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## Omani international students' social connection and friendship at a New Zealand university

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### Abstract

*This is a qualitative study that explored the experiences of friendship formation of Omani international students at a university in New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from 12 Omani participants and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Utilising Bochner et al.'s (1977) Functional Model, the study found that Omani students were generally satisfied with how they were developing friendships with co-national and international students but revealed dissatisfaction concerning forming friendships with New Zealand students. The perceptions of Omani students revealed six factors that influenced their formation of intercultural friendships: (1) willingness to establish intercultural friendships, (2) frequent communication and social interaction, (3) English language proficiency, (4) capability to engage with host nationals, (5) cultural differences, and (6) personality traits. The data suggest that host-national contact is lacking and that international students prefer to contact co-national and multinational friends, which indicates that highly supportive co-national and international social ties significantly predominate. Higher-education providers in New Zealand and receiving countries addressing one cohort of international students will find these findings particularly useful.*

### Keywords

Intercultural; Omani students; international students; host-national students; New Zealand

### Introduction

A growing number of students are opting to study overseas at higher education institutions (Ng et al., 2017; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020; Yu & Shen, 2012). International students are endeavouring to gain educational experiences in foreign countries and to learn the English language (Alqahtani & Pfeffer, 2017; Alshafi & Shin, 2017; Vulić-Prtorić & Oetjen, 2017). In New Zealand, research has paid much attention to the experiences of international students in the last decades (Campbell & Li, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Vaccarino & Dresler-Hawke, 2011), given the importance of their contribution to the economy and higher education institutions as well as New Zealand's commitment to them through The Education



(Pastoral Care of International Students) Code of Practice 2016. Due to this attention, there has been considerable research on the experiences of Asian international students in New Zealand (e.g., Cao & Zhang, 2012; Vaccarino et al., 2018); however, only a few studies have investigated the experiences of Muslim or Omani international students (e.g., Alkharusi, 2013; Bahiss, 2008).

It was suggested that international students' sociocultural adjustment to a foreign country is facilitated by intercultural contact with host-national students (Ward et al., 2001). Nevertheless, studies have emphasised that international students often reveal having no or only a few host-national friends (Gareis, 2000; Gareis et al., 2011; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Research on international students has raised concerns about their inability to form intercultural friendships with host-national students (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). A national survey in New Zealand by Ward and Masgoret (2004) found that "one in four students said they had no interactions with New Zealanders in social settings, and 35% reported that they had no New Zealand friends" (p. 10). In response to the lack of intercultural contact, educators and university policymakers have begun to seek ways to foster social interaction and relationships between international and host-national students (Brown, 2009; Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

This paper is part of a larger doctoral research that investigated the academic and sociocultural adjustment experiences of Omani international students. One major theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was friendship formation. The purpose of this paper is to report findings that are not related to Omani students' friendships with co-nationals (students of the same nationality or culture), but rather with multinationals (other international students) and host nationals (those whose nationality is the host country), as these two types of relationships contribute to their sociocultural adjustment in the context of a foreign host culture. For many international students, forming social ties with host nationals is a challenge, and studying the reasons behind such challenges could help international education and is particularly relevant to the internationalisation of higher education.

## Literature review

Bochner et al. (1977), in their study of international students in the U.S., proposed a functional model of friendship networks. In their model, Bochner et al. (1977) outlined three types of friendships and the psychological function associated with each type of friendship: (1) a co-national network, consisting of people from the same country or culture, and its function is to express and practise the values of home culture; (2) a host-national network, including host country students, teachers, or academic advisors, and its function is to help international students achieve their academic and professional goals; and (3) a multinational network, consisting of other international students, and its function is to provide companionship. Given the present investigation's focus on the diversity of host-national cultures, this model is a good one to use given the focus of this study.

Researchers (e.g., Bochner et al., 1977; Mrekajova, 2017; Pho & Schartner, 2021) found that building friendships with co-nationals is the most prevalent for many international students. That is, co-national friendships act as the main source of emotional and social support (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Further, intercultural friendships, such as with multinational students, are seen to provide mutual support and fellowships in the new culture (Meng et al., 2021). Another benefit of forming friendships with multinational students is that it helps create solidarity and a sense of belonging to a community as a result of the commonality of being foreign students in a new cultural environment (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Despite the benefits each type of friendship network offers international students, intercultural friendship with host nationals is found to improve the sociocultural adjustment of international students (Swami, 2009).

It has been found that a number of international students do not enter into a friendship relationship with any host nationals, even after several years (Sam & Berry, 2006). A growing stream of literature has emphasised that cultural differences and language barriers impede the ability of international students to develop friendships with host-national students (Gareis, 2012; Li & Zizzi, 2018; Vaccarino

et al., 2018). A recent qualitative study conducted by Li and Zizzi (2018) that focused on female Asian international students in the United States, found that the Asian students revealed limited social interactions with American student friends due to language barriers and cultural differences. In a similar vein, Saudi Arabian graduate students in a study by Yakaboski et al. (2018) reported negative interactions with their American classmates both inside and outside the classroom. In their study, the Saudi students indicated that it was difficult to form intercultural friendships with the U.S. students due to the huge cultural gap between the Saudi and American cultures. Relatedly, McDermott-Levy (2011) described the experiences of Omani female students in the U.S. as difficult to build relationships with American peers; instead, they sought interaction with other international students, who seemed more approachable.

In the New Zealand context, Vaccarino et al. (2018) surveyed 136 Chinese international students to explore their intercultural friendship development. The Chinese and New Zealand students had different perceptions of what friendship means, influenced by their cultural backgrounds (i.e., collectivist versus individualistic). The low level of English language proficiency of the Chinese students led to difficulty in communication between the two groups of students and thus limited the opportunity for them to interact and form friendships. In his study of intercultural communication experiences, Alkharusi (2013) found that cultural and religious values made friendships with others difficult for Arab Muslim students in New Zealand.

The literature on international students' social networks has given much attention to social contact and friendships with host-national students and reported issues about this relationship. International students' social relationships with multinational students have been given less attention than their relationships with host-national students in the literature. In light of the issues of forming intercultural friendships among international students, this study hopes to add insight into future research by examining one cohort of international students at one university in New Zealand and by exploring factors that foster or inhibit friendships with both multinational and host-national students.

## Research question

Using Bochner et al.'s (1977) Functional Model of Friendship Networks, this paper investigates the friendship experience of Omani international students at a New Zealand university, with specific attention to two types of friendship patterns: host-national and multinational. To achieve this aim, the paper intends to answer the following research question: How is developing intercultural friendships experienced by Omani international students in New Zealand?

## Method

### Participants

Omani students were very motivated to travel overseas and to try different educational environments that could be different from Oman. Motivations to study overseas were varied among Omani students. They had expressed a desire for an educational experience outside their country and have a long-term plan for their career and learning English.

The Omani students ( $n = 12$ ) who volunteered to participate in this study (eight males and four females) were aged 18 to 24. Participant selections were based on several criteria. First, participants were Omani students and native speakers of the Arabic language. Second, they were international students holding student visas. Third, they were undergraduate students studying at a New Zealand university. Finally, they had been in New Zealand for six months or more at the time of data collection, as it was deemed that they could have gained some social and cultural experiences during those first six

months after arrival to New Zealand. Those who met these criteria were invited to participate in this study.

Participants were recruited using “purposeful sampling”, as often employed in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018). Access to participants was conducted by the first author through these steps: (1) direct contact at the university with Omani students, (2) contacting the Omani Students’ Association at the university where participants were studying. In addition, after attracting a few Omani students’ attention, a “snowball approach” (Cohen et al., 2018) was applied to enable contact with Omani students’ friends.

### Data collection

To elicit participants’ responses, semi-structured interviews were used (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Two interviews were conducted face to face with each participant. The first interview took between 40 to 70 minutes and the second interview lasted between 15 to 30 minutes. Interview questions were open-ended, as consistent with most qualitative research interviews. Participants were given a language choice, and all preferred to be interviewed in their native language (i.e., Arabic). This is in line with advice from Barbour (2007): “Even where they are also fluent in English, using their mother-tongue can encourage more spontaneous and open discussion” (p. 99). Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. After that, the interviews were transcribed in Arabic and then translated from Arabic into English by the first author. To check the accuracy of the translation, the two versions of the translation were sent to an individual who was bilingual in Arabic and English for consultation (Birbili, 2000) to identify any misinterpretation in the translation. Finally, participants were sent a copy of their interview transcripts in English to review. All participants reported no issues and agreed on their responses.

### Data analysis

The first step in the analysis process was to import all data into NVivo 11 computer software. NVivo 11 was used to organise the data and to enable accurate analysis. Data were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used in this study “for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The thematic analysis employed in the data analysis included six steps: (1) read the data to identify relevant ideas; (2) code data that were relevant to each other; (3) collect the codes into potential themes and all data relevant to each theme; (4) check if the themes are associated with the code extracts; (5) identify and name each theme and then write a detailed analysis of each theme; and (6) write the final analysis that included sufficient themes with selected extracts that related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at a university in New Zealand. The main concern of research ethics was to ensure that participants were fully protected from any harm due to participating in the project (Denscombe, 2014). In addition, participants were informed about this research project through an information sheet and consent form. The information sheet referred to the participants’ rights, including anonymity. Informed consent was also sought and granted by participants before they were involved in the interviews.

## Findings

The analysis revealed that Omani students were keen, especially early in their stay, to communicate and interact with others in the hope of building friendships because they were aware of the importance of establishing friendships in the host country. Omani participants were able to develop intercultural friendships with multinational students; however, it was difficult to develop friendships with New Zealand students, although they revealed that New Zealanders were generally welcoming and friendly people. Six major themes emerged from responses concerning factors that influenced Omani students' intercultural friendships:

- Willingness to establish intercultural friendships
- Frequent communication and social interaction
- English language proficiency
- Capability to engage with host nationals
- Cultural differences
- Personality traits

Further details about each factor are discussed below. The first two factors focused on ways to establish friendships, while the rest explored the obstacles that impede friendship formation.

### Willingness to establish intercultural friendships

Participants reported showing their willingness to communicate and form intercultural friendships with other international students. Omani students and other international students shared somewhat similar challenges in both social and academic life, and they felt they needed to communicate with each other so they could mutually benefit from their interactions. Facing the same challenges created reasons for developing intercultural friendships. P1 mentioned:

We all share being international students. Our main purpose is for studying. This matter helps us to maintain communication 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)

P1 pointed out that sharing the same goals motivated international students to cooperate and support each other. P1, in his quote, referred to the importance of belonging to a community; that is, international students. This community helped its members to create a comfortable zone where they could share ideas, seek support and, most importantly, attach to the community. This environment provided a place to form intercultural friendships, especially for students who felt neglected by the host community.

Omani students found bonds of solidarity when interacting with other international students, as a reaction to their difficulty when trying to enter relationships with the host-national students. They expressed their desire to develop friendships with Chinese and Japanese international students, especially those at the language school where they studied. In the participants' opinion, most Chinese students they encountered were trustworthy and supportive in both their social and academic lives. Therefore, 10 Omani participants mentioned having Chinese international students as friends more often than any other nationality. For example, P6 said:

... I have friendships with Chinese students, as they were the largest number of students when I was studying at language school, and I also have with students from Japan, Korea, and a girl from Brazil. Those were only one or two, but most of my international students' friends are Chinese. (P6)

As most students at the language school were Chinese and Japanese, P6 found herself interacting with these ethnicities of international students more than other groups of international students. Thus, it would be expected that P6 and most participants were having Chinese and Japanese friends.

### Frequent communication and social interaction

Frequent communication and social interaction were considered ways of promoting intercultural friendships by participants. P1 said:

When I came here, it was the Chinese New Year celebration. ... I joined this celebration and I learned about their culture. I mixed with those students. So, I have many Chinese friends. When I came here, I intended to mix with non-Omani students and make friendships with many nationalities. At the language school, I was sitting with three Chinese students at the same table for the whole 12 weeks I spent in level six. We all became friends. (P1)

In this quote, P1 showed his motivation to develop intercultural friendships with multinational students. The desire to interact with these students was built in the mind of P1 when he first came to New Zealand. Being receptive to other nationalities made P1 keen to have multinational student friends, more so than co-national friends.

It was found that intercultural friendship formation created circumstances for intercultural interaction and communication, with this achieved through invitations and travel. One participant, P4, revealed that he was invited out by his Chinese friends very often and they celebrated both his and their national holidays together. He emphasised that visiting each other was seen to create opportunities for social contact for him, not only with his friends but also with their family members:

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)

In his quote, P4 indicated that social interaction and socialising offered opportunities for building intercultural friendships. By celebrating with one cultural group of international students, such as the Chinese culture, a socialising opportunity was offered. Thus, it was beneficial for building intercultural connections to be part of Chinese celebrations.

### English language proficiency

A major factor identified by participants that both enabled or hindered the formation of intercultural friendships was English language proficiency. The key idea that the English language was a barrier in the host country was discussed by 10 participants. The majority ( $n = 10$ ) emphasised that their low English ability created communication barriers with host-national students, especially in their initial period in New Zealand. For example, P2 commented:

Um, similar to other newcomer international students is the language—the difficulty in communicating with the native English speakers. Although we have studied English at school, we did not practise the language in daily life and we did not practise with native English speakers. There are also different English accents. (P2)

Here, P2 revealed that his language limitation prevented easy communication with native English speakers in New Zealand, as well as the differences in understanding the accents.

A low level of English proficiency led one participant, P5, to isolate herself and to interact only with co-national student friends:

I might say fear of speaking in front of native English speakers. Although they do not comment or criticise me, on the contrary, they will correct me with love and kindness, but fear as a student who speaks English as a second language. So, I could not communicate or let me say I was a little isolated from the New Zealand world! So, most of the conversation was with the Omani friends. (P5)

A lack of confidence and fear to speak English in front of native English speakers obliged P5 to limit her social interaction with Omani student friends and, therefore, reduced her opportunity to form friendships with other international and host-national students.

### Capability to engage with host nationals

Omani participants attributed their dissatisfaction in developing friendships with host-national students to their lack of capability to engage with them. Although Omani students expressed the desire to develop host-national friendships to integrate into the host society and improve their English language, half of the participants in this study ( $n = 6$ ) mentioned that they did not have any New Zealand friends. Thus, forming friendships with host nationals was the least favourable type of friendship for Omani students.

Seven participants were expecting to interact with New Zealanders before they arrived in New Zealand; however, their expectations did not match reality. Participants described that they did not expect that mixing would be only with international students. P5 said:

I expected that I would mix a lot with the New Zealand students. But when I came here I found that international students like to mix with others, but most New Zealand students do not like to interact with others. So, my friendships with New Zealand students can be very few compared to other nationalities, such as the Chinese or Japanese. (P5)

The quote revealed that P5 was a little surprised by her inability to connect and engage with the host-national students. P5 found that it was easier to mix with other international students but not with the New Zealanders. She felt that she was unable to establish friendships with the New Zealand students.

P4 referred to the difficulty of entering groups of New Zealand students on campus. He believed that most New Zealander's friends are from high school and thus it would be difficult for these groups to accept new members:

They [New Zealand students] don't accept new members into their groups, as most of them were friends in high school and moved together to university. ... Even if you make an effort to form a friendship with them, you cannot. So, I shifted to making friends with international students; I have some Chinese friends. (P4)

According to P4's viewpoint, New Zealand students are satisfied with their formerly friendship groups and do not want to expand their social networks.

The difficulty in developing intercultural friendships with New Zealand students became a strong disincentive for participants to initiate and develop regular social contact with New Zealanders. Participants emphasised that interaction with New Zealand host students was only related to academic topics. As a result, they had no motivation to spend much time and effort on building relationships with New Zealand students, while it was easier to do with their co-national and international counterparts. This led the majority of participants to focus on forming friendships with co-national and multinational students.



### Cultural differences

One issue that was found to contribute to Omani students' difficulties in making friends in New Zealand was cultural differences. One of the clear differences between Omani and Western cultures was the consumption of alcohol during social occasions. According to Islamic beliefs, alcohol-related behaviour is not commonly accepted in Islamic or Omani societies, whereas this social habit is common in New Zealand society and particularly within New Zealand university student culture. P4 came to New Zealand with high expectations of positive interactions and friendships with New Zealanders, but the reality was different in that he made no friends from New Zealand. For P4, one reason for a lack of interaction with the New Zealand students was due to drinking alcohol:

I expected more interaction, particularly with the New Zealand students! ... I understand that it is difficult for them to cope with us due to cultural differences. They prefer a friend who can enjoy and have a drink together. I can mix and talk to them, but I will not drink. (P4)

P4 stressed the difficulty of making friendships with New Zealanders. According to P4, the difficulty was because New Zealanders would only accept someone that fits with their Western cultural norms and customs. Thus, because P4 valued the maintenance of cultural and religious practices, as evident in his behaviour, this limited the possibility of forming friendships because of the drinking habit of some New Zealand students.

Cultural differences can also appear in the academic context. P8, who tried to build relationships with his New Zealand classmates, stated that for him, making New Zealand friends was only associated with mutual benefits concerning studying. Group work forced students to have academic interactions and the frequent meetings with study peers could lead to social interactions and eventually friendships. However, P8 was not satisfied with this form of friendship:

Yes, I tried to make connections with them [New Zealand students], especially with those in my major. But you cannot say a friend, but rather a "friend for benefits", a friend to do something. For example, a student in the same group, so I was forced to meet him many times. (P8)

The quote described the difficulty P8 found in developing real friendships with New Zealand students in group work, as his perception was that the interactions only occurred to progress their learning and/or assessment work. Thus, P8 did not consider that "a friend to do something" was a real friend.

### Personality traits

Personality traits were identified as a factor influencing social interaction with foreign students in the host country. Based on their personality types, four participants clarified that their introversion influenced why they had difficulty expanding beyond co-national friendships. P7 considered herself a shy person when initiating friendships. Thus, she had few true friends and these were mostly Omanis:

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

Shyness and introversion were associated with P7. Therefore, it was difficult for her to initiate a conversation with other students due to her shyness, and because of this P7 had few friendships.

Similarly, when P2 attempted to interact with others or develop new relationships, he needed a long time to begin to develop a relationship with that person:

I am a person that if I meet someone, I could not make him a friend directly because I do not know that person; I do not know his background. ... I think it is not easy to make a friend. (P2)

The quote shows that an introverted person tends to struggle to interact with people or form new relationships. Even though P2 might not be as timid as P7, it is clear that he faced difficulty in making true friends.

Nevertheless, Omani participants (n = 8) did not attribute their inability to form friendships to their personality types. P1, for instance, described himself as someone with a high level of openness. As a result of his openness, he had no problem reaching out for help:

I like to ask people for help, and I like to watch how people do things to learn from them. If I need to ask for help, I do not hesitate and I ask. I came here to learn to be independent. I do not hold my phone all the time, so I ask people. This thing helps me make friends. One time, I made a new friend just because I asked him for something. (P1)

P1 seemed to enjoy asking people to enhance his knowledge and to learn to be independent. Openness to experience created opportunities for P1 to interact with others and build friendships.

## Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate Omani international students' experiences of developing intercultural friendships. On entering New Zealand, they assumed that most of their friendships would be with New Zealanders, but they found this not to be the case. The Omani students in this study reported positive communication, social interaction and friendship development with co-national and other international students, but they were not satisfied with host-national friendships in New Zealand. Their English language proficiency, capability to engage with host nationals, cultural differences and personality traits were identified as factors that hindered intercultural friendships and, in particular, friendships with New Zealand students.

The study supported Bochner et al.'s (1977) findings concerning co-national students as the most preferred friendship type among Omani students. It is notable that Bochner et al. (1977) concluded that host nationals were the second favourite type of friendship, while multinationals were the least favourable, and this was not in accordance with the results of this study. According to this study, Omani students were least happy about their friendships with New Zealand students because they found it difficult to interact with them. Given that the results of this study were somewhat consistent with Bochner et al.'s (1977) Functional Model of Friendship Networks, the study brought to light the positive role played by multinational students' friends in the sociocultural adjustment of Omani students, which compensates for the absence of host-national social contact.

Omani cultural traits become more salient when pursuing friendships. It appears that friendship solely for benefits is unacceptable in Omani culture. This is because the notion of a friend in Omani culture is not based on mutual benefits, but rather is related to caring, sharing, hanging out together, eating together, travelling, or celebrating Omani national or Muslim festivals. Hence, the meaning of friendship appears to be different between Omani and New Zealand cultures.

Omani participants were interested in interacting and developing friendships with other cultures and ethnicities in New Zealand. In ways similar to the findings of Belford (2017), social contact with international students was found to have a positive effect on Omani students, as it helped them to create opportunities for intercultural friendships. Indeed, Omani participants believed that having international

students' friends would contribute to their sociocultural adjustment and enhance their overall satisfaction of life in New Zealand. However, parallel to the study of Belford (2017), they suggested that their interactions with New Zealand students in an academic setting rarely extended to friendships beyond class. McFaul (2016) also found that host-national friendships were more infrequent than other friendships for international students.

This study examined factors that enabled or hindered the development of intercultural friendships for Omani students. Previous studies have investigated the difficulties that international students face when seeking close contact and trying to form intercultural friendships with host-national students (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). The results of this study showed a positive relationship between English language proficiency and intercultural friendship development. Omani participants emphasised the crucial role of the English language in their social and academic interactions. Participants emphasised the importance of having good ability in language that allowed them to interact and communicate well with other people in the host country. All participants agreed that an international student should have at least a basic knowledge of English, to enable them to communicate well with non-Omanis or non-Arabs. These findings align with Vaccarino et al.'s (2018) study, which confirmed that a low-level English language proficiency impeded Chinese international students from social contact with domestic students in New Zealand. Different findings were reported, however, in the study of Vaccarino et al. (2021), as Pacific Island students were more likely to use English regularly in their home country. Therefore, in their study, the English language was not reported as a major barrier when interacting with host New Zealanders.

Brown (2009) pointed out that international students' indifference to some aspects of the United Kingdom's culture and a negative attitude against Muslim students due to Islamophobia hindered contact and intercultural friendships with host nationals. This was not an issue that was raised by the participants in this study. In this study, Omani students were able to form friendships with multinational students in New Zealand and reported being able to enjoy celebrating their ethnic holidays with them, such as the Spring Festival of China, as well as Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr from their Muslim faith. Notably, Asian cultures, such as those of the Chinese and Japanese, are very different from those of the Omani; however, what makes them find solidarity with each other that is lacking with host-national students? It could be, for example, sharing academic goals and success as well as practising the English language as the purpose of studying at the language school. Learning about other cultures to integrate into New Zealand society was another reason that motivated attempts by Omani students to develop intercultural friendships. Friendships with co-nationals and multinationals could be related to sharing somewhat similar interests and their need to have a feeling of connection with some people in the country where they were living (Pazil, 2019).

However, in this study, often Omani students' difficulties in forming friendships with host nationals remained unresolved and they gave up after a time. Literature that has examined friendship networks of international students highlights the essential role of friendship-making with host-national students but has also highlighted difficulties in doing this (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018). The participants in this study complained about a lack of opportunity for social interaction with New Zealand students. They mentioned that New Zealand students already had well-established networks of local friends, and so they felt they were not motivated to engage with Omani or international students. Similar experiences have been reported by researchers in other contexts (e.g., Rienties et al., 2012). Some students in this study blamed their own shyness or willingness for their lack of engagement. It seemed that some students were "ground down" by trying multiple times to make connections with New Zealand students but to no avail. This was discouraging for them. Emotion has been found to be a major factor influencing international students' attitudes (Sam & Berry, 2006), so it is not surprising that these were said to play a part in the findings of this study.

Overall, this study demonstrates that for a group of Omani students in a country very foreign to them, and very different culturally, making friends with host nationals was extremely difficult. They

were surprised by this and by the fact that their friends in New Zealand ended up being co-nationals or multinationals. After many attempts, many of them seemed resigned to not having New Zealand friends, but they did appreciate the multinational friendships they made.

## Implications

This study has a range of implications for international students and the institutions in which they are studying:

- In their preparation for coming to New Zealand, Omani students need to be adequately briefed about New Zealand's host culture so that they can understand how New Zealanders live, and this could help them to make friends in the country.
- Omani students are well served by multinational friends and need to understand the value of this.
- The university plays an important role in promoting friendships among international students; for example, by organising more social activities and social clubs.
- To empower New Zealand's educational institutions to develop a culturally inclusive campus climate that engages host-national students more in the internationalised tertiary education.

## Limitations and future research

In discussing the findings, there were two limitations in this study. First, due to the nature of a qualitative approach and the relatively small sample size ( $n = 12$ ), the findings cannot be generalised. Second, the sample of Omani participants in this study was chosen from one university in New Zealand, and hence the experiences of those participants might differ from other Omani students in other universities. Therefore, future research should take into account these limitations and might consider other factors that contribute to the international students' friendship formation or adopt different methodological approaches.

## Conclusion

This paper has reported findings from a qualitative study that explored the experiences of Omani international students making friends at a New Zealand university. The findings suggest that developing intercultural friendships was seen to enhance the overall satisfaction of Omani students. These results suggest more attention could be given to the role of the university in creating strategies to support international students to develop more intercultural friendships with other international students. In addition, this study offered insights into the experiences of Omani international students concerning developing intercultural friendship networks in New Zealand. Omani students mostly formed co-national and multinational friendships, as these two types of friendships were easy to formulate and provided adequate support in the host country. However, their inability to establish close contact and friendships with host nationals needs attention. Adjusting the expectations of Omani students, teaching them about the nature of New Zealand culture and offering more opportunities for social and academic activities could enhance the intercultural communication and social interaction between Omani and New Zealand students.

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