مجلة جامعة الشارقة للعلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية

اسم المقال: الحفاظ على الهوية الوطنية للطلبة الكويتيين الدراسين في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في الغرب: الفوائد غير السوقية للتعليم العام في دولة الكويت
اسم الكاتب: عبد المحسن عايض القحطاني
رابط ثابت: https://political-encyclopedia.org/index.php/library/8959
تاريخ الاسترداد: 2026/11/01 21:59 +03

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Humanities & Social Sciences



Vol. 15, No. 1
Ramadan 1439 A.H. / June 2018 A.D.

ISSN : 1996 - 2339

Maintaining National Identity of Kuwaiti Students Studying in Western Higher Education Institutions: a Non-Market Benefit of K-12 Education in Kuwait

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Received on : 25-07-2016 **Accepted on : 06-03-2017**

Abstract:

This paper examines national identity among Kuwaiti international students studying in Anglophone universities in the US and the UK, using the notion of post-sojourn identity of international students from Kuwait. The study highlights some of the complexities behind the Muslim Arab identity that may explain why it is not fully understood in the West. Having surveyed a sample of 500 Kuwaiti students in Anglophone universities, the research shows that age, educational background, knowledge about national identity, and a sense of belonging to the national group all significantly predicted the success level of maintaining a national identity. The findings showed that, while the majority of the participants chose "Muslim Arab" as their self-reported national identity, there was evidence of an "identity dilemma" present among a high proportion of participants. The factors that affected this identity dilemma were educational background, acceptance by the host population, knowledge of their own identity, and how the host population perceived their identity. The study concluded with a call for a conscious "national identity" promotion for students studying abroad and further studies about national identity from other perspectives.

Keywords: national identity; Kuwait; Arab; Muslim; international students

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Statement of the problem:

Identity, in its simplest form, is the way a person perceives of him or herself and how this self is related with the world around them (Lawler, 2013). This identity is multifaceted; people can have a number of identities pertaining to their sex, age, education, or political orientations, to name but a few. Thus, theorists of social change indicate that changes in the relationships within and among these identities are the real essence of social change, not the physical world around us (Burke & Stets, 2009). Of course, the ultimate goal of this identity, whether maintained or changed, is a self that is "accepted" in the given community (Willinger, 2013). If this is the case, this identity is subject to a cluster of socio-economic factors that visibly affect the perceptions of that self.

National identity is commonly conceptualized as the ethnic component of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Tajfel (1981) defined it as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". National identity is crucial to the self-concept and psychological status of ethnic group members. Various issues can influence the status of the national identity and thus the well-being of individuals (Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Gonzales-Backen, 2011). The most important of these are (1) the extent to which individuals are involved with their national culture and heritage; and (2) their responses to probable negative views from the dominant group of their national group (Lawler, 2013). This national identity is not static, however; rather, it is dynamic, even to the extent of manipulating it for diverse motives, including instrumental motives such as safety in the face of discrimination. The most common cause for a denial of national identity pivots around prejudice and oppressive behaviors by the dominant group (Quintana, 1998; Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, & Guimond, 2009). In critical cases, this identity might undergo what is known as "identity dilemma." This dilemma appears to exist in individuals who feel they belong to a different national identity than that of the residing country (Ganeri, 2013; Kiwan, 2013); it is not usual for this dilemma to lead to "ethnic switching" (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Umaña-Taylor & Guimond, 2010).

Kuwait gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. The citizenry is made up of Muslims belonging mostly to Arab origins. For that reason, the constitution of Kuwait in its articles 1 and 2 postulate that Kuwait is an Arab Muslim independent country; therefore, citizens of Kuwait, who technically

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include individuals of different skin color and origin, are unified as Arab Muslims. Additions to the group of Kuwaiti nationals are rarely made through naturalization, which helps to maintain the "Arab" factor of the national identity. This is in contrast to citizens of nations like the United Kingdom, where national identity (British) is differentiated from ethnicity and religion.

Kuwait spends a noticeable amount of its GDP on education. An essential goal of the educational system in Kuwait is to maintain and promote values of national identity of Kuwait. This identity promotion is achieved through pedagogical activities in K-12 and tertiary education in Kuwait. To accommodate the increasing social demand for university education, however, certain Kuwaiti students have the opportunity to receive a government scholarship to study abroad, especially in the UK and US Anglophone universities. Once those students depart Kuwait to enroll in UK and US Anglophone universities, the issue of maintaining national identity arises, and it can be difficult. Thus, the current study attempts to explore some socio-economic factors in relation to maintaining the national identity of Kuwaiti students studying in Western Anglophone higher-education institutions.

Significance of the study:

The findings of this study will redound to the benefit of society, considering that promoting national identity plays an important role in one's sense of belonging and in the sense of a nation as a cohesive whole. The greater need for promoting national identity among Kuwaiti students studying abroad justifies the need for more effective strategies for promoting national identity amongst those students. Thus, institutions that are in charge of those students will be guided on what should be emphasized in national identity promotion programs. For researchers, on the other hand, the study will help them uncover critical areas in the national identity issue that many researchers might not able to explore. Thus, a new perspective on the concept of national identity may be achieved.

Review of relevant literature:

There is no consensus among scholars of a specific theoretical framework to approach identity; however, the lack of consensus reflects differences between three broad perspectives to study identity: social identity theory, acculturation and culture conflict, and identity formation (Burke & Stets, 2009). The first perspective, social identity theory, was developed by social psychologists to indicate that being

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a member of a specific identity provides individuals with a sense of belonging, which in turn contributes to a positive self-concept. Nevertheless, if the identity group that a person belongs to perceives itself as a low-status group, its members might seek to improve their status by "passing" as members of the dominant group (Romero & Roberts, 2003). Despite the fact that this behavior might have negative consequences on individuals, it is not necessarily available to those belonging to a "racially" distinct group, especially those who are easily recognized by others as members of that group (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). Some people can practice a dual bicultural identity through participating in the two cultures, but still there is room for the two identities to conflict in an identity dilemma (Kiwan, 2013; Lawler, 2013).

In contrast to social identity theory, acculturation and culture conflict theory examines changes in cultural attitudes, values, and behaviors that result from contact between two distinct cultures (Jones & Abes, 2013). It emphasizes the group level rather the individual, where the focus is on the relationship between the minority and the dominant groups. Two models were formulated under the umbrella of this perspective to understand identity: the linear model and the two-dimensional model. Within the former, identity is conceptualized as a conflict between two separate identities where changes in attitudes, values, and behaviors are intensive; the later conceptualizes the two identities on a continuum, where there is room on that continuum for each (e.g., by being thought of as Arab American). The third perspective, identity formation, was developed by psychologists within the fields of counseling, development, and psychoanalysis (Lawler, 2013). Its main argument is that identity is an outcome of chronological exploration and experimentation and leads people to decide how they define their own identities (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004).

Based on what has been said so far, identity could be measured as constituting elements of self-identification, a label that an individual holds for him or herself. Thus, identity comprises group membership, group involvement, and the intensity of sense of belonging to the group (Erikson, 1968). These elements can be seen through individuals' social participation and the cultural norms with which they wish to be associated (Pahl & Way, 2006; Willinger, 2013). Although research shows that young people can label themselves with a distinguishing identity, often determined by descent, the scene gets complicated when other influential factors arise. Peer influence, environmental, and political systems are the most common factors creating this struggle within the search for appropriate identity labeling

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(Umaña-Taylor, Zeiders, & Updegraff, 2013).

Identity labeling is not just restricted to how individuals label themselves, as they are passive in this regard. Rather, identity labeling reflects the attitude of others toward the identity or identities chosen by an individual (Ganeri, 2013). Attitudes about an individual's group membership affect how he or she forms an identity. It is believed that, if an individual holds positive attitudes and contentment toward a group that are reciprocated, it would encourage acceptance of that group as part of his or her identity. This acceptance would encourage the individual to get involved in social life practices and cultural norms of the group. Involvement is an indicator of the extent of attachment to a group. Using native language, making friends within the same group, attending social events of the group, culturally behaving as a member of the group, and further identifying themselves as a group member to others are all indicators of that attachment (Jones & Abes, 2013).

The concept of the international sojourn is defined by Ward, Bochner, and Farnham (2001) as a temporary culture, where international students are exposed to a host culture for a time before returning to their own culture. The sojourn has two spheres of forces that exert pressure on their cultural identity. The first are socio-environmental pressures related to friendship, language, financial, belonging, and familiarity with the host environment. These are particularly high during the initial stages of the sojourn's transition. Second are those pressures related to the academic sphere, such as learning, classroom experiences, teaching, and administrative issues. Tarry (2011) highlights the need for Anglophone institutions to understand the cultural and social impacts they have on international students when imposing a worldwide approach of culture and values on them. Perhaps this could be done by encouraging staff and students from the host culture to acknowledge and understand cultural differences between international students, instead of assuming and treating all students as the same. According to Tarry (2011), this could help to limit any changes that students may experience on re-entry to their own cultures, reducing the risk of psychological distress and unsettlement arising from changing identity post-sojourn.

It is clear that all perspectives attempting to understand identity were based on sociological or psychological explanations. Yet there is little said about the economic perspective on the issue of identity. Akerlof and Krantor (2010) suggested that the concept of identity can be used to elaborate on economic analysis in various ways. The relationship between behavior resulting from identity and choice is a significant in the economic analysis of identity; identity can uncover the motive for

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changes to individuals' behavior with respect to decision-making and adaptation of new preferences. Furthermore, identity could be used as a framework to explain economic problems facing individuals and societies, the most critical of which is inequality in economic gains.

Akerlof and Krantor (2010) presented a utility function with identity. They proposed that identity is based on social categories (C). Using the word 'identity' to indicate both an individual's self-image and their assigned categories, each individual (j) is assigned to a specific category (cj). Thus, each individual has a perception of his or her category and of others' categories as well. This assignment assumes different prescriptions (P) for different C – prescribing the behavior that appears compatible with C in various situations such as physical characteristics and other attributes – an ideal social category. Of course, those assigned social categories have either a lower or higher social status. Following these premises, the utility function of identity is as follows:

$$Ij = Ij(aj, a - j; cj, \varepsilon j, P)$$

An individual j's identity (Ij) depends on his or her assigned social category (cj). If j is assigned a category with higher social status, he or she may enjoy an enhanced self-image. That identity also depends on the extent to which j's own given characteristics □j are compatible with the ideal of j's assigned category, prescribed by cj's prescriptions (P). Furthermore, identity depends on the extent to which j's own and others' actions match prescribed behavior, indicated by P. An increase or decrease in utility that derive from Ij is called gains or losses in identity. With this model formulated, Akerlof and Krantor (2010) hypothesized that j chooses actions to maximize utility, taking as given cj, □j, and P and the actions of others. Thus, identity is clearly related to economic explanations with respect to status and income.

The current study utilized the theoretical perspectives found in the published literature. Specifically, it adopted the acculturation and culture conflict perspective on the one hand, and the identity function proposed by Akerlof and Krantor (2010), on the other. Then, later, the function was transformed into a Logit model (i.e., logistic regression) to assess how socio-economic components affect how Kuwaiti students studying in Western higher institutions maintain their national identity. The Logit model is a regression model in which the dependent variable Y (Kuwaiti national identity) is a binary random variable that takes on only the values zero (0) and one (1) in light of independent variables (DeVellis, 2011).

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Thus, the model gives the probability that Y = 1 is chosen conditional on a set of explanatory variables.

Previous studies on the issue of national identity in Arab context showed that maintaining and promoting such identity is not an easy task, particularly in the era of what is known "globalization," where the world became a village in terms of stretching boundaries in all directions (Kan'aan, 2008). Students, among all other population groups, are the most vulnerable to the national identity dilemma (e.g., Elsayed, 2007; Kan'aan, 2008; Mahmoud, 2011). It was indicated as well that mere rejection of others' cultures cannot ensure securing national identity; rather, national identity should be perceived as social action that holds core values and permits as well to interaction with other cultures.

Methodology:

Participants:

The participants of the current study were 500 Kuwaiti students studying in different Anglophone universities in Europe and North America. Those 500 students were randomly selected using systematic random sampling to be included in the survey. In statistics, random sampling is a subset of individuals (i.e., a sample) chosen from a larger set (i.e. a population). Each individual is chosen randomly in a situation in which each individual has the same probability of being chosen at any stage during the sampling process, and each subset of k individuals has the same probability of being chosen for the sample as any other subset of k individuals. Systematic sampling refers to a technique of selection in which, following a random start, every kth is selected and included in the sample. Hence, having obtained the lists of names of Kuwaiti students from the relevant Kuwaiti cultural attachés, the population sizes (Europe and North America) were respectively divided by the desired sample size.

Tool:

Based on reviewing the relevant published literature on national identity (e.g., Smith, 1991; Willinger, 2013) a data collection tool (i.e., survey) was developed for the purpose of this study. The survey consisted of four parts as follows.

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1. Demographic data

Three categorical variables were included for examination: age, sex, and school background. School background was classified into three categories: public school, private Arabic school, and international private school.

2. Identification with hosting society

Participants were asked to indicate their perceptions about the degree of their identification with the hosting society. In this case, the hosting societies are Britain, the USA, and Canada. There were three statements regarding how much they had in common with the hosting society, how much they knew about the hosting society's culture, and how much they thought they could be a part of the hosting society. Each statement was rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all familiar) to 6 (extremely familiar). The identification with the hosting society scale ranged from 3 to 18; the higher the score is, the higher the identification with the hosting society.

3. Knowledge about their national identity

The participants were asked to indicate their perceptions about their national identity. The statements included how much time they spent getting to know about their national identity, getting to have more information on it, and gaining a good understanding of the connotation of national identity membership. Each statement was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The knowledge scale identification with the hosting society scale ranged from 4 to 20; the higher the score is, the higher the knowledge about their own national identity.

4. Belonging to national identity

The participants were asked to indicate their perceptions about their sense of belonging to their own national identity. The statements in this section were about efforts made by the students to get involved in student organizations and how they engage with their host community. The statements were used to ascertain feelings of the students toward their national identity. This included aspects like "happiness" in being with other people (Kuwaiti students) close to their own national identity. The level of pride the students had in their national identity was also questioned using statements. These evolved to reflective statements, where participants would need to reflect on the experience of their feelings toward their

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own national identity in everyday life while living abroad.

Additional statements related to the feeling of positivity toward their national identity and the extent of belonging that participants felt in relation to their national identity. The degree of attachment that participants felt toward their own national identity was also questioned through statements. Students are provided with an opportunity to engage with 'national identity activities' while abroad; therefore, some statements questioned the participants' level of engagement with national identity activities. Each statement was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The belonging scale ranged from 8 to 40; the higher the score is, the higher the sense of belonging to national identity.

The research tool was rated by a panel of experts in this area of research. They had some remarks on its original version. The modified version was then sent back to the same experts for further examination. The final version of the tool was approved. A pilot study was conducted to check tool reliability, using the test-retest technique. Test-retest reliability is a measure of reliability obtained by administering the same test twice over a period to a group of individuals. The scores from Time 1 and Time 2 can then be correlated to evaluate the test for stability over time. Thus, a sample of 20 Kuwait students studying abroad was randomly selected to administer the research tool twice (the time difference was a two-week period). The correlation coefficients between the two administrations ranged from 0.73 to 0.78, meaning that the tool measured what it was meant to measure.

Procedure and data analysis:

After the surveys were emailed to the randomly selected students and then received again from them, the data were processed using SPSS software. Because the study was basically correlational, it was crucial to explain the variables taken into consideration. Based on the constitution of the State of Kuwait, Kuwait is an Arab country and the official religion is Islam; therefore, its identity is basically defined as an Arab, Muslim country whose people are Arab Muslims. Thus, the dependent variable (Y) was given a value of either 1 for the participants who did not show any identity dilemma while studying abroad (i.e., stating clearly that their national identity was Muslim Arab as their identity in all situations) or 0 for the participants who did show some identity dilemma while studying abroad (i.e., not clearly stating that their national identity was Muslim Arab in all situations). This

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dependent variable was measured through a set of open-ended questions within which the participants were asked to choose their identity. The total score of these questions indicated to what extent the participants had an identity dilemma, ranging from 0 to 6; the higher the score was, the lower the sense of identity dilemma. The independent variables were age, sex (male was coded as 1 and female was coded as 0), educational background (the chosen background was coded 1 and the one not chosen was coded 0), identification with hosting society, knowledge about their national identity, and belonging to national identity.

Results and discussion:

Data analysis highlighted some of the key factors that were related to the likelihood of students experiencing identity dilemma. One of the factors was to what extent their perceived level of acceptance by the host community had an influence on how they described their own identity. The type of school that participants had attended seemed to have an impact on their identity dilemma, along with perceptions of their own identity by the host population and knowledge of their own identity.

The participant response to the survey was distributed as follows: 270 male and 230 females, with a mean age of 21.3 (standard deviation [SD] 0.4); 44.5% were from public schools, 43.5% from international private schools, and 10% private Arabic schools. The descriptive statistics show some interesting issues. Although 96% of the participants identified their identity as Arab Muslim, it was clear that the majority of them had an identity dilemma ($M = 1.8$; $SD = 0.41$); they chose other identities, such Middle Eastern (which is a region not an identity) or Asian (which is not the articulated national identity of the State of Kuwait) when asked to identify their identities in different situations. One of the reasons for this could be the options available to participants. Where there is a need to define their identity as "ethnicity" for demographic data in application forms or surveys in host countries, the Arab option might not have been present. The "Arab" option was only incorporated by the ONS (Office for National Statistics) in the UK from the 2011 Census (ONS, 2013). The pilot Census in 2007 had identified ambiguities that the "Arab" option would bring, and it was considered "confusing and too broad" (ONS, 2009, p. 16). Until the 2011 Census, those that may consider their ethnicity as 'Arab' had used the "Other" or "African" options. The Census can be considered as a benchmark for institutions and researchers when collecting demographic data. One of the main advantages of adopting this approach is that it opens channels of comparability to the population for institutions and research.

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Roosens (1989) indicated that the intensity of people's perceptions about identity might rise and fall according to the situation. That is, the alternation in the degree of attachment to a specific identity was context-related. If we match this result with the other variable examined in the study, it is interesting to find that participants' perceptions of their identification with the hosting society scored the highest (M = 9.0; SD = 2.7), then knowledge about their national identity (M = 9.1; SD = 1.9), and finally belonging to their national identity (M = 15.9; SD = 4.2). The question was whether the Kuwaiti students realized their identity, but in the search for their identification, the host society made them unsure whether to publicly disclose their national identity in different situations. Along the same lines, it is imperative to ask whether Kuwaiti students had sufficient knowledge of their national identity or if it could be that they did not have a solid sense of belonging to their national identity. The Logit analysis helped in uncovering these relationships. All the independent variables were entered into the equation.

Before running the Logit analysis, it was imperative to check whether the model fits the obtained data. Tests of Likelihood Ratio (LR), Hosmer-Lemeshow (H-L), and the Expected Prediction Table were calculated. The results showed that the model was significant where LR = 62.2 (p = 0.000) and H-L = 22.4 χ^2 (8) (p = 0.01). The Expected Prediction Table statistics showed that the model explained 77.2% of the variance in the Kuwait students' national identity dilemma while studying in Western higher education institutions. Table 1 shows the unique contribution of each independent variable in explaining the variance in national identity dilemma. Standardized coefficients (β) indicate the rate of change of national identity dilemma with respect to a change in the independent variable; odds ratio (OR) represents a measure of association between national identity dilemma with respect to a change in the independent variable. In other words, the exponential function of the β value is the odds ratio associated with a one-unit increase in the independent variable. Marginal effect (ME) shows the magnitude of change in β value as a result of a one-unit increase in the independent variable.

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Table 1: Summary of Logistic Regression analyses for variables predicting national identity dilemma

Variable	β	Z	OR	ME
Constant	0.42	0.41	1.5	–
Age	–0.04	–3.10*	1.00	–0.02
Sex	0.25	1.10	1.30	0.04
Public school	1.32	2.29*	3.84	0.01
Private Arabic school	0.21	0.36	1.23	0.03
International private school	0.64	–1.00	0.53	–0.10
Identification with hosting society	0.16	–2.50*	1.20	0.02
Knowledge about their national identity	–0.19	2.65*	1.10	0.01
Belonging to national identity	–0.20	3.10*	0.80	–0.03

β: standardized coefficient; Z: z-score; OR: Odds Ratio; ME: marginal effect.

* Statistically significant at 0.5.

Table 1shows a cluster of variables that could potentially be predicting variables. Two demographic variables and three attitudinal variables were found to be statistically significant, affecting Kuwaiti students' national identity dilemma, taking into consideration the odds ratios. Being older resulted in a lower probability (2%) of having a national identity dilemma while studying in Western countries. One possible explanation for this was that maturity can help individuals constitute a gestalt of "I and the other" in a more realistic and balanced way (Willinger, 2013). Only those Kuwaiti students who attended public schools were susceptible (1%) to having a national identity dilemma while studying in Western countries. This result raises a question as to whether character education concepts in Kuwaiti public schools were sufficiently and efficiently introduced in public pedagogy. It was interesting to find that, in contrast to identification with the hosting society, knowledge about their national identity and belonging to national identity were negatively associated with the level of national identity dilemma while studying in Western countries. This seems logical. The less a student felt identified with the hosting society, the higher the probability was of not having a national identity

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dilemma (2%). On the same line of argument, the more students had knowledge about their national identity and a sense of belonging to a national identity, the less sense of identity dilemma they had (1% and 3%, respectively).

Conclusion and implications:

The current study attempts to examine the national identity dilemma of Kuwaiti students studying in Western higher education institutions. It was found that a small percentage of students had a sense of identity dilemma. A cluster of potential determinants was included in a Logit analysis for further investigation. Age, attending public schools, identification with hosting society, knowledge about their national identity, and belonging to their national identity all had some kind of predictive power in explaining the variance of that dilemma. Based on the obtained findings, a number of implications can be drawn. First, identity is not a static human trait; it is a dynamic characteristic, its intensity rises and falls according to the given context and the accompanying circumstances. This by no means indicates, however, that individuals can disguise their national identities; rather, they can disclose them without confronting the hosting culture identity or sacrificing their own. This is the essence of moderate acculturation with respect to people living in a foreign country for a temporary period, such as students (Ward, Bochner, & Farnham, 2001). Second, teaching students their national identity is not a guarantee that they are intellectually or emotionally secured from any fractures that could occur in the national identity construct (Willinger, 2013). Discussing identity issues and how to maintain that identity in a mature, reliable way is crucial. Third, scholarship policies and the cultural attachés of Kuwait in the hosting countries must ensure that students are aware of the dominant group lifestyles and behavior patterns to integrate them properly without the assimilation that might lead to loss of separate national identity.

The key findings from this study can inform the cultural attaché in providing means to strengthen the bond of national identity amongst Kuwaiti students and strengthen the notion of loyalty to their nationality. The findings are ideal for helping to inform policy surrounding the pre- and post-sojourn transitions for students who have scholarships to study in Anglophone universities. The study also provides the rationale for a qualitative or mixed-methods study to be conducted in the near future to further develop the issues raised and to identify high-risk countries where students may choose to study.

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الحفاظ على الهوية الوطنية للطلبة الكويتيين الدراسين في مؤسسات التعليم العالي في الغرب: الفوائد غير السوقية للتعليم العام في دولة الكويت

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ملخص البحث:

تهدف هذه الدراسة التعرف على الهوية الوطنية لدى الطلبة الكويتيين الذين يدرسون في الجامعات الأمريكية والبريطانية، من خلال توظيف مفهوم نظرية هوية ما بعد الإقامة في الدولة الأخرى (post-sojourn identity). وتلقي الدراسة الضوء على بعض القضايا الشائكة ذات الصلة بالهوية الإسلامية العربية، التي ربما توضح لماذا تلك القضايا غير مستوعبة بالكامل كما يجب في الغرب. وأبرزت نتائج الدراسة بأن عمر الدارس والخلفية التعليمية له، ومعرفته لهويته الوطنية، والشعور بالانتماء، كل هذه العوامل تتنبأ بدلالة إحصائية بمدى الحفاظ على الهوية الوطنية. وأوضحت النتائج وجود معضلة في الهوية' بصورة جلية بين المشاركين في الدراسة، على أنهم اختاروا تعريف أنفسهم «مسلم عربي». وكانت العوامل التي تؤثر في تلك المعضلة هي: الخلفية التعليمية، وتقبل المجتمع المضيف، ومعرفة الهوية الوطنية، وكيف يتصور المجتمع المضيف هوية أولئك الدراسين.

الكلمات الدالة: الهوية الوطنية، الكويت، عربي، مسلم، الطلبة الأجانب.

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