curve model integrates the stress and coping, culture learning, and social identification theories that comprise the ABC model into a single model. O'Dea (2022) also stated that the U-curve model stands out, as it covers social and academic adjustment, with each affecting the other, unlike other models which focus on social-psychological aspects.

Nevertheless, the U-curve model does not discuss the process of moving between its stages (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). I endeavoured to complement the U-curve model by using the ABC model to consider the reasons for participants' adjustment. Specifically, the culture learning process in the ABC model can explain the mechanism of moving between the stages of the U-curve model. It is important to note that I utilised the culture learning process after the data showed that the model was helpful in understanding the adjustment process and in providing evidence for why students shifted between the stages of the U-curve model.

The following chapter discusses the methodological approach of this study.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter discusses the research methodology and method used in this study. It is divided into 10 main sections. Firstly, I present the interpretative paradigm that guides my inquiry (Section 4.2), followed by my justification for using qualitative research (Section 4.3). As mentioned earlier, this study seeks to explore Omani students' lived experiences concerning sociocultural and academic adjustment; thus, a phenomenological approach was used to fit this aim (Section 4.4). Section 4.5 and its subsections outline the research setting and participants. One data collection instrument was used to address the three research questions stated in Chapter 1: semi-structured interviews, as described in Section 4.6, with an audit trail of how data were collected in subsections. In Section 4.7, an explanation of the data analysis procedure in terms of thematic analysis is presented. This section is followed by a discussion of the trustworthiness of this research (Section 4.8), ethical considerations (Section 4.9), and reflexivity (Section 4.10). Finally, in Section 4.11, the chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

4.2 Interpretive Paradigm

A research paradigm is defined by Glesne (2016) as "a framework or philosophy of science that makes assumptions about the nature of reality and truth, the kinds of questions to explore, and how to go about doing so" (p. 5). In other words, a paradigm is a "worldview" that puts forward the overall research system (Willis, 2007, p. 8). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), a study's chosen paradigm is determined by a researcher's assumptions concerning three basic premises: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Ontology refers to the "reality" a researcher perceives and interprets from the surrounding environments. Epistemology concerns the "knowledge" a researcher investigates, its nature and forms, and how it is gained and shared. Methodology is a strategy in that a researcher carries out the research and finds out the data required to answer the research questions (Given, 2016; Glesne, 2016; Hennink et al., 2011; Hua, 2016; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Terrell, 2016).

In planning this study, it was important to consider the philosophical assumptions that underpinned this research. My view as a researcher is that the reality is multiple and could be discovered from the participants being investigated (Creswell, 2013). These realities were

interpreted according to how participants interact with the surrounding world and how they construct their social realities in it (Denscombe, 2014). This ontological assumption helped me understand the realities of Omani-student participants' lived experiences and viewpoints and further supported my epistemological assumption.

Regarding epistemological assumption, my view of uncovering knowledge was linked to how participants create and construct meanings of their experiences. My belief was motivated by the interpretive position. Knowledge did not come about in a vacuum but rather from the social context surrounding participants (Creswell, 2013). When people interact with each other, they develop knowledge and meanings in a social context (Scotland, 2012). As such, there is a connection between the participants' experiences and social context. To understand the participants' views and their meaningful realities, I adopted a subjective standpoint to the investigation (Creswell, 2013) (see Section 4.10).

The ontological and epistemological assumptions lead to the choice of methodology (Krauss, 2005). Glesne (2016) points out that "what you believe knowledge to be, in turn, shapes and serves to justify your methodology, your theoretical perspectives about how to go about knowing" (p. 5). Research is guided by the nature of reality (ontology) and how to investigate and know this reality (epistemology), which in turn determines the way of investigation (methodology) (Sarantakos, 2013; Slevitch, 2011). According to qualitative interpretive inquiry, the best way to understand reality is through engaging and interacting with participants in the context of the phenomenon under study (Krauss, 2005).

The ontological and epistemological standpoints of this research are parallel with the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm's main goal is "to understand people's lived experience from the perspective of people themselves" (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 14). It focuses on studying the meaning of people's understanding of the reality of the social world from a subjective point of view (Hennink et al., 2011; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Interpretive researchers seek to interpret participants' reflections about their experiences from their viewpoints and within the surrounding context (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). According to this paradigm, the interpretation depends on the researchers' understanding of reality from participants. The way participants convey their subjective human experiences guides the researchers' interpretation, which could accept different perspectives and viewpoints according to the characteristics of individuals (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Therefore, different realities could emerge from the

situations and contexts of research, which, in turn, depends heavily on the researcher's interaction with participants (Cohen et al., 2011; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

4.3 Qualitative Research

The interpretive paradigm aligns with qualitative research and methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ormston et al., 2014). This study adopted qualitative research as suiting the aims and research questions of this study mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1.7. Given that, this approach allowed gaining an in-depth understanding of Omani students' opinions and views concerning their transition processes. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) define qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 10). The investigation process in qualitative research seeks to establish a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon under study from a subjective viewpoint (Flick, 2015). Further, the research process is inductive (Guest et al., 2013; Williams, 2007). This indicates that the investigation involves emerging procedures from specific to general. It is not predetermined but somewhat depends on the participants' understanding of the issue under study (Hennink et al., 2011).

Qualitative research was conducted to explore a specific phenomenon and highlight participants' voices and experiences. Hence, listening and talking with people and inviting them to share their opinions and stories allowed me to develop a comprehensive understanding of their transitions and adjustments to an unfamiliar context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In addition, it helped to explore how the participants evaluated their experiences, expressed their opinions and beliefs, and reflected on their social behaviours during this time (Hennink et al., 2011).

Unlike the quantitative approach, which focuses on statistics and close-ended questions, the qualitative approach depends on texts and images and uses open-ended questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Usually, quantitative researchers employ a large sample population, and the results seek generalisability, while qualitative researchers typically investigate a small number of participants in order to provide an in-depth interpretation of the data set (Denscombe, 2014; O'Leary, 2010). Further, quantitative researchers are distinguished as being objective in their views, depending on deductively testing hypotheses (O'Leary, 2010). On the other hand, the qualitative researcher's subjectivity is reflected during the process of interpretation of findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Ormston et al., 2014).

This study is concerned with what Omani international students experience while studying at a New Zealand university and how they give meaning to their experiences; therefore, adopting an interpretive standpoint that best uncovers these aspects was deemed to be appropriate for better understanding their adjustment process. This interpretive standpoint allows me to understand how Omani students view their realities in interacting and socialising with others in the context of New Zealand universities and communities. Further, qualitative interpretive research is associated with several major approaches to inquiry. Creswell (2013) suggests five approaches: *Narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography,* and *case study*. While these approaches are studied within qualitative research, each is suitable for investigating different research problems (Williams, 2007). Exploring how participants interact in a social context can be investigated by using a phenomenological approach. For this current study, a phenomenological approach was utilised to explore how individuals describe their experiences and are described next.

4.4 Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a qualitative research method is used in social sciences, such as education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Phenomenology is "the study of the nature and states of lived experiences" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 151). Creswell and Creswell (2018) point out that "the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants" (p. 13). In other words, phenomenologists are interested in two aspects: (1) exploring the life experiences of a group of participants and (2) how those participants describe their life experiences from their perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denscombe, 2014). Thus, following the phenomenological approach, this study focused on the descriptions of lived experiences provided by Omani student participants.

Phenomenology began as a philosophical movement before it evolved into a qualitative research method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology has two general types or variants: *descriptive* and *interpretive*. As a school of philosophy, phenomenology began in the 20th century and is credited to Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), which is referred to as descriptive or transcendental (Giorgi, 2008). Husserl's descriptive phenomenology aims to find out common "essences" derived from people's experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In other words, common features might emerge from people because they have experienced the same phenomenon. The focus is not on the phenomenon itself but on how people experience, understand, and describe

it from their viewpoints (Giorgi, 2012; Liamputtong, 2013; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Plakhotnik, 2016; Willig, 2008). In addition, for Husserl, the phenomenon occurs on its own, and the setting surrounding the phenomenon is not as important (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

One key philosophical assumption in descriptive phenomenology is *phenomenological reduction* (Giorgi, 2008; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction is achieved through *epoche* or *bracketing* (Giorgi, 2008; Moustakas, 1994). Epoche means suspending preconceptions and past knowledge of a phenomenon to understand it as it is (Giorgi, 1997). In other words, a researcher should not use his or her previous knowledge of the phenomenon under study during the research process (Chan et al., 2013; LeVasseur, 2003). In light of this, Moustakas (1994) asserts that "the phenomenological Epoche does not eliminate everything, does not deny the reality of everything, does not doubt everything – *only the natural attitude*, the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for the truth and reality" (p. 85). This did not mean I eliminated all my previous experiences, but, instead, I set aside my personal biases about the phenomenon under investigation.

According to Giorgi (2008), phenomenological reduction is utilised through two things:

> (1) The researcher has to bracket personal past knowledge and all other theoretical knowledge not based on direct intuition, regardless of its source, so that full attention can be given to the instance of the phenomenon that is currently appearing to his or her consciousness; and (2) the researcher withholds the positing of the existence or reality of the object or state of affairs that he or she is beholding. (p. 3)

This entails the importance of conducting the epoche, i.e., eliminating how the researcher perceives the world in order to articulate what is experienced by the participant, as such, uncovering the essence of the experience (Aagaard, 2017). Further, when utilising an epoche stance, a researcher could give much awareness to the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

Given that attitude (i.e., epoche), I practised the epoche during the process of data collection and analysis (Ahern, 1999). I tried my best to suspend most of my relevant assumptions about the process of adjustment before interviewing participants in order not to affect the way they described their adjustment experiences and to reflect their viewpoints (Giorgi, 2008). In addition, I tried my best to avoid any biases during the data analysis process. I carefully selected

quotes from participants' responses that did not reflect my own assumptions but rather the essence of the lived experiences (Ahern, 1999).

The second major variant, interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology is associated with Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who was Husserl's student (Jackson et al., 2018). Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology focuses on individuals' perceptions of the world or surrounding environments, such as their relations to time and place (Lopez & Willis, 2004). For Heidegger, context is essential, and individuals are connected to and influenced by their surroundings (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology aims to interpret the meaning of the experience without paying attention to the essence or common features (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Plakhotnik, 2016; Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

In Heidegger's philosophical assumption, the researchers cannot detach themselves from the process of inquiry and they exist within the phenomena (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Researchers develop their interpretation based on their previous knowledge of the phenomenon and need to embrace a subjective attitude (Jackson et al., 2018). Hence, Husserl's concept of epoche or bracketing is incompatible with Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology. In light of this, descriptive phenomenology was more appropriate for this study. The reason for choosing a descriptive phenomenological approach was that it offered a deeper understanding of the lived experience from participants' perspectives with little influence from me as a researcher (Jackson et al., 2018). Omani international students' descriptions of adjusting to New Zealand might be different if another researcher, other than myself, was interviewing them. However, even though, as a researcher, I could never be able to remove myself from my own experience, my role as a researcher was not to affect participants' way of description, but, rather, I aimed to engage and interact with them in order to get an in-depth understanding of their adjustment process.

Interpretative phenomenology was not deemed to be suitable for this study. I believe that this approach could lead to bias and alter the structure of the findings, as it is highly subjective on the part of the researcher. Conversely, I found it useful to implement a partial bracketing attitude in my research. This allowed me to explore the phenomenon of adjustment with a fresh perspective.

Further, although other qualitative research approaches might be relevant to this study in some way, they were not the primary intention of this research. Given that other qualitative

methodologies might not fit to a large degree with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research discussed in the previous section, I found phenomenology is deemed to be suitable for this study and to answer my research questions. Phenomenology is also congruent with this research's ontological and epistemological assumptions. The current study did not intend to generate a new theory about international students' experiences (e.g., grounded theory), or observe common cultural practices or behaviours (e.g., ethnographic study). It also did not focus on narrating the stories and life events of participants (e.g., narrative study). Instead, this study explored how Omani students experience their adjustment process and how they describe and give meaning to their experiences. Additionally, this study was a means to gain an in-depth understanding of the essence of Omani student participants' sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences.

Taking this into account, there was no conflict between the study's theoretical framework (i.e., the U-curve and ABC models) and phenomenology as a research methodology. As this study was inductive and employed a phenomenological approach, I did not use these models as a predetermined theoretical framework. Rather, I used them after collecting data to make sense of the data. Following Larsen and Adu (2021), a descriptive phenomenological study cannot be conducted on the basis of predetermined theories and frameworks; instead, "researchers could use them as descriptive tools, using their associated concepts to code the data and/or develop themes when needed" (p. 176). This approach can ensure that the investigation describes the participants' lived experiences and the essence from their perspectives and employs an epoche or bracketing attitude (Larson & Adu, 2021).

In summary, I used phenomenology as an overarching methodological framework that guided the research process and data collection, while the U-curve and ABC theories were used to comment on the participants' adjustment experiences in this study. Specifically, Giorgi's (2008) theoretical understanding of descriptive phenomenology enabled me to explore the unique adjustment experiences of Omani students, while the U-curve and ABC enabled me to describe the nature and process of their adjustment experiences, including defining the emergent themes.

This research was designed to describe the lived experiences of Omani international students from their viewpoints in the New Zealand context by listening to their voices of how they gave the meaning of their experiences while studying and living in New Zealand. To this end, I

deliberately chose a research methodology that best accomplished my research aims. I chose the phenomenological approach.

4.5 Research Participants

This section outlines the process of recruiting and accessing participants for this study. It includes identifying the research setting, the sampling strategy, access to participants, the description and basic background information about participants.

4.5.1 The Research Setting: The Participant University

The research setting for the current study was a public university in New Zealand[3]. During the time of data collection in 2020, the university had approximately 13,000 students, of whom over 2,000 were international students. The university awarded numerous undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications (or degrees) from several divisions and schools. As the university focused on high academic standards and creativity, it provided students with a wide array of skills and knowledge for their future jobs. Omani participants in this study were enrolled in four schools: Engineering, Education, Science, and Management.

There were various types of facilities and support services available for students at the university. Its main campus had prayer rooms for Muslim students and other faiths to practice their religious beliefs. A variety of clubs and societies, a well-being hub, and food and drink outlets were also located on its campuses to provide students with access to all amenities.

This university supported international students through its international office, where they could seek information, advice, and assistance, including student visa information, scholarships, and any general support that students may need. Student counselling services offered another support service for university students. Regarding student accommodation, there were various on-campus options and homestays for international students who wished to live with a New Zealand family. Further, a language school at the university was established for international students, who are non-native English speakers, to help them improve their

[3] Information in this section was summarised from the university website. Due to ethical considerations, the university's name and website were not revealed.

English language skills and interact with each other by offering several general and academic English language programmes.

4.5.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposeful sampling was used in this study to collect data regarding the lived experiences of Omani international students. Often qualitative research employs purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2011). Purposive sampling enables researchers to choose participants who most closely fit the study purpose, answer the research questions (Tracy, 2013), and provide detailed data suitable for the research (Hennink et al., 2011). In addition, a phenomenological method often recommends a non-random sampling technique (i.e., purposive sampling) (Padilla-Díaz, 2015).

The second strategy of sampling employed in this research was snowball sampling (Cohen et al., 2011). I used snowballing in this research because of my difficulty in recruiting Omani students. Snowballing is a method of recruiting that "involves building a sample through referrals" (O'Leary, 2010, p. 170). To begin the snowballing, I asked pilot focus group participants to nominate their Omani friends to potentially participate in this study. I also asked interview participants to nominate their Omani friends who may be willing to share their experiences. Two participants invited their friends, and one invited her sister to participate in the research. Further, snowballing was a helpful strategy that made my research known to many Omani students.

4.5.3 Access to Participants

Accessing participants was a key concern in conducting this research (Cohen et al., 2011). Specific procedures were used to gain access to participants: (1) I invited participation from Omani students at a New Zealand university whom I knew or did not know personally through direct contact, (2) I sent invitation letters (see Appendix D) to the president of the Omani Students' Association and asked them to send my invitation to Omani students, and (3) I asked participants to contact their friends and acquaintances to see if they would be interested in participating in my research (only those who met the research criteria, which it is outlined in Subsection 4.5.4). I informed potential participants by invitation letter and a personal explanation of the research project. When approaching participants for the first time, it was important to state that this research was for a PhD study so that participants would know that

their participation would be used for academic purposes. If they agreed to participate, I asked participants to contact me via email, text messages, or WhatsApp.

4.5.4 Description of Participants

A number of criteria were used to select participants: First, participants were Omani students and native speakers of the Arabic language. Second, they were international students holding a student visa (i.e., not immigrant students). Third, they were undergraduate students (i.e., pre-degree certificates, masters, and doctoral were excluded) enrolled at a New Zealand university at the time of data collection. Finally, they had been in New Zealand for six months or more, as they had gained some social and cultural experiences during those first six months after arrival in New Zealand. Only Omani students who met these criteria were invited to participate in this research project.

In relation to the sample size, phenomenological research often requires a small-scale sample size (Smith & Osborn, 2004). The primary purpose of phenomenological research is to accumulate rich and in-depth data on a phenomenon within one group of individuals (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Thus, phenomenological researchers should carefully select participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study (Englander, 2012). Typically, phenomenologists do not recruit more than 10 participants in research (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Other researchers, such as Leedy and Ormrod (2013), suggested a range of five to 25 participants for phenomenological research.

The population of this study was 12 Omani students (eight males and four females) for the interviews. For phenomenological research, this sample size is within the suggested range. The Omani participants were all international undergraduate students aged between 18 and 24 years old and had been in New Zealand for one to five years. Their IELTS (International English Language Testing System) scores were from testing before their arrival in New Zealand. Table 4.1 presents the participants' demographic information. Participants' names or pseudonyms were replaced with "P" and a number (P stands for participant).

Table 4.1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	IELTS score	Area of Study	Years in NZ
P1	Male	19	5.5	Earth Science	1
P2	Male	23	n/a	Engineering	5
P3	Male	24	n/a	Engineering	5.3
P4	Male	20	5.0	Education	2
P5	Female	21	4.5	Education	2.4
P6	Female	19	5.5	Education	1
P7	Female	19	4.5	Management	1
P8	Male	22	4.5	Engineering	4
P9	Male	21	6.0	Engineering	3
P10	Male	23	3.5	Engineering	3
P11	Male	20	7.5	Engineering	2.5
P12	Female	22	5.0	Engineering	4

Note. The IELTS scores for P2 and P3 were not provided.

4.5.5 Participants' Basic Background Information

All participants in this study mentioned that they had been granted external (i.e., studying overseas) scholarships from their government. They explained that Oman's Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) offered scholarships to Omani students to pursue higher education inside or outside Oman. These scholarships were granted based on specific criteria in which students were not free to choose a specific host country. The scholarship scheme covers all students' financial aspects, such as the university fees and monthly stipend. It also covers studying at a language school, the foundation programme, and the bachelor's degree. All participants in this study included New Zealand in their lists of host countries in the scholarship application, but it was not any participant's first selection. The main reason for their admission to New Zealand was Oman's scholarship system.

Most participants had limited information about New Zealand before applying for a scholarship. A general view held among participants about New Zealand was that it is a small and distant country. The tendency not to list New Zealand as a first study option by participants was related to a lack of information about the country. For them, the country was very far in the distance, and, thus, it would not be easy to travel there. One reason that motivated Omani students to include New Zealand as a study destination in their lists of host countries was its nature. New Zealand is famous for its natural beauty and is a well-known tourist destination. The nature and calmness of New Zealand were found to attract Omani students to list New Zealand as a study destination.

Before coming to New Zealand, none of the participants had travelled overseas as international students. Only five male participants had previously travelled to Western countries as tourists before coming to New Zealand. Those experiences were considered a positive factor in self-confidence and accomplishment in the new host culture. Exposure to life in a different country could encourage international students to interact better with the host culture.

4.6 Data Collection Procedures

In this study, I drafted questions, piloted these with a focus group of four PhD students, redrafted the questions, and again piloted these with two small groups of Omani students. Based on these pilots, I adjusted the questions. I then completed two pilot interviews to fine-tune questions and give myself practice. After this, I completed in-depth interviews with 12 Omani participants (two rounds). Because none of the focus group data or pilot interview data was utilised directly to answer the research questions, all of these initial activities were seen as the piloting phase of the research project. Only the data from the semi-structured interviews with 12 Omani participants were analysed in order to identify themes and main results. Table 4.2 outlines the piloting and actual data collection procedures in this study.

Table 4.2

Overview of Piloting and Actual Data Collection

Period	Procedure
Phase 1 – Piloting September 2019 – December 2019	3 pilot focus groups 2 pilot interviews
Phase 2 – Actual data January 2020 – September 2020	12 semi-structured interviews (2 rounds)

In the following subsections, I discussed the data collection procedures, including preparation and piloting and the actual data collection method: interviews.

4.6.1 Preparation and Piloting

Conducting a pilot study was important for avoiding irrelevant and unclear questions and providing feedback from the chosen participants that may help to revise the final version of the questions (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). The pilot study was conducted on a small-scale sample to test the research method (Ismail et al., 2018; Kim, 2011). Further, piloting allowed me to increase my experience and self-confidence in conducting interviews.

Mainly, I conducted pilot focus groups in this study to inform the interviews; that is, to generate ideas and insights that could be further explored in individual interviews (Hennink, 2014). The group interaction among focus group participants who share similar experiences could add other insights and understanding of their storytelling. My justification for using pilot focus groups in this research, as discussed above, and my belief that the group interaction would encourage participants to share their experiences enhanced this phenomenological study (Wu et al., 2011). However, some issues might not be appropriate to discuss in groups. One issue is that some people might feel uncomfortable or stressed in front of a group of people. In addition, some participants may speak more, and some remain silent, requiring more effort from a researcher to control the group discussion (Hennink, 2014). Therefore, individual interviews were conducted as an actual data collection method, following phenomenological research.

Before engaging in the actual data collection stage for this study, I had the opportunity to pilot three focus groups and two interviews. The first pilot focus group was carried out with four international PhD students (two males and two females) from different nationalities. As this was my first experience carrying out a focus group, I invited PhD participants to benefit from their experiences conducting a focus group and the suggestions they gave to improve my interview skills and self-confidence. This pilot focus group lasted about an hour. The second pilot focus group was conducted with two male Omani undergraduate students and lasted around one hour. The third pilot focus group was conducted with three female Omani undergraduate students and lasted around one and a half hours. The first and second pilot focus groups were held in September 2019 and the third in November 2019. After that, I invited two Chinese undergraduate international students (one male and one female) for the pilot interviews in December 2020. The two interviews lasted around 68 minutes. At the end of the focus group and interviews, I asked the participants to comment on the questions. Their feedback and suggestions were of great benefit and helped me in the field. A summary of the key points of the focus group and interviews were written and sent to the participants.

I developed focus group and interview questions in English based on the literature relating to international students' adjustment worldwide. It was required to translate these questions into Arabic as Omani-student participants' native language is Arabic. I first translated the questions into Arabic myself. To ensure the adequacy of my translations, I asked two PhD students, who are bilingual in Arabic and English, to check the two versions of the questions (Alkharusi, 2013). A few amendments were suggested by the PhD students and were taken into consideration. After the pilot studies, the questions of the interviews were tested and modified for the actual data collection stage.

4.6.2 Interviews

Most qualitative researchers commonly conduct interviews as a method of data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Glesne, 2016; Morris, 2015). A semi-structured in-depth interview is mainly used to collect qualitative data (Guest et al., 2013; Mason, 2002). This study utilised a semi-structured in-depth interview method to listen to participants' experiences and stories from their perspectives.

The following subsections describe in detail the process I conducted in the interviews regarding the purpose of a semi-structured interview, its structure, and procedure.

4.6.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Morris (2015) points out that semi-structured in-depth interviewing is suitable for eliciting rich information from participants concerning their understanding and reflections on a phenomenon related to the research topic. It gives participants the decision to choose what aspects of their experiences can reveal that they think are most suitable to discuss. Further, questions in semi-structured interviews are open-ended to allow participants to describe their experiences deeply, and from their responses, researchers can find answers to research questions (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). It is also possible in this method to use probing questions, when appropriate, to allow participants to uncover more aspects of their experiences and enrich the interview data. In the present study, semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed me to cover the topics of social interaction, friendship patterns, cultural distance, academic life, and the English language of the participants. In the semi-structured in-depth interviews, "the interviewer has topics that they want to cover that are related to their research question/s, but there is plenty of scope for digression" (Morris, 2015, p. 10). I allowed a discussion with the participants and gave them space to talk freely, but all related to the research topic. I used semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit in-depth information from participants that reinforced detailed answers to the interview questions.

4.6.2.2 Structure of Semi-Structured Interviews

Although phenomenological research focuses primarily on interviews as a method of data collection (Moustakas, 1994), little research has given attention to the phenomenological interview structure (Bevan, 2014). One author, Seidman (2013), discussed in detail a structure of in-depth phenomenological interviews based on three interviews with each participant. In this study, Seidman's three-interview series were combined into two interviews. Conducting three interviews with each participant could impact the participant's time, and it might be difficult to be committed to three appointments. Seidman (2013) stated that researchers can seek alternatives to the structure of interviews if the alternative structure allows participants to reveal in-depth data about their experiences. Thus, I sought alternatives in this study in terms of the number of interviews, spacing, period, and changes because of COVID-19.

Following Seidman (2013), the first interview contains two sections: (1) questions related to focused life history and (2) questions about the details of the experiences. The purpose of the first section was to set the scene of participants' experiences by asking questions concerning their background, such as their cultural norms and traditions in their home country; that is, to examine the possibility if they were facing cultural differences in New Zealand. In addition, questions were then directed towards exploring their initial experience in the host country and the possible challenges they faced in their first few months of arrival. Participants were encouraged to recall their first days of arrival and their expectations before coming to New Zealand as the study focuses on exploring the process of adjustment to the host country.

The second section of the first interview focused on participants' experiences in terms of sociocultural and academic aspects. This section covered several theme questions concerning social interaction, friendship patterns, cultural distance, participating in activities, interaction in academic life, and the English language. These aspects stimulated participants to recall important incidents in their daily lives, positive or negative, according to their beliefs. In particular, I asked questions related to social and academic life as a vital part of their experiences. Finally, I considered the English factor in this interview section, as good English could help participants in their social and academic lives. Most importantly, this section gave much attention to the details of Omani students' social, cultural, and academic experiences, which comprised the major part of this research project.

In the second interview, participants were asked questions based on their previous responses in the first interview. This allowed participants to give meaning to their experiences. Therefore, questions began with: "You have said in the previous interview that social interactions … How do you understand the effect of social interactions and friendships in your social experiences in New Zealand?" Such questions encouraged the participant to think deeply about his/her experience and to make meaning of this experience. The reflections on meaning are when participants connect their present and past thinking (Seidman, 2013). Participants were encouraged to reveal stories about their experiences and to construct meaning of these events from their viewpoints. The centre of attention here was to guide participants to think about the events and stories they had revealed in the previous interviews and reflect on those incidents.

4.6.2.3 Procedure of Semi-Structured Interviews

Setting up the interview was the first aspect that I needed to consider. Interview participants were given a choice to select a time and place for the interview and whether they preferred face-to-face or online interviewing. All interviews were conducted face-to-face between January and September 2020. I chose an appropriate place for the interview to ensure that participants felt relaxed. Therefore, I suggested the library study rooms at the university where participants studied as a quiet and convenient venue, and all participants agreed. As the study related to the experiences of international students, setting the interview in an academic environment was deemed to be more comfortable than other places for the interviewees.

The first interview was longer than the second interview and lasted around 40 to 70 minutes per participant. The second interview lasted around 15 to 30 minutes. This time was enough to elicit reasonably detailed experiences from participants. In terms of spacing between the first and second interviews, it was appointed by participants according to their convenience as they were engaged in lectures, exams, or lab work.

It was important to establish rapport with the participant and make him or her feel relaxed, so the interviewee could open up and talk freely. I put much effort into creating a friendly atmosphere that did not make the participant feel bored or stressed. Thus, as I interviewed, a form of dialogue developed between the participant and me. I asked questions about the participant's experiences and encouraged him/her to share his/her experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I also encouraged the participants to tell stories about incidents that happened during the experience. Telling a story to describe an experience allows participants to recall valuable moments in that experience and reinforce the interview (Seidman, 2013).

I prepared an interview guide in advance; I read literature related to international students' cross-cultural adjustment to get a deeper understanding of the method (see Appendix F). I followed the interview guide but was flexible, as guided by semi-structured interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The interview guide contained the procedure to be followed and questions to be asked during the interview. Interview questions were in-depth about social, cultural, and academic life experiences while living and studying in New Zealand. I covered all the questions in the interview guide to obtain the data required for the analysis process in order to answer the research questions. I asked questions in order, but if the participant said something related to a

later question, I followed up with that question. Some follow-up or prompting questions were prepared in advance but modified according to the participant's responses.

At the beginning of the interview, I introduced myself, thanked the participant for accepting to be interviewed, explained the purpose of the research, and clarified that the university ethics had approved the research and that their names and personal information were confidential. At first, the participant was informed to sign a written consent of his/her participation and record the interview. I used a digital voice recorder and a smartphone to record the interviews. I also asked the participant to fill out a background information sheet (see Appendix E).

During the interview, I was attentive to the participant's responses and showed interest in what he or she said. This is important to keep the interviewee engaged in the interview and enthusiastic about sharing his or her experiences (Morris, 2015). I gave participants the freedom to talk to express themselves and reconstruct their own experiences but in points related to the research topic. Sometimes, during the interview, I found a participant was uncomfortable telling some aspects of their experience. In these situations, the participant had the right to decide on the aspects that he or she was willing to reveal, and we focused on what made him or her feel comfortable.

Before concluding the interview, I thanked the participant again and informed him/her that after transcribing and translating the interview, I would send them an email with a copy of the interview. I asked him/her to check/modify words in the transcript and, if any, highlight them and resend them to me within three weeks. This procedure is written in the consent form (see Appendix C). None of the participants emailed me with any modifications to their transcripts.

4.7 Data Analysis Procedures

The process of data analysis was associated with qualitative inquiry. According to Hall (2009), "qualitative data analysis is an inductive process that establishes patterns or themes that emerge from the data" (p. 26). Therefore, thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data. Data analysis was based on translating the verbatim transcripts of interviews. For sufficient analysis, codes emerging from the analysis were stored using NVivo 11 computer software for qualitative data analysis.

The following subsections present the procedures for data analysis in greater detail. It describes the process of transcribing and translating, using NVivo 11 and thematic analysis to analyse the data.

4.7.1 Transcribing and Translating

Many authors recommended that a researcher, who conducts interviews, should transcribe by himself or herself (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Morris, 2015; Warren & Karner, 2015). Thus, I transcribed and translated my data from the audio recording of the interviews. Transcribing enabled me to examine the responses repeatedly and familiarise myself with the data obtained (Morris, 2015). I transcribed all the speech that was said in the interview, including some non-verbal expressions, such as laughs or pauses. To ensure the accuracy and quality of the transcripts, I re-listened to the recording several times and searched if there were any typing errors to correct in the transcripts.

It was required to ask participants whether to conduct the interviews in English or Arabic. All interviewees preferred to be interviewed in Arabic, as they felt more confident describing themselves in their native language. It was easier for me to follow, listen, and engage with the participants using our native language, Arabic. While conducting the interviews in the Arabic language would be easier, the translations after that would add more time and effort to the process.

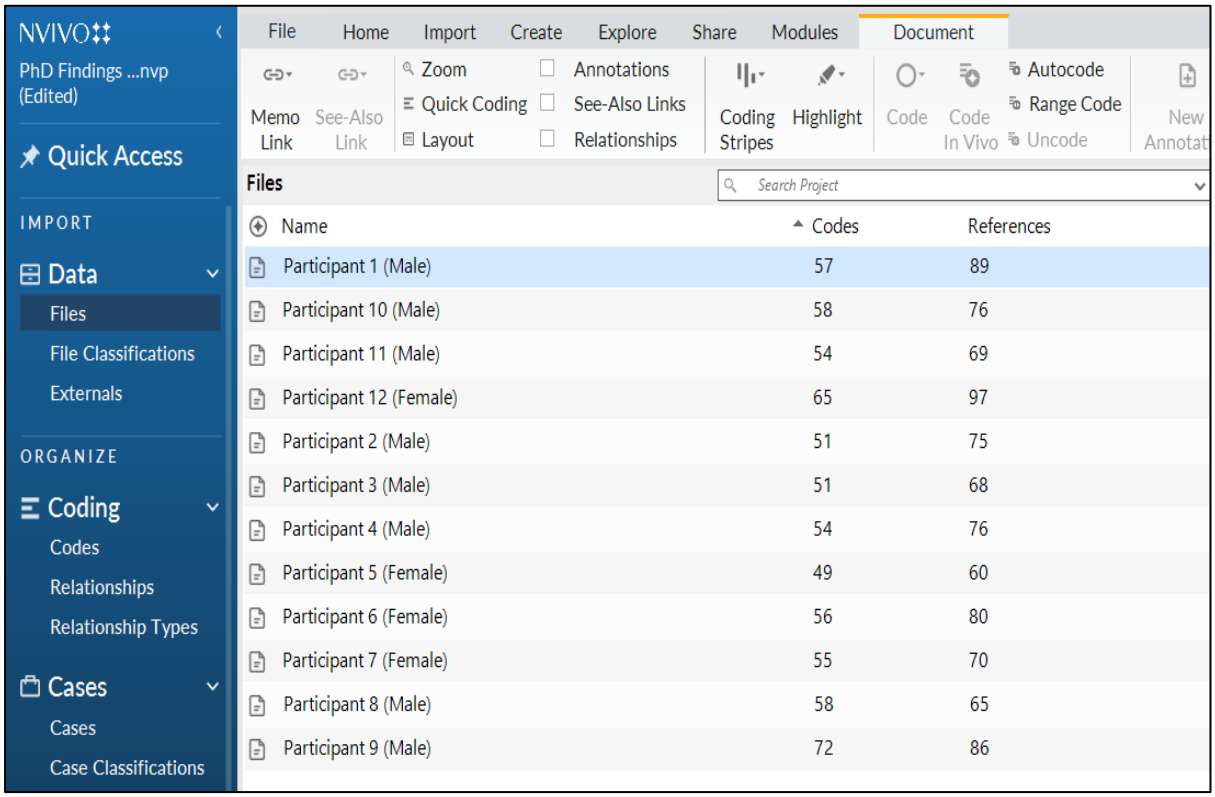
The process of translation took a long time due to the difficulty of translating the linguistic expressions between Arabic and English. Sometimes, finding the best equivalent of some Arabic expressions to English was difficult. As such, I used online dictionaries, such as *Cambridge* or *Google Translate,* to ensure the accuracy of the translation. Although the interviews were in Arabic, most participants used code-switching. In other words, they used some English words and expressions while speaking in Arabic because they are studying in an English-medium university and living in an English-speaking country. I wrote these English words literally to reflect how they describe their social incidents, such as homestay, Student Village, campus, summer school, or their areas of study. I also translated literally some Islamic and cultural expressions used typically by Arabs or Muslims in their everyday conversation. Words such as *Mashallah* (God bless), *Alhamdulillah* (thank God), or *Inshallah* (God willing) were repeated frequently by participants. Therefore, I included transliteration of the Arabic words and translation in brackets.

4.7.2 Using NVivo 11 Software

Using qualitative data analysis computer software, such as NVivo, has become more popular because it offers productive data analysis with less time and effort (Auld et al., 2007). It is also encouraged to use this qualitative data analysis software to save time and boost the validity and quality of the qualitative data set (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Prior to the analysis process, the English translation of interview data was imported into NVivo 11, organised, and coded. Thus, the analysis was conducted using the English language. Files were created for each interviewee, as seen in Figure 4.1. Hence, NVivo 11 helped me arrange the whole data set by creating related files that can be easily accessed when needed (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The emerging codes were stored using NVivo 11, as this could make the analysis more precise (Gibbs, 2002). NVivo 11 provided an organised tool for coding data that was grouped later into themes (Gibbs, 2002). Importantly, NVivo 11 did not take the place of my personal and in-depth analysis but instead supported my data organisation to enable accurate and sufficient analysis.

Figure 4.1

Files of Interviewees in NVivo 11 Software



4.7.3 Thematic Analysis

In the present study, I utilised thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the data from the interviews. Thematic analysis is utilised to analyse different qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, or diaries (Clarke et al., 2015). In this study, I utilised thematic analysis "for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The primary purpose of this method is to search for themes or patterns from the data set (Finlay, 2015). The themes identified reflected the elements that contributed to the participants' lived experiences; hence, answering the research questions mentioned first in Chapter 1. As Clarke et al. (2015) point out, the coding system of the thematic analysis is flexible and appropriate for answering different kinds of research questions, such as those concerned with the lived experiences of participants.

The reasons for using thematic analysis were the following: First, thematic analysis helped me discover in-depth and rich narratives from the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, thematic analysis is considered a fundamental qualitative method for analysing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, the final stage in the analysis provides a narrative account that allows the researcher to use his/her creative style to write the final report (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Finally, thematic analysis could be applied to various qualitative frameworks, including, in this study, the phenomenological approach because the method offers a flexible tool for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For this study, I utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis, which are outlined in Table 4.3. I then explained the six steps.

Table 4.3

Overview of the Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

Step	Description
1. Getting familiar with the data	I read and re-read the data and identified relevant ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	I coded data and collected data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	I collected and combined codes into potential themes and all data relevant to each theme, and developed mind maps.
4. Reviewing themes	I checked if the themes were associated with their codes.
5. Defining and naming themes	I identified and named each theme and then wrote a detailed analysis of each theme.
6. Producing the report	I wrote the final analysis, including sufficient themes with selected extracts relating to the research questions.

Note. From "Using thematic analysis in psychology." by V. Braun, & V. Clarke, 2006, *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), p. 87. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Step 1: Getting familiar with the data

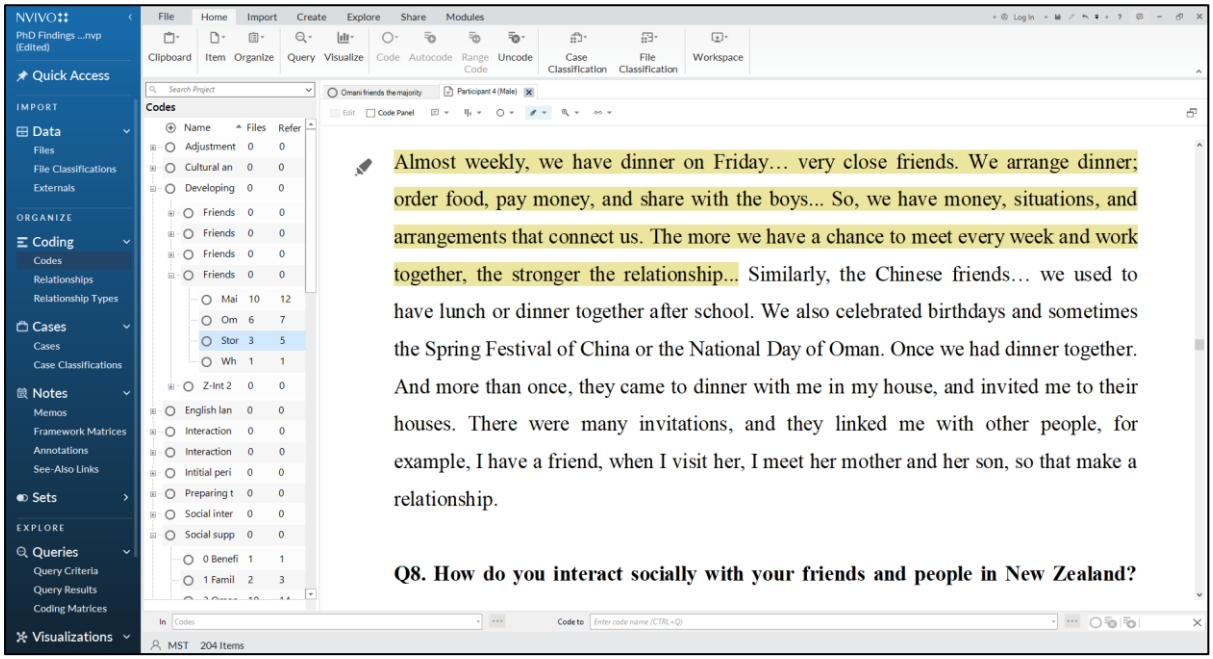
In this initial step, I read and re-read the transcripts several times to get a sense of the whole, making notes and trying to identify important ideas (Braun et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2015; Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Step 2: Generating initial codes

The second step involved coding the important ideas that were identified through the first stage. In other words, I extracted and highlighted relevant texts from the interviewee transcript and categorised them into codes. A code is an idea or phrase that could help to answer the research questions (see Figure 4.2). NVivo 11 software was used to store the codes and associated extracted examples to facilitate the analysis process (as described in Subsection 4.7.2). These codes were prepared for the next phase: searching for themes.

Figure 4.2

The Coding Process in NVivo 11 Software

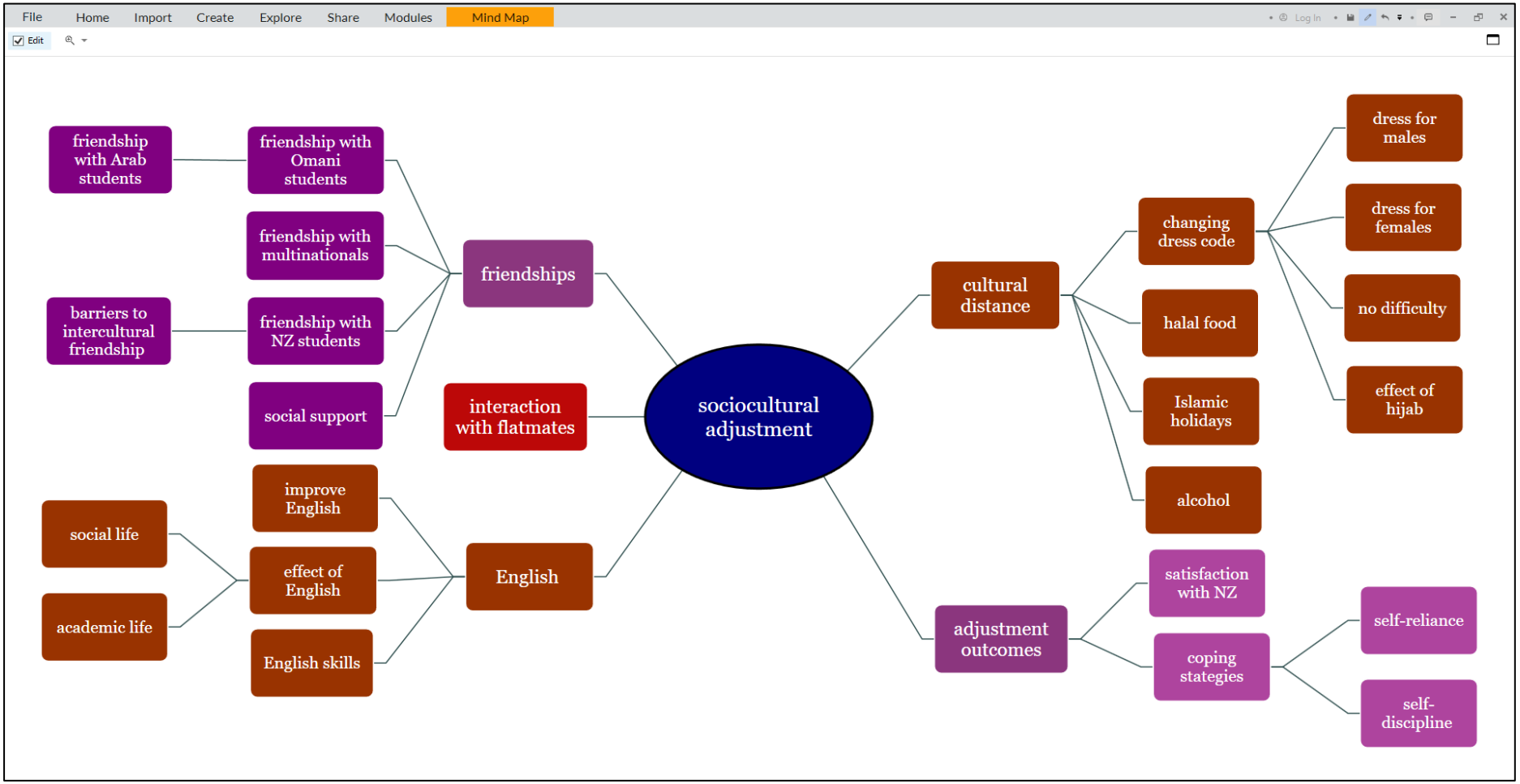


Step 3: Searching for themes

In this step, I grouped and categorised the codes relevant to each other to develop the initial themes. The generated themes should potentially form answers to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To make the process more accessible, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest forming tables or mind maps, which involve clustering the potential themes in order to review them in the next stage. In my study, I used NVivo 11 to create mind maps to visually organise potential themes (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Sample of a Mind Map



Step 4: Reviewing themes

This step involved looking at and revising the themes. The process indicated checking the potential themes and their related codes. The themes and associated codes should give meaningful explanations of the data set, or otherwise, re-read again and develop new themes. During the process, I looked carefully at whether the themes suggested accurate analysis that provided answers to my research questions (Clarke et al., 2015).

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

In this step, I determined suitable themes and subthemes to constitute the foundation of my analysis and excluded any irrelevant themes that did not answer my research questions. It took me a long time to refine the selected themes and subthemes until I found the most relevant ones to my research. The final selection of the themes and subthemes was given accurate names to help write the final report.

Step 6: Producing the report

This final step involved writing a report or a thematic analysis, including the selected themes and subthemes along with relevant extracts from the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this report, I aimed to produce rich insights into the participants' viewpoints.

At times I counted the occurrences of codes to understand the distribution of data during the coding and categorisation process in NVivo 11. This helped me assign numerical values to themes and subthemes. It was important for me to assess the representativeness of different views, so as to assess whether the U-curve model was appropriate, for example. Braun and Clarke (2006) pointed out that with qualitative data, researchers could count responses. Sarantakos (2013) also stated that while qualitative research allows for text, images, and themes, it can be further strengthened by "quantification of the data" (p. 380).

These are the themes that resulted from my analysis and are shown in Table 4.4 below. These themes are presented in the following chapters.

Table 4.4

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1) Preparing to travel overseas	1) Reasons for studying overseas 2) Expectations about New Zealand
2) Initial experience in New Zealand	3) First impression and arrival support 4) Students' accommodation: Homestay experience 5) Language school 6) Social interaction in university activities 7) Social interaction in Omani Students' Association 8) Transport system: Using the bus
3) Social interaction and developing friendships	9) Friendship-making with co-national students 10) Friendship-making with international students 11) Friendship-making with host-national students 12) Barriers to intercultural friendship 13) Friendships and social support 14) Social interaction with flatmates
4) Cultural and religious distance	15) Changing dress code (for males and females) 16) Halal food and alcohol-free environment 17) Observing Muslim holidays 18) Overview of cultural distance
5) Adjustment outcomes	19) Self-discipline 20) Self-reliance 21) Satisfaction with living in New Zealand
6) Interaction in the undergraduate degree	22) Students' first impressions 23) Interaction with classmates 24) Group work interaction 25) Relationship with lecturers 26) Coping with extraordinary events
7) English language proficiency	27) English language as a barrier to social life 28) English language as a barrier to academic life 29) Need to improve English skills

4.8 Trustworthiness

As this study focuses on exploring the lived experiences of Omani student participants from a qualitative perspective, it is important to ensure the quality of qualitative data. In quantitative research, internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity are employed (Guba &

Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the concept of *trustworthiness* to assess the quality of data in qualitative research. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is achieved by considering four criteria: *Credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of these criteria and their implementation in this research are discussed below.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree of similarity between the participants' viewpoints and the findings presented in the study (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The credibility of research could be enhanced by several procedures. One procedure is prolonged engagement with study participants (Anastas, 2004; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morrow, 2005). In this study, there was a persistent informal conversation with participants in the field of study for more than a year during the stage of data collection. This enabled me to build rapport and trust with most of the participants. Trust and rapport encouraged them to share most of their experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Additionally, spending a long time with the participants allowed me to develop a rich understanding of their sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences, which, in turn, helped me to elicit richer data for writing the findings of this study (Morrow, 2005).

Another procedure to improve credibility is member checking, which could be seen as the most essential (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kornbluh, 2015). Member checking refers to the process whereby participants can check their responses to ensure that they reflect their own intentions and viewpoints (Kornbluh, 2015; Kumar, 2011). This process also gives participants "a chance to judge overall adequacy of the interview itself in addition to providing the opportunity to confirm individual data items" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 239). Participants in this study were encouraged to provide feedback after the interviews. Interview participants were given a chance to check, modify, add, or delete any information in their transcripts before confirmation. Their feedback was considered, which enhanced this study's credibility.

Transferability

Transferability of the findings is ensured, as the current study sought to establish a rich account of the participants' experiences in relation to the context of these experiences (Morrow, 2005). This thick description focused primarily on the participants' viewpoints and their processes of adjustment to provide a vivid picture of the findings. The comprehensive picture of the findings

could help readers to compare with other studies and may allow for replication of this study in similar contexts (Flick, 2015).

Dependability

In terms of dependability, it was attained by an audit trail (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The audit trail includes documentation of "a detailed chronology of research activities and processes; influences of the data collection and analysis" (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). In this study, all the processes of data collection and analysis were documented in a reflective journal, which is described in Section 4.10 about reflexivity. In a reflective journal, I recorded my thoughts, observations, steps taken, and procedures to address data dependability. All these steps and procedures were examined thoroughly by my thesis supervisors.

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability was employed in this study by ensuring that the final report emerged largely from the raw data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Tobin & Begley, 2004). This was sought by adhering to my reflexive role and ensuring that my bias was minimised during the research process. Further, an audit trail was employed. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), the audit trail could be used both to ensure the dependability and confirmability of the study. That is, the audit trail could be used in dependability to assess "the quality and appropriateness" of the data and in confirmability to assess that the data "can all be traced to original sources" (p. 243). Hence, the reflective journal was also used to establish the confirmability of the current study.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

As the research involves human participants, approval from the Human Ethics Committee had to be obtained before the research proceeded (Given, 2016). Ethical guidelines must be considered during the research project, starting from writing the research proposal, data collection and analysis, writing the final report, and storing the data after accomplishing the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The main concern of research ethics was ensuring that participants were fully protected from any harm due to participating in the project (Denscombe, 2014). Therefore, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee in the Division of Education at the University of Waikato (see Appendix A). The most important documents in the ethical approval were the information sheet (see Appendix B) and the consent form (see

Appendix C). By providing an information sheet and consent form, participants were fully informed of all aspects of the research project. Participants who showed interest and agreed to participate were given a hard copy of the information sheet that included the purpose of this research project and what they were asked to do if they agreed to participate. The information sheet also ensured that the rights and anonymity of the participants were protected. Their identities and names were kept anonymous.

Further, informed consent was sought from participants before agreeing to be involved in the interviews. The process of obtaining informed consent included ethical aspects, such as participants giving consent to audio record their participation. The transcripts of the interviews were used for the purposes of this research and other publications, such as journal articles or conferences. In terms of participating, participants were invited to take part in this research voluntarily and could withdraw their participation up to three weeks after receiving the transcript. None of the participants requested a withdrawal from this study.

The ethical approval also included how my translation checkers were expected to behave. I first translated the verbatim transcripts of the interviews by myself then, for quality assurance, a translator checked some samples of my translations. The translator considered my translations to be equivalent to a large degree.

From the outset of my research, I have done my best to ensure that I am working ethically and respecting participants. This was achieved by showing a positive attitude and manner towards participants and interpreting their data honestly (Denscombe, 2014; Hennink et al., 2011). The audio recordings were stored at the university in a locked filing cabinet in my office. The Word document transcripts and translations were stored in password-protected files on the university PC in my office.

As the ethical approval emphasised the protection of participants, several procedures were taken to prevent any harm, and potential risks were limited. Often, the recollection of past stories and experiences can reveal the emotions of stress, anger, or belonging. Hence, participants were free to participate in this research without any pressure. During the interviews, participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable. Participants also had the chance to change or modify their responses if they were unsatisfied by revealing a story or an incident that happened to them. Accordingly, no harmful outcomes were reported to me from the participants.

The following subsection describes the cultural sensitivity of some Omani students as part of the ethical approval.

4.9.1 Sensitivity to Cultural Norms and Gender

The cultural sensitivity of some Omani students was taken into consideration. As a Jordanian citizen, the participants and I share, to some extent, the same cultural background. I was very aware that some cultural differences might arise with some other Omani student participants; therefore, much attention was given to the cultural issues that might occur during the research project. A potential cultural consideration I encountered was gender segregation for some Omani female participants. It was my responsibility to ensure that participants were safe and comfortable. In light of this, I asked the female participants whether or not they would like to be interviewed by a female research assistant. None of the female participants asked for a female to interview them.

As a male researcher, approaching male students was less difficult than female students, although even some male students were hesitant to participate. On the other hand, recruiting female participants was the main challenge in this research. Other researchers working in a similar study area discussed the difficulty in recruiting female Arab participants, such as Alkharusi (2013). Although I was aware of the difficulty of recruiting the female participants in this study, their participation was of great value to this research, as their experiences were different from the male participants.

Being a male interviewer interviewing female participants was challenging due to their Islamic and cultural sensitivity. Consequently, ensuring that the female participants felt comfortable and motivated was essential. This was achieved through establishing rapport and trust with them. I introduced myself as a researcher who wanted to invite their Arab-student fellows to share their social and cultural experiences. I encouraged them to accept the invitation as it would be within an academic context. During the interview, I kept eye contact to a minimum, except if I wanted to engage in the conversation. I followed the Islamic values and behaviour concerning how to deal with the opposite gender. I was very careful with how I talked and the space I kept when approaching them. The relationship between the female participants and me was built on mutual respect.

4.10 Reflexivity

The interpretive paradigm emphasises that objectivity cannot be achieved, but rather subjectivity is encouraged in research (Hennink et al., 2011; Ormston et al., 2014). As such, interpretive researchers recognise their subjective role and that "personal views and interpretation in the research process is not only acceptable but advisable" (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 109). Qualitative researchers must be engaged actively in the research process and interpret the data from a subjective viewpoint (Palaganas et al., 2017). In addition, the researchers' background and the way they understand the surrounding environment must be integrated into the research process (Hennink et al., 2011).

Commitment to subjectivity and its influence in the research process requires an evaluation of researchers to their roles. This evaluation is referred to as reflexivity. Reflexivity is a process "where researchers engage in explicit, self-aware analysis of their own role" (Finlay, 2002, p. 531). Being reflexive, I could eventually evaluate the extent to which subjectivity integrates into the research process, therefore maintaining the trustworthiness of my research project (Finlay, 2002; Hennink et al., 2011).

Reflexivity needs to be evident throughout all the research processes, from the early stage to the data collection and analysis stages (Finlay, 2002; Tracy, 2010). For phenomenological inquiry, this stage requires that "the researcher prepares to approach the phenomenon to be investigated with openness and wonder" (Finlay, 2002, p. 536). As a phenomenological researcher, I partially eliminated my pre-understanding of the topic under study from the early stage of conducting research, i.e., practising the epoche (Finlay, 2002).

Finlay (2008) states that the role of researchers in phenomenology does not require them to adhere to an objective viewpoint, but rather "the researcher is fully involved, interested and open to what may appear" (p. 3). My position enables me to balance between maintaining the bracketing and fully engaging in the research process. My stance indicates being conscious of my participants' experiences, encouraging them to be more open, and inviting them to share their experiences. This stance requires building rapport with participants, as suggested by Seidman (2013). The rapport was built on mutual respect and friendship.

I was aware of my position and the roles I played while interacting with the Omani international students throughout this study. As a Jordanian international PhD student, my experiences and

knowledge enabled me to better understand the cultural backgrounds of my participants, which proved to be an advantage in this research. However, I was aware that my position could have an impact on how I described students' adjustment experiences, and my cultural background could bring in biases and assumptions during the data collection and analysis. For instance, I expected participants to consider cultural differences, such as accessing halal food, to be a significant obstacle, and expected to hear about this during the interviews. To minimise potential biases, I took great care to pay attention to the participants' responses and carefully analysed the data again in a way that reflected their viewpoints. In addition, I discussed my research process with my supervisors and sought feedback on how to clarify my role and minimise bias while presenting the findings.

Additionally, I kept a reflective journal in which I recorded important information about the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Ortlipp, 2008). A reflective journal is a useful tool that "allowed the researcher to acknowledge thoughts and emotions" (Lamb, 2013, p. 85). Further, journaling helped me document my reflections on the data collection process, which formed some elements in the analysis stage. I began my reflective journal by recording my thoughts on how I recruited participants, what difficulties I encountered, and what advice and suggestions were recommended from meeting with my supervisors. In the reflective journal, I recorded notes and ideas that came to my mind (Watt, 2007). I also documented information related to participants, such as their contact details, scheduling their interviews, and the place where I met them. Information in the journal was recorded in chronological order and was kept in a Word document. I used English to record information in the journal because I wanted to feel more engaged while writing my thesis (Banegas, 2012).

4.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology and method in terms of the rationale for choosing an interpretive paradigm, qualitative research, and a phenomenological approach as well suited to exploring the lived experiences of Omani international students in New Zealand. Twelve Omani student participants were invited to participate in this research project through semi-structured interviews (two rounds) to answer the three research questions regarding the students' adjustment experiences. This method provided rich data on Omani students' sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis were used to analyse the data because they offered an in-depth and rich

narrative from the data set. NVivo 11 was used to organise, code, and assist in analysing the data. Further, aspects related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability with the study were addressed, along with ethical considerations and the researcher's reflexivity.

The following three chapters present the findings of this study obtained from the semi-structured interviews with regard to Omani students' initial period (Chapter 5), sociocultural experiences (Chapter 6), and academic experiences (Chapter 7).

CHAPTER 5: PREPARING TO TRAVEL OVERSEAS AND INITIAL EXPERIENCE

5.1 Chapter Overview

The findings of this chapter respond to research question 1: How do Omani international students describe their initial experience in New Zealand? These findings are particularly important for determining what factors influenced their initial experience (or settling-in period) and whether the students were excited or experiencing culture shock in the initial stage of their stay in New Zealand.

This chapter is organised into three main sections: Section 5.2 explores participants' preparation to study overseas and comes in two subsections: students' reasons for studying overseas and their expectations about New Zealand. The process of preparing to study overseas is presumed to play a role in the initial period of adjustment, whether this is positive or negative. The second section (Section 5.3) presents findings about the students' initial experience in New Zealand. This section is divided into six subsections: first impressions and arrival support, students' accommodation (homestay), language school, university activities, Omani Students' Association, and difficulty in the transport system. Finally, a summary of the whole chapter is presented in Section 5.4.

5.2 Preparing to Travel Overseas

This section presents students' preparation (or pre-departure) stage, initially contributing to their excitement in New Zealand, including students' reasons for studying overseas and expectations about New Zealand.

5.2.1 Reasons for Studying Overseas

Responses from the interviews revealed that most Omani participants had similar reasons and personal goals for studying overseas. Participants revealed that they were highly motivated to have scholarships and pursue international education overseas. In particular, participants mentioned three main reasons motivating them to study overseas. First, some mentioned that it was a dream for them to travel and study overseas. P6 revealed that studying overseas to

become a biology teacher was a dream that came true. Thus, she revealed she was delighted with her situation as a scholarship student in New Zealand:

> It was my dream to become a biology teacher. I mean, a biology teacher for me is wonderful, fun, and interesting. To balance my choices of what I want to study and the new experience, which is to get an overseas scholarship, was perfect for me, Alhamdulillah [thank God]! (P6)

P6 states in her quote that she attained two goals that delighted her: she received an overseas scholarship and studied the major she wanted.

P9 appeared to have a long-term vision concerning his future career. He was searching for different career options that would increase his practical skills and eventually would benefit him when he graduated. He aspired to work beyond his country and the Arab countries. He revealed:

> My motivation to study overseas was that I wanted to have a new experience, to know other cultures, and, most importantly, to get more knowledge about my major, which is different from Oman and has a different direction from Arab countries. (P9)

One of P9's reasons for studying overseas was to engage in a cross-cultural experience. The desire to opt for an educational experience outside his country was evident in his responses. Travelling alone as a young student indicated courage and a desire to gain new experiences.

A final reason for studying overseas mentioned by participants was to improve their English language. Learning English and becoming a fluent speaker was the main goal for P5. She expressed that her motivations for studying overseas were to learn another language and to meet people from different cultures and ethnicities. P5 seemed to be interested in the idea of living in a multicultural environment, as she would be able to discover and learn about other cultures that could be different from the Omani culture. She said:

> My only motivation for studying abroad was to learn another language and to get to know people of different nationalities who might have different cultures and get to know them. (P5)

Thus, P5 seemed to be enthusiastic about learning about other cultures, meeting new people from different ethnicities and nationalities, and gaining overseas experience. Meeting people from different cultural backgrounds and learning English was essential to P5, indicating she understood their importance for her future career.

As such, three reasons motivated Omani students, as sponsored overseas students, to travel to New Zealand: to fulfil their dreams, to boost their future careers, and to improve their English.

5.2.2 Expectations about New Zealand

The common expectation amongst participants (n = 7) concerning the characteristics of New Zealand society was that they would interact mainly with New Zealand host people. Expectations concerning the amount of social interaction they could expect with host nationals were not a key concern for most Omani students before arriving in New Zealand. For example, P5 pointed out:

> I expected that I would mix a lot with the New Zealand people more than, for example, the Chinese or other nationalities who are here. But when I came here, I found that the Māori like to mix with others, but the "white people" do not like to mix with other nationalities. Therefore, my friendships with people of New Zealand nationality can be very few compared to other nationalities, such as the Chinese or Japanese. (P5)

From this quote, it seems that P5's expectations of the interaction with host nationals were not met. She was surprised that only international students were interested in interacting with her, as well as the Māori New Zealanders. However, European New Zealanders were not interested in initiating contact; thus, it was difficult for her to develop a friendship with them.

Similarly, P3 was expecting that he would interact with New Zealanders more than international students. The reason was that he wanted to practise the English language. P3 mentioned:

> I decided to study outside of Oman because I wanted to speak English with native speakers. I never thought that international students would be my friends! I thought it would be the local people at first. (P3)

P3 revealed his expectation of New Zealand as a native English-speaking country. P3's common idea, similar to many international students, is that travelling overseas is primarily to improve English, which can only be achieved by interacting with native English speakers.

Surprisingly, one student, P11, did not care about how host country people might treat him or how they could behave. That is, P11 seemed to give more attention to his academic life than his social life. His expectations were determined by his understanding of what being an overseas student meant to him. He revealed:

> I never had expectations! I never cared about how the people here would turn out or how they would do whatever eventually. I just came here, and then [pause]. I think I met a few New Zealanders here, and that is it … I never really expected that there would be different nationalities. (P11)

The quote revealed that coming to New Zealand for P11 was for studying in the first place; hence, he did not give much attention to the characteristics of New Zealand people. Further, he did not expect that he would meet different nationalities and ethnicities. P11 seemed to be very self-confident, and he focused more on his academic adjustment.

However, the other four Omani participants held expectations that they would interact with different ethnicities and cultures in New Zealand. For example, P2 shared the following:

> I was expecting to interact with other cultures before I came to New Zealand as I searched for the country while I was in Oman. I always watch foreign movies, so I have a lot of information about their culture. (P2)

This showed that the expectation of meeting diverse ethnicities and cultures was in the mind of P2 before coming to New Zealand. Searching for the country and watching movies before coming to New Zealand helped P2 have a clear idea about the characteristics of New Zealand society.

In sum, Omani students in this study seemed to have limited expectations when they decided to travel to New Zealand as international students. Expectations held by Omani students were that they would interact primarily with local New Zealand people and converse with them in English. Most Omani students did not expect that they would interact with many nationalities in New Zealand. They were surprised at how people from diverse ethnicities were able to

communicate with each other. It is possible that this is what led to their good impression when they first arrived in the country.

5.3 Initial Experience in New Zealand

Based on interview data, the initial experience (or settling-in period) in New Zealand was described as short and exciting by eight Omani students but confused or caused homesickness for the other four. On their arrival to New Zealand, Omani participants were supported by their government as sponsored students, making their arrival smooth. This led to a positive first impression of New Zealand. Their first accommodation was in a homestay, where they interacted with local people, learned about New Zealand's culture, and improved their language skills in a supportive and family environment. During their academic journey, they first attended a language school, where they were able to interact with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This allowed them to develop intercultural friendships and practise their English language skills. In addition, they enjoyed attending university activities and mixing with other Omani students through the Omani Students' Association. Generally, most of them reflected that they felt happy and excited about arriving in an overseas country, where they enjoyed exploring their new sociocultural environment, the city and the university. However, it was initially difficult for them to adapt to the new transport system and use the bus.

The following subsections present findings about the Omani participants' initial experience in New Zealand.

5.3.1 First Impression and Arrival Support

Omani newcomer students, who are on sponsored scholarships, are received at the airport when they first arrive in New Zealand. They are guided by staff from Omani Higher Education. These procedures are arranged in advance. P2 reported:

> When I first arrived, staff from Higher Education in Oman met me at Auckland Airport and instructed me on what I should do until I reached my accommodation. He welcomed me and gave me some information, such as "do this and this". He also booked a shuttle bus to drive me to my homestay family. (P2)

From the quote, P2 reported on his first day in New Zealand, which seemed to reflect a good impression. He did not face any difficulty when he first arrived, as he was instructed on what

to do by a government staff member from his country. Basic information was given to P2 at the airport, and he was booked on a shuttle bus to travel to his homestay.

Omani students, who are sponsored by their government, also have the advantage of arriving in New Zealand in groups. A number of participants described the benefit of having their Omani peers on the flight and travelling with them to their accommodation. P11 shared the following:

> I came to New Zealand by myself from Masqat to Dubai and from Dubai to Auckland. I did not know anybody, but I knew from one of our international supervisors that there were some Omani students. So when I left the airport, I saw them: a group of Omani students. I asked them, are you the Omani students that you were flying with me? They said, "Yes." Then, we went together, and we came here. We were all planning on meeting on the bus. I met them, and we came here. (P11)

P11 explained that when he first came to New Zealand, he met a group of Omani students at Auckland Airport and travelled together to their residency.

An interesting story was reported by P6. She experienced driving on the left-hand side of the road for the first time. Unlike in Oman, drivers in New Zealand sit on the right side of the car. This was surprising to P6. She shared this story on her first day:

> I remember a funny incident that happened with me at the airport [laugh], which is driving here. They drive on the left-hand side of the road, and we are on the right-hand side! So I said to my female friend while the car was passing by, I would directly look at the driver's seat that we are used to in my country. I did not see the diver, and the car's windows were shaded. So I told my friend, to this degree, the development [laugh] – the car was like a drone! When the car passed by and we saw the driver on the other side, we laughed a lot! (P6)

The story reported by P6 indicated a lack of information about the host country. It also revealed one aspect of the differences between the home country of Omani students and the host country.

To sum up, Omani participants did not report any difficulty when they first arrived in New Zealand. Staff from their government arranged all arrival procedures in advance. They were

waiting for the students at the airport to give instructions on what to do when they first came. A shuttle bus was also ready to drive them to their accommodation. Accordingly, the first day of arrival appeared to have passed smoothly.

5.3.2 Students' Accommodation: Homestay Experience

One accommodation option for international students is a homestay, where a student lives with a local family. The university helps students to arrange this. In this study, all participants stated that they lived in homestays when they first came to New Zealand. The period of their stay in a homestay varied between several weeks to several months, depending on the students' satisfaction with living in their homestay families. At the time of data collection, nine participants had moved to live with other flatmates, and two had moved to live alone. Only one participant said he was still living with a homestay.

Most Omani participants reflected on their satisfaction with living in homestays during their initial period in New Zealand. The relationship between homestay and Omani participants was built on mutual respect and understanding. Participants described homestay benefits and some homestay regulations in the following subsections.

5.3.2.1 Benefits of Homestay

Participants described the benefits of living with homestay families. In addition to providing good accommodation conditions, homestay helped them practise English and learn about New Zealand culture. The homestay was seen to provide students with a cultural learning experience and offer students an experience of a family atmosphere.

P2 reported positive attitudes towards homestays concerning respecting others' religious practices. This indicated that his homestay was open-minded towards others' cultures and religions. P2 shared the following about his homestay:

> My homestay was a Kiwi [nickname for a New Zealander] family – only one Kiwi woman was living in the house. I was comfortable living there. She knew about my religious practices before I came, as some Arab students used to live with her. She knew about halal food. She knew that we should pray five times a day and praying time, so she offered a Muslim Prayer Mat with a compass. Thus, she knew about

> Muslims. She knew where to find halal food and advised me where I could find halal food. Hence, I did not face difficulty with pork or alcohol. (P2)

The quote referred to an essential consideration for Omani students: consuming halal food (Muslim dietary restrictions) and Muslim praying. P2 revealed that these considerations were met while living in his homestay. Thus, he did not face any problems with his Islamic practices and was able to perform them freely. Thus, P2 was comfortable with this homestay.

P7 reflected that her homestay was interested to know about Omani culture. Thus, she revealed her positive interaction with her homestay family. P7 expressed that she was cooking breakfast and lunch meals by herself. However, dinner was shared with the family. P7 also said:

> When I was living in the homestay, I was largely welcomed. They understand how I think, my religion, where I come from, and my community and culture. They showed interest in learning about my community and country and collecting information or even reading about it. They greatly respected my culture and me. (P7)

Living with a family that showed respect for others' cultures and ethnicities seemed convenient and positive to P7. She emphasised that her homestay gave her an atmosphere of welcome, relaxation, and comfort. These feelings reduced the difference between Omani and New Zealand culture in P7's mind, making her satisfied.

An important benefit of the homestay was improving their English language. P12 revealed that her homestay mother was a good source of support and that she encouraged her to practise the language. The homestay mother used to speak English clearly and slowly so that P12 could understand her easily. She also connected the English word with its reference if P12 could not understand the meaning of a word. P12 described how her homestay mother helped her. She said:

> Honestly, she was the best homestay compared to other homestays. She was talking slowly to understand her accent. She was pronouncing all the letters. When I could not understand, she took me and showed me the thing she was talking about so that she could communicate with me. In the first week, she took me for a walk every

> day for about half to one hour to talk. She was helping me to practise the language [laugh]. (P12)

The quote referred to an important aspect of the adjustment process – that is, practising the English language. Omani students revealed that they needed to practise the English language with native English speakers to know how it is used in daily conversations.

In addition, Omani participants perceived the homestay as a source of positive energy and a family environment. Showing care and passion to students was critical for their psychological state and well-being. Giving an impression of solidarity could reduce the feeling of living overseas away from family. This was evident in the initial experience of P5:

> The homestay mother I lived with gave me an Arabic impression because her name was Sarah [laugh]. She was a woman who lived alone. So she and I were only in the house. She was a very enjoyable homestay mother. She transmitted positive energy to me. She helped me during my first days in New Zealand. She cared a lot about students. When she saw me leaving my room, she took the opportunity to sit and talk to me, trying to tell me what things were going on. Frankly, I learned a lot from her new English vocabulary, especially things related to the kitchen [laugh], as they were new to me. (P5)

This quote from P5 reflected what homestay families could provide international students. This homestay mother provided P5 with kindness, care, and support that helped her feel included with family members. It also helped her develop her English language skills.

The family atmosphere offered by the homestay meant P12 did not feel homesick and lonely. P12 explained that moving from a homestay and living with flatmates with whom she could not get along caused her to feel homesick and lonely:

> I used to tell my mother the feeling of homesickness only occurred when I moved from the homestay! I did not feel homesick while living with the homestay! However, when I moved to a flat, I really felt homesick for the first time in New Zealand. This feeling was awful. I wanted to return home. The flat was one room on the first floor for me and two on the second floor for my flatmates. I knew before

> that my flatmates were close friends. Thus, I felt myself living alone downstairs. (P12)

From this quote, the homestay was seen as a valuable part of P12's initial experience; the homestay played a significant role as a sociocultural bridge. This illustrates that for some Omani students who initially felt excited about the new culture this was strongly influenced by their homestay experience.

Unlike other Omani participants in this study, P1 was still living with a homestay family at the time of the interview. He appeared to have adapted well to living with his homestay family. P1 described his homestay as the following:

> My homestay father is a Māori New Zealander, and my homestay mother is from Auckland. My first impression of them is that they were simple people. The house is neither big nor small. They gave me a nice room but a little small. It is OK. I liked the dinner in my homestay. (P1)

In this quote, P1 described his homestay in a positive manner. It appeared that P1 was very comfortable with the family atmosphere of his homestay, which encouraged him to return home during dinnertime to eat with his homestay family at a scheduled time.

5.3.2.2 Regulations of Homestay

On the other hand, living in a homestay requires following some regulations (or house rules). Some of these rules were acceptable to students, while others were not. Those who did not accept these regulations could report their interest in moving to the university. In this study, only two participants expressed discomfort with some homestay regulations.

P6 reported that one of the homestay regulations/rules was that she was not allowed to use an alarm at dawn. P6 mentioned that she was using an alarm for *Fajr-prayer* (dawn prayer). This bothered the homestay mother, leading her to write some rules for P6 to be quiet. P6 said:

> Among the homestay rules, I remember one rule that bothered me very much [smile] because their houses are made of wood, and the voice is very easy to hear. Also, the Fajr-prayer (dawn prayer) alarm was bothering them. I must wake up and make Fajr-prayer. The alarm disturbs them, although I informed them about this

> point previously! My homestay father had no problem; he used to say, "Take your comfort, and I understand this point." But my homestay mother said, "This alarm is very loud to me, so try to lower the voice". I think the voice is very audible because their houses are made of wood. While in Oman, the houses are made of brick; the sound is never heard. So we do not pay attention to this point. (P6)

P6 described an important consideration while living with her homestay – that is, try not to make any noise while others are sleeping in the early morning. P6, in the quote, showed her understanding of why the alarm was loud. This created a problem for her as she had to wake up at dawn to pray. Interestingly, the homestay father was not bothered; only the homestay mother expressed her complaint.

Another regulation mentioned by P3 was that he was not allowed to cook or invite guests to the house. Thus, he moved to live with other flatmates. He thought that his flatmates were able to support him in terms of daily life in New Zealand because they helped him to feel engaged and to belong to a social group. P3 shared the following:

> I got some restrictions – I was not allowed to invite anyone home. I was not allowed to cook; I had to eat this food and was not used to eating food [pause] for four or five days in the refrigerator! I can eat food that lasts only two days in the fridge, and on the third day, I cannot eat … I was not comfortable in the house. I mean, I was restricted; I could not do what I wanted; for example, I could not cook what I liked. These issues led me to move to live with flatmates. (P3)

In the quote, P3 explained that not only was he not allowed to cook for himself, but he also had to eat food prepared by his homestay that had been in the refrigerator for several days. This made P3 uncomfortable.

P3 and P6 also identified that their homestays were far from the university. Thus, they preferred to move to a place near the university:

> Most homestay families are very far away. You have to take the bus. I prefer to live around the university. This issue led me to live with flatmates. (P3)

> The most challenging issue I initially faced was the location of the homestay chosen by the Accommodation Office, which said it would be in Dinsdale! This area is far

> from the university in the distance. I do not know how far exactly, it could be around 9 km, which is about an hour by bus. So the time, the distance, and getting tired from the bus were challenging. We never used to take buses in Oman; everyone uses his/her private car. A month later, I could not stand it; I moved to live on campus – at Student Village … (P6)

The quotes clarified that distance from the university was critical in students being satisfied with their living in a homestay. It may lead some students to leave homestays despite their great benefits. Thus, some students said they were moving because they felt tired and going to the university was time-consuming. This was because P3 and P6 had no experience using buses in Oman, similar to other Omani students. P6 clarified that she was spending an hour every day going to the university by bus. The distance of her homestay and the difficulty of using the bus made her tired.

To summarise, living in a homestay was generally of great benefit to Omani participants. Participants reported positive experiences while staying in homestays. Living in homestays in their early sojourn may be one of the reasons that led to a feeling of excitement. Homestay families supported learning English, provided food and a family environment, and reduced cultural distance. They were also able to provide emotional support to students who felt homesick. Thus, they were satisfied with their homestay experience. However, only two Omani participants reported some regulations while living with the homestays, making them uncomfortable.

5.3.3 Language School

Omani students are required to study at a language school before enrolling in a foundation programme and a bachelor's degree, a requirement of their scholarships. The language school offers a cooperative environment that enables students to study and interact with one another. Participants' responses regarding language school revealed two themes: benefits and interactions with classmates.

5.3.3.1 Benefits of Language School

In this study, the language school greatly benefited most Omani students. Enrolling in language schools is often the first step during an international student's stay in the host country, so it is

a great opportunity for them to practise the English language and interact with other international students. The majority of Omani participants commented on the benefits of language school. The benefits mentioned by participants were around three aspects: (1) practising the English language, (2) good interaction with other students, and (3) easy to make intercultural friendships.

The first benefit was improving the English language. As Omani students speak English as a second language, they need to improve their English for academic and social purposes. Six participants pointed out that language school was a great opportunity to practise the language. They emphasised that their language improved during that period at language school. For instance, P5 shared the following:

> My language improved greatly, especially in Level 8, because it was during the summer school period, so most Omanis were returning to Oman. I even did not meet any Omanis. So this period helped me a lot to improve my language because I needed to speak with someone, and most of the people I used to speak with did not speak Arabic. They did not even know anything about Arabic. It was all through English, so the language improved significantly. (P5)

P5's quote emphasised the importance of interacting with non-Omani students. As P5 explained, interacting with ESL international students at language schools was a benefit. It is the most effective way to practise English.

The ability to interact easily with other international students was the second benefit of language school. P9 pointed out that the language school encouraged students to interact. He described that teachers assigned activities and tasks that included engagement and cooperative learning. Students mostly worked in groups and shared tasks. P9 revealed:

> The language school encourages students to interact with each other, such as in activities or competitions. Every activity or task they make at language school should be among two or more students, except for some individual tasks that students need to do alone … You cannot be left alone. This thing helped me. I was interested in interacting with others. (P9)

P9 described in his quote that the learning environment created at language school helped international students to work cooperatively and individually depending on the task. The entire class is engaged, and none of the students is left behind. Apparently, the learning environment created at language school helped him, as an international student, by making him more motivated and engaged.

Further, the language school motivated students to learn about other cultures. The classroom in language school included students from different cultural backgrounds. Teachers used cooperative learning groups; they assigned tasks to students and informed them to work in groups. Each group included students who spoke different languages; thus, students had to communicate in English to understand each other. As students only study in one classroom, they need to speak and communicate with each other. P7 described the classroom environment in the language school in the following:

> Every week, teachers assigned us to a new group to get to know each other, learn about different cultures, and interact with each other. The break time was too limited, only 15 minutes, so we could not leave the classroom. Instead, we stayed in the classroom, talking with each other and learning about other cultures and daily news. Our teachers told us that every day, we have to talk with our classmates and tell them about what happened yesterday. So I feel I can interact with them and get to know them. Also, I can understand my lessons, and after the class, I go out with them. (P7)

P7's quote referred to the role of collaborative activity in motivating students to engage and interact with one another. Being from different cultural backgrounds, students could be curious to learn about other students' cultures and traditions.

The final benefit mentioned by participants was the ability to create intercultural friendships. The Omani participants were able to make many friends easily and in a short time. One participant, P1, clarified that most students at language school were keen to learn about other cultures. They were enthusiastic about interacting and forming friendships with people from different cultures. He said:

> I have to interact with those students in my group. I felt we were similar to each other … Some of them wanted to interact with other cultures. As a result, I managed

> to make friendships with those students quickly. The language school helped me to make friends with the Chinese and Japanese, unlike the undergraduate study. (P1)

According to P1, making friends at language school was easier than at the bachelor's degree. In his comments to other international students at the language school, P1 emphasises that all are interested in interacting.

However, a few participants clarified that the period at language school was not helpful, and they were not able to improve their English. For example, P8 pointed out that his main benefits came only at the undergraduate level and that the classes for his major were of great benefit. P3 and P9 stated that they spent only a short time at language school; therefore, there was not enough time to practise and improve their English language. P3 mentioned:

> As for my English language, it did not improve a lot. The problem was in the period I spent in language school, which was only eight months. I could have studied for another eight months, but I went to the foundation programme, even though my language was still not strong. (P3)

P3 indicated that he had not been satisfied with the amount of time he had spent at language school. He thought it would have been better to spend another eight months there. That is, he felt he needed more time to practise and improve his level of English. It seemed that his scholarship might allow him to stay longer at the language school; however, he preferred to move to the university level.

5.3.3.2 Interaction with Classmates in Language School

Interaction with language school classmates not only happened in the classroom but also off campus. Participants revealed that going out and socialising with language school students outside class time was not difficult. P4 shared the following story:

> We had always been to barbecues and parties; for example, we were classmates having parties in one of our houses. And birthdays have always been celebrated. I have so far kept my birthday gifts and messages [laugh]. I remember the most beautiful trips I took with my close classmates. (P4)

P4 was enthusiastic about socialising with his classmates and celebrating birthdays and indicated they visited each other's houses for parties and took trips together. It seems that these activities gave P4 good memories.

On the other hand, P6 clarified that she did not socialise with her classmates at the language school beyond going out for coffee on campus:

> As for the interaction with classmates, I did not go out with them! Only little things, such as we used to drink coffee on campus. But I did not go out for a barbecue with them. Only at the university, we used to have coffee in the morning or lunch during the break. (P6)

P12 echoed this point:

> I was the only Omani student in that class. So I interacted with the Chinese when we only engaged in group work or presentations … I never went out for a barbecue or coffee with them [laugh]. They did not initiate contact. I felt Chinese students only establish strong relationships with their co-national students. Omani students went out together. (P12)

P12 reported limited interaction with language school classmates out of class time as they did not initiate expanded contact. She noticed that her classmates only established strong relationships with co-national peers.

Furthermore, most participants were more satisfied with the interaction in language school than with undergraduate degrees. They indicated that the language school offers a cooperative environment that enables students to study and interact socially. In contrast, the foundation and an undergraduate degree mainly focus on delivering lectures with less focus on interactive aspects. One of the responses was mentioned by P3:

> Language school provided opportunities for interaction among students more than the undergraduate did. This is because students in a language school are studying English and want to interact … There is a lot of interaction in the language school in terms of study. But in the foundation and undergraduate, it is just a lecture, and then we go out. There is no communication among students, except in some papers. (P3)

P3 specified that language school is better than an undergraduate degree in terms of social and academic interaction. He felt that there was a lack of interaction during his undergraduate degree compared to his language school experience.

Many participants attributed much value to the period they spent at language school in which they experienced good memories and an exciting time. The language school was an opportunity for the participants to make new friends. It was also an opportunity for interaction with other international students, such as Chinese and Japanese students and a few other nationalities. Hence, it was a unique sociocultural experience. Participants talked about their memories, socialising, gatherings, or trips while studying in the language school. P4 described interaction at language school as follows:

> The interaction in language school was fantastic because I met students from different cultures; for example, I met many Chinese and Japanese students … In the undergraduate degree, students only wanted to study, while in language school, they wanted to study, enjoy, hang out, play, and have money they wanted to spend. So they had a passion for getting to know many friends. And we used to go out together, have dinner, [they would] invite me and [I would] invite them … [We would] travel and spend time together. (P4)

P4's quote indicated that good academic interaction could lead to social interaction. He showed a positive attitude and engagement towards the period that he was studying at language school, as peers were keen to study and socialise; they were interested in making friends. As interaction in language school was found to be positive, P4 expanded his academic interaction to off-campus. It seemed that P4 was enthusiastic about interacting socially with his classmates in the language school. The time he spent with them and the friendships he formed with them were enjoyable to him.

Presenting a different viewpoint, P10 pointed out that language school was only related to improving language abilities. In comparison, undergraduate degrees had bigger goals and aims. For P10, the undergraduate degree was more related to a future career. P10 said:

> The university stage is bigger than the language school. Every student has his/her aims, bigger than studying in a language school. I saw students who had different goals. In language school, we have one aim: only learning the English language.

> While here at the university stage, every student has his/her goals and different ambitions. For me, social interaction and making friends were better in the university degree. (P10)

Surprisingly, P10 thought undergraduate degree study created more opportunities for making friends than a language school.

To sum up, participants appreciated the period they spent at language school in which they reflected on good memories and interactions with students from different cultures. The language school encouraged students to practise English by engaging in social interaction and cooperative learning. Therefore, students had opportunities to establish various intercultural friendships with other students. Most Omani participants commented on the vital role of language school in boosting their social interaction, developing friendships, and improving language proficiency. This led to an initial excitement about their stay in New Zealand.

5.3.4 Social Interaction in University Activities

A common agreement amongst participants was that the university offered opportunities for interaction among students. One way of doing this was by organising social and cultural activities during the academic year that included both international and local students. Engaging in social activities on campus encouraged social interaction among students. P5 remarked:

> I think the university does its best to organise activities; some of these activities are held almost daily at the university. The university expected that interaction between students would be very strong due to these activities. (P5)

P2 added:

> Yes [the university organises several activities], such as the “Cultural Hour”. The university also runs several organisations, such as the Omani Students’ Association and other clubs. These organisations gather to introduce their social customs and traditions and some cultural aspects of their countries, for instance, their food, dress, etc. Hence, it is an opportunity to meet other cultures. (P2)

The quotes referred to a university's role in motivating students to interact and mix. P2 and P5 acknowledged the university for making every effort to get students involved in a variety of events on a daily basis. These activities introduced them to other cultures and allowed them to learn about other cultures.

The social and cultural activities organised by the university were not only found to offer social interaction to students but also to help them establish new friendships. When students attended activities, they met other students. This benefit was mentioned by P11, who thought attending the university's activities would enable him to meet other students who are studying in his major. P11 noted:

> For example, "International Day", where international students come to show their cultures … In this activity, students interacted fairly well, as they wanted to have friends. A student could interact with other students who are in the same major and start friendships that could support each other. (P11)

P11 indicated that in these activities, students could start a conversation and build social connections that would expand to other social contexts. P11 thought that after meeting new students in these activities, they would share ideas and information to support and help each other.

5.3.5 Social Interaction in Omani Students' Association

The university actively supports student clubs, such as the Omani Students' Association. This club offers Omani students opportunities for social interaction with their co-national peers. These interactions are created by organising several social and cultural activities during the academic year.

Omani students described how they engaged and interacted in different activities organised by the Omani Students' Association. For example, P9 revealed intensive involvement in social activities organised by the association. One activity P9 described participating in was camping:

> I have participated in all activities organised by the Omani Students' Association since I came to New Zealand. One of the activities I participated in this year was camping. We booked a camping place. The place was equipped with tents … We

> did some activities like kayaks and entertainment competitions. We also made breakfast, lunch, and dinner by ourselves. (P9)

The quote of P9 described one experience of social interaction with co-national Omani students. Through this out-of-class social activity, P9 reflected on cooperation and engagement with his co-national friends, which optimised their affiliation to a social community. P9 seemed to communicate well with his peers as they prepared food together.

Further, the Omani Students' Association offered several volunteer work opportunities to Omani students. It is assumed that volunteering provides an opportunity for social interaction that could help international students, such as Omani students, to integrate into New Zealand society. Two students (P7 and P12) mentioned participating in volunteer work organised by the Omani Students' Association. P7 described one experience:

> I participated in volunteer work organised by the Omani Students' Association. We went to a farm and assisted farmers in cleaning the farm. The farmers there loved us after we talked with them and got to know them. It was a beautiful experience because I felt I did something good and helped with the cleaning … This changed my mood and my thinking style. I also learned about a new culture and developed relationships with others. (P7)

Participating in social activities related to the host society, as in the case of P7, offered ways to observe how people in the host community behave and interact with each other. Through these social situations, P7 learned how to engage with the farmers and how to develop relationships with them. The ability to accomplish this volunteer work opened opportunities for P7 to learn different ways of practice in the host community that might help to improve her social adjustment.

The Omani Students' Association provided students with a sense of belonging to a community at the university. It was a unique place to share experiences and develop new friendships. P7 said:

> I feel that the Omani Students' Association is bringing the Omani community closer. As an overseas student far away from my family, attending the activities

> held by the Omani Students' Association makes me closer to the community of Omanis. And I may make new friends who could help me. (P7)

In this quote, P7 indicates the Association helped her feel closer to other Omani students and meet Omani students who might assist with her adjustment.

Participation in the Omani Students' Association reduced students' feelings of homesickness after they had been in New Zealand for several weeks to months, that is after the initial period. P12 described the Association's role concerning homesickness and loneliness as follows:

> When I attended [the] Omani Students' Association celebrations, my feelings of homesickness and loneliness were reduced. Yes, we would like to be with our families, but we tell them we are with Omani groups, and we celebrate Eid [an Islamic celebration] … So the Omani Students' Association made it easy for me, as I celebrated Eid and did not stay alone. (P12)

Here P12 acknowledged the supportive role of the Association, especially in relation to Islamic celebrations.

As such, according to the participants, the Omani Students' Association accomplished its role of connecting Omani students with their co-national peers. The critical role of the Omani Students' Association was to support Omani students by organising social activities that encouraged social interaction among Omani student members and helped them develop new friendships. Participants reported being satisfied and involved in most of the social activities in the association and the volunteer work in the local community. The association also helped in reducing their feelings of homesickness and loneliness.

5.3.6 Transport System: Using the Bus

Omani students described using the bus in New Zealand as inconvenient, especially during their initial period. They indicated they were not accustomed to using the bus in Oman, as they used to rely on their families for transportation. They used private vehicles. However, when arriving in New Zealand, they had to adapt to using public transportation.

The concept of bus use was new to P11, who used a car in Oman. While P11 expressed that the transport system was his major difficulty, he believed that using the bus was a good thing in New Zealand. P11 mentioned:

> I think the most difficult thing was how much I relied on the bus to take me anywhere. In Oman, we do not use the bus. I mean, it is a new concept in Oman. I think it was two years ago that it was introduced. But here, it is necessary. So I have to take the bus or use a car. So adapting to the bus was a challenge but a good thing. (P11)

Several participants indicated that it was difficult for them to adapt to the bus system in New Zealand because they had to wait a long time for the bus. The bus schedule created a problem for P7 due to the delay of buses and the need to wait for the next bus, which she found problematic. She expressed:

> When I first arrived in New Zealand, I faced difficulty with transport because the bus did not reach its destination on time – sometimes late or delayed to another bus stop. So I had to wait for half an hour or one hour until the next bus came! It was a problem. (P7)

Similarly, P1 had issues with the bus schedule and told this story about one of his trips to the Gardens:

> I went to the Gardens at the weekend. I did not know that the last bus from the Gardens to the Transport Centre is at 2:00 pm. I went there at 11:00 am, and it was my first trip to the Gardens. At 3:00 pm, I finished my visit and wanted to return home, but I did not see a bus to the Transport Centre! I searched for buses that go to the Transport Centre. I found a bus, but I needed to walk about half an hour to its stop, and only come every hour. I calculated exactly how long it should take to reach the bus and when the bus would arrive. So I walked for half an hour to the bus stop and waited around 15 minutes until the bus arrived. (P1)

P1 pointed out that he had to calculate the time to find another bus to return to his accommodation. This experience with transportation required P1 to learn how to find

alternative ways to reach his destination. He had to calculate his time if he did not want to waste his time walking.

The difficulty of using the bus prevented P3 from going out with his friends. He thought the buses were not convenient. This led P3 to feel isolated. He expressed:

> It was hard to get on the bus, as it was not always available all the time. There was a barrier between the people and me hanging out together, so I went out alone! As you see, it is hard to get a bus here all the time, and the buses are getting late and not fast. Thus, because of transportation, I could not go out. (P3)

The difficulty of getting the bus at a suitable time prevented P3 from meeting his friends, as buses came late or drove slowly. Therefore, he went out alone.

In sum, Omani students revealed that using the bus in New Zealand was not convenient. The problem with using the bus was that they had to search for the bus schedule and sometimes had to wait for a period. Several students found this time-consuming and limited their time socialising with others.

5.4 Chapter Summary

The findings in this chapter presented themes related to Omani participants' preparation to study overseas and their initial experiences in New Zealand. Participants described how they prepared for their overseas travel, contributing to their initial excitement about the new environment. In this study, Omani participants appeared motivated to study overseas as scholarship students. They described a range of personal goals to study overseas and expectations about New Zealand. For some Omani students, travelling overseas was a dream come true, while for others, it was an opportunity to learn the English language and meet people from different cultures. Before arriving in New Zealand, participants held positive expectations about New Zealanders. They expected they would interact a lot with New Zealand host people; however, expectations did not match, and their interactions were limited to international students. A few participants expected that they would meet people from different ethnicities and cultures in New Zealand, as they had searched about the country before they came to New Zealand.

The initial experiences of participants were composed of several factors: First, Omani students reported a smooth first day upon arriving in New Zealand as staff from their government were waiting to receive them at the airport and guide them until arriving at their homestays. Thus, their first impression of New Zealand was positive. Second, Omani participants described that a homestay offered them an opportunity to practise English, a sense of the family environment, and halal food, which contributed to their excitement at the beginning of their stay in New Zealand. However, after several months, most participants moved to live with flatmates due to some restrictions placed by the homestay families. Third, the language school offered collaborative activities that motivated students to engage and interact with one another. Participants appreciated the experience of attending the language school. They made good memories and interacted with students from different cultures, such as Chinese, Japanese, and a few other nationalities. Fourth, participants acknowledged the role played by the university to organise social activities that created opportunities for students to mix and build relationships that could then expand from academic to social contexts. In addition to the university activities, social activities organised by the Omani Students' Association had an important role in bringing Omani students together, reducing their feelings of homesickness, and helping them to integrate into New Zealand society. Finally, transportation was reported as a challenge that impacted participants' experiences, as most were unfamiliar with using a bus system.

The next chapter (Chapter 6) presents findings concerning participants' social and cultural adjustment experiences.

CHAPTER 6: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

6.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents data to answer research question 2: How do Omani international students experience their sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand? In response to this question, three themes emerged: social interaction and friendship development, cultural and religious distance, and adjustment outcomes.

There are four main sections in this chapter. Section 6.2 explores how participants described their social interaction and friendship development. This section describes what types of friendships participants developed and how they interacted with their friends in the host country. The section also describes friendships and social support, and interactions with flatmates. Section 6.3 describes the cultural and religious distance experienced. This section explores several cultural and religious aspects participants faced while interacting with people in New Zealand. It also explores students' overviews of cultural distance. Section 6.4 presents Omani students' adjustment outcomes. It consists of three subsections: self-discipline, self-reliance, and satisfaction with living in New Zealand. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of the whole chapter in Section 6.5.

6.2 Social Interaction and Developing Friendships

A major theme that emerged from participants' responses was developing friendships and their function in social adjustment in New Zealand. It was easy for Omani participants to develop and maintain friendships with other Omani students. They were also able to communicate and interact with international students as long as they shared common interests. However, most Omani participants reported issues about forming friendships with host-national students.

The following subsections present the three patterns of friendships that were found, as well as subsections on friendships and social support, and interaction with flatmates.

6.2.1 Friendship-Making with Co-Nationals

The findings indicated that friendships with co-nationals (friends from the same country) made up the overwhelming majority of their friendships. For example, P1 responded:

> My closest friends are mostly Omanis, as we are always together, go out, and can understand each other easily. (P1)

P1's quote represented agreement amongst Omani students on what type of friendship was their preference. P1 indicated that his co-national students are easily identified, as they are always near each other and can meet them in many places. Thus, it doesn't take much effort to search for Omani students. This could be an important consideration that led them to mix and interact with each other.

According to participants' responses, cultural and language similarities were the main reasons to consider co-national students as the most preferred friends. P10, for example, indicated that Arabs and Omanis generally were very open when interacting with each other due to sharing similar cultural traditions. Thus, P10 referred to the safety of Arab social circles in which social contact is not complicated, especially if they were overseas students. P10 said:

> I can say most of my friends are Arabs and Omanis because this is our nature as Arabs when we meet a person; we want to know him … If I meet an Arab or Omani student in a mall, a barber, or any other place, I will directly talk with him. I may ask him personal questions, such as about his family. I may also ask about his phone number. I may later contact him and invite him for lunch or dinner. (P10)

Importantly, what made Omani students close to each other was sharing common cultural values that could be difficult to share with other ethnicities. P10 thought starting a conversation and interaction tended to be easier when meeting Arabs or Omanis, as they share similar traditions. Thus, he preferred to connect primarily with Arab or Omani students.

It was found that social interaction with co-nationals played an essential role in bringing Omani students together and positively influenced them. Being with co-national friends gave Omani students a feeling of belonging to a social group. For example, social gatherings and invitations among co-national Omani students would improve their friendships. Five participants clarified that social gatherings were the best way to maintain friendships with their co-national friends. They revealed that they kept in contact with their co-national friends by regularly visiting their houses or via social media. P7 indicated that it was easy to interact with her co-national students as she understood them easily. P7 added:

> I maintain my relations with them [Omani female students] by spending a lot of time with them … We may eat together at home or invite each other outdoors. For example, my Omani [female] friends and I usually go out for lunch or dinner together. (P7)

In her quote, P7 indicated that interpersonal relationships with co-national students were maintained through social interaction. The developing network composed of co-national friends was seen to contribute to a feeling of belonging in their internal group because of the stronger relationships between them.

However, a negative social experience could change an individual making him/her reluctant to interact with others. P12 revealed that she used to socialise with others and had many friends. However, due to a negative experience in social interaction with a group of Omani female friends, she became unenthusiastic about having new friendships, and she rarely mixed with other people. P12 shared the following:

> When I first came here, I was very social to a large degree, and I considered everyone to be my friend. However, an issue with a group of Omani girls made me satisfied to have only two girls as friends … When I was living in a homestay, I met many Arabs. They used to make many invitations. I would accept the invitation. Now, if someone invites me, I do not go [smile]. If I want to invite people, I only invite my closest friends because I do not like mixing with people like before. (P12)

P12 pointed out that arguments or conflicts may compromise her capacity to socialise with others, decreasing her social networks since making new friends can also cause conflict.

6.2.2 Friendship-Making with Multinationals

Developing friendships with multinationals (non-Omani international students) was reported as the participants' second most common type of friendship. The majority of participants showed the ability to interact with Chinese or Japanese international students both on- and off-campus. Omani students started building friendships with other international students when they were studying at language school, as most students there were international. The ability

to maintain relationships with international students depended on the participants' desire or the desire of others to interact and learn from different cultures.

Participants revealed that intercultural friendships were essential to improve their adjustment to the New Zealand social and academic environment. The academic and social difficulties faced by Omani students were similar to those faced by other international students. Therefore, they needed to communicate and benefit from their experiences. One student, P1, mentioned:

> We all share being international students. Our main purpose is to study. This matter helps us to communicate and adapt to social and academic life here. For example, if we study the same major, I could ask and benefit from them concerning our studies. They also can ask me. (P1)

In P1's opinion, international students are more likely to support and engage with one another, as they have similar educational objectives. Without adequate support, students might struggle in their academic journey and social adjustment to the host country. P1 noted that what draws international students to each other is being able to share common ideas and benefit from one another in both social and academic aspects.

Developing intercultural friendships provides several benefits for international students. One benefit mentioned by participants was practising the English language. English was used as a medium of communication among international students in the host country. International students seek to form a connection with each other. This connection would help them to improve their English. Similarly, Omani students need to communicate with other international students to improve their English. In this regard, P1 and P5 mentioned:

> The Chinese students helped me practise the English language the most. The thing is that I do not speak Chinese, and they do not speak Arabic. So we used to communicate in English. We improve our English skills by communicating and going out together. (P1)

> The period in language school helped me a lot to improve my language because most of the students I interacted with at that time were international students who did not speak Arabic. So our communication was in English. So my English language improved significantly! (P5)

The role of the English language in establishing communication and interaction among international students is shown in these two quotes. The experiences of these two participants emphasised the importance of having intercultural friendships. They assumed that this kind of friendship would improve their English language proficiency. The desire to communicate in English indicated high self-awareness of the role of English language proficiency in the learning process in the host country.

Another important benefit of intercultural friendship development was creating ways for social interaction. A participant, P4 said he shared invitations with his Chinese friends often, and they both celebrated holidays together. According to him, this allowed him to establish social contact with his friends. He said:

> My Chinese friends and I used to invite each other a lot. We used to have lunch or dinner together after school. We also celebrated our birthdays and sometimes the Spring Festival of China or the National Day of Oman. And they linked me with other people; for example, one of my Chinese friends, when I visited her house, I met her mother and her son. (P4)

P4 referred to the essential role of socialising in his intercultural friendship development. A socialising opportunity was offered to P4, as he interacted with Chinese international students. Participating in Chinese celebrations would create an intercultural connection that made P4 able to engage in various forms of cultural activities in the host country.

6.2.3 Friendship-Making with Host Nationals

Omani participants reported that developing friendships with host-national students was the least common type of friendship, as it was difficult to interact with them. One participant, P6, complained that she did not have the opportunity to interact with New Zealand students. She expected to interact with the New Zealanders or local people to practise English. However, she was only able to mix with international students. P6 revealed:

> When I first came, I met the international students, and so mixing was with them! This thing was annoying because we wanted to interact with the New Zealand people and people whose English is their mother tongue. (P6)

From the quote, P6 indicated that most international students were speaking English as a second language and interacting with New Zealand native English speakers would lead to better language learning from her viewpoint.

Although Omani students expected to interact with New Zealand host students before coming to New Zealand, only six (out of 12) of the participants mentioned that they had New Zealand friends. Thus, it appeared that participants' ability to establish friendships with co-national and international students was found to be easier than with host-national students.

Despite six participants having host-national friends, only two of them (P9 and P11) seemed to be satisfied with their friendships. This could be because P9 and P11 did not face any difficulty in English, as their IELTS scores were 6.0 and 7.5, respectively (see Subsection 7.3.1). P9 revealed that he had four New Zealand friends, and they were studying the same major. P11 explained why making New Zealand friends was not difficult for him:

> [As for New Zealand friends], till now, yes. So we get in groups, and so we get friends from the groups. From the friends that I have met, I am satisfied with our relationship. So I do not have any problems making friends with New Zealanders. (P11)

In this quote, P11 clarified that making New Zealand friends was easy for him due to his studying in groups. His group work with New Zealand students went well, and he seemed to get along with them. This made him content with their host-national friendships.

In this study, it is clear that most Omani students did not try to develop friendships with New Zealanders. Only three participants pointed out that they tried to develop friendships with New Zealand students. One participant, P4, was keen to develop relationships with New Zealanders. P4 tried to make friends on- and off-campus because he was aware of the importance of building social networks in the host-national community. P4 revealed having one New Zealand friend – a senior teacher. P4 also tried to build friendships with classmates; however, he was not able to expand the relationship from a classmate to a friend. He said:

> Unfortunately, we seldom delved into the conversation. We rarely talk outside the study. They always indicate that we are only classmates and do not expect anything

> more! So I keep myself away! I mean, I am making more effort with them, and it is better if I am making an effort with someone who wants to befriend me. (P4)

From the quote, P4 revealed that interaction with New Zealand classmates was only related to studying. He thought his New Zealand classmates intentionally limited the interaction within the study context. For him, this was unmotivating, spending time and effort developing relationships while they did not respond. As a reaction to this tendency, P4 shifted his friendships to that with co-nationals and other international students.

6.2.4 Barriers to Intercultural Friendship

Participants mentioned that interactions and forming friendships with New Zealand students were challenging for several reasons. One reason, according to P5, was that New Zealand students generally respect the privacy of others and, thus, do not like to go deeply into others' personal lives or ask private questions. She said:

> As for the New Zealanders, they do not reject me. They normally talk to me nicely when I try to talk to anyone. But they do not like to go deep into something or interfere with a person's life; they do not ask personal questions. Possibly, we, as Arabs, like to ask about a person, for example, about his/her age or so on … (P5)

Another reason reported by P4 was the difficulty entering New Zealand student groups. P4 believed that New Zealand students would not allow international students to mix with them easily. Most of their friends were from high school and continued to university together. Hence, their ability to accept new members would be limited. He mentioned:

> They [New Zealand students] established their groups before university. In other words, three or four friends, for example, studied high school and moved to university together; they walk together, eat together, and go out together! This means their group does not accept any new members easily! Then, if you enter, this is considered awkward. (P4)

A final reason mentioned by P1 was assuming cultural differences. He said:

> I do not know what the reason is! Maybe, cultural differences or different interests … It is difficult to find a Kiwi or domestic student among international students. I

> feel that domestic students stay together and international students stay mostly together. (P1)

In the quote, P1 assumed that culture was the reason, as he seemed unsure of the main reason. P1 indicated that this barrier hinders making friendships and social contact between international and New Zealand students.

In addition, a few participants stated that their personality traits prevented them from making friends with New Zealand students. Being shy, P7 revealed that making friendships would be difficult for her. She expressed having a problem making friends; she needed a long time to go deep into a relationship. P7 revealed having many colleagues, but they were not genuine friends. She described herself and her friends as the following:

> I am somewhat of a shy person! I can't build deep friendships; I have a problem making friends. But if I get used to one, I may communicate with him/her most often. For the first time, I found it difficult to make a friend with someone I had never known or met before. So I only have a few international friends. But most of my friends are Omanis. (P7)

The quote above referred to the shyness and introverted personality traits of a student. P7 described her relationship with other students. Shyness could determine the inability of a person to make friendships. P7's personality traits would likely make it difficult for her to start talking to another peer. Hence, she had few friends.

Another student, P2, described his personality as unsociable. He thought that this could lead to creating boundaries in developing intercultural friendships. P2 expressed his unwillingness to maintain relationships with some international students. He said:

> I am not very sociable to a large degree; I cannot interact with anybody. You can say, I choose whom I want to interact with. I should get along with the person, or we should have something in common. Thus, I interact mostly with the Omanis or Arabs because we share many common things in social life. I have very few international students with whom I interact but not to a large degree like the Omanis or Arabs. (P2)

P2 thought that making friendships should be maintained by common interests. Without having something in common, it would be difficult for P2 to develop intercultural friendships. Thus, he indicated that most of his interaction was with Arabs or Omanis, as they share a lot of the same interests. Thus, sharing the same interests made P2 and his co-national Omani friends engage in similar activities and have a lot of time to interact.

6.2.5 Friendships and Social Support

The majority of participants indicated that they sought support from two social relationships: Omani friends in New Zealand and family in Oman. Participants acknowledged that a key source of support in New Zealand was from their Omani friends. Students remarked:

> Mostly Omani students. I always keep in touch with them, and we go out together. If I need something, I contact them, so they help me. (P1)

> If I have a problem or need advice, I ask my Omani friends because they are my closest friends now. They do support me in all kinds of support. (P11)

The quotes referred to a type of social relationship the students choose to seek social support. Friendships with Omani students were seen to be uniquely associated with social support in which they were able to provide all the support needed. According to P1, he asked for support from his co-national friends because of their closeness and regular contact.

One participant, P4, stated that his friends' support was critical in his initial period. P4 said:

> I did not feel alienated; I never felt homesick. I came from a place and returned to the same place [laugh]. Thus, my first month was very easy because my friends helped me – this is a SIM card for the mobile, this is the bus schedule, this is Uber; things were easy! Everything is on apps, but you just need to get used to it. The university also greatly facilitates most things. There are supervisors and student advisors; if a student needs something, he/she can go to the Student Advisors' Office at the university. It is very easy! (P4)

P4 reflected that the first month of a sojourn was easy for him because his friends explained many practical matters to him such as how to use his mobile phone and the buses. He also appreciated support from university supervisors and student advisors. Due to this, he did not

experience homesickness. His experience draws attention to the influential role played by the university in supporting international students. It can be predicted from the quote that a feeling of excitement characterised the initial period of P4.

In addition to co-national friends' support, participants mentioned the role of the family in supporting them. P1 considered his family as a reliable source of support for his well-being. Regular contact with his family made P1 satisfied with life in New Zealand and did not feel a longing for his home country. He said:

> Most social support comes from my family in Oman. They helped me a lot at the beginning. Although they are very far away, I can communicate with them via phone every week. Hence, I did not feel homesick! Until now, I have not felt homesick at all because I always keep in touch with them. (P1)

The quote shows the extent to which social support from family was very important to P1 in his adjustment to the new environment in New Zealand. P1 indicated that he maintained regular contact with his family by phone, and they were able to support him. In this sense, family support contributed to not feeling homesick for P1 in the host country.

Only one participant, P10, identified that a New Zealand friend supported him. P10 was very satisfied with the support provided by his New Zealand friend and sometimes considered him before his Omani friends. P10 mentioned:

> As for social support, it depends on the problem; sometimes, I ask my New Zealand friend … It is seldom to have such a New Zealand friend who understands me, and I understand him. I may ask him anytime, and he even told me this. He said, "If you have any problem, you can tell me." (P10)

P10 reflected on his experience of finding someone who could provide support at any time. He found social companionship support from a host-national friend that no other co-national friends provided. This led P10 to consider his New Zealand friend before his Omani friends when he needed consultation or advice.

As such, social support was considered an essential aspect of the adjustment experiences of most Omani students. The relationship between social support and social relationships was obvious, as it indicated somewhat of a connection between maintaining friendships and

providing support. Close Omani friends in New Zealand were found to be a major source of support to participants. They were able to provide support when required. Omani participants also clarified that they sought support from family in Oman.

6.2.6 Social Interaction with Flatmates

At the time of data collection, nine participants mentioned living with other flatmates after moving from their homestays. They indicated that they were generally comfortable living and interacting with their flatmates. The female participants revealed that they preferred to live with co-national (female) friends, as it was easier to interact with them. For instance, P5 was very comfortable with her Omani female flatmates. Understanding each other led to positive interactions to the degree that she considered them sisters. P6 had the same opinion about her flatmates. She clarified that she and her flatmates were a small family and that social interaction with them was very good. P6 said:

> I live with two Omani girls. One girl is similar in age, and we lived together in the homestay and Student Village before moving into this flat … There is no problem with communication. We communicate via phone, and we meet at home. It is unlike other flatmates who, for example, stay in their rooms and never go out. We are different; truly home – a small family overseas. (P6)

This quote shows the positive aspects of flatting. An advantage for P6 was that one of her flatmates had lived with her in a homestay and university accommodation. P6 and this flatmate created a good social life. For her, this social interaction provided companionship and trust.

The male participants indicated they lived with Omani or non-Omani students. One student, P3, was living with flatmates from different nationalities who were non-Omani international students. He described them as social and said he was able to get along with them very quickly. P3 described his flatmates as follows:

> I live with students from different nationalities, New Zealanders, Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos. I noticed that they are social … I just have been there for a short period. I thought if I moved from one house to another, I would face difficulty with my flatmates. But, I did not; they invited me, and I also invited them. I

> communicate with them daily. After 5:00 pm, we are together – we cook together and share food. (P3)

P3 seemed to communicate well with his flatmates. Even though P3 was living for a short period in the house, he was able to gather and share food with most of his flatmates, indicating a relaxing environment. Prior to this, in the interview, P3 revealed that he could not cook while living with homestays. In the flat, he had the space and freedom to cook, share food, and do what made him happy.

6.3 Cultural and Religious Distance

Three subthemes emerged from the interview analysis related to cultural and religious differences. Omani participants described what aspects of cultural and religious differences were perceived during their cultural adjustment in New Zealand. They mentioned several cultural/religious differences between Oman and New Zealand. These were dress style, halal food and alcohol, and Muslim holidays. An overview of cultural differences follows this.

6.3.1 Changing Dress Code

In this study, changing or modifying the dress code for Omani participants emerged as a theme. Upon arrival, all participants revealed that they had changed or modified their dress style. The main reason for the change was their attempt to blend in with the local community in New Zealand; that is, wearing traditional Omani attire in Western culture might attract attention as being prominent and different from the others. This would create a feeling of stress for Omani students while interacting with foreign people in New Zealand.

The next two subsections present findings related to changing dress styles for male and female Omani students.

6.3.1.1 Changing Dress Code for Male Students

Male participants described their daily clothing in Oman. They revealed that the traditional male Omani attire was *dishdasha* (a long loose gown usually white in colour). It is worn in everyday life, such as when attending the mosque or invited to weddings, formal gatherings, or graduations. On formal occasions, Omani male participants also used to wear the Omani *khanjar* (curved dagger).

Male participants reported that shifting from wearing dishdasha to wearing Western clothes was to blend in with New Zealand's host culture and avoid anxiety when other people observe them wearing their traditional clothes. For example, if wearing Omani male traditional attire (i.e., dishdasha), P2 mentioned he would feel anxious knowing that other students see him as a stranger. According to P2, changing the Omani dress style was a coping strategy that helped to blend in with the New Zealand Western culture and to avoid any strange looks from other people. In this connection, P2 revealed:

> I feel strange if I come here wearing my traditional dress because all nationalities here, including Arabs, tried to adjust to the Western cultures by changing their dress style … If wearing my traditional dress, they might look at me strangely, as if wearing a strange dress! I do not like being in this situation, so I changed my clothes. So that this might not change how people look at me. (P2)

P2 indicated that international students studying and living in a Western country need to adapt to the traditions of these countries in terms of dress. P2 was concerned about how other people view and understand the Omani dress attire (i.e., dishdasha). Wearing the Omani dishdasha could contradict the everyday dress style in New Zealand.

Thus, P2 justified changing his dress style for two reasons: One was related to a coping strategy, and another was imitating other Arab people when travelling to Western countries. The ability to adapt to the New Zealand Western culture motivated P2 to change his dress code. He gave reasons to justify the change in his appearance in order to blend in with the host culture. This entails that P2 had the desire to interact and communicate with non-Muslim students regardless of cultural differences.

P9 mentioned another reason for changing the Omani attire. For P9, Western clothes were more comfortable than Omani attire (i.e., dishdasha). It was difficult for P9 to use the toilet or public transportation while wearing his Omani attire in New Zealand. However, it was very convenient for him to wear trousers and a shirt (i.e., Western clothes). Further, Omani attire could be more suitable for hot weather than cold weather. P9 said:

> When I came to New Zealand, I changed my clothes to adjust to the new environment and to become more comfortable … For example, using the toilet or transportation while wearing Omani attire is difficult. It is also not suitable for cold

> weather. So it is easier when you wear Western clothes … Thus, changing clothes is more comfortable, suitable for the weather, suitable to the options here, and helps me to adapt. So changing clothes has a positive effect. (P9)

P9, in his quote, referred to some differences between Oman and New Zealand in terms of the environment and facility services. Unlike New Zealand, the weather in Oman is very hot; thus, Omani clothes are more suitable for hot weather than cold weather. In addition, most Omanis use their private vehicles for transportation. They are not accustomed to using the bus. Thus, wearing Omani attire while travelling by bus was uncomfortable for them.

Noteworthy, all male participants pointed out that the change was not difficult for them. P11 indicated he did not regularly wear Omani male attire (i.e., dishdasha) when he was in Oman. He only wore them to the mosque, school, or social occasions. Thus, changing the dress code was not that difficult for P11. He indicated that he brought most of his clothes from Oman to wear here. He said:

> When I came here, I did not find difficulty in terms of changing clothes. My experience with clothes was OK! I mean, I just brought with me the same clothes that I wore in Oman here. (P11)

The quote shows that P11 was already prepared to wear Western clothes in Oman (i.e., trousers and shirts). This gave him the advantage that he did not need time to get used to the new clothes in New Zealand.

As such, all Omani male participants were willing to change their Omani dress style to blend in with the New Zealand host culture and avoid a feeling of stress from the surrounding environment. Besides, for most Omani male students, changing their dishdasha was normal, as they sometimes wear casual clothes in Oman.

6.3.1.2 Changing Dress Code for Female Students

Female participants pointed out that women in Oman wear abaya (a long loose garment usually in black colour) and hijab (a headscarf) to cover their heads. For example, P5 described the dress of Omani females as follows:

> Oman is a Muslim country, some may know. Usually, dressing or most clothing for girls is in different clothes, but it is governed by decency. The clothes there are often long, depending on what we are used to in that place. So the clothes are long and covered and, often, in public places, abaya and hijab are for girls. (P5)

From the quote, P5 shows that Omani female attire is often referred to as Omani women's national dress, which is the abaya. This dress must be modest and follow Islamic rules and traditions. This shows that Omani culture is very closely tied to Islam.

In this study, female participants had changed their abaya to wear Western-style dress (e.g., trousers and long shirts) while still adhering to wearing hijab (a headscarf). Similar to male participants, this change in dress attire was not intended to neglect Islamic norms but rather to blend in with the New Zealand culture. The primary purpose was to create a familiarity with other cultures that could find them strange if they were wearing the abaya. One female participant, P5, described why wearing the abaya in a Western country was not suitable:

> For me, yes, my clothes have changed completely, not because I wanted to change, but according to my convictions or principles, I feel that the thing in Oman is something that we are used to. I mean, if the girl goes out to a place in Oman, for example, without wearing abaya or without long clothes, it will draw attention to her. While here, wearing abaya will draw attention. I am not saying that people here are against wearing abaya, but it will draw attention to wearing this dress in a foreign country. (P5)

In P5's opinion, the dress code was related to what is appropriate in society. She pointed out that the society in Oman prefers a girl to wear abaya; thus, most girls adhere to that cultural norm. On the other hand, the society in New Zealand was used to the Western dress code. Hence, wearing abaya in Western society would be inappropriate for Muslim female students.

Overall, moving to a different cultural environment required adapting to the cultural norms and traditions of the new environment. Omani students adjusted by changing from traditional clothes to Western clothes. Otherwise, keeping the same clothing would draw attention.

Female Omani participants reflected on the effect of wearing hijabs on their academic experiences. One participant, P6, revealed that she was exposed to some strange questions

about her hijab or headscarf. The questions were asked by some international students when she was studying at the language school. She thought these questions were asked because of their limited knowledge about other cultures. P6 mentioned:

> At the language school, I remember international students used to ask us, "Do you wear hijab during the shower?" Of course, I will not be wearing it in the shower! "Do you wear hijab because you do not have ears?" I did not know if their questions were spontaneous or mockery! I mean, I did not differentiate because the way they asked implied that they were talking seriously, and so I accepted it from them. At the end of the day, you should accept encountering these things, as you choose to study overseas. (P6)

From the quote, P6's words indicated an open-minded student, who was patient when exposed to embarrassing or weird questions. P6 thought that those kinds of questions reflected limited knowledge of the significance of hijab and its meaning to a Muslim female. Being unaware of the religious and cultural values of hijab would lead some international students to wonder about these religious customs.

Further, wearing a hijab may have led to a lack of communication with other students when working on group projects. P12 thought that a lack of communication with group peers was due to her hijab. Thus, she thought the hijab was a barrier. According to P12, students in a group project would assign duties without interacting with other peers if the group included female students wearing hijabs. P12 said:

> If the group included international students and veiled girls, most problems were due to miscommunication. For example, when the group included another Omani girl and me, they assigned our work, and that was it! You do your work, and we do our work. There was no communication with them. (P12)

P12 reflected on the effect of hijab on her academic experience. While working on one group project, P12 assumed that the other students in the group avoided interaction with her because of her religion and wearing a hijab. She built her assumption on the view that international students were afraid to interact with veiled Muslim girls. On the other hand, those international students in the group might have wrong information about Islamic norms. They thought it was

not allowed to deal with veiled Muslim women because of their religion, and therefore, they decided to step back.

In sum, female participants changed their dress code while living in New Zealand. They were aware that their Omani dress code could be a barrier when interacting with international or New Zealand students. Accordingly, they developed ways to overcome that barrier. This was by changing their dress style, but they still adhered to wearing a hijab (or a headscarf) as obeying Islamic beliefs. The choice to wear the hijab by Muslim female students in a Western culture indicated a strong affiliation to their Islamic beliefs. This was central to their Islamic customs and something they chose to retain because of this.

6.3.2 Halal Food and Alcohol-Free Environment

In this study, the majority of Omani participants (n = 10) pointed out that finding halal food was not a problem in New Zealand. Participants commented that their homestays were very considerate about halal food and alcohol, as they had hosted Muslim students before. They even helped their Muslim students to find shops that provided halal food. For example, P5 mentioned:

> From the first day when she [homestay mother] picked me up from the university accommodation, she took me shopping for the things I needed. She also asked me where to find places or companies that may offer halal food because she had a background that I am a Muslim and I want to eat halal food. (P5)

P5 referred to their being shops where she can buy halal food and other things. Initially, new Omani students may be unaware of these shops. Thus, homestays supported this aspect of learning them.

P1 added a comment about pork and alcohol in homestays:

> Something good about this homestay family is that they do not drink alcohol. They also eat pork only when they go out alone. When I am with them, and they want to cook pork, they just cook a little for them, and our main dish would be, for example, chicken or meat as halal food. (P1)

P1 and P5 reflected that having self-awareness about Muslim norms enabled homestay families to be aware that Muslim students had particular requirements for dietary food. They were able to provide halal food. They also showed the respect that Muslims are not allowed to drink alcohol. Thus, these cultural differences were not found to be an issue for P1 and P5.

Only two participants (P3 and P9) mentioned that it was a little difficult to find halal food in restaurants or shops in their first year in New Zealand. One student, P9, mentioned:

> As for the restaurants, in the first year, it was not good, as the options here are fewer than in [major cities in New Zealand]. Yes, the options here are fewer if we talk about halal food. There are few halal restaurants here. I suffered in the first year, as I thought I would just eat at restaurants. As time passed, money was not enough if I just relied on restaurants. So I learned to cook. At first, I was not a good quality cook, but later I improved my cooking. Now, I only cook at home. (P9)

The quote of P9 referred to a student's lack of knowledge about the host country in the initial period. At first, P9 was unfamiliar with his city's restaurants and how to manage his living. Later, when he adapted to life in New Zealand, he found that it would be better for him to learn to be independent in terms of cooking.

One participant, P10, shared an experience of alcohol with his flatmates. P10 remarked:

> The other cultures did not affect me … For example, I did not see a drunk person in Oman in my presence [laugh] … I have lived with [international students] flatmates who used to drink alcohol. It is OK with me. I accept this. These are their decisions. I think this strengthens my belief. I mean, I became more confident that I would not drink alcohol. I think I am on the right way. (P10)

As noted in P10's quote, the drinking habits of his flatmates did not impact him, as he tolerated this and remained dedicated to his religion. P10 revealed that alcohol is not commonly consumed in Oman. However, the alcohol-related experience led to a positive effect that strengthened his Islamic values. Thus, cultural differences from other international students did not appear to affect his religious commitment.

Accordingly, halal food was not found to be an issue for Omani participants in New Zealand. Participants were able to consume halal food as part of maintaining their cultural/Islamic

practices. Only for two students, it was not easy initially. Further, no issues were reported related to alcohol that negatively affected the participants' religious beliefs.

6.3.3 Celebrating Muslim Holidays

There are two main Islamic holidays celebrated in Oman and Muslim countries – Eid al-Fitr (festival of breaking the fast) and Eid al-Adha (festival of the sacrifice). Participants described in detail how they used to celebrate these two Islamic holidays in Oman. They mentioned that celebrating Islamic holidays was an opportunity for a family and extended families to gather. Eid celebration also involves eating different kinds of Omani-ethnic food for three days.

One way to celebrate Eid in New Zealand was described by P5. She mentioned that Eid was celebrated among a small group of Omani (female) friends at their houses. P5 mentioned:

> During the two years I have been here, we celebrated Eid Al-Fitr by gathering in our houses as a group of Omani girls. We shared different meals. We tried to make some traditional meals that we used to cook in Oman. We gathered for the whole day from morning until night, talking and trying to have some fun [laugh]. (P5)

From the quote of P5, it is noted that Omani girls' students preferred celebrating Eid in their co-national groups. They could celebrate and talk freely at their home. P5 indicated that Eid was a chance for them to eat, talk, and be with other co-national friends.

Unlike in Oman, most participants reflected that they did not enjoy celebrating religious holidays in New Zealand. Although participants tried to create an atmosphere of Eid, it was still different from family celebrations in Oman. The connection between Eid and family was missing for the participants in New Zealand. Accordingly, they felt homesick during this time.

P7 revealed that her inability to enjoy Eid in New Zealand was due to the cultural differences between Oman and New Zealand. When living in Western culture, such as New Zealand, celebrating Islamic holidays could reveal a different feeling. P7 said:

> I greatly enjoyed the celebration when I was with my family in Oman. But here in New Zealand, despite celebrating Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the feeling was different from that in Oman. When living in a culturally different country, the celebration will be different. (P7)

P7, in her quote, referred to the atmosphere of Eid, which was missing in New Zealand.

The difficulty of enjoying Islamic holidays away from family made participants feel homesick. P12 mentioned:

> In Oman, the beginning of Eid was mostly by family gatherings … While here, it is very different. I felt homesick because I was not among my parents. There are indeed Omanis here, who try to create an Eid atmosphere and give us the feeling of Eid, but it is still different in New Zealand. (P12)

For P12, the Eid holiday was an occasion mainly related to family gatherings. However, when P12 came to New Zealand, she felt a longing for her country and family. Even being surrounded by Omanis, P12 still felt the difference between Eid in Oman and New Zealand.

In the same vein, P3 missed his family and celebrated religious holidays (Eid) with them. He felt lonely and homesick due to encountering an unfamiliar cultural environment. As P3 did not have any previous overseas experiences, he was not accustomed to living far away from his family. P3 remarked:

> It was the first Eid I spent without my family, which was very difficult. I mean, I missed the entire atmosphere in Oman. I mean, there is nothing here – just like a normal day. The only news on social media, and I did not see people celebrating. I am sitting alone! I did not know where the mosque was and where the people went to celebrate! I knew nothing. (P3)

Like all participants, P3 experienced living alone for the first time in his life, which made him feel confused and lost in the new culture. This was particularly evident because students said they were not used to being away from their families for such a long time, especially since they were young (around 18 years) when they first travelled to New Zealand. Such feelings appeared to be difficult for P3, as a young person experiencing loneliness and homesickness. He experienced celebrating Eid for the first time away from his family.

Overall, it was evident that students occasionally experienced the feeling of homesickness that is associated with loneliness. Most of them experienced these negative feelings after their initial period in New Zealand, specifically during their Islamic holidays since they were away from their families. They missed their families because of their strong bonds with them.

A number of participants mentioned that their lecturers were very considerate of Muslim students, as they allowed them to observe their religious holidays after doing exams. In this connection, one participant, P6, remarked:

> As for Eid, there is no celebration in which we feel Eid outside our country because I feel that the time and the environment are not convenient. For example, I remember I had a test on the morning of the last Eid. I was forced to go for a test. But they [lecturers] were flexible with us; for example, when I was studying at language school, they used to tell us: "After the test, you can go home. You are exempt from studying on that day." I mean, they will not record attendance because we have a celebration. (P6)

In the quote of P6, it was explained clearly that observing non-Christian holidays in Western countries might be challenging for some Muslim students. In this situation, Muslim students may not celebrate Islamic holidays if they clash with their classes or exams at universities that do not recognise them. Muslim students, however, can mitigate this difficulty by having lecturers who are knowledgeable about and able to understand their religious practices.

As such, celebrating the Muslim holidays (i.e., Eid) in New Zealand was not satisfactory to most Omani participants. Although participants were able to celebrate their Islamic holidays in New Zealand, they did not fully enjoy them because celebrating Eid in Oman was a family gathering and revealed happiness and enjoyment. This feeling was a reaction to the meaning of Eid, in which happiness came from joining the family. During this timeframe, students felt homesickness and loneliness.

6.3.4 Overview of Cultural Distance

Omani participants described their viewpoints about the cultural differences between Oman and New Zealand. A number of participants emphasised the vital role of their homestay in reducing the impact of cultural and religious differences on them. For example, P7 reflected that she perceived cultural differences in New Zealand. However, after interacting with her homestay family, she learned many cultural aspects of New Zealand that contributed to her sociocultural knowledge. She remarked:

> The cultural differences did not impact me to a great extent. On the contrary, I started to adapt because I first lived with a homestay family and learned many things about New Zealand and its culture … Thus, it did not affect me greatly, but I found a gap in my life in the norms and traditions of life found in Oman compared to life here. (P7)

The quote highlights the importance of social interaction with host nationals in the adjustment process. As a result of interaction with a homestay, P7 gained a greater understanding of New Zealand culture. In this process, P7 referred to different norms and traditions between Oman as an Islamic country and New Zealand as a Western country.

Another student, P1, thought that people from different cultures could effectively interact when they do not worry about cultural differences:

> I think it [cultural differences] does not affect me too much! That is, I maintain all the cultural practices that I used to do in Oman. I feel they are with me all the time. I even can practice them here with my Omani friends. Similarly, I can mix with the Kiwi culture or Chinese culture. Although our cultures are very different, they were not annoyed by my culture, nor was I annoyed by their cultures. Thus, I do not think cultural differences could be a problem for me. (P1)

P1, in his quote, highlighted two important aspects related to cultural differences. First, P1 indicated that living in a different cultural environment does not affect maintaining his Islamic practices. The second is that even though cultural differences exist between Oman and other cultures in New Zealand, this was not seen as a barrier to interacting with them.

As such, Omani participants highlighted that different religious traditions and lifestyles were perceived in New Zealand; however, they were not seen as a barrier to adjustment for Omani students and were not impacted by them. Participants acknowledged the homestay's supportive role that helped them learn about New Zealand culture. Additionally, participants revealed that the cultural differences did not seem to impact social interaction with other cultures.

6.4 Adjustment Outcomes

This section presents findings concerning Omani participants' adjustment outcomes or ways developed to address their needs to adjust to New Zealand society. They learned to become

self-disciplined and self-reliant. Participants also described how living in New Zealand changed their personalities and to what extent they were satisfied with living in New Zealand.

6.4.1 Self-Discipline

Omani students utilised ways of adjustment in response to the patterns of behaviour they saw in New Zealand. These ways were seen to be effective and enhanced their adjustment in New Zealand. One way that was mentioned by a number of participants was to respect the law in New Zealand. Participants clarified that people in New Zealand respect the law to a large degree. Two participants indicated that they were impressed by how New Zealanders comply with the law, and thus, they started to behave the same way. One participant, P1, said:

> In Oman, we comply with the law. But here, people comply with the law more than in Oman. In other words, people here respect the law very much. Hence, I respect the law similar to theirs. I became a disciplined person. (P1)

Interestingly, P1, in his quote, did not mean the law in the sense of government laws, but referred to more accepted social ways of doing things in New Zealand. An example of this aspect, according to P1, is people waiting in a queue. He referred to this aspect as self-discipline in New Zealand. Being self-disciplined, P1 changed some of his habits in the host country that he used to do in his home country. He managed to control himself and change his ways of doing things in the host society. This would improve his self-control and help him to integrate into the host country.

Being punctual was another coping strategy Omani participants used to help them adjust to New Zealand culture. Coming late to an appointment could be considered a negative habit for some people in New Zealand, but it was not considered rude or bad in Oman. However, living in a society where its members were characterised by punctuality required imitating them to integrate into that society. Thus, P2 pointed out that he started to be punctual in New Zealand. He revealed:

> Being punctual! In Oman, for example, a person says, “I will come in 15 minutes”, and then he/she comes after one hour! Here, however, I learned to come on time! (P2)

In his quote, P2 gave an example of how people in his country do not respect others' time and come late to an appointment. This habit would not be appropriate in New Zealand society, as it is against the social norms. Thus, P2 revealed that he changed his habits and became punctual to adjust to New Zealand society.

Another way of adjustment was to follow a routine to go along with a New Zealand homestay family. P4 pointed out that he changed some of his habits to adapt to his homestay lifestyle. If he did not change, he might have needed to live alone. Thus, if he wanted to integrate into New Zealand culture, one possible way was to follow their routine and organise a daily schedule. This showed how P4 tried to integrate into the New Zealand host culture. P4 clarified:

> I was at the beginning against the routine – [I am] someone who does not like the routine! But I discovered that here, I must follow a routine! It means going out at scheduled times and eating at scheduled times. No matter how much I try to change, I cannot because I will be lonely – I mean, 6:00 pm dinner starts, 6:30 pm dinner ends. I tried to make it at 7:30 pm but could not because I would be alone having dinner. (P4)

The quote shows that following a systematic way of living was a way of adjustment for an international student. P4 indicated that he might feel lonely without following a specific routine, such as a homestay way of living. He would not feel like belonging to a homestay family. He would not interact with the homestay members and, thus, would not learn some of the social and cultural traditions of the host country that would help him adjust.

Transportation was reported as a challenge for some Omani students, especially in their initial period in New Zealand. To overcome this problem, P7 used a bike as a way of transportation. She mentioned:

> So the difficulties were with transportation and food. As for these difficulties, I tried to adapt to them … I could successfully overcome these problems and get used to them, especially when I bought a bike to face the bus problem. (P7)

For P7, using a bike seemed to be an effective way to save time waiting for the bus. It seemed that P7 was uncomfortable while using the bus and hence, tried to find a solution to deal with this transportation difficulty.

6.4.2 Self-Reliance

This study found that after several years in New Zealand, the participants learned to rely on themselves and to become self-reliant. Participants maintained self-reliance in several ways. They learned how to become independent and solve their problems. They also learned how to manage their daily expenses, such as rentals and paying bills.

Studying overseas was a significant change in the participants' lives, as they came to New Zealand around the age of 18 years old. P3 described that this age was important to make a shift in life. He referred to the experience of moving from a person who depended on his family to a person who depended on himself. In New Zealand, for example, he became responsible for his accommodation and food. This was an adult way of doing things. P3 shared the following:

> There is a huge difference! Before I came here, everything I needed was offered to me at home in Oman. As soon as I arrived in New Zealand, I lived a life that must depend on myself, especially during this period – from 18 to 24 years old … I have moved from a life that is very dependent on my family to a life that is very dependent on myself, such as providing food, drink, housing, and everything … I do what I want and rely on myself for many things. I solve my problems by myself, and sometimes my friends consult me if they have any problems which I have experienced something similar before. (P3)

The quote shows that this overseas experience influenced P3, whereby he thought differently in this new sociocultural environment. P3 reflected that his life in New Zealand has changed him as a person. He expressed how he benefited from this change in his circumstances and personality. This experience also increased his problem-solving skills. He became more capable of solving problems effectively. This capability of solving issues was improved by accumulative experiences and interaction with other people. This added strength to his personality.

This overseas experience enabled Omani participants to grow. For instance, P2 learned many things in all aspects of life while he was living in New Zealand. The most beneficial thing for P2 was to become independent. He revealed that being able to decide what to do in terms of social life without asking for support from other people meant he became self-dependent. In a

similar opinion, P5 described how living in New Zealand influenced her personality concerning her self-reliance. She said:

> When I was living in a homestay, I did some or most of the things by myself, such as washing my clothes, arranging my room weekly, and cooking. So here I was mostly self-reliant, whereas, in Oman, my mother used to cook for me. (P5)

Unlike living in Oman, P5 indicated that even in her initial period in New Zealand, when she was living with a homestay, she learned how to manage her things by herself. Hence, this transitioning experience made P5 more independent in that she became more self-aware in managing her daily life matters and more engaged with the surrounding environment.

Moving to live and study overseas enabled participants to mix with many cultures and nationalities. Mixing with other international students gave, for example, P4 the ability to be more open-minded. P4 described the effect of mixing with different cultures and ethnicities on his way of thinking. He indicated that he became more receptive to other opinions and viewpoints. He also became more able to present himself and engage with others. P4 reflected:

> The experience I gained that affected my personality is that I have mixed with different groups of people of different ages, origins, and ethnicities. This experience gives me more flexibility to accept more opinions. I became more receptive to other opinions than before. In addition, and more importantly, I have an opinion and I have a presence because if I do not enhance my presence, I will be almost invisible. This gave me more self-confidence, gave me the desire to enhance my voice and have a word for me among all age groups. (P4)

The above quote of P4 shared common characteristics that he had experienced to become self-reliant in a way that was different to his home country. P4 reflected how life in New Zealand had changed him from a person who was dependent on his family to a fully self-reliant person. This is reflected in his positive thinking and engagement with other people. Being positive and open-minded, P4 became more considerate in terms of his consciousness of his social and cultural experiences.

Another aspect related to participants' self-reliance was the ability to take responsibility concerning flatting and rentals. As most participants lived off-campus and with flatmates, they

had to deal with housing aspects, such as paying the rent or power and Internet bills. They needed to manage their energy consumption. Not all participants were aware of these aspects, as they lived with their families in Oman before coming to New Zealand. However, living in flats required dealing with these aspects. This concern was mentioned by P9, as he said:

> When we came here, most of us were a little under 18 years old. I was 18 years old … When I moved to live with flatmates, things changed completely. I have to pay the house rent. I have to pay the power bills, which could increase in winter and decrease in summer. For example, I do not need to use the heater in summer. So I learned how to reduce energy consumption. While in Oman, I did not consider those things, as I was living with my family. (P9)

The quote of P9 included another example of self-reliance, which is a person's ability to learn how to manage money. One aspect of managing money was housing expenses, such as power bills. The experience of studying in New Zealand enabled P9 to learn how to be economical in spending money and dealing with rentals and bills. Dealing with these housing matters should be kept in the mind of P9 if he wants to live independently. The ability to live independently improved P9's personality and self-reliance.

In sum, Omani participants arrived in New Zealand after high school around the age of 18 years and hence, living independently was a significant shift. In Oman, interviewees were dependent on their families to fulfil their needs. However, travelling overseas to study and live meant relying on themselves to deal with study and life matters. Their life had changed since they decided to live overseas. In their country, they had to discuss every detail of their life with their parents, who were always available. Here, in contrast, they learned to become self-reliant in terms of study and life matters.

6.4.3 Satisfaction with Living in New Zealand

The majority of participants (n = 11) interviewed were satisfied with New Zealand as a country for living and studying. They did not regret coming to New Zealand to pursue higher education. For example, P4 mentioned that after he experienced living and studying in New Zealand, he was very satisfied with the country and studying education. Another student, P10, also expressed his satisfaction with life in New Zealand. He built his opinion about New Zealand in comparison with other Western countries. P10 said:

> I am satisfied with living in New Zealand. I have never lived in Britain or America. But my experience here is suitable for me, and I am comfortable, Alhamdulillah [thank God]! (P10)

Although P10 had not lived in other overseas countries, he believed New Zealand was the most suitable country to study and live in. Thus, he thought coming to New Zealand was a good decision for him. He indicated that his experience in New Zealand was pleasant.

Omani participants compared the city they were living in with other major cities in New Zealand. Before arriving in New Zealand, participants expected this city to be similar to other major cities in New Zealand. However, it was different from other major cities in New Zealand. For example, P9 mentioned:

> I am satisfied with the city I am living in now. This city is quiet and nice but not vivid like other major cities in New Zealand. If I live in [a major city in New Zealand], I will have a different lifestyle but a high cost of living. (P9)

The quote above of P9 indicated that living and studying in a small and quiet city might indicate a lower cost of living. P9 referred to financial problems and compared the cost of living in the city he was living in with other major cities in New Zealand. Unlike major cities, P9 clarified that small cities normally have a quiet lifestyle but a relatively low cost of living. This could be more convenient to P9, as a sponsored student, that his monthly allowance was relatively acceptable compared with the cost of living in the city he was living in. Thus, agreement on the quality of living might raise satisfaction in the host country.

Another aspect that impressed P6 in New Zealand was practising religious beliefs freely. She expressed being happy to see places to pray and mosques in many places in New Zealand. People from different ethnicities and cultures were able to practise their religious beliefs in New Zealand freely. This raised P6's satisfaction with living in New Zealand as a host country. She mentioned:

> Here, there are mosques and places of prayer at the university and the airport. This thing is very beautiful. I was amazed! For example, in France or Britain, airports do not have places for praying. But here, for example, at Auckland Airport, there is a place of prayer. So this is a nice thing here. (P6)

One aspect of maintaining Islamic beliefs is praying. In P6's opinion, maintaining cultural and Islamic practices was an important consideration that contributed to satisfaction in the host culture. Being in a Western country promoted P6's attention to observing aspects of religious beliefs. Many religious aspects were not found in many European countries. The ability to practise religious beliefs freely made New Zealand a unique country and a good place to study and live.

Furthermore, Omani participants revealed positive opinions about the characteristics of New Zealand host people, saying that they were generally friendly. They were open-minded and kind towards other ethnicities and cultures. This was surprising to some participants. For instance, when P12 arrived in New Zealand, she clarified that dealing with New Zealanders was surprising. In this regard, P12 described New Zealand people as the following:

> I did not know New Zealanders would be so nice to this degree! I did not expect that I would open a conversation with a foreign person in my life. They [New Zealanders] are so nice that they would open a conversation with anybody, even foreign people. They welcome you as if they have known you for a long time. This is the best thing that made me comfortable in New Zealand. (P12)

P12's quote explicitly describes New Zealanders as being very good people. This opinion was based on the positive behaviour of New Zealanders observed by P12. Socialising with New Zealand host people was a positive experience. According to P12, New Zealanders were friendly people. She expressed that her decision was exciting and that she was very satisfied dealing with New Zealand people. Accordingly, she did not regret choosing New Zealand as a host country.

In a similar viewpoint, P8 reflected on his satisfaction with the way people in New Zealand deal with others. In this connection, P8 gave an example to compare people in his country and people in New Zealand. His example was related to very friendly staff in New Zealand. He pointed out that bank staff in New Zealand always welcome customers with smiling faces, whereas bank staff in Oman always show serious faces. P8 shared the following:

> New Zealand people are friendly and kind. I used to tell my parents about life here and in Oman is like entering the bank; when I enter the bank in Oman, and when I enter the bank in New Zealand. In Oman, most staff at the bank are usually serious;

> nobody smiles. I do not generalise, but this is a general impression [laugh]. While in New Zealand, they always smile and give you positive energy. So I feel this is something very nice [laugh]. Alhamdulillah [thank God], I have a good impression of New Zealand in all aspects. (P8)

New Zealand people share a set of values that stem from their culture. These values are based on respecting other cultures and ethnicities. P8, in his example, referred to these common characteristics of New Zealand people in general. He indicated that people in New Zealand smile and deal with others in a friendly manner.

Only one participant in this study, P3, expressed that he was only partially satisfied with his experience in New Zealand. He evaluated some aspects of his sociocultural experiences as positive and other aspects as negative. He thought his experience in New Zealand would only help him when returning to Oman in some respects. P3 reflected that he experienced some sociocultural situations in which he was not fully satisfied. He said:

> I have New Zealand experience. I consider it a good experience when returning to Oman that I would, for example, build a family and engage in married life. However, I am not fully satisfied with my experience here. I can say, on average, because of the experience that I went through in New Zealand, maybe it is not like what I expected it to be and what I drew in my mind before! I could not say I expected to see this social and cultural life and the way of living here. (P3)

P3 believed that he learned from his experiences in New Zealand to take responsibility, such as things related to establishing a family in the future. However, it seemed that P3 had different expectations before coming to New Zealand, which made him partially satisfied while living and studying in New Zealand. As mentioned earlier, P3 expected that most of his interactions would be with New Zealanders; however, he was only able to interact with international students (see Subsection 5.2.2).

In summary, participants described their satisfaction with living in New Zealand. All participants showed they did not regret coming to New Zealand to pursue their overseas higher education. For them, New Zealand would be better than many other overseas countries. Participants further revealed their happiness in dealing with New Zealand people. They evaluated New Zealanders as being kind and welcoming to other ethnicities and cultures.

6.5 Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this chapter focused on the sociocultural adjustment experiences of Omani students in New Zealand. They described the students' needs for social interaction and developed friendships, how they perceived cultural and religious distance in New Zealand, and what adjustment outcomes they reported.

The first section focused on the role of friendships in the social experiences of Omani students. Friendship development with co-national students was described as the most common and favourable type of friendship. Participants specified that the majority of their close friends were Omani students, and these friends provided most of their social support. Intercultural friendships with, for example, Chinese or Japanese international students were reported by a number of Omani participants. The majority of participants were dissatisfied with their friendship formation with New Zealand students due to the difficulty of interacting with them. Only two participants seemed satisfied with their host-national friendships; they considered they were able to form these friendships because of their English proficiency. Further, participants who were living with flatmates, usually from different nationalities (e.g., New Zealand, Chinese, or Indian students), revealed a positive interaction in their accommodation and were able to maintain communication with them.

The second section explored how Omani students perceived their cultural and religious experiences while living and studying in New Zealand. All participants (males and females) reported changing their traditional Omani attire. They stated that changing their dress style was not to neglect their cultural traditions but to blend in with the New Zealand local community. They thought changing their dress helped them to blend in with New Zealand culture. Participants indicated that they did not find any difficulties concerning halal food. Their homestays were able to provide halal food and were highly considerate towards Islamic practices. As participants were away from their families, they reported dissatisfaction with the celebration of religious holidays in New Zealand. For them, religious holidays meant gathering together and celebrating with their families. Participants reported feeling homesickness and loneliness spasmodically after the initial excitement stage in New Zealand because of their inability to enjoy their religious holidays and leave the homestay's family atmosphere. Interestingly, participants indicated no issues with cultural distance and that it did not impact their adjustment experience.

In the final section, two major changes in participants' behaviours as a result of their overseas adjustment experiences were reported: increased self-discipline and self-reliance. The aspects of self-discipline mentioned by participants were respecting the law, being punctual, and following a daily routine. As participants arrived in New Zealand at the age of 18 years old, becoming self-reliant was a major change as they had been living with their families in Oman. Their families had taken care of all their needs. Now, they needed to be more independent. Finally, Omani students described New Zealanders as kind and welcoming, contributing to their overall satisfaction with living in New Zealand.

The next chapter (Chapter 7) presents the findings of this study concerning participants' interactions in academic life.

CHAPTER 7: INTERACTION IN ACADEMIC LIFE

7.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, the findings are related to research question 3: How do Omani international students adjust to academic life at a New Zealand university? The findings focus on interactions in academic life, specifically participants' enrolment in their bachelor's degrees and English language proficiency. These findings are important because they set the scene for effective academic adjustment, a major purpose for most overseas students.

This chapter has three main sections: Section 7.2 reports findings regarding undergraduate degrees. This comes in five subsections: students' first impressions of undergraduate degree, interaction with classmates in undergraduate degree, group work interaction in undergraduate degree, relationship with lecturers, and coping with extraordinary events. The second section (Section 7.3) presents the participants' experiences of English language proficiency in three subsections: English language as a barrier in social life, English language as a barrier in academic life, and need to improve English language skills. Finally, Section 7.4 presents a summary of the chapter.

7.2 Undergraduate Degree

Omani participants reported some difficulties when they began their bachelor's degrees. This section describes students' first impressions and interactions in the undergraduate degree, their group work experience, their relationship with lecturers, and how they coped with extraordinary events (COVID-19).

7.2.1 Students' First Impressions of Undergraduate Degree

The first day of the undergraduate degree was a little difficult for most participants who were unfamiliar with the new academic environment that was different from the language school. Unlike the language school, the bachelor's degree students had to study every paper in a different classroom and with a different lecturer. P10 shared a story about the first day of his bachelor's degree:

> I remember the first class in my major was calculus. I entered from the front door that was for the lecturer. Students were looking at me when I entered the class [laugh]. I entered and sat in the front seat. I was unaware of what was going on! There were a large number of students in one classroom, and all of them were talking. Everything was different. When the lecturer entered the classroom, it was different from what I expected. I was surprised that the lecturer suddenly entered the classroom and started the lesson without any introduction or warm-up, unlike in language school. (P10)

The quote shows that this new academic environment appeared to be different from what P10 expected. The large number of students in the classroom was a little surprising to P10. The teaching style differed from what he expected based on a language school. Thus, P10 needed to deal with this new classroom environment and teaching style differently and adjust accordingly.

P8 and P9 reported another incident on the first day. They mentioned that they were confused about finding the location of the classroom. Thus, they relied on Google Maps to guide them to the location of their lectures. For instance, P8 shared the following:

> The first day at the university was difficult. I knew nothing about the university [laugh]. I used to ask a lot. I did not know what to do! Many incidents happened, and I did not know what to do! For example, what is the best solution to solve some problems? … My friend and I used to use Google Maps to know where our lecture was. (P8)

P8 pointed out that he faced some issues initially in his undergraduate study. These issues were due to a lack of knowledge of how to initially solve problems related to his academic life. It appears; however, that technology facilitated finding his way around the university.

7.2.2 Interaction with Classmates in Undergraduate Degree

A number of participants identified that interaction with classmates in undergraduate degrees was limited. Participants described some reasons for their overviews. One reason, according to P6, was that the lecture in the undergraduate degree was only one hour, which was not long enough to create opportunities for interaction among classmates. In many classrooms, the

undergraduate degree structure made interaction a little more difficult due to the limited time classmates spent in the classroom. P6 said:

> When I started my bachelor's degree, I had no opportunity to have a coffee with a [female] friend from another nationality because the lecture was only one hour. One hour is not enough to get to know her and invite her to coffee. I finish my class and, then, I have a break, but at the same time, she has another class. Our schedules are incompatible … I can say an excuse that I have a class, or she says, I have a class. (P6)

P6 referred to an issue that limits interaction between students. Students may have different and busy schedules; thus, it can be difficult for them to meet and socialise.

Another possible reason for the difficulty of interacting with classmates in the undergraduate degree was mentioned by P10. P10 thought that interaction is associated with exchanging information among classmates. They would interact when they wanted to share ideas related to their studies with other classmates. This could be the reason for their limited interaction when related to individual work. P10 revealed the following:

> As for interaction with my classmates in my major, I always look for a classmate who could benefit me, and I benefit him. Classmates are not always friends. It is just exchanging information or ideas. Most undergraduate students are looking for mutual academic benefits, not friendships. That's it – everything ends after that. (P10)

The quote is about being pragmatic about academic benefits and not friendship. P10 thought most undergraduate interactions were about "mutual academic benefits" rather than friendship.

Interestingly, P4 thought that students in New Zealand were generally satisfied with a few friends, while in Oman, most students wanted to have many friends. As a way to develop relationships with classmates, P4 tried to invite his classmates to coffee during a class break, but he revealed his disappointment after several invitations. He shared this story:

> I tried to develop friendships with my classmates in my major. I always invite them to coffee if there is a break in a workshop or tutorial. I always say, do you want

> coffee or something else? … I expected more interaction, but unfortunately, I tried hard, but I didn't find any positive reaction. (P4)

P4 tried hard to develop relationships with his classmates, but it seemed he struggled to find any acceptance. This led to a little dissatisfaction for P4 during his bachelor's degree academic interaction.

To sum up, Omani participants described their experiences of interaction with classmates in undergraduate degrees. It appeared that they were generally not satisfied with interaction with classmates, as the interaction was found to be limited when related to individual work. In their responses, participants described a variety of reasons for their thoughts. The undergraduate degree consists of only one hour of lectures, which is not enough for students to interact with one another. Interaction in the classroom is primarily focused on exchanging information and ideas, not expanding to social contexts. The New Zealand students have established few friendships and do not wish to expand their friendships.

7.2.3 Group Work Interaction in Undergraduate Degree

In this study, group work interaction refers to communication among study partners or peers in a small group to accomplish a group assignment. Omani participants indicated that most of their papers included group projects, group presentations, tutorials, or workshops. This learning environment offered a medium of interaction that could be more motivational than usual lectures. The ability to fulfil group work depended on the successful interaction of individuals in a group with one another.

Some participants expressed satisfaction with the group work interaction, while others reported issues leading to dissatisfaction. In this study, half of the participants (n = 6) were satisfied with their interaction with group work. They reported good communication with most study peers within the group work. For example, P11 emphasised that when group members understand each other and communicate well, they continue to work on future projects. P11 mentioned:

> In the first semester, I had a group project in ENGEN170. Students and I were in the same group for the whole semester. So we got to know each other. And we helped each other to complete the group project successfully … During that time,

> we had fun, laughed, enjoyed, and talked about different things, not only about our group project … So we decided to work together on more group projects in the second semester in different papers. (P11)

The quote refers to a collaboration in a group project. P11 and his group peers found themselves happily engaged together while accomplishing their group tasks. They established good contact with one another, which made them comfortable working together. This indicates that the group project required a kind of familiarity among students to establish a relationship.

Good interaction among group members could lead to friendships. P4 revealed that he expanded the interaction with his study peers to form friendships on Facebook and Instagram. Thus, academic interaction led to an opportunity to create social interaction, even if it was only on social media. P4 mentioned:

> We were in a friendship, and we made a group on Facebook. We were adding each other on Facebook and Instagram, following our posts and interacting with each other. Until today, we always post 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year'. I hope these activities are more because they encourage us to contact other students outside the classroom. (P4)

P4, in his quote, explained that students in his group contacted each other freely outside the academic environment. Interaction in social media could be the most favourable way of communication, especially among young people. Thus, P4 and his study peers found a medium of interaction that was more motivated for social interaction than a normal classroom. Interestingly, he referred to his group classmates as friends. He indicated that they had kept in touch via social media over the university holiday period (Christmas and New Year), which suggests a kind of familiarity and interest in forming a friendship outside the academic context.

Group work offered an opportunity to interact with students from different cultures if the group included multiple nationalities. It enabled group members to get to know other cultures. P8 was enthusiastic about interacting with his group members, who were from different nationalities. He remarked:

> In my first year, there was a paper on ENGEN180. In this paper, we had to design a boat. This was my first project. At first, they assigned the groups. I interacted

> with many nationalities in the group, such as Kiwis, Māori, and Chinese. We worked together to design the boat in all its details. This group project was very nice. I did not expect that I would do a project like this one if I studied in Oman. (P8)

From P8's quote above, it seemed that he did not expect to have this kind of group work experience and achievement before coming to New Zealand. However, interacting with students from different cultures raised P8's engagement in group work. Further, the collaborative learning that offered peer interaction within the group could be the reason that motivated P8 to be an active learner.

However, six participants reported several issues that impacted interaction in group work, including students of mixed levels, a random selection of group members, a language barrier, and an inability to form friendships with students.

One important aspect raised by some participants was that not all students could make an equal contribution to performing assignments for the group. P5 seemed unsatisfied with the different levels of students in the same group. Similarly, P12 reported that a group might include students from first- to fourth-year students. This, according to P12, created gaps between students. For example, some students might complete most of the work, while others might just accomplish a small amount of the tasks. P12 reported that in a group project, she was a second-year student and was working with third-year students. She worked with more experienced students, who did most of the work while she only participated in a small amount of the group's work. P12 shared the following:

> For me, I do not like working in groups because of the problems that have happened and the miscommunication among us. The last time I worked in a group was last year with students of mixed levels. They were third-year students, and I was a second year. So they did not allow us to work. The problem lies here. They knew the work, but we were still beginners and did not know what to do. They thought we did not know what to do, so they just gave us orders. They even took our opportunities; they took our work. In other words, they did 80% of the work, and we did 20%. In the end, they just wanted to finish the work, but we did not get many benefits. (P12)

From the quote, P12 was not satisfied with communication among the group members. It seems that when students are from different levels, they face an issue interacting with each other.

Choosing the group members might not be well received by some students. When students in the group are unable to get along, miscommunication may occur. P3 thought that other students in the group treated him wrongly. Thus, he was not satisfied with his final results after completing the group work. P3 shared the following:

> The group selection was randomly taken in the first and second years of my major. I came with students who knew each other. I mean, they are friendly but just lazy. I was working; I am not saying my job was 100% perfect, maybe just good. When I noticed the work of the other group members, I discovered that my work was somewhat similar to theirs, but they got higher grades than mine. So I faced problems with this group and could not interact with them … (P3)

P3 associated his lower grade after completing the group assignment with the selection of students in the group. It seems that P3 prefers to choose his study partners to be comfortable working together. P3 was not engaged because the other members of the group knew each other, but P3 did not know any of them. Thus, some issues occurred between P3 and the other students in the group. As a result, P3 was not satisfied with working with his peers in this group.

A further issue in multicultural group work reported by Omani students was proficiency in the English language. Compared to local students, a number of Omani students identified that their low English level creates difficulty in completing group work successfully. For example, P7 pointed out that when working in a group that includes a mix of students who are native English and non-native English speakers, the language barrier raises a problem. She revealed:

> Sometimes, we may make group presentations in some papers, and this may get us closer to each other. I made a group presentation in Business class. It was shared with two students; they were non-New Zealand students, but English was their mother tongue. They were somewhat careless! I noticed that if students' mother tongue is English, they find the topic easy! While we, as non-native English international students, find the topic of study difficult … (P7)

The importance of having a good level of English was also evident in P3's group work experience. He mentioned:

> In my second year, I had a paper that should be done in groups. My group included New Zealand or domestic students … I had a problem in terms of communication with them … I thought I would get a similar grade, but I got less than their grades! This affected my grade on that paper! Instead of getting an A- or B+, I got a C-. [pause] I worked hard, but they thought I was not working enough because my English was low! Thus, they fixed some of my work and reported that! (P3)

It seems that P3 faced difficulty communicating with New Zealand students, and this language barrier may have made it more difficult for him to understand the requirements of the group tasks. This led New Zealand students to try to help him. However, he seemed dissatisfied because he got lower grades than them. Apparently, as ESL learners, some Omani students perceived a gap regarding a lack of English language skills when working with New Zealand or domestic students.

On a different issue, P10 identified that although students could work together for three or four months on the same group project, forming friendships that could persist after the group work completion was difficult. P10 reported that his relationship with other study partners was just during the group task. After completing the group work, they behaved as if they did not know each other. P10 described his experience in one group project as the following:

> We used to be in a group that consisted of four students. I was expecting that I could make new friends with them. In some group projects, we worked for three or four months within the same group. I expected that I could make friends or relationships during the period of my study. Relationships that could last for a long time. But in most of my group projects, I was shocked to see that everybody forgot the others after we finished the group project. If we work together, we should not forget each other … (P10)

P10 added:

> I still prefer to work with New Zealand or international students in group work, as my goal is to get good grades and achieve a better academic level … It is better to

> speak English. But if there is one Omani student, I have to talk with him in Arabic. So I think it is better if the group work includes many nationalities. (P10)

In this quote, P10 refers to a long-term versus casual friendship. P10 expected that the relationships with group work members would lead to long-term friendships; however, they did not. Although P10 expressed disappointment with regard to friendships, his main objective was improving his academic and English skills.

In summary, participants reflected on their experiences concerning group interaction with study peers. Working in group work was a good opportunity for the participants to interact with other students, as it included a small number of students. It could also enable the participants to form friendships with the group members. However, they reported a few issues in the group work: the group included students of mixed levels, a random selection of group members, a language barrier, and an inability to form friendships with students in a group.

7.2.4 Relationship with Lecturers

The majority of participants (n = 9) reported positive relationships with their lecturers. They highlighted the quality of this relationship, as they appeared satisfied with the academic support provided by lecturers. They also revealed positive interaction with their lecturers and tutors. For example, P4 pointed out that he was very satisfied with the assistance provided by his lecturers. His lecturers were always available to provide adequate support. P4 said:

> The lecturers are cool! Honestly, whenever I move to a stage in my study, I like the lecturers more. Some of them are very strict, but the stricter they are, the better for me … They are always trying to help students. They are always trying to guide students. Whenever I needed them, they were always available. Any problem with academic issues, they were always ready to help. Thus, I am 100% satisfied with the support provided. (P4)

The above quote by P4 refers to the quality of the academic relationship and interaction between students and lecturers. It appeared that lecturers used different ways to assist students in the classroom. This assistance was shown in the form of guidance to academic issues encountered by students during academic life. Lecturers also maintained the quality of

interaction with students, which led to successful academic experiences. Therefore, P4 was an active learner during interaction with lecturers in the classroom.

In a similar opinion, P9 and P12 mentioned another important aspect that contributed to successful interaction with their lecturers. P9, for example, compared two types of lecturers; one type of lecturer was always ready to support students, and another type avoided students' questions. P9 reported that most of his lecturers were from the first type. He said:

> Most of my lecturers are good! They are interested in answering my questions. They do not have a problem and are willing to help. This thing helped me, as I like this kind of lecturer. I do not prefer a lecturer who avoids students' questions or answers them carelessly just to finish. The first kind of lecturer is more than the second kind. They are cooperative and helpful. (P9)

P9 positively evaluated the lecturers. His evaluation was based on a lecturer's availability and readiness to respond appropriately to students' enquiries. P9 indicated that his lecturers were able to support him. He appeared satisfied with their feedback and engaged well during the lecture.

Other participants, P4 and P12, commented on the informality between students and lecturers. In P4's opinion, stress and pressure would be reduced when students were given more freedom to discuss and make decisions in the classroom. This is illustrated through the informal student-lecturer relationship. P12 mentioned another aspect of the informality of the relationship between students and lecturers; that is, how to refer to lecturers in New Zealand. P12 referred to informality in academic life by the following:

> In Oman, some lecturers do not prefer students to call them by their [first] names. While here, I was surprised that students called the lecturers by their [first] names. For example, we call a professor by his/her [first] name. In the beginning, I was embarrassed to call a lecturer by his/her [first] name, but later, I learned that this is normal here. (P12)

When P12 first arrived in New Zealand, she was expecting a professional studying relationship between students and lecturers like in Oman. Therefore, P12 needed to adapt to the informal relationship between students and lecturers in New Zealand universities.

However, three participants reported some issues concerning interaction or academic support from their lecturers. P10 expected more support from his lecturers. He complained that some of his lecturers did not cooperate with him, did not respond to his emails promptly, and did not provide adequate support to him. This made P10 a little disappointed with some of his lecturers. Another issue with the lecturers was mentioned by P3 and P5. P3 remarked that most lecturers were very busy, and it was difficult for them to provide sufficient time for academic support or interaction. The reason was related to a large number of students in the classroom, which limited interaction with the lecturer. P3 revealed:

> There is no communication with the lecturers because the classroom is very large; for example, a lecture may include 150 students! The lecturers are also very busy with research and other things. So it is difficult for a lecturer to give a student time to talk or to do something. So we do not often communicate with most of them. (P3)

The above experience of P3 expressed that even though the majority of participants were satisfied with their interaction with their lecturers, few students had negative experiences. P3 explained that the lack of communication with his lecturers was due to their heavy teaching schedules and research.

In sum, most Omani participants expressed satisfaction with their interaction with lecturers. Participants were satisfied with the lecturers' willingness to provide academic support, to answer questions, and their informal relationships. Alongside this, a few participants expressed dissatisfaction that lecturers had not communicated well, which they attributed to lecturers' heavy workload in teaching and research.

7.2.5 Coping with Extraordinary Events

During the time of interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic, an extraordinary event, had a significant impact on social and academic life. This pandemic affected people's relationships because of the prevention of social interactions. It also affected the education system, leading to a shift to studying online. A number of participants commented on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown on their life and study. They reflected that this led to a lack of interaction and communication with other students. For instance, P8 pointed out that due to the

lockdown and the shift to studying online, most group projects were cancelled. P8 also stated that he was only able to interact with his flatmates. He mentioned:

> In the period of lockdown, I did not remember … I guess it was only one group project. We were divided into groups. So there was not any interaction except only with my flatmates. (P8)

The online study offered a different academic medium, where managing group work might be a little difficult. P8 indicated that he was able to participate only in one group project. Thus, interaction with study peers was significantly impacted.

As emphasised by Omani participants, there was a lack of social interaction both on- and off-campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown, which negatively affected communication among friends and other people. Specifically, it significantly impacted the participants' engagement in the local society. P7 complained:

> Under the current circumstances [the COVID-19 pandemic], the interaction has significantly decreased, as we need other people to communicate with, but for now, there is none! (P7)

P7 reflected that the lockdown had changed all people's lifestyles. People needed to stay home. It seemed that P7 felt a sense of isolation.

However, two participants revealed different opinions about the effects of this pandemic. They reflected that the study online increases academic interaction among students. For instance, P9 revealed that the lockdown increased the number of group projects he had to work on. This offered more opportunities for him to interact with his peers. P9 remarked:

> For me, COVID-19 made me get to know people more than before [laugh]. I had more group projects in the last semester during the lockdown than before. After changing the criteria of grades in which the group work will take more grades than individual work, students in those groups were forced to communicate and search for other students in the group … From time to time, we could speak about other topics, such as online papers, assignments, or grades. This generally strengthens my relationships. (P9)

Interestingly, the lockdown and the shift to studying online offered great opportunities for P9 to interact more in group work. Students in the groups were obliged to communicate and interact with each other. However, the reason for this increase in the amount of interaction was not related to the shift to online study but rather to the focus on group evaluation. Unlike individual evaluation, group evaluation motivated students to work cooperatively.

7.3 English Language Proficiency

The English language played an essential role in the social and academic experiences of Omani participants in this study. The ability to speak English fluently was seen to have a major influence on the participants' social and academic interaction with people in New Zealand. The study found that speaking English fluently (or having an acceptable level of conversing in English with others correctly) was identified as a major challenge in the adjustment experiences of Omani students.

This section presents Omani students' experiences concerning the English language as impediments to their social and academic life in New Zealand. It also includes the need to improve their English skills.

7.3.1 English Language as a Barrier to Social Life

A key theme that emerged was considering the English language as a barrier. This theme was associated with major challenges that faced participants, especially during their initial period in New Zealand. The majority of the participants indicated that their English language was often limited. Thus, they identified themselves as not proficient in English, but they were keen to improve their language. A particular concern they raised was the difficulty of conversing with New Zealand people, who are native speakers of English. For example, P2 commented on his main challenge when he first came to New Zealand:

> Um, similar to other newcomer international students is the language – the difficulty in communicating with native English speakers. Although we have studied English in schools, we did not practise the language in daily life nor practise with native speakers. There are also different English accents. Our English teachers at school were Omanis so that we could understand easily. Here, communication

> with native English speakers is different from what I have studied before. So the difficulty in English was everywhere, even at the university. (P2)

P2 was not used to speaking English before coming to New Zealand. P2 believed that his difficulty with English was because he had not developed a good foundation in speaking skills; that is, his school teachers in Oman had been non-native English speakers.

Further, participants described language-related problems concerning speaking in the initial period. Many participants complained about their lack of vocabulary and conversation ability in English. They often found it difficult to express themselves and to find the right vocabulary when speaking. P10 mentioned:

> The most challenging thing was the language. If you want anything, you will talk with the person next to you. If you do not have a language or you cannot form a correct sentence, how would you transfer information to other people? I used to translate before speaking about what I wanted. I was not bad at English, but I did not know some vocabulary. (P10)

P10 pointed out that good communication needs good English basics. He was using a dictionary due to his limited vocabulary. Therefore, a lack of language proficiency impacted participants' conversing with others in New Zealand.

A second language-related problem reported by participants was what New Zealand signs and labels mean. One student, P6, described how she could not understand some of those signs at the beginning. In this context, she said:

> When I see a sign "smoke-free", like a Google translate or a translation of someone who has only seen this sign here – smoking is free [laugh]! I even remember in Student Village, there was a sign on the floor where I was living, "alcohol-free" [laugh]. What does it mean?! The apartment next to us gives alcohol for free! (P6)

The importance of using language in real life was highlighted in P6's quote. P6 misinterpreted the meaning of a sign due to her limited linguistic knowledge. She mistranslated the sign's meaning in a way that led to an opposite meaning.

However, only two participants (P9 and P11) in this study clarified that English was not considered a barrier due to their high level of English proficiency before coming to New Zealand. They spent only a few weeks in language school compared to other Omani participants in this study. They commented:

> As for the English language, my language was good before coming to New Zealand. I got a 6.0 in IELTS. So I just studied General English at the beginning of my stay to get used to New Zealand's accent. It was just for four or five weeks … Language was not a barrier for me because I had a good score on the IELTS test. (P9)

> I did not face many problems [in English] … I only attended a language school for a short period because I had high scores. So I did not need to do it. I skipped it! I had a 7.5 in IELTS. So I just skipped through it. The thing is that they put me in an English class, but it is not for me! For me, it is a waste of time! (P11)

The quotes clearly illustrate the positive effect of English proficiency on those students. The students felt self-confident due to their high level of English language. Accordingly, they did not face many language problems compared to other participants, which did not make the language an obstacle for them in New Zealand.

7.3.2 English Language as a Barrier to Academic Life

English was not only seen as a barrier in social contact but also in an academic environment. Two participants correlated language barriers with the difficulty of understanding accents of New Zealand English. Their struggle could be related to unfamiliarity with practising English with New Zealanders, whether in a social or academic context. P3 said:

> As for my undergraduate degree, it was difficult for me to understand other students' accents; it was very fast, and I did not understand what they [New Zealand students] said. It was difficult communicating with them at the foundation stage. This stage was after language school and before the undergraduate degree. I studied a foundation programme. Even in my first year of study, I struggled to communicate with New Zealand students. (P3)

P3 indicated he struggled to understand other student accents, and, as a result, he experienced a communication barrier in his first year in New Zealand.

Lack of English ability affected Omani students' understanding of some English terminology used by lecturers. This caused P12 to struggle to follow up with the lectures. She mentioned:

> At the beginning of my study, when I was in the foundation, I suffered because I understood everything the teacher said, but I did not know the terminologies that he said. So language was a barrier, but after that, I got used to it. I feel I need time to learn the terminologies so that I can understand the lectures … My language difficulty is that when I tried to explain my problem to my lecturers, they said, "What do you mean?" So I could not explain what I meant! So sometimes I face this problem, especially when it is face-to-face, not via email. (P12)

P12 described her English problems in the classroom. She referred to the difficulty of understanding most of the lecture. A lack of understanding of classroom terminology was also associated with her difficulty expressing herself and being understood by the lecturer.

Like many Omani students, P12 further reflected that she struggled when working with New Zealand students in group work. P12 observed that as native English speakers, New Zealand students usually do not need much time for preparation compared to other international students who are non-native English speakers. Thus, English is not a barrier for them. P12, in comparison, used to be worried when she was working with New Zealand students due to language difficulties.

In addition, some participants reported issues concerning their reading and writing skills. They needed to learn basic reading and writing skills to be able to read their textbooks and do the assignments. P4 pointed out the difficulty of reading English but he did not specify why this skill was the most difficult for him. He said:

> Reading is a problem for me. Until now, I have not dared to read books in English even though my library has books in English, but I do not like it, and I prefer reading in Arabic. I love writing and speaking, and I go deeply. (P4)

In the quote, P4 indicated, reading in Arabic was preferable to reading in English.

The majority of participants believed that writing was the most difficult skill to master. They found themselves unable to write correctly due to grammatical errors or spelling mistakes. P6 indicated that she had experienced this problem since she was very young. Although she worked hard to improve her writing, especially at language school, she could not reach a level that made her satisfied. She said:

> The most difficult skill is writing because I study Education, and thus, I must focus on writing … Only writing I have had a problem since I was very young that I forget spelling even for simple words that I must always remember. For example, the simplest word, people, I always forget whether it is with the letter "o" or "e". These simple things affect my writing. I tried to fix this problem when I was studying at the language school. But I know this problem has been with me since I was in school, so it needs constant focus… (P6)

P6 identified making spelling mistakes in English, which was one of her critical writing issues. She pointed out that she even made mistakes in spelling simple words.

7.3.3 Need to Improve English Skills

Omani students in this study were keen to improve their English proficiency since they thought it was essential for them to be able to interact and converse with others when living and studying in an English-speaking country. Participants thought there was a specific level to achieve in English to integrate into life in New Zealand. Thus, they were motivated to improve their English skills because of the essential role of the English language in their everyday life in the host country.

P3 expressed that English proficiency was associated with social contact with international students. P3 said:

> The language was difficult at the beginning, but not after a while. I remember that in the first two years, I had trouble communicating with other students. Later, after I mingled with them, it became easier to communicate with them. Therefore, language affects every aspect of life – my academic life and interaction with students. For example, I study English, and, therefore, I need to learn the language and communicate with other students. (P3)

The quote of P3 referred to something about a challenge easing over time. P3 clarified that the more time he spends in the host country and the more he practises English, the better his interactions with others. He mentioned that the language was a problem at the beginning, but what made his English improve was his interaction with other international students.

According to P6, learning the language is essential to learning the culture of the host country, and without having a basic knowledge of the English language, it would be difficult to learn the cultural norms in the host country. P6 reflected:

> If you know the language that the people speak in the host country, you will surely gain more experience, as you will have more knowledge and more friends. And your knowledge of their language will help you. How can you acquire the culture of other people when you do not understand their language? The more you know the language, the more you know the culture of the country because there is a link between language and culture. (P6)

From P6's viewpoint, when a student learns the English language, he/she will be able to understand the host country's culture, become knowledgeable, and develop new friendships.

Another important dimension of the English language discussed was that it helps international students to be social and open to other cultures. P10 indicated that on his arrival in New Zealand, he was unable to mix with people from other cultures due to his low level of English language. P10 reflected on his experience with learning the English language:

> That is what I feel about students who do not speak English correctly – they are lonely. They do not like to know people from other cultures, as they cannot speak correct English. So they keep silent. In the beginning, I was like those students. Later, when I improved my language, I became more open and able to talk with other people without asking other students to translate. (P10)

P10 linked improving the English language and the ability to become extroverted and confident. His experience was that he had a low level of English, so he lived in isolation and would stay silent.

P5 reflected on how she overcame the language barrier and became confident when speaking English:

> In the beginning, I rarely talked, and I could count on my friend to speak English on my behalf. But now, I am confident. Let me say that I am confident in myself, that I am speaking, that I am asking for something myself, that I am saying the thing myself, and that I initiate doing this thing and using English. I think the language school had a role in terms of the teachers who taught me as well as the students or mixed with students of various nationalities… (P5)

In this quote, P5 mentioned that in the initial period, she used to rely on her friend to communicate with non-Omani people. Later, after she improved her English, she had the courage and ability to speak with other nationalities and to communicate well in English. She acknowledged studying at the language school and mixing with other international students as reasons for their improvement.

Further, participants reflected on their motivation to improve their English language skills. For example, P11 indicated that improving listening skills would lead to better communication with other people. Thus, he emphasised practising the language to understand people's speech. P11 remarked:

> If my English level is low, it becomes hard to communicate with others. It becomes tough to understand them. Even though you may know the English basics, there is also an accent and different slang words that you need to understand! You may not understand them at first, but as you try to speak and communicate with other people of that level … As you communicate, you will understand them and develop a sense of understanding of how they speak. (P11)

P11 pointed out that in the beginning, a student might not understand the accent of the host country. However, the more a student communicated with others, the more he/she would be able to understand different people's accents and their usage of words, thus, becoming familiar with how language is used in daily conversation.

P12 revealed that her English level has improved in speaking over time. In the beginning, she was not able to pronounce words correctly. Later her pronunciation improved, and her speaking became more natural:

> If I compare myself now and before I came here, my speaking skill has changed a lot. When I came here, I had the terminologies, but I could not use them in the correct sentence or pronunciation. Now, I have become more aware of my pronunciation. I speak more naturally. (P12)

In this quote, P12 reflected that living in New Zealand developed her ability to speak fluently and pronounce words correctly.

P9 linked improving his writing skills and his academic achievements. He indicated that even though he was studying engineering, which mainly depended on numbers or equations, writing skills were important. P9 said:

> The English language has played an important role, especially since my language was not good at the beginning. It was weak in some respects, but I managed to overcome these weaknesses. For example, you need writing skills in all your studies; even if you study engineering and your papers do not need too much writing, you still need to know referencing and paraphrasing. So you need to learn many skills in writing. All these writing skills are important to achieving a good academic record. (P9)

P9 referred to two writing skills: referencing and paraphrasing. These writing skills are essential for writing assignments and reports.

Overall, Omani participants reported that English was important for enhancing their social and academic interactions. They indicated that good English language skills were essential for effective communication. Otherwise, it would be difficult to adjust to the social and academic life in New Zealand. Accordingly, participants recognised the importance of improving their English skills for success in social and academic settings.

7.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has described Omani participants' views of their interaction in academic life and the implications of their English language proficiency. Their interaction in the undergraduate degree was described as limited, except when they were required to work in groups. Participants indicated that although group work offered opportunities for interaction, they experienced some issues in group interaction with study peers. These included groups

consisting of students of mixed levels and of a random selection of group members. They also included language barriers and an inability to form lasting friendships with students in their groups. As for the student-lecturer relationships, the majority of participants reflected positively on their academic interaction with their lecturers and informal communication with them. They were satisfied with the academic support provided by their lecturers.

As data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants reflected on their experiences of shifting to studying online and the need for social distancing. Reflections on these aspects varied among participants; some participants reported little interaction and others reported increased interaction during the online study.

The English language was reported as the most challenging issue in their academic experiences by most participants. The majority of participants identified themselves as not proficient in English. As a result, some said they limited their interactions to co-national students. They indicated they sometimes had difficulty understanding the terms used by their lecturers. They gave these factors as reasons they needed to improve their English language skills.

The next chapter presents a discussion of the findings with reference to relevant literature.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

8.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter discusses and interprets findings related to the three research questions in light of previous research and theories on international students' adjustment experiences. The three research questions that framed the study were:

> RQ1. How do Omani international students describe their initial experience in New Zealand?
> RQ2. How do Omani international students experience their sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand?
> RQ3. How do Omani international students adjust to academic life at a New Zealand university?

Concerning the first research question focusing on the initial experience of Omani students in New Zealand, themes are outlined in Section 8.2. The themes associated with this question are homestay, language school, and Omani Students' Association. Section 8.3 discusses the findings that relate to the second research question, focusing on students' experiences of sociocultural adjustment. The themes related to this question are the following: social interaction and developing friendships, cultural distance, English language proficiency in social contexts, and adjustment outcomes. With regard to the third research question, namely the nature of students' academic adjustment and experience at the university, themes are set out in Section 8.4. The aspects identified relate to interactions in academic life, focusing on group work, interaction with the lecturers, and English language proficiency in academic contexts. Finally, a discussion of the theoretical framework of this study is presented in Section 8.5, followed by a chapter summary (Section 8.6).

8.2 Understanding Initial Experiences

Three major themes emerged from student commentary about their initial experiences: the value of homestay, experiences in language school, and support from the Omani Students' Association.

8.2.1 Homestay as an Initial Location for Sociocultural Adjustment

All the Omani students in this study began their stay in New Zealand in homestay accommodation. Interactions with homestay families contributed to Omani students' sociocultural adjustment, particularly their initial experiences in New Zealand. In the homestay, Omani participants, on a daily basis, interacted and communicated with host-national people. In the initial stage of their time in New Zealand, participants regularly interacted with host family members and had only limited contact with host-national students. This result is in line with a previous study (Tanaka, 2007), which found that Japanese and New Zealand students rarely interact and that the only way for Japanese students to interact with New Zealand people was through their homestay families. This finding, however, is not in agreement with Campbell (2004), who found that Chinese students in New Zealand generally expressed feelings of alienation and discomfort in homestay families. Their initial experiences were associated with anxiety and homesickness.

In this study, homestay helped adjustment by mitigating any effects of the cultural/religious distance between Omani Muslim practices and those commonplace in New Zealand (see Subsection 5.3.2.1). The Omani participants reflected on the value and importance of the way homestay families respected other religions. They revealed that when eating with their homestay families, their families avoided drinking alcohol and cooking non-halal food. They interpreted this as an indication of respect for them and their Muslim and religious practices. In this way, homestays helped the Omani students establish a sense of belonging and comfort in New Zealand by providing a family atmosphere. The findings of this study align with a previous study (Torii et al., 2020), indicating that daily interaction with homestay families, in addition to offering a family atmosphere, can facilitate host-cultural understanding for students.

In addition, homestay interactions helped Omani students, as ESL students improved their English and introduced them to New Zealand's social and cultural life (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). The positive role of homestays in engaging international students in the local community was acknowledged by the Omani participants in this study. The homestay experience helped them learn about the local culture, including New Zealand's social and cultural norms and lifestyles. This is similar to findings by Jarvis and Mady (2021) and Torii et al. (2020), highlighting the importance of homestay interactions in proving students' cultural understanding of the host country. Further, a significant benefit of homestays in this study was improving Omani students' English language skills. Omani students believed their homestay

families supported and encouraged them to practise English. For example, one student revealed that when she could not understand English words, her homestay mother referred to objects to explain the English words. This support was particularly helpful, as English was identified as a significant barrier in their adjustment experiences. These results align with Back et al. (2022), who found that homestays facilitate language acquisition. Back and colleagues also found that homestay helps students learn about the host culture and lessens the impact of culture shock.

The results of this study suggest that despite reporting some regulations (or house rules) in homestays only by two participants (see Subsection 5.3.2.2), the majority of them tended to be highly satisfied with their homestay experiences. This supports findings by Ho et al. (2007) and Ward (2005), reporting international students' overall satisfaction with homestays in New Zealand. Ward and Masgoret (2004) suggested that international students' satisfaction with homestays in New Zealand is influenced mostly by their homestay family relationships but can be lowered by the cost of the homestay. In this study, Omani participants positively rated their relationships with homestays; homestay cost was not reported as an issue. As international scholarship students, most Omani students were probably not facing financial difficulties, and the cost of living in the city where the participants were residing was relatively low compared to other major cities in New Zealand.

Overall, social interaction with homestays helped Omani students learn about New Zealand society and lifestyles, mitigated cultural distance, and offered ways to practise English. Thus, homestay played a role in sociocultural bridging in Omani students' adjustment process. Their awareness of cultural differences and improving Omani students' language was apparent and reflected positively on students' initial experiences. Omani students found that the homestay met their needs in terms of social and language aspects and a sense of belonging to a family. Accordingly, the homestay facilitated the (social) honeymoon stage suggested by the U-curve model. This was shown in the initial experience of eight (out of 12) Omani students.

8.2.2 Language School as a First Academic Experience

Findings indicate that studying in a language school was an important contributor to student adjustment at the beginning of students' academic journey (see Subsection 5.3.3). Students valued their time at the language school, where they had many happy experiences, positive interactions, and friendships with students from other cultures. The supportive role provided by the language school was found to optimise Omani students' excitement in the initial period

in New Zealand. Omani students noted that language school provided them with a supportive and safe environment in addition to allowing them to learn the English language. These findings are in line with earlier New Zealand-based research (Ho et al., 2007; Ward, 2005) that found international students generally had a positive attitude towards the supportive environment found in language schools.

Previous studies in New Zealand (Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Zhang & Brunton, 2007) found that international students' satisfaction at language schools was lower than international students at university. In this study, however, Omani students were generally more satisfied with the time spent in language school than in their undergraduate degrees. It is possible that this is why they had some difficulty adjusting to university life after language school (see Subsection 5.3.3.2). For example, some students reported difficulty in the first days at the university as it differed from the language school. These findings support those of Ho et al. (2007), who stated that Chinese students who finish language schools faced a difficult transition to tertiary education in New Zealand because the student-centred learning approach is different from the one in China. Omani students, however, found the transition difficult due to having trouble interacting with their classmates at the university. They reflected that a language school aims to develop English skills and foster student interaction; however, a university class lasts one hour, limiting interaction unless working in groups (see Subsection 7.2.2).

In light of this discussion and the importance of language school, it is possible to draw a connection between social adjustment in terms of living in the country and academic adjustment in terms of studying in the country. Development in these two areas is occurring at the same time. As well as having a supportive social environment in the homestay, which fulfils their social needs, students also need support for their academic needs. Omani students' initial academic experiences were optimised by the language school's safe environment, where they were able to practise English, learn about other cultures, and develop intercultural friendships. In this way, the language school served as a stage of (academic) honeymoon for students. Considering both the social and academic aspects of students' needs would make a holistic view of the U-curve model. For students to fulfil their different needs in the host country, they need to consider both their social and academic lives. It may not be helpful for students to fulfil one need while neglecting the other, as both can proceed in the same direction.

8.2.3 Omani Students' Association as a Setting for Social and Cultural Support

Findings suggest that the Omani Students' Association – a cultural club for Omani students at the University Student Union – played a supportive role for the participants, allowing them to interact in a friendly environment (see Subsection 5.3.5). Participants emphasised the association's role in bringing Omani students together and offering opportunities for social interaction and friendships among Omani students through organising regular activities. Thus, eleven (out of 12) Omani students in this study reported active participation in the Omani Students' Association, especially during their initial period in New Zealand. These results are consistent with those of Yeh and Inose (2003), who noted that international students in the U.S. can benefit from counsellors and student organisations or clubs in establishing their communities and support systems.

Results also show that the Omani Students' Association fostered social interactions with the host nationals. In the case of two students (P7 and P12), this was achieved by supporting Omani students to participate in several volunteer work opportunities off-campus with the local community. This finding is in line with a previous study by Coles and Swami (2012), in relation to Malaysian international students in the U.K., that university student clubs and student accommodation have affirmed the role these clubs and housing play in supporting international students by offering ways to mix and interact with other international and host-national students.

In this study, the Omani Students' Association met its role as well as contributed to reducing the effects of culture shock (i.e., homesickness and loneliness) and providing a forum for meeting host-national students in most Omani students.

8.2.4 A Triad of Complementary Social and Academic Supports

Findings suggest that there is socialisation with host-national people, international students, and co-national students in a successful initial period. These three come together, and they need to be met. What does the homestay give? It gives a day-to-day experience with New Zealand life (i.e., students are learning about New Zealand's culture and lifestyles). What does the language school give? It gives a safe and supportive first academic learning experience of a different way to learn (i.e., students are learning about academia). What does the Omani Students' Association give? It gives easy access to interactions with co-national students,

which is easy; however, it has been hard work in a homestay and a language school. Students do not have to put in as much effort with the co-national students in the Omani Students' Association. They can find it easy to interact due to sharing a similar culture and language, which can be relaxing. Thus, these three elements come together to give a firm basis for students to adjust. All of these elements can contribute to their adjustment in different ways. Students need these three types of support, and they had them successfully at the first stage of their adjustment. Overall, this triad of interactions contributed to Omani students' initial experiences in New Zealand by satisfying their social and academic needs, giving them a sense of belonging, and feeling included in the host society.

The following section presents a discussion to better understand Omani students' sociocultural adjustment.

8.3 Understanding the Nature of Sociocultural Adjustment

Omani students' sociocultural adjustment was found to be influenced by three aspects: social interaction and developing friendships, cultural distance, and English language proficiency. First, most social interactions and friendships were with those closest in cultural distance to participants – other Omani students, followed by international students (different home cultures but all adjusting to New Zealand culture). Interactions with host-national students were limited and only related to students' academic tertiary level. Second, cultural distance did not appear to affect students' cultural adjustment since no issues were reported regarding practising their Muslim traditions, with the exception of difficulty setting up the atmosphere of their Islamic holidays. Third, English language proficiency in social contexts was identified as important as it applies to all aspects of everyday life off-campus. Finally, in this section, students' adjustment outcomes are discussed. They reported how living in New Zealand changed their behaviours to become more self-disciplined and self-reliant and how satisfied they were with their life in the country.

8.3.1 Social Interaction and Developing Friendships

Consistent with other research, for most international students, a key component of the adjustment process is developing friendships (Belford, 2017; Campbell & Zeng, 2006). Though some differences existed, Omani students reported all three types of friendships identified in the Bochner et al. (1977) Functional Model of Friendship Networks: (1) a monocultural

network (co-national friends), (2) a bi-cultural network (host-national friends), and (3) a multicultural network (international student friends). That is, in Bochner et al.'s (1977) model, co-nationals come first, host nationals come second, and multinationals come third in terms of importance or frequency. While the Omani students in this study were content with their ability to form friendships with co-national and other international students, they were disappointed with the nature and extent of their host-national friendships.

A discussion of the three types of friendship networks of Omani students in the host country is presented in the following subsections.

8.3.1.1 Friendships with Co-National Students

A key finding regarding friendship formation is that the overwhelming majority of close friends and a major source of support for Omani students were co-national students. Although seven Omani students (out of 12) expressed their expectations and desire to establish friendships with host nationals, for all 12 participants, their primary friendships (i.e., in the first position) were with co-national students. Previous studies (Bochner et al., 1977; Cao et al., 2017; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Mrekajova, 2017; Pho & Schartner, 2021; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) found that building friendships with co-national students is the most favoured type of friendship for many international students. The findings related to co-national friendships in this study align with this trend, confirming that co-national friendships form the primary friendship network of most international students.

From the Omani students' perspective, the reasons for having Omani friends were that they shared similar cultural values, traditions, and language, and thus, were more comfortable interacting and making friends with them, and ultimately, building trust was easier (see Subsection 6.2.1). In addition, Omani students viewed their co-national friends as a significant and trustworthy source of social, emotional, and financial support. They reported often seeking advice from them and sometimes offering assistance without being asked. This finding agrees with previous studies (Maundeni, 2001; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006) that confirm having co-national friends acts as the primary source of social and emotional support. Nevertheless, these findings are not in line with Schartner's (2014) study, which found that co-national friendships constituted the secondary network in the U.K. for international students; international friendships formed the primary network. In Schartner's (2014) study, the

participants believed that close contact with co-national students hindered their attempts to practise English, while other international students provided a valuable support resource.

The study's findings may raise some concerns, given that previous research (Gareis, 2000; Glass et al., 2014; Maundeni, 2001) has found that long-lasting social interaction with co-nationals is less conducive to interacting with host nationals and impedes the acquisition of English language. Although Omani students did not mention this as a worry, some of them prefer to have New Zealand students or international students as study peers so that they can use English in their communication, thereby improving their English.

8.3.1.2 Friendships with International Students

In this study, friendships with international students from countries other than Oman ranked second in terms of frequency of social contact. Omani students were happy with their level of interaction and making friendships with multinational students in New Zealand. Consistent with Belford's (2017) findings, Omani students reported positive contact and communication with international students. In this way, they developed many intercultural friendships. Omani students were fully aware that having international students' friends played a vital role in their overall adjustment to New Zealand life. It also boosted their overall well-being in the country.

The Omani students mentioned that most of their social interaction was with Chinese international students since many international students in New Zealand are Chinese, particularly those who study in language schools (see Subsection 6.2.2). Indeed, the Chinese culture differs greatly from Omani culture, posing a question about what encourages them to come together. Findings suggest that international friendships formed as a result of sharing similar motivations and academic goals (such as improving English language proficiency, learning about other cultures, and offering ways for social interaction). The participant Omani students reported being happy about their friendships with other international students in New Zealand. These findings share similarities with those of Spencer-Oatey and Xiong (2006) on Chinese students in the U.K. and Cao et al. (2017) on Chinese students in Belgium. However, the findings are different from those of Meng et al. (2021), who found that Chinese international students in Belgium reported some friendships and interactions with other international students; however, they felt these were superficial and unsatisfactory.

The results of this study differ from those of Bochner et al.'s (1977) Functional Model of Friendship Networks, suggesting that international ties are the least favourable type of friendship, and their function is recreational or companionship. In this study, Omani students mentioned that they appreciated spending time with international students' friends to celebrate their ethnic holidays. They also enjoyed celebrating the National Day of Oman with their international friends. This runs parallel with New Zealand universities' visions (as long as this includes encouraging friendships across international student groups) in their campuses that contribute to international students' well-being.

8.3.1.3 Friendships with Host-National Students

International students expect to gain cultural learning and social skills from their host country, with this achieved through adequate social contact with host nationals, leading to positive sociocultural adjustment (Ward et al., 2001). By engaging with members of the host culture on a regular basis, international students can integrate fully into the host culture (Wilson et al., 2013) and, thus, feel happier and less homesick (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Despite having high expectations of social interactions and friendships with host-national students before coming to New Zealand, a high proportion of Omani participants indicated that these interactions were below their expectations due to the difficulties they found in forming friendships with New Zealand students (see Subsection 6.2.3). This is similar to those from previous studies conducted in New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2008; Zhang & Brunton, 2007) and internationally (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006; Wu and Hammond, 2011), which showed that Chinese and Asian international students had trouble making friends with host-national students. The results of this study also align with previous research in the U.S. (e.g., Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; McDermott-Levy, 2011; Yakaboski et al., 2018), which found that Arab international students had difficulty interacting and establishing relationships with their American peers.

Findings indicate that there were few opportunities for Omani students to interact and converse with their New Zealand peers. Research has examined how international students find it difficult to interact with host-national students and develop intercultural friendships with them (e.g., Brown, 2009; Campbell & Li, 2008; Gareis et al., 2011; McDermott-Levy, 2011; Vaccarino et al., 2018; Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Yakaboski et al., 2018). In Omani students' opinions, New Zealand students were not interested in engaging with Omani or international students because they had already formed local friendships before entering university (see

Subsection 6.2.4). Hence, Omani students gave up trying to form intercultural friendships with them because of these issues.

This study's results suggest that intercultural friendships tend to be associated with students' English language proficiency. Vaccarino et al. (2018) noted that Chinese international students' low levels of English proficiency impacted their social interaction with New Zealand host students. Similarly, in this study, Omani students highlighted that English language proficiency is essential for effective interactions. They reported that a lack of proficiency in English may lead to challenges while trying to interact with the New Zealand people.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that Omani students found it difficult to build satisfying friendships with host people in New Zealand. They did not expect their social relationships in New Zealand to be composed mostly of co-nationals and international students. This somewhat slowed the process of sociocultural adjustment because students' expectations of interacting with New Zealanders did not match. Additionally, this may have had an effect on their English language levels since conversing with native English speakers can help them improve their English (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Wang & Hannes, 2014).

8.3.1.4 Friendships and Social Support

In this study, most Omani students considered their friends and families to be the most reliable support source (see Subsection 6.2.5). As well as seeking help from family in Oman to reduce homesickness, Omani participants mentioned seeking help from other Omani students and international student friends. These results are consistent with a previous study by Rabia and Karkouti (2017), who found that Arab international students in the U.S. were very satisfied with the social support they received from their families and friends, particularly those of similar cultural backgrounds and other international students. Similar findings are also reported by Campbell and Zeng (2006), who found that Chinese international students in New Zealand were mainly supported by their families and co-national friends. Thus, social support and friendship work in tandem to contribute to international students' adjustment.

8.3.2 Cultural Distance

In this study, cultural distance was not found to act as a significant barrier to the cultural adjustment of Omani students. Omani participants discussed the salience of cultural distance

with regard to changing their dress code, especially female dress style (i.e., hijab), consuming halal food, avoiding alcohol, and observing Islamic religious holidays. Participants noted that they had no issues with these aspects of cultural differences, except that they were not satisfied with how they celebrated their Islamic holidays. The inability to create a family atmosphere for their Islamic holidays, as they did in Oman, left participants feeling homesick and lonely occasionally. The following subsections discuss key aspects of cultural differences between Oman and New Zealand cultures. These are all visible elements of cultural/religious practice.

8.3.2.1 Changing from the Muslim Dress Code to Resemble Western Practices

All participants in this study revealed that they changed their clothes upon arrival in New Zealand (see Subsection 6.3.1). They said this was a relatively easy decision as most Omanis change their dress code when travelling to Western countries. Interestingly, the change of clothes did not seem to be motivated by cultural differences; instead, they wanted to adapt to the new culture and blend in with the local community. This was associated with students' different levels of needs to be included in the new sociocultural environment and not appear different.

Omani female participants shifted from wearing the abaya (a long loose garment usually in black) to Western-style dress, such as trousers and long shirts but continued to wear the hijab (a headscarf). They noted that the change did not mean giving up Islamic or cultural traditions; it was mainly motivated by the desire not to draw attention to themselves. This is similar to findings by Yaghi (2019) investigating the acculturation experiences of Saudi Arabian mothers in New Zealand. Alkharusi (2013) also found that the female participants in his study modified their hijab to achieve a balance between maintaining their identities and the influence of New Zealand's host culture. Bahiss (2008) found that Muslim women students modified their dress code and hijab to "fit in" or adapt to New Zealand's Western culture.

Although female participants revealed that they did not perceive explicit racial discrimination in New Zealand because of their hijabs, they revealed that they were questioned by other international students about why they wore hijabs. These questions were based on wanting to know, due to a lack of knowledge, about the significance of the hijab. This result agrees with Yakaboski et al.'s (2018) study in the U.S., which found that American students and university staff asked Saudi women students about the reason for wearing the hijab and covering their

bodies. Since many non-Muslim students do not understand the significance of the hijab, it is not surprising that they would be curious when observing the modest Islamic dress.

A few female participants reported a lack of communication and limited interaction with other students in group work, which they thought was due to their hijabs (see Subsection 6.3.1.2). McDermott-Levy (2011) found that female Omani students felt that American students had limited interaction with them because of their hijabs; therefore, they could not make friends with American students. It was also reported by Karaman and Christian (2020) that Muslim women students in the U.S. have often been rejected by their classmates because of their hijabs. These researchers reported that some Muslim women participants took off their hijabs as a coping strategy due to concerns about racism or the desire to be included in the American host community. This is not the case with the female participants in this study. They chose to retain the hijab because it was central to their Islamic customs and traditions. Wearing the hijab by Omani female students in a Western culture indicated a solid connection to their Islamic values or cultural norms. They also did not feel pressure while wearing it in New Zealand.

Accordingly, the female participants retained the hijab and thought the impact of this on their adjustment experiences in New Zealand was minimal. These findings align with previous New Zealand studies (Ali et al., 2015; Pratt, 2010), indicating that Muslim women in New Zealand generally have a positive experience, regardless of whether or not they wear a hijab. A possible explanation for this result is that New Zealand is a multicultural environment, where religious freedom and diversity are respected. It is reflected in the fact that students have a prayer room at the university.

Overall, changing their dress code was one change in their appearance that Omani students implemented in reaction to a new sociocultural environment in New Zealand. There was no tension between deciding to change their dress and retaining their traditions; it was relatively easy. According to the female participants, changing their dress code (i.e., abaya) while living and studying in a Western country was necessary because they thought wearing this might attract attention to them.

8.3.2.2 Halal Food Provision

Following Islamic dietary restrictions, referred to as halal food, is an important consideration for Muslims, who follow religious practices around food as part of their cultural and religious

identity (Jamil et al., 2020). Findings suggest that access to halal food was not a big problem for them (see Subsection 6.3.2). This finding agrees with a study by Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005), who found that Iranian international students did not face issues related to finding ethnic food in Scotland. Similar to the findings of this study, the availability of halal food was also reported by Midgley (2010) by newly arrived Saudi students in Australia. The Saudi community made sure food was easily accessible to them. The findings do not support research by Novera (2004), who found that Indonesian Muslim students struggled to maintain their daily Islamic practices in Australia due to a lack of Muslim facilities and difficulty finding halal food. Alakaam et al. (2015) reported that Muslim students in the U.S. changed their dietary behaviours and ate less food due to difficulty finding halal food both on- and off-campus.

8.3.2.3 Alcohol-Free Environment

Unexpectedly, some of the cultural differences, such as drinking alcohol in the host country, were not identified as a barrier by the Omani students in this study. Findings suggest that alcohol consumption in New Zealand was not an issue for them. They did not report any negative experiences related to alcohol on- or off-campus (see Subsection 6.3.2). These results were not in agreement with previous research (Novera, 2004; Possamai et al., 2016), which found that Muslim students are generally unwilling to attend social gatherings that include alcohol, as this makes them feel uncomfortable and restricts their social interaction. In this study, Omani students indicated that New Zealanders showed respect by not consuming alcohol when eating with Muslim students. Homestays were very considerate and avoided drinking alcohol while eating with the participants. The students thought this respectful behaviour could enhance social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. On the other hand, one participant identified that his flatmates used to drink in their shared house; however, he reported this action enhanced his religious values, making him more strictly adhere to his Islamic belief.

8.3.2.4 Observing Muslim Holidays

For Omani students, observing Islamic holidays (i.e., Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha) was limited to socialising with groups of Omani students in their houses or social activities in the Omani Students' Association. Despite the participants' efforts to create an atmosphere of Eid in New Zealand, they still felt it was different from Oman, as they were living away from their families (see Subsection 6.3.3). Thus, they failed to find satisfaction in celebrating their Islamic holidays in New Zealand, which made them feel homesick and lonely occasionally. Previous studies

(Anwar, 2007; Chen & Tabassumb, 2019) stated that, generally, Muslim students have difficulty celebrating Islamic holidays in large groups or publicly in non-Muslim universities. Oman's Eid celebration is primarily a family gathering while, usually, in New Zealand, students are on their own.

Prior research (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Anwar, 2007) showed that Western universities do not formally observe Muslim holidays. Thus, Muslim students may decide whether to attend or skip classes to observe their holidays (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). If students skip classes and leave for holidays, they need to make up the work they miss later (Anwar, 2007). The study's findings indicate that although the university where the participants are studying does not formally recognise Islamic holidays in their academic calendars, language school teachers show consideration for Muslim students; for example, they allow them to go home after finishing exams on the day of their celebration. This implies that staff at New Zealand tertiary institutions are familiar with international students' religious and ethnic celebrations, an indication of enhancing the diversity on campuses. This finding is not in line with a study carried out by Seggie and Sanford (2010) at an American university, who found that Muslim holidays and Ramadan (the fasting holy month for Muslims) are not well-known among most people on campus.

8.3.2.5 A Summary of the Findings on Cultural Distance

Contrary to the literature (e.g., Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Kwon, 2013; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999), the findings of this study suggest that cultural distance was not a strong factor in Omani students' adjustment to life in New Zealand (see Subsection 6.3.4). Even though the cultural differences between Western and Muslim cultures are considerable (Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Mostafa, 2006; Swami, 2009; Swami et al., 2010), the Omani students did not identify any of the issues that might have been expected to impact on their sense of comfort or satisfaction with life in New Zealand. The findings of this study do not agree with research conducted on Muslims in New Zealand by Shepard (2006) and Stuart (2014), who found that cultural differences contributed to Muslims' difficulties adjusting to the social and cultural life in the country. Possibly, the mosque attacks in Christchurch in 2019 (see Subsection 2.6.1) sensitised New Zealanders to the practices of and challenges faced by people of Muslim faith – people may now have more knowledge of Muslim practices, and anecdotal commentary indicates halal food, for example, is easier to find than it was even five years ago.

8.3.3 English Language Proficiency: Social Life

Omani students' English competence increased their capacity to learn necessary New Zealand cultural norms to achieve successful adjustment. This finding supports previous studies (Andrade, 2006; Ozer, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), indicating that English language proficiency is one of the most vital indicators of successful adjustment in a foreign country.

This study found that the English language was identified as a major barrier to Omani students' adjustment experiences, especially in their initial experiences in New Zealand (see Section 7.3). The issue of the English language being an obstacle for international students has been identified by many studies, such as those in the U.S. (Gautam et al., 2016; Mahmood & Burke, 2018) and those in New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2008; Campbell & Zeng, 2006). Generally, international students cannot rely on their mother tongue for their needs in the host countries. Thus, they need to practise and improve their English in order to achieve successful educational and social experiences. When feeling settled in New Zealand and after practising the language for several months, Omani students began to feel confident when communicating with New Zealand native-English speakers. They overcame the barrier of language over time. This result is in line with that of Wang and Mallinckrodt (2006), who indicated that international students who are fluent in English and have spent more time in the U.S. are less likely to experience difficulties adjusting socioculturally and psychologically. Thus, it is assumed that the higher the international students' English levels, the better they will adapt to the new sociocultural environment (Mahmood & Burke, 2018).

Findings suggest that Omani students' high English language ability can reinforce their social interaction and intercultural friendships, given that the language in common was English (see Subsection 7.3.3). However, a lack of confidence when speaking English, particularly in the early stages, prevented some Omani students from mixing and socialising with New Zealand students. For example, a lack of confidence when speaking English prevented P5 from mixing and socialising with other cultures before she felt her English had improved. This result supports the earlier argument that poor English language skills can impede the building of social ties with host nationals (Andrade, 2009; Campbell & Zeng, 2006). A study conducted by Campbell and Zeng (2006) found that Chinese students' limited ability to speak English and cultural differences were the main reasons that impeded their ability to form close relationships with New Zealand students. On the other hand, because of their high proficiency in English, international students in the U.S. in the study by Hendrickson et al. (2011) reported having

more host-national than co-national friends. The findings of Hendrickson et al. (2011) differ from those presented in this study, as none of the Omani participants reported having more host-national than co-national friends.

The analysis of data in this study identifies that only two Omani students reported English levels at or above "competent" according to IELTS testing before arriving in New Zealand (see Subsection 7.3.1). Compared to the other 10 participants, their higher English proficiency could be one reason that enabled them to perceive fewer adjustment challenges. This observation agrees with those of Kukatlapalli (2016), which found that Indian international students in New Zealand were satisfied with their academic performances and social experiences as a result of their high English language proficiency.

8.3.4 Adjustment Outcomes: Feeling Independent

The study's findings suggest that Omani students learned to become independent in response to their needs to adjust or "fit in" with the new culture (see Section 6.4). The majority learned to become self-disciplined (e.g., learn social ways of doing things, become punctual, and follow a daily routine) and self-reliant (e.g., become independent and able to solve their problems and manage their daily expenses) (see Subsections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2). These findings are consistent with previous research in New Zealand (Campbell & Zeng, 2006; Zhang & Brunton, 2007), which indicated that Chinese international students tended to employ various strategies, such as becoming independent and developing social support and friendships, to cope with life in New Zealand. Omani students may find this transition experience difficult due to their previous lifestyle, where they were highly dependent and attached to their families.

Moreover, the results show that Omani students were generally satisfied in New Zealand, suggesting that their adjustment was relatively smooth. Eleven participants were satisfied with their social and academic life in New Zealand, while only one said he was partially satisfied (see Subsection 6.4.3). This is similar to previous studies (Campbell & Zeng, 2006; Kukatlapalli, 2016; Zhang & Brunton, 2007) indicating that international students in New Zealand are generally satisfied with their stay in the country.

Prior research indicates that among the factors that could enhance satisfaction with life in New Zealand is the feeling of safety in the country, as reported by Zhang and Brunton (2007) and Ho et al. (2007), and the "New Zealand lifestyle" and "ways of doing things" as indicated by

Campbell and Zeng (2006). These factors are evident in this study in which Omani students developed an understanding and learned the social ways of doing things in New Zealand. The ability of Omani students to learn to become self-disciplined demonstrates a positive change in their personality to conform to the host-national norms and to learn how to interact with others in social and academic settings. Omani students were also impressed to observe that the university and the airports in New Zealand have prayer rooms for Muslims, which they thought were not found in European countries. This was one reason that enhanced their satisfaction with the country.

8.3.5 Summary of Students' Sociocultural Adjustment

The study's results suggest that the Omani students found ways to mitigate their sociocultural adjustment. In this study, social interaction and developing friendships were the strongest factors that enhanced Omani students' sociocultural adjustment. Omani students emphasised that most of their close friends and sources of support were co-national students and other international students. The vital role of these friendships was not only to provide support but also to provide companionship. In comparison, forming friendships with New Zealand students proved more difficult than expected. Most of them appeared to have accepted the fact that they had ended up without friendships with New Zealand students. Nevertheless, they valued the intercultural friendships they had with international students. Interestingly, cultural distance in New Zealand did not adversely affect Omani students. This was indicated by all Omani students changing their dress code to resemble Western clothes to adapt to New Zealand's Western culture easily. The change was to respond to their needs to feel included in the new society and not to draw attention to themselves. Students also did not report any issues concerning the availability of halal food and avoiding alcohol. However, even though students tried to create an atmosphere of their religious holiday in New Zealand, they still feel it is different from Oman because they are not living with their families. This led them to experience homesickness and loneliness spasmodically. Students identified their English language proficiency as a significant obstacle to social and academic adjustment in New Zealand. Despite taking some time, they persistently improved their English until they felt confident expressing themselves and engaging in English conversation. Overall, Omani students seemed to have adjusted well to New Zealand's social and cultural settings. They reported being generally satisfied with their lives in New Zealand and learning self-discipline and self-reliance.

Having discussed the salience of adjusting to the sociocultural environment, the following section discusses the Omani students' academic adjustment to a New Zealand university.

8.4 Understanding the Nature of Academic Adjustment

Omani participants stated that they came to New Zealand primarily to pursue higher education. However, there are academic differences between Oman and New Zealand academic standards and ways of working, which students need to adjust to. Omani students' academic adjustment was influenced by interaction in group work, relationships with lecturers, and English language proficiency.

8.4.1 Interaction in Group Work

Most Omani participants agreed that group projects provided the best opportunities for social interaction with other students (see Subsection 7.2.3). Achieving the goals of the group project requires maintaining good communication and engagement among students in the group. In other words, to fulfil the project's goals and achieve high results, students need to keep in contact with their peers to enable effective collaboration. The findings suggest that Omani participants appreciated the benefits of group work as a learning environment that offers a medium of interaction that is more engaging and motivating than typical lectures. Although half of the Omani participants (n = 6) valued this form of collaborative learning, the other half reported challenging experiences in working in groups, negatively impacting their academic experiences. There was a satisfactory outcome for six Omani participants as they found the group work to be a valuable experience for forming new friendships and interacting with other cultures when the group included mixed nationalities. These results support previous studies carried out in the context of group work (Slavin, 2014; Wattanawongwan et al., 2021). The study's results are also in agreement with Li and Campbell's (2008) study, which found that Asian students in New Zealand view group work as an effective means to establish new friendships. As Wattanawongwan et al. (2021) noted, cooperative learning in group work is beneficial for enhancing interaction and establishing positive social relationships among group members and, therefore, leads to better social and academic outcomes.

Conversely, six Omani participants reported negative academic experiences with group work. The participants attributed their negative experiences to several reasons. Omani students indicated that a random selection of group members and students with mixed academic levels

were among the reasons for a negative experience with group work. Parallel to the study of Strough et al. (2001), Omani participants possibly prefer to work with friends to facilitate communication or interactions among group members. Previous research (Gillies, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2004) investigated the possibility of students choosing their group members. Jehn and Shah (1997) noted that friendship groups demonstrated strong ties, positive interactions, and voluntary connections, which led to productive results. However, Cohen et al. (2014) stated that group members should not be friendly, as group interactions may be viewed as socialising rather than working as a group. Due to this, students may prefer the social aspect of working with friends instead of understanding the function of group work. It would be, therefore, important to promote a better understanding of teamwork in the students' minds.

Additionally, Omani students' language level was found to create a barrier in multicultural academic group work. Study findings suggest that, in multicultural group work, students with different levels of English proficiency may experience difficulties and an unequal allocation of work. The results of this study find support in previous research, highlighting that poor English language proficiency impedes interaction and communication in multicultural group work (Clark et al., 2007; Li et al., 2010; Popov et al., 2012). Clark et al. (2007) identified the language barrier as one of the challenges that negatively affected Chinese students' ability to interact with other peers in multicultural group work in New Zealand. Similarly, Li et al. (2010) found that Chinese students in Australia had difficulty interacting only in multicultural group work, while they did not have this problem if the members of the group were all Chinese students. The data in this study indicate that Omani students are very aware of the importance of English language ability; therefore, they are keen to improve their language skills to facilitate better interactions and communication with others (see Subsection 7.3.3).

Interestingly, the difficulty forming friendships after the group work was completed was another reason that led to a negative group work experience. One Omani student noticed that most of his friendships that developed within a group ended after completing the group task, which disappointed him. This reason was more related to a student's expectations from the group work. This finding supports a previous study conducted by Johnson and Johnson (2009), who stated that group work based on cooperative efforts could enhance friendships among diverse peers; however, if group work is driven only by competitive or individual goals, friendships may fall apart after completing the group task. Possibly, the main reason why some Omani students had difficulty establishing friendships was their inability to understand

academic relationships. In other words, typically, Omani students in this study expected that after studying together or working collaboratively, an academic relationship might grow into a lasting friendship. However, it appears that their expectations did not match the reality.

8.4.2 Relationship and Interaction with Lecturers

The relationship between students and lecturers has a significant impact on the learning process and students' success (Adeyele & Yusuff, 2012; Uleanya, 2019; Yunus et al., 2011). The results of this study show that the majority of Omani participants (n = 9) viewed their lecturers positively, where they revealed positive interactions and relationships (see Subsection 7.2.4). Participants clarified that their lecturers were always able to provide adequate support and were available to answer students' questions promptly, and they were satisfied with their informal relationship with them. These results are supported by previous research by Stephen et al. (2008), who noted that the approachability of lecturers was one consideration for students when related to their relationship with lecturers and the importance of keeping students connected to university staff. Similar to the approachability of lecturers, the findings also support a study by Fitzmaurice (2008), which indicated that students who perceive their lecturers as being supportive are more likely to experience positive learning environments.

It is evident from this study that most lecturers in the New Zealand context of this study were supportive and approachable. Omani students were found to believe that a good relationship between students and lecturers is based on whether or not lecturers can interact positively, provide adequate support, and respond to their needs as soon as possible. This finding could be interpreted as students, in general, thought that when lecturers are available and give time to students, students would achieve better academic performances.

Previous studies (Fitria & Koentjoro, 2020; Komarraju et al., 2010; McDowell & Westman, 2005) advocate that the informality of the relationship between students and lecturers could lead to a better learning environment and can contribute to student's academic performance. The data suggest that the informality of dealing with lecturers and calling them by their first names (without academic titles) creates a more relaxed and comfortable academic environment. The benefits of addressing lecturers by their first names were confirmed in a study by McDowell and Westman (2005), who found that students who address their lecturers by their first names create a sense of mutual respect, value, and approachability. This is evident and supports the findings of this study. Possibly, Omani students in New Zealand enjoyed a

relaxed and informal academic environment in which they could interact openly with lecturers inside and outside the classroom, although they found using lecturers' first names difficult for a start. Providing a relaxed academic environment that encourages students to express their opinions freely could allow them to learn more effectively and contribute to enhancing their satisfaction with academic life.

Three participants reported a lack of interaction and poor relationships with their lecturers for various reasons. Among the reasons were that the lecturers were unable to provide sufficient academic support, did not interact constantly, and did not offer time to students because the class included a large number of students. As a result, those participants were not satisfied with the quality of the relationships. This is similar to a study by Uleanya (2019), who found that most students reported that their ability to learn and academic results were negatively impacted because they had poor relationships with lecturers. In Uleanya's (2019) study, the reasons behind the poor relationships included students' personality traits and how students and lecturers viewed each other. However, the three participants in this study who described poor relationships were only related to a large number of students in the class.

8.4.3 English Language Proficiency: Academic Life

In this study, English language proficiency was found to be a factor in Omani students' academic experiences (see Subsection 7.3.2). Findings suggest that some Omani students struggled to understand New Zealand or Māori accents during the initial period of their stay in New Zealand. The difficulty of understanding New Zealand's English accents by international students was also confirmed in the study by Lewthwaite (1996) and Zhang and Brunton (2007) in New Zealand. Omani students' lack of understanding also extended to some English discipline-specific terminology used by lecturers in the classroom. Similar language-related issues in the classroom were also reported by Chinese international students in New Zealand (Holmes, 2005), Asian international students in New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2008), and international students in Hong Kong (Evans & Morrison, 2011).

Omani students also reported issues with English reading and writing skills. This is in line with a previous study by Novera (2004) highlighting Indonesian students' reading and writing difficulties. While one Omani student complained about his inability to read and comprehend English books, the majority referred to writing skills, such as grammatical or spelling, as the most challenging. In prior research, there have been similar findings regarding international

students' difficulty in the English language, especially their academic writing skills (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Park, 2016). For example, it was the most prominent challenge for first-year international undergraduate students in Hong Kong (Evans & Morrison, 2011) and international graduate students in the U.S. (Park, 2016). One possible explanation for the difficulty of academic English writing, which could apply to Omani participants in this study, was that undergraduate students might find the academic writing style in the university challenging because it is quite different from the style they used in a secondary school as noted by Evans and Morrison (2011). Another possible reason is that academic performance at many universities heavily depends on written work that requires an academic writing style. The university, therefore, requires students to have certain levels of writing skills depending on faculty/subject areas.

8.4.4 Summary of Students' Academic Adjustment

Adjusting to academic life was found to be more necessary than sociocultural adjustment for Omani students since it is the primary purpose of their overseas experiences. Findings indicate that most Omani students identified that group work in their bachelor's degree was their best opportunity for social interaction with other students. However, several issues led to negative experiences with group work, including the random selection of group members, students from varied academic levels, language barriers, and a lack of ability to maintain lasting friendships. Students reported that their lecturers were always able to provide adequate support and answer their questions promptly, which enhanced their academic integration. Most students also indicated they were impressed with the informal relationship with their lecturers. Finally, English language proficiency was also associated with academic performance. Students identified difficulty understanding New Zealand's English accent, specific English terminologies used in the classroom, and reading and writing skills.

Following that is a discussion of how the theoretical foundation was applied to understanding the adjustment process of Omani students.

8.5 Theoretical Foundations of Adjustment

In this study, I argue that the U-curve model has the potential for helping to understand Omani international students' adjustment experiences. However, before settling on this theoretical framework, I employed a phenomenological methodology, so I had no theoretical assumptions

about models before starting the data collection. I first listened to the participants' experiences and described them. Then, I found that the U-curve model provided a useful and insightful explanation of the adjustment experiences involved. Although the U-curve model was developed several decades ago, it is still being used and accepted (see Section 3.3 for some recent studies). There is also evidence in these recent studies that this model provides a useful way of giving a phenomenological account (e.g., Aisha & Mulyana, 2020; Mulyana & Eko, 2017). These studies showed that the model is relevant in a range of contexts, and I found it also to be relevant to my study.

The U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) was reviewed in Section 3.2. In this model, the adjustment process is seen as following a predictable pathway, starting from a positive or honeymoon period followed by a dip into a negative feeling of culture shock or anxiety, with the curve moving upwards with recovery from shock and adjustment to the new culture. Findings of this study suggest that the U-curve model was an appropriate depiction of the adjustment experiences of most of the Omani student participants. In line with the U-curve model, this study provides support for the occurrence of the honeymoon (or excitement) stage in the initial experience in a new country: eight of the Omani students experienced a honeymoon stage followed by a feeling of homesickness and loneliness occasionally (see Section 5.3). For these students, the excitement stage lasted from several weeks to a few months. The other four students did not experience the honeymoon stage; instead, they experienced negative feelings of homesickness and loneliness at the beginning of their sojourn. These findings support recent studies that have utilised the U-curve model and found that many but not all international students experience the honeymoon stage during their initial sojourn in the host country (e.g., Aisha & Mulyana, 2020; Jamal & Wok, 2020; Liang, 2019; Mardhiyyah et al., 2022). However, the results of this study are not in line with previous research indicating that most participants experienced stress or difficulty during their initial period (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Chien, 2016; Hirai et al., 2015; López, 2021; Schartner, 2014; Ward & Kennedy, 1996; Ward et al., 1998).

Findings in this study provide a possible explanation for why some students might find their initial period in a new country exciting. A factor that helped Omani students initially feel excited was that the first day of arrival in New Zealand went smoothly, as all arrival procedures were arranged in advance by the participants' government for scholarship-sponsored students (see Subsection 5.3.1). Further, Omani students' high expectations and motivation before

coming to New Zealand were met initially due to their first impression of the friendly and welcoming environment (see Subsection 5.2.2). This result matches those observed in recent studies (Jamal & Wok, 2020; Larasati et al., 2021), which showed that when international students perceive their host country and people to be friendly and welcoming, they experience an initial honeymoon or excitement stage. Similarly, this study's findings agree with Aisha and Mulyana (2020), who indicated that international students underwent the honeymoon stage when they arrived in the U.K. because they were fascinated by the idea of travelling to the U.K., a dream they have fulfilled.

When students first arrived, they were placed in a homestay (which offered immersion in a local family social context), language school (a supportive academic and social context), and were involved with the Omani Students' Association (a social context which facilitates interaction with the students' own cultural group). It is possible this contributed to an initial honeymoon stage for many (but not all) students because it provided adjustment support across the sociocultural and academic aspects of their lives. Relationships developed in the homestay environment, and the acknowledgement and respect of cultural differences (e.g., halal food and avoiding alcohol) were central to students' initial feelings of excitement. The homestay environment was experienced as a safe and supportive environment for learning about New Zealand culture. The language school study environment supported the development of intercultural friendships early in students' stay in New Zealand. Further, the comfort zone Omani students found in their Omani Students' Association interactions also led to a positive feeling. Thus, students were reasonably happy when they first arrived.

Feelings of homesickness and loneliness were experienced later in their stay when support from homestay and language school was removed (see Subsections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3). These negative feelings happened spasmodically with participants in this study – at any time during their stay. These negative emotions were due to living away from family for the first time, not cultural distance. They included the challenge of everyday activities that were new to them, such as using public transport. Negative emotions were especially strong during Islamic holidays, as participants used to celebrate these with family and friends in Oman (see Subsection 6.3.3); the Omani Students' Association helped reduce homesickness and loneliness if this occurred at these times.

Previous studies exploring international students' adjustment experiences have reported culture shock levels in terms of homesickness and loneliness and linked those feelings with cultural

distance (e.g., Abunab et al., 2017; Alsahafi & Shin, 2017; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Students did not report significant cultural distance concerning dress, food, and alcohol norms associated with Islam: participants did not experience the sort of culture shock suggested by Oberg (1960) in the form of rejecting the new cultural environment and host-national people.

Further, Omani students were able to transition into the recovery or adjustment stage with ease due to the development of friendship networks and the support they received from their friends (see Section 6.2). In line with previous research (Aisha & Mulyana, 2020; Tuerxun et al., 2020), Omani students developed their cultural knowledge of the sociocultural and academic ways of interacting expected and required in New Zealand as their host country. Hence, they became more independent and appeared to have mastered the self-discipline and self-reliance needed (see Subsections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2). As a result, they appeared satisfied with their social and academic lives in New Zealand and did not regret going there to pursue their higher education.

While the U-curve model offers a description of the adjustment process, the ABC model is also important because of the process of culture learning it utilises. That is, culture learning can be seen as an underpinning process that explains how students progress through the stages of the U-curve. When considering the stages of the U-curve as found in this study, culture learning, which is related to social interaction with other international students, is evident. In this study, culture learning is the mechanism that causes movement through stages in the U-curve.

This study provided insights into how Omani participants went about culture learning through interacting and socialising with others. For instance, one student learned to be punctual, realising its importance in New Zealand, and another student was unsure of the meaning of signs and labels in New Zealand before learning about them from others. Similarly in academic life, an example of culture learning involved how students learned to address their lecturers by their first names. Students were impressed by the informality between students and lecturers in New Zealand universities. Accordingly, students became familiar with the rules and conventions of New Zealand's society.

Findings indicate that academic adjustment did not occur in parallel with sociocultural adjustment. Their academic adjustment may have been more difficult when students began their undergraduate studies, even though their sociocultural adjustment was more advanced by this time because they encountered a different environment in undergraduate degrees than in

language school, with limited interaction and some group work issues (see Section 7.2). This made transitioning from language school to undergraduate studies somewhat difficult for students. The language school and the university were academically different cultures, which required further adjustment. In line with Campbell and Li (2008), students' positive interactions with their lecturers, in addition to the supportive environment they provided, contributed to their overall satisfaction with academic life, even though some struggled with the dynamics of group work.

Overall, the study findings identify that the adjustment process is dynamic and complex and is not always as foreseen as the U-curve model depicts it. For example, homesickness and loneliness can happen anytime, and students can feel better, then worse, and then better again. Findings suggest that the adjustment process is associated with a number of conditions and factors, both sociocultural and academic. Sociocultural factors include social interaction and friendships, less perceived cultural distance, and improved English language proficiency. Academic factors include interaction in group work, peer relationships and interactions with lecturers, and English language proficiency in academic contexts.

To conclude, the U-curve model anticipates an initial honeymoon stage followed by a period of culture shock, then recovery and comfort with the new context. The findings of this study were that the U-curve model represented the experience of most (but not all) Omani students in this study. They came with hopes, and some of them experienced a honeymoon stage, and some of them did not, with the latter in line with the ABC model and recent studies of the U-curve model. Students then moved through a period of shock in terms of homesickness and loneliness, especially during Islamic celebrations. Thus, they all did experience culture shock, as indicated by the U-curve model, but only to a limited extent. Establishing friendships and building social support were crucial factors in recovering from culture shock and adjusting to the new environment. In the final stage, some Omani participants (but not all) experienced the acceptance or integration stage to New Zealand life.

8.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the key findings of the present research with related literature to shed light on Omani students' adjustment to social and academic life in New Zealand. The above discussion explores the possible social, cultural, and academic factors that impact Omani participants' adjustment process and contribute to their lived experiences in New Zealand.

Omani students experienced adjustment as a situated social, cultural, and interactive academic experience. The discussion provided an overview of three aspects of the experiences: the initial period, sociocultural, and academic adjustment. First, homestay (interaction with host nationals), language school (interaction with international students), and the Omani Students' Association (interaction with co-national students) contributed to Omani students' initial period, leading to their initial excitement in New Zealand. Second, social interaction, friendships, and social support were found to make the process of sociocultural adjustment easier. It was easier for Omani students to form friendships with co-national and international students, which provided adequate support in the host nation. They were, however, incapable of establishing close friendships with host-national students. Despite the cultural distance found in this study, Omani students did not report significant challenges, except their inability to fully enjoy their Islamic celebrations in New Zealand, which made them feel homesick and lonely occasionally. The majority of Omani students had difficulty with their English levels in social and academic contexts, and, therefore, they persevered to improve their English, realising its vital role in their adjustment. As a result, most students generally reported that their sociocultural adjustment was successful, indicating their ability to become independent. Third, the academic adjustment in this study was related to interaction in academic settings. Omani students identified group work as the best opportunity to interact with other students in academic life. Overall, the supportive academic environment created by their lecturers helped Omani students adjust well to academic life. Finally, the U-curve model was supported in this study as it worked for the majority of participants but not for all. The viewpoint provides a valuable lens for this study to review the adjustment issue based on theoretical underpinnings.

Next, a conclusion of this study and its contributions, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are presented in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

9.1 Chapter Overview

This final chapter provides a brief summary of the key findings associated with the research questions (Section 9.2), and the theoretical, methodological, and contextual contributions of the study (Section 9.3). It outlines the implications of the study findings for Omani scholarship providers, prospective Omani international students, policy makers in New Zealand, and New Zealand universities (Section 9.4). The chapter concludes with a discussion of research limitations (Section 9.5), opportunities for future research (Section 9.6), and my reflection on this study (Section 9.7).

9.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study explored Omani students' sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences while pursuing undergraduate degrees at a university in New Zealand. A summary of the key findings of this study is presented in line with the thesis' research questions.

9.2.1 How do Omani international students describe their initial experience in New Zealand?

Before coming to New Zealand, Omani students were passionate about studying overseas as scholarship students. For some of them, it was a dream to study overseas; for others, it was an opportunity to meet people from different cultures and improve their English skills. Students' initial experience (i.e., settling-in period) in New Zealand was not loaded with significant difficulties other than using public transportation and the language barrier. Findings indicate that a combination of the host country, and international student and co-national student interactions support the initial period of sociocultural and academic adjustment for many students. Specifically, the initial period, which lasted for several weeks to a few months, was facilitated by homestay and language school experiences and participation in the Omani Students' Association. In homestay (through interaction with host nationals) and language school (through interaction with other international students), they experienced supportive and safe environments that reduced their sense of cultural distance and helped them improve their English. They were able to interact and engage in social activities with co-national students through the Omani Students' Association, which helped reduce homesickness and loneliness.

Through these interactions and support in a caring environment, most (but not all) Omani students felt excited and included in the host country.

9.2.2 How do Omani international students experience their sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand?

Regarding overall sociocultural adjustment, friendships with and the support of co-national and international students helped students' sociocultural adjustment go smoothly. Cultural distance was not experienced as a significant factor because students did not have difficulty accessing halal food and there were no issues around alcohol. However, they changed from their traditional dress code to blend into New Zealand's Western culture, and they found it difficult to fully enjoy their Islamic holidays because these holidays were usually celebrated with their families. Overall, Omani students' adjustment to New Zealand life seemed to be successful and they were satisfied with their lives in New Zealand. They appreciated that they had developed greater self-discipline and self-reliance; they had been able to establish routines, including being punctual, to acquire problem-solving skills, and to manage their daily expenses. Students saw these new social behaviours as valuable to their adjustment. Thus, the students not only had adjusted to new social norms but also had developed these self-management and independence skills – a positive more than simply adjusting.

9.2.3 How do Omani international students adjust to academic life at a New Zealand university?

Concerning overall academic adjustment, most participants reported less satisfaction with interactions in their bachelor's degree study than in language school. During their bachelor's degree study, participants were only able to interact with classmates through group work. There was a split of opinions among participants concerning their satisfaction with group work, with six participants describing positive interactions and communication and six describing difficulties. The positive aspects identified were that working in groups allowed them to interact with students from different cultures and to make new friends with whom they could collaborate in future groups. The difficulties reported were that groups included students of mixed educational levels or knowledge, a random selection of members, and involved language barriers and did not lead to friendships among group members. Concerning relationships with lecturers, these were described as informal and positively impacting academic achievement. Students considered lecturers offered academic support that helped with academic adjustment.

Finally, Omani students' English language proficiency was reported as a barrier to communication and adjustment in both their social and academic lives. Findings indicate that students' desire to integrate into the host culture and community prompted them to improve their English skills. Communication and interaction with others in English helped them understand New Zealand accents and that New Zealanders are generally friendly and smiling.

9.3 Contribution of the Study

The findings of this study contribute to knowledge and existing literature concerning the nature and scope of the sociocultural and academic adjustment experiences of international students in Western societies. Its contributions are theoretical, methodological, and contextual.

9.3.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study utilised Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve adjustment model to help understand the adjustment experiences of 12 Omani international students in New Zealand. The findings contribute to Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve adjustment model in a number of ways. The first contribution is related to the timing of different elements of adjustment suggested by the U-curve model (see Chapter 3, Figure 3.1). Lysgaard (1955) proposed that the honeymoon stage generally occurs in the first six months and is followed by culture shock or adjustment difficulties over a period of six to 18 months. However, the findings of this study suggest that the timing of the initial stage is very variable, and there may not be a honeymoon stage. In this study, eight of the Omani students experienced an initial period of excitement with this, lasting from several weeks to a few months. Following this, they faced challenges in terms of homesickness and loneliness due to exposure to a new academic and cultural environment. The other four participants experienced negative emotions immediately upon arrival, contradicting the U-curve model. These negative emotions were encountered spasmodically for all four participants, with no specific timing. Accordingly, the ABC model was also useful to apply to the other participants who did not experience the honeymoon stage at the beginning.

Furthermore, the U-curve model does not describe the movement of international students between the stages of adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). This study built upon the original U-curve model by providing a comprehensive understanding of the adjustment process and the reasons behind students' shifts between the different stages of adjustment. The ABC

model through the process of culture learning was useful in explaining movement between the stages of the U-curve model.

Another contribution to theory is in how students' different living and study circumstances impacted their experiences. Specifically, homestay, language school, and the Omani Students' Association impacted students' adjustment trajectories. Findings indicate that living in a homestay helped students adjust to the host culture. Students' adjustment was enhanced because they had an opportunity to learn about New Zealand culture, develop new intercultural friendships and improve their English through daily interaction and communication with homestay families. Further, their homestay experience greatly influenced Omani students' excitement (the honeymoon stage) when they arrived in New Zealand by offering immediate and easy interaction with host nationals, mitigating their experience of cultural distance, and helping to improve their English. Language school played a role in the adjustment process by offering a safe and comfortable environment where they could interact with other international students. Taken together, living in a homestay and studying in a supportive language school help international students to transition from their home to the host culture and to understand the new sociocultural and academic milieu. The Omani Students' Association provided social support and fostered social contact among students, which eased homesickness and loneliness. These three factors, if each is present, may mean international students are more likely to have a positive adjustment and less difficulty in the initial stage of a sojourn.

Findings on undergraduate student experience regarding interaction and overall satisfaction in multinational group work is a further contribution. In the literature, the collaboration between students during group work is emphasised as a factor that enhances student learning; however, students in this study discussed language barriers and the inability to form friendships as barriers and disappointments. The study findings indicate that random grouping and students with varying levels of knowledge can negatively affect the quality of group work and lead to miscommunication, with implications for academic adjustment.

Overall, this research contributes to understanding how international students can develop sociocultural understandings that help them adjust to a new culture. The U-curve model can be applied, with some improvement, to provide insight into the complexity of international students' adjustment process over time.

9.3.2 Methodological Contribution

With regard to research methodology, this study contributes to adjustment research through its adoption of a qualitative interpretive paradigm and phenomenological approach. This study utilised a descriptive phenomenological research methodology, which required me to start with an open mind to interview participants to avoid affecting their viewpoints (Giorgi, 2008). After data collection, I had to find a theoretical framework that allowed me to include the idea that participants felt excited initially (a honeymoon stage), which was important for my participants; therefore, I chose the U-curve model. In other words, I engaged in this study with fresh eyes (following phenomenological bracketing), and through my reading, I found that the U-curve model was a useful model to apply. There was no tension in this research between utilising phenomenology as a research methodology and the theoretical framework.

This study employed an in-depth semi-structured interview approach based on phenomenology to gather an extensive account of the participants' lived experiences. This highlights how in-depth interviews are a powerful instrument for conducting qualitative research, providing valuable insight into participants' experiences. Given the difficulties encountered by some researchers (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013) in recruiting and interviewing female participants from Arab Gulf countries, as well as potentially myself, with Omani students, an alternative data collection method for interviews might be written accounts, such as journals or diaries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants could draft these experiences using their own devices in their first language. Using written accounts can help gather more complete data while reducing the pressure associated with the interviews. This approach would enable the timely capture of data following experience, ensuring that the data were accurate and not forgotten. However, these alternative data gathering methods were not required in this study, as all female students who participated were happy to talk with me in interviews.

The literature acknowledges four descriptive phenomenological data analysis methods developed by van Kaam (1966), Colaizzi (1978), Giorgi (1985), and Moustakas (1994) (as cited in Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). These methods differ in their data-analysis steps. Colaizzi's method includes a step in which participants must confirm the results; however, this step is not included in the other methods (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). After reviewing and considering the variation among these approaches to descriptive phenomenological data analysis, Braun and Clark's (2006) approach to data analysis was chosen as optimal for this study. Braun and Clark's thematic analysis approach's flexibility makes it applicable to phenomenological

investigation. Its nature as an analytical approach to data analysis makes it also a useful qualitative method (Braun & Clark, 2006).

9.3.3 Contextual Contribution

This study provides more insight into the New Zealand research context for Omani students as one group in the diversity of international students. It is one of the few studies that have identified aspects that contribute to better integration and adjustment into New Zealand culture. This study identified homestay, language school, and the Omani Students' Association as integral in students' initial adjustment stage. Further, Omani students' academic and sociocultural adjustment, including social interaction and friendships, cultural and religious distance, group work, and language barriers, have been investigated in-depth in this study. These aspects have been identified as contributing to the adjustment of international students.

In contrast to earlier findings in New Zealand (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013; Shepard, 2006; Stuart, 2014), the results of this study indicate that the participants had no problems related to cultural distance. They had easy access to halal food and had no issues with alcohol. It seems possible that the change in the current results is due to the changes that are taking place today, especially following the mosque attacks in Christchurch in 2019. New Zealanders may have become more aware of the challenges and needs specific to Muslims. An awareness was shown by the homestay families, which contributed to the participants' satisfaction with the availability of halal food.

Findings also show that the diversity of student experience that can occur within one university setting depending on the courses/programmes students are enrolled in. That is, this study does show that in one context (i.e., a university), there can be hugely variable responses by students depending on the courses they attend (e.g., language school vs. undergraduate). For example, the Omani students in this study were more likely to interact and form intercultural friendships in language school than in undergraduate studies.

9.4 Implications of the Study

Several practical implications can be drawn from the study findings for Omani scholarship providers, future Omani international students, New Zealand policy makers, and New Zealand universities. The following four areas are presented below.

9.4.1 Implications for Omani Scholarship Providers

Countries sending students overseas need to consider providing an induction programme prior to students leaving their home country. It is recommended that scholarship providers in Oman provide Omani students with induction sessions that address their academic needs and the social and cultural norms of students' host country or New Zealand. Induction sessions could usefully focus on readiness to live overseas, including ways of managing stress, living independently, and staying connected with family and with social networks in their home country. It could usefully include sessions on differences in social and academic expectations and ways of interacting/working and an introduction to the support services available in the host country institution and local setting. Origin country induction could be complemented by induction in the host country or institution for students to learn about these aspects and meet the groups and services that could support them.

9.4.2 Implications for Omani International Students

Omani students need to gain knowledge about New Zealand and can be reassured that they will not necessarily face stigmatism due to their religious and cultural practices. Reading about the cultural norms and values of New Zealand's Western culture would be beneficial so that they can understand different ways of living. It would be useful for Omani students to know that New Zealand's society is multicultural and that in this new environment, they will meet people from diverse cultures, nationalities, and religious beliefs.

Students would benefit from knowing that they need to be proactive and use their initiative to take up opportunities to interact with people in the host country, as this can ease the adjustment process. Students are recommended to connect with their home country student association and to volunteer and participate in local activities that are organised by the association or the university more generally. These activities help students to connect to and interact with the local community members and to establish friendships and support networks. Socialising by attending social gatherings and groups can help students learn ways of interacting and doing things in the host country which further enhances their sociocultural adjustment.

Omani students are fortunate to have international students as friends to support them. Their readiness for interaction with other cultures can enhance their intercultural friendships in the host culture. While Omani students might aim to build relationships and friendships with host

country students, international students from other countries can be a rich source of information, support, and friendship. The results of this study lend insight into the essential role of friendships in the adjustment experiences of international students, increasing well-being and lessening the impact of culture shock. Building strong friendship ties with other international students served as an alternative to the lack of friendship ties with host-national students. However, it is important to note that some international students may lack the awareness of their Muslim student counterparts. It can be very helpful to their adjustment if Omani students share their culture with others, such as explaining the significance of hijab or halal food.

The findings of this study have implications for students' adjustment trajectories if they come to rely strongly on co-national friendships and support. While co-national friendships can serve to mitigate culture shock, some Omani students' lengthy interactions with their co-nationals prevented them from interacting with host and other international students and from practising the English language.

9.4.3 Implications for Policy Makers in New Zealand

Implications for policy makers can be drawn from the findings of this study. Policy makers working in the internationalisation of higher education in New Zealand could consider providing more explicit guidance to support prospective international students and enhance their adjustment experiences. There is evidence that international students find New Zealand attractive because of its world-class education system, campus diversity, safety, and beautiful surroundings (Ho et al., 2007; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). However, the Omani students in this study did not list New Zealand as their first study destination because they had limited information about the country. Staff in international education in New Zealand may be encouraged to liaise with scholarship providers in Oman or other Middle Eastern countries, and pass information on to policy makers. An implication is that policy makers may, in turn, reinforce their international programmes or policies that inform scholarship providers about the opportunities that New Zealand has to offer and the nature of the sociocultural environment and multicultural education in New Zealand.

9.4.4 Implications for New Zealand Universities

It is recommended that New Zealand universities adopt more strategic and proactive approaches to supporting the adjustment experiences of international students as part of recognising the diversity and richness they bring to campus life. Host country students need opportunities to understand and experience the value of interaction with international students as part of the multicultural dimension of their tertiary education. At the same time, educators working in higher education need access to more effective ways of supporting international students' adjustment and enhancing the multicultural dimension in tertiary education. This study found that international students are less homesick and lonely when they form friendships and engage in social activities, such as those organised by students' associations and university clubs. One way to provide international students with a sense of inclusion and belonging in the campus climate would be for university international departments to introduce more clubs or work with current clubs to increase student involvement. These could then be supported to provide opportunities for and encourage host students to interact with international students and bring students from different backgrounds together. Furthermore, involvement in these activities comes with the potential to enhance students' awareness of and appreciation for diverse cultures.

Another suggestion is that universities provide a cultural induction and learning programme for international students, for example, during Orientation Week at the beginning of every academic semester. Knowledge about international students' religious holidays, dietary restrictions, cultural norms, or dress codes could be shared with all students during Orientation Week. Further, the implications of students having difficulty using the bus call for a strategy of liaising between the university and transportation providers. There could be several orientation sessions in which both local students and international students are invited and involved, thereby encouraging intercultural contact. This is particularly critical since many international students encounter social and cultural gaps while studying overseas.

Given that Muslim students have a distinctive set of needs, such as places to pray and the provision of halal food options in universities, it is recommended that universities audit their provision of these facilities. University international departments could look to establish a direct dialogue with Muslim students and their clubs/associations to arrange to share their Muslim celebrations through religious and cultural activities on campus. In promoting such

connections, universities would be better able to listen to students' cultural and religious needs and gain insight into how to support student adjustment.

The findings of this study draw attention to the essential role of homestay families in providing a place of cultural and linguistic safety and comfort. It is recommended that the practice of students beginning their sojourn in a homestay continues. However, some students struggled with the expectations of their host family, indicating that more needs to be done to ensure students and homestay families are each clear about what are reasonable expectations and their respective responsibilities.

9.5 Research Limitations

Despite the richness of the data obtained from the Omani participants, several limitations can be identified. These are outlined below.

Firstly, students' adjustment experiences are influenced by the length of their residence (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Participants of this study had been in New Zealand for a range of one to five years at the time of their interviews. That is, they had been in New Zealand for a variety of periods. Hence, all stages of the U-curve model were not observed for all participants. In addition, even though the data collection took place over nine months (from January to September 2020) with 12 participants and with two interviews with each participant, it was difficult to schedule a timeline and follow the Omani students' stages of adjustment due to the COVID-19 pandemic (New Zealand experienced a number of periods of lockdown over 2020 where students could not go on campus).

Secondly, this study explored 12 Omani international students' lived experiences and adjustments studying at one university in New Zealand, which limits the generalisability of the results. This study also relied on semi-structured interviews for primary data collection and focus groups as a piloting exercise to generate ideas and questions for the interviews. These data collection methods have the limitation of potentially putting participants under pressure; thus, they may forget or omit to describe some aspects of their unique experiences.

Thirdly, despite gender being out of the study scope, there was a limitation that eight participants were male and four were female. Recruiting as many females as male students proved difficult. This said, with the researcher being male, female participants were offered a

female researcher to interview them (see Subsection 4.9.1), but none of the Omani female students requested a female researcher. Nonetheless, in light of the ratio of male to female participants, the views of male participants have been able to be described more thoroughly than the views of the female participants.

Finally, the adjustment phenomenon in this study was explored from the Omani international students' perspectives without considering the viewpoints of the New Zealand host students. It was beyond the scope of the current study to examine the perspectives of host-national students and their attitudes towards international students.

9.6 Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations discussed earlier can serve as a basis for future research. For instance, it would be helpful to examine the adjustment experiences of international students by conducting a series of interviews over an extended period of time, such as over 12 or 18 months to broaden the understanding of their adjustment process. Future research could also be undertaken on a larger sample of university students at the same level of study (e.g., first-year or second-year students) to better examine the diversity, if any, of their adjustment over time. Future research could consider the perspectives of other groups of international students and investigate these in more than one and different university contexts. Studying the adjustment in multiple universities would provide a wider description of the phenomenon and could go some way to addressing the limitations of this study's generalisability.

Female students, especially those from Muslim-majority countries like Oman, might experience adjustment differently than male students. For instance, there are some restrictions on females regarding interaction with people of the opposite gender in Muslim-majority countries like Oman which do not apply in countries like New Zealand. Thus, further investigation into the experiences of female students that consider cultural differences in ways of interacting is recommended.

A final recommendation for future research is to incorporate other international and host-national students' perspectives. Considering the host-national students' perspectives would assist in understanding their attitudes towards international students, their willingness to interact and form friendships with them, and what might hinder them from doing so. This would

offer the possibility of a more holistic view and comprehensive understanding of adjustment experiences and their underlying factors.

9.7 Final Thoughts

I embarked on my PhD research project aiming to explore how students adjust to the new sociocultural and academic environment and what factors contribute to their adjustment. Exploring the adjustment experiences of international students proved to be an interesting and complex endeavour. I identified that it is essential to support students' sociocultural and academic adjustment. Having good language ability, genuine friendships, and adequate support as a triad of support can help ensure a positive overseas experience. My findings suggest that most international students are likely to be fascinated initially by their new surroundings and curious to learn new social and cultural norms. However, all students tend to experience culture shock at some stage as they immerse themselves in the new academic and cultural environment. I was interested to find that through studying overseas my participants considered they had become more self-disciplined and self-reliant. In light of the findings, I have developed a greater understanding of the experiences of international students and how to support them to enhance their overseas experiences, and what might assist in improving international education to the highest levels of quality.

I would like to conclude by saying that writing this doctoral thesis has been a long and hard academic journey. During this journey, I faced many challenges, including access to participants. The COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to recruit Omani student participants. However, I found the Omanis to be kind and helpful, which assisted in my establishing a bond with them. Despite having some cultural differences related to social norms specific to a region, I had a similar cultural background to the participants. Hence, my interaction with participants of similar cultures and languages promoted engagement and encouraged them to express themselves and share their thoughts. This interaction and the exploration of the participants' lived experiences also enabled me to better understand my role as a researcher and enhanced my personal experience as an international student in New Zealand.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Te Kura Toi Tangata
Faculty of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand, 3240

FEDU Ethics Committee

fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz
07 8384500 ext. 7870
www.waikato.ac.nz/education

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

22/7/2019

Dear Muwafaq Al-Tamimi

FEDU Ethics Application Approved FEDU045/19

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application for the project entitled "Sociocultural Adjustment of Arab International Students in New Zealand Universities" was approved by Te Kura Toi Tangata Faculty of Education Ethics Committee on July 22nd, 2019.

Please be aware that the Te Kura Toi Tangata FEDU Ethics Committee must be advised (by memo) of any changes to the details recorded in your ethics application. Please send any such advice to fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz. You will receive a memo of approval once the change(s) has been considered.

Kind regards

Co-chair
Te Kura Toi Tangata Faculty of Education Ethics Committee

PVC's Office
Division of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand

Phone +64 7 838 4500
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THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

MEMORANDUM

To: **Muwafaq Al-Tamimi**

cc: Dr Frances Edwards

From: **Dr Noeline Wright**
Co-chair Division of Education Research Ethics Committee

Date: 25 February 2020

Request for Extension to Research Ethics Approval – Student (FEDU045/19)

Thank you for your request for an extension to the ethics approval for the project:

Sociocultural Adjustment of Arab International Students in New Zealand Universities

It is noted that you wish to make changes to your Ethics application approval (FEDU045/19) as follows:

- You will interview the participants twice rather than once and this second interview will be shorter than the first
- You have existing approval to send your data to a certified translator. However, you, as the researcher wishes to translate it yourself. For quality assurance you will get a translator to check some samples of your translations.

I am pleased to advise that this extension has received approval.

Please note that researchers are asked to consult with the Division's Research Ethics Committee in the first instance if any further changes to the approved research design are proposed.

The Committee wishes you all the best with your research.

Dr Noeline Wright
Co-chair Division of Education Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Information Sheet for Interviews

INFORMATION SHEET

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Research title:
Sociocultural adjustment of Arab international students in New Zealand universities

Researcher information:
I am a PhD candidate in the Division of Education at the University of Waikato, and I am currently carrying out a research project that leads to a PhD thesis. I am interested in the adjustment experiences of Arab students in New Zealand universities.

Purpose of the research:
The purpose of this study is to explore the sociocultural adjustment experiences of Arab international students studying in New Zealand universities and the extent to which social interaction influences the adjusting experiences of Arab students in New Zealand.

I am inviting you, as an Arabic-speaking student studying at a New Zealand university, to participate in my study if you have been in New Zealand for six months or more. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to talk about your social and cultural life experiences in New Zealand in an individual interview. You can choose to participate in the Arabic or English language.

What is asked of you as a participant in this study?
If you agree to participate in the project, you will be asked to:

- Sign a consent form (if you agree to participate in the research project).
- You are invited to participate in an interview that will last between 40-50 minutes.
- The interview will be audio-recorded for the purpose of analysis.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary upon your agreement.
- You can choose a pseudonym during the interview.
- If you choose a video interview (such as Skype, Google Hangouts, or Messenger), please make sure to choose a quiet place and a good Wi-Fi connection.

What are your rights?
If you choose to participate in this study, you have the following rights:

- You can still withdraw or choose not to answer any questions during the interview, and you can withdraw your data within three weeks after receiving the transcript of your individual interview.
- You will be able to review your transcript to confirm within three weeks of receiving the transcript of your individual interview.
- You can select the time and place of the interview that is preferable to you.

- The information gained from your participation will be used for academic purposes, including this PhD thesis, and I might use some of the data collected for other scholarly publications, such as journal articles or conference presentations.
- If you would like to access the findings of the study, you can do so by searching for the thesis upon completion from the library search in the University of Waikato Research Commons for theses.

How to ensure your anonymity?
Your anonymity and privacy will be protected. Your real name will not be written in the research, but rather pseudonyms, and every effort will be made to protect your identity; however, this cannot be guaranteed. The reporting of the information from the research will not identify you or your location.
All the recordings and transcripts will be kept secure. Only my supervisors and I have the right to see the data. The translator of the Arabic transcripts and potential female interviewer for the female participants can also see the data; however, they will sign a confidentiality agreement that implies not using or processing any of the information of this research to anyone.

How will the data be stored?
The audio recordings of the interviews will be stored at the university in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. The Word document transcripts will be stored in password-protected files on the university PC of the researcher's office. All the recordings and transcripts will be kept secure. All the data will be stored for at least five years and, after that, will be destroyed.

Do you have any concerns or need further information?
Should you have any concerns, questions, or need further information about the research, you can contact me directly or either of my supervisors below:

Muwafaq Al-Tamimi
Division of Education, The University of Waikato
Email: msa23@students.waikato.ac.nz

Dr Frances Edwards
Division of Education, The University of Waikato
Email: francese@waikato.ac.nz

Dr Shazre Sarfraz
Division of Education, The University of Waikato
Email: ssarfraz@waikato.ac.nz

Appendix C: Consent Form for Interviews

PARTICIPANT CONSENT

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Research title:
Sociocultural adjustment of Arab international students in New Zealand universities

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet.
- Any questions that I have relating to the research have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation.
- I give consent for the researcher to take notes during my participation and to audio-record and transcribe my responses.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I can decline to answer any questions or withdraw during my participation up to three weeks after receiving the transcript.
- I understand that I will be able to check and modify the transcript of my individual interview to make sure that it accurately reflects what I said within three weeks after receiving the transcript.
- I understand that my identity will be protected and my real name and location will not be identified and stay anonymous, but that cannot be guaranteed due to the nature of the research.
- I understand that I will retain ownership of the data obtained from my participation, but I give consent for the researcher to use the data for the purposes of this research project and other scholarly publications, such as journal articles or conference presentations.
- I understand that when this research is completed, all the information obtained will be securely stored for five years and, after that, will be destroyed.
- I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: ____/____/_____

Muwafaq Al-Tamimi,
Division of Education, The University of Waikato
Email: msa23@students.waikato.ac.nz

Appendix D: Invitation to Participate in a Research Project

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Research title:
Sociocultural adjustment of Arab international students in New Zealand universities

Dear participants,

I am a PhD candidate in the Division of Education at the University of Waikato. I am currently conducting a research project entitled: *Sociocultural adjustment of Arab international students in New Zealand universities.* There is very little research on Arab students' sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand. Hence, this study and your participation will contribute to a greater understanding of Arab students' experiences and potential suggestions to promote their academic knowledge and practical implications. The aim of this study is to investigate the social and cultural experiences of Arab students while living and studying in New Zealand universities. Therefore, participants will be asked questions related to their social and cultural life experiences in New Zealand through either a focus group or an individual interview.

You are invited to participate in either the focus group or individual interview if you agree. The interview will be conducted in the Arabic or English language upon your request. The focus group will be in the Arabic language unless all participants are confident in using the English language. There will be two focus groups (one for male Arab students and another for female Arab students). Interviews will be face-to-face, telephone interviews, or other video interviews (such as Skype, Google Hangouts, or Messenger), according to your preference. Female students can request a female interviewer or be accompanied by a male relative if this is preferred.

If you are willing to accept this invitation, please contact me via my email below so that I can send you full information about the research project.

Yours sincerely,

Muwafaq Al-Tamimi,
Division of Education, The University of Waikato
Email: msa23@students.waikato.ac.nz

Appendix E: Pre-Interview Questionnaire

PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Research title:
Sociocultural adjustment of Arab international students in New Zealand universities

- Name (or Pseudonym):
- Email contact:
- Gender:
- Age:
- What are you studying?
- How long have you been in New Zealand?
- Do you have any other experiences studying overseas?
- What is your IELTS score?
- Where do you live in New Zealand? □ Homestay □ Flatmates □ On-campus

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix F: Interview Guide

Interview Schedule:

- Greetings, I will introduce myself and give an overview of the study
- Ask to sign a consent form
- Ask for oral permission to record the interview
- Ask to fill out the pre-interview questionnaire
- Remind them that the interview is expected to last 40-50 minutes

Interview Key Questions

Interview 1

Section 1: Focused Life History

Q1. What was your motivation to study overseas, and why did you choose New Zealand?

Q2. Do you have any other overseas experiences before coming to New Zealand? Could you tell me about those experiences?

Q3. Could you tell me about some of your cultural traditions or dress style in your country? Have you changed any of them to cope with New Zealand culture?

Q4. What were your main challenges when you came to New Zealand? What was your initial reaction to those challenges?

Q5. Do you remember your first day in New Zealand? What was it like? Could you tell me about your settling period until you commence your study here?

Q6. What was your expectation of interacting with other cultures and nationalities when you first arrived in New Zealand? Did it change? How is it now?

Section 2: The Details of Experience

Q7. Could you tell me about your friends in New Zealand? Did you know anybody when you moved here? Did you have any difficulty making friends here?

Q8. How do you interact socially with your friends and people in New Zealand? How do you expand that social interaction?

Q9. Could you tell me about any activity or volunteer work you have attended in New Zealand (e.g., trips, parties, or joining a club)? How was your interaction with people there? Could you tell me a story?

Q10. Did you study at a language school before your undergraduate degree? How was your social interaction with other students at that time?

Q11. How could you describe your interaction with students in undergraduate study (e.g., classmates, group projects, and study partners)? Could you tell me how your first day was at the university? Do you remember what your first class was like?
Q12. To what extent does the English language affect your academic study and social interaction with people and students in New Zealand?

Interview 2

Section 3: Reflection on the Meaning

Having described your social and cultural experiences in New Zealand:
You said in the first interview…

Q1. How has living and studying in New Zealand changed you as a person?
Q2. How do you understand the importance of making good communication with international students from different cultures in New Zealand?
Q3. How do you understand the effect of social interaction and friendships on your social experiences in New Zealand?
Q4. What are your expectations of interacting with classmates, group projects, study partners, lecturers, and staff in the undergraduate study?
Q5. How do you consider the role of the English language in your academic and social experiences in New Zealand?
Q6. What advice would you like to give to any Arab students moving to New Zealand to study?
Q7. Do you have anything you would like to share in relation to your social and cultural experiences in New Zealand?

By the end of this interview, I would like to thank you for participating in my study, and if you have any suggestions, please feel free to add them.