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# Chapter 4

## **Addressing student challenges in transnational education in Oman: the importance of student interaction with teaching staff and peers**

### **Abstract**

Transnational education is highly developed in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, with among the highest levels of TNE enrolments of any region worldwide. Approximately a third of the Omani students in higher education are registered in programmes offered transnationally, and the UK is the main provider. The principal aim of this study was to identify the challenges that Omani students face when studying in transnational education by means of a survey and follow-up interviews. The findings show that challenges relate mainly to the continual adaptation to transnational higher education and the challenges of academic writing in achieving the progressively more demanding learning outcomes, while the students indicate they address these challenges through collaborative learning. It argues in favour of widening the definition of contextualisation from simply including local examples to a pedagogical approach in TNE that supports students in dealing with academic challenges. The findings of this study may guide TNE lecturers in making well-informed decisions about their teaching practice and student support.

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#### **4.1 Introduction and theoretical framework**

The past two decades have seen more and more international students studying in Europe, Canada, America and Australia and an increasing expansion of transnational education (TNE) elsewhere (British Council, 2016). TNE is here defined as the provision of education to students in a country other than where the provider is located (McNamara & Knight, 2016), with the following key elements applicable: the local higher education institution (HEI) teaching staff provide academic support; teaching staff are expatriates resident in the host country; and the distance HEI provides the programmes, qualification, and quality assurance (Knight, 2016). With these increasing numbers it is important to understand student challenges, so that they can be better supported towards academic success. This study aims to contribute to the nascent body of research into TNE in the Gulf region and investigates the challenges students experience. Given that there is scant research specifically into the student experience in TNE in Oman while the numbers are quite substantial, this paper draws on the literature on international students as they share many similar characteristics and learning needs, on research conducted into student related aspects in the Gulf and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and on TNE research elsewhere.

##### *4.1.1 Supporting international students*

In response to increasing numbers of international students in Canadian campuses, Dimitrov & Haque (2015) developed an intercultural teaching competence model to be used as a reflective tool for instructors in making their teaching more effective across cultures. Particularly their facilitation competencies such as tailoring the content to students with different levels of linguistic ability, creating opportunities for peer learning, and mentoring students' transition into a new academic culture are relevant to TNE as well. Supporting international students in learning how to write assignments in a New Zealand university was deemed necessary even after an initial writing course, and writing support within the discipline included extensive assignment instructions and individual formative feedback from staff, while some students also sought peer support (Skyrme, 2018). Successful strategies to reduce plagiarism amongst international students in a UK university also included a discipline-embedded academic writing programme, and individual feedback (Divan, Bowman, & Seabourne, 2015). The nationwide need for academic teaching staff to support international students in Australia in their English language competence development during their studies was highlighted by an Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) steering committee (DEEWR, 2009). While this committee developed a useful set of ten good practice principles to support the development of English language proficiency of international students, Murray (2012) nevertheless argues that there is no one-size-fits-all when student profiles and English language proficiency needs may vary across disciplinary contexts and curricula.

Apart from the development of international students' English proficiency, there may be additional gaps in practical subject skills and subject knowledge. Specific support in these areas feature prominently in the international foundation year described by Jones, Fleischer, McNair, & Masika (2018). However, this seems to imply that addressing the deficits will automatically lead to student success throughout their Bachelor's programmes. Yet when students are not actively supported in how to apply their language skills in their oral or written communication, progression to a higher level of English language proficiency will not automatically take place (Benzie, 2010). Lea and Street (2006) argue that not only international but also home students will benefit from the academic literacies

model that they proposed. This model connects students' learning of subject content with the discipline-specific writing requirements.

#### *4.1.2 Transnational student experiences*

There is a limited body of research into the TNE student experience in this region, covering themes such as student satisfaction, first-year integration, and the contrast between previous learning experiences and the expectations of a Western university. Wilkins et al. (2012) noted that UAE students from state schools in an international branch campus found the programmes more academically challenging as they were not accustomed to independent learning, problem solving and essay writing. Qatari students in a Canadian branch campus (Lemke-Westcott & Johnson, 2013) indicated they had needed to shift from memorisation in high school to comprehension in the university programme. Previous learning experiences were also found to impact on the first year experience and degree of academic success of medical students in Bahrain (Holden, 2018). Factors such as moving from an Arabic medium secondary school to an English language curriculum and the pedagogical-didactical disconnect were found to make this transition particularly challenging. Holden (2018) argued that for a successful academic transition students need to realise in time that their long-held self-efficacy and approach to learning may not fit the new educational context they are in and that they need to adapt.

Outside the Gulf and MENA region some recent studies have focused on TNE student perspectives on plagiarism; on contextualisation and the transfer of learning to local and regional societies; on effective teaching methods; and on developing academic literacy. Palmer et al. (2018) found that students in four universities offering Australian programmes in Singapore have inadequate awareness of what constitutes plagiarism. They therefore recommended a set of measures in order to promote academic integrity in the TNE environment, of which a compulsory unit on plagiarism seemed to be the most effective means. In another study in Singapore, Hoare (2012) concluded that TNE providers still have some way to go in designing curricula that facilitate in-class intercultural and transnational comparisons as the postgraduate interviewees had reported losing interest in class when lecturers drew on foreign case studies and Western philosophies. Students' local knowledge should be utilised in debates and discussions so that transfer of learning to the context of Singapore takes place. Similarly, Yao and Collins (2018) found that discussing topics in class with a group of classmates was perceived by students in a Vietnamese German university to be an effective learning practice, and in a context where both staff and students are non-native speakers of English, the flipped classroom and collaborative learning outside class helped them to deal with English language issues. They recommended shifting to cooperative learning with a stronger role for teaching staff facilitating student engagement through group work in class. For TNE students in Hong Kong, Evans and Morrison (2011) found that the most challenging factors in the first year include academic writing, comprehending lectures, participating in seminars, acquiring specialist vocabulary and getting familiar with new forms of assessment and grading.

Students in Oman come from a teaching-centred schooling system where curricula and examinations allow success through memorisation, and where the development of higher order thinking skills has long not been prioritised (World Bank, 2013). Contrarily, the latter is what is emphasised in British curricula in higher education (Quality Assurance Agency, 2011). The Ministry of Higher Education in Oman actively encourages quality assured higher education in the private sector, as the public sector cannot absorb the growing number of students. TNE thus increases access for local students, both

school leavers and mature students, to higher education. All private higher education institutions are required to be affiliated with an accredited university abroad, most of which are from the UK. The vast majority of the students in Oman first attend a foundation year that focuses on general English, academic study skills, mathematics, and information technology before starting on their Bachelor’s programme.

#### **4.2 Aims of this study**

Hence in TNE, Omani students find themselves in a novel teaching and learning environment that is structured around the interplay between the British curriculum and non-Anglophone expatriate academics, all with their own culturally embedded assumptions of what higher education entails. These different assumptions may be disadvantageous to students’ learning experience and engagement in the classroom. Therefore, this study aimed primarily to identify what specific challenges Omani TNE students face in this environment and secondly, what type of support students subsequently need as a first step towards creating an appropriate teaching and learning environment in which they can succeed academically. This study moved deliberately beyond the initial transition phase into TNE by also including students in levels 5 and 6, as the issues associated with transition into the first year of higher education (level 4) may be more accentuated in TNE but occur globally and are not specific to TNE.

#### **4.3 Method**

This study used a mixed-methods research approach with a survey, followed up by interviews with twelve students in order to interpret the data based on deeper insights gained from the students.

##### *4.3.1 The research context*

This case study was conducted in a private college in Oman. TNE is well established in this country with approximately a third of the students in higher education registered in private institutions, as shown in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1** Omani students registered in higher education institutions

<b>Academic year</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>Public / all other</b>
2013-2014	60,294	116,691
2014-2015	68,350	138,632
2015-2016	70,294	141,790

Note. National Centre for Statistics & Information; data extracted on 29 April 2019 from <https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Elibrary/Pages/LibraryContentView.aspx>

In this college, the UK Bachelor’s programmes in the Faculty of Computing Studies (FCS) and the Faculty of Business and Management Studies (FBMS) are delivered to predominantly Omani students (96%), both school leavers and mature students, by non-Anglophone academics from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, the MENA region and recently also a few from Oman. The minimum English language requirement for both students and academic staff on the programmes is an IELTS 6.0, a requirement set by the partner university and the Ministry of Higher Education respectively.

### 4.3.2 Participants

The aim was to get a sample of approximately 1000, distributed proportionally across the levels in each faculty, and therefore this number of hard copies was handed out in core modules across the Bachelor's programmes, which resulted in 790 students filling in the anonymous survey, a response rate of 79%. Thirty-five copies had to be rejected, as they were not completely filled in resulting in 757 valid responses, 746 of which were from Omani students and 11 from students originating from the Gulf and MENA region. The respondents made no additional comments. At the time, there were 429 students registered in FCS and 2372 students in FBMS. Table 4.2 shows the breakdown of the responses (level 6 is the final year of the Bachelor's programme).

**Table 4.2** Number of responses per level (n=757)

	FBMS	FCS	Total
Level 4	196	21	217
Level 5	176	64	240
Level 6	240	60	300
Total:	612	145	757

Twelve Omani students were interviewed; eight from FBMS and four from FCS, as at this point saturation took place. Table 4.3 shows the profile of the interview participants.

**Table 4.3** Profile of participants

FBMS	Gender	Level	FCS	Gender	Level
B1	M	4	C1	F	5
B2	F	4	C2	F	5
B3	M	5	C3	F	6
B4	M	5	C4	M	6
B5	M	6			
B6	M	6			
B7	F	6			
B8	F	6			

### 4.3.3 Data collection and procedure

The student survey was partly adapted from the teacher survey conducted in an earlier study (Lamers, Admiraal, & van der Rijst, 2020). Where necessary, statements were rephrased from the teacher to the student point of view (e.g. adapting my style of teaching – adapting to different styles of teaching). Lecturers distributed the survey to their students in class and gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the survey, emphasising its anonymity and voluntary nature.

In the survey, students were asked to indicate how challenging each aspect of studying in TNE (as formulated in the items) was on a 5-point scale from "not at all" to "very". The mid-point of the response scales was formulated as "it varies". Descriptive statistics for each item are included in Table 4.4. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was then conducted on the 20 items using SPSS 25 in order to identify clusters of interrelating variables underlying the items in the student survey. These clusters of variables were used to structure the interview data (see below). The factor analysis with direct Oblimin rotation showed adequate Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of 0.939 and resulted in two main components: continual adaptation, and achieving learning outcomes. Continual adaptation includes items that refer to students' continual adaptation throughout the years to the progressively more demanding requirements of the British Bachelor's programme the students are in. Achieving learning

outcomes includes items that refer to learning tasks and assessments. Two items formed a third component that was difficult to interpret. Three items showed low factor loadings (<0.40) and one item showed cross-loadings (>0.40). These six items were not clustered into one of the two main components and are presented under the heading of 'Other' in Table 4.4.

The follow-up interviews were piloted with three students, and twelve students were sought to participate in the follow-up interviews with the assurance that what they said would not be attributable to any individual. All students agreed to the interviews being audio recorded and used for research. They were given a hard copy of the survey items and the interviewer read each statement out aloud as they moved through the interview. She asked them to what extent they considered each one challenging and why, how they had adapted and what support they found useful. They were also asked if there was anything else they wanted to add. Interviews lasted between 25 and 39 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts were analysed and coded through reiterative reading, initially per transcript on general comments students made and on responses to the research questions, and in the second phase across each item for a more fine-grained analysis. The frequency with which certain subthemes occurred was tabulated per statement. Next, after the EFA, relations between variables within each component were identified in order to distil meaning and their implications (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Finally, the transcripts were read once more for anything that might disclaim the interpretation or conclusion, and a few minor changes were made.

#### ***4.4 Findings and discussion***

Table 4.4 summarises the descriptive statistical results of the 17 remaining survey statements per component.

**Table 4.4** Student survey results

		FBMS (N= 612)		FCS (N= 145)		Total (N= 757)	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Continual adaptation to TNE</b>							
1	Getting familiar with the academic rules and regulations of the British higher education system	2.45	0.97	2.59	0.99	2.52	0.97
2	Adapting my style of studying (compared to school)	2.64	0.90	2.79	0.87	2.67	0.90
3	Adapting to different styles of teaching (compared to school)	2.60	0.92	2.72	0.94	2.62	0.93
5	Understanding how to avoid plagiarism	2.48	0.97	2.60	0.93	2.51	0.97
6	Different expectations that the lecturer has of me (compared to school)	2.61	0.93	2.83	0.86	2.66	0.92
7	The level of English required for my studies	2.52	0.95	2.65	0.99	2.55	0.96
8	Getting enough support from the lecturer inside class	2.48	0.96	2.65	0.91	2.51	0.95
9	Getting enough support from the lecturer outside class	2.59	0.93	2.75	0.93	2.62	0.94
11	Developing critical thinking skills	2.58	0.90	2.68	0.89	2.60	0.89
<b>Achieving learning outcomes</b>							
13	Writing long answers in exams	2.72	0.89	2.77	0.95	2.73	0.90
14	Writing assignments	2.69	0.94	2.77	0.85	2.71	0.92
15	Giving presentations	2.59	0.95	2.78	0.88	2.63	0.94
16	Working with other students in class (in pairs or in groups)	2.33	1.00	2.68	0.93	2.40	0.99
17	Speaking English in class	2.30	1.00	2.64	1.00	2.37	1.01
<b>Other</b>							
4	Understanding module content	2.58	0.97	2.71	0.89	2.61	0.95
10	Online access to the UK library	2.75	0.92	2.60	1.00	2.72	0.93
12	Theory to practice	2.66	0.89	2.78	0.96	2.69	0.91
18	Balancing study and work	2.64	0.87	2.77	0.96	2.66	0.88
19	Finding opportunities to study together with other students in the college	2.54	0.90	2.66	0.94	2.56	0.91
20	Study outside class	2.47	0.95	2.65	0.91	2.50	0.94

Note. Item mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), per faculty and in total.

The mean scores for the survey results lie quite closely together. The high standard deviations for each statement, however, indicate that students differ greatly in how they experience their studies in TNE possibly because their backgrounds differ (e.g. grade point average or motivation). For the two faculties combined the highest scoring challenge is writing, whether in exams or in assignments, whereas working with other students and speaking English in class were the least challenging. Independent t-test did not show any significant differences between the two faculties (with  $\alpha=0.05$  and Bonferroni correction for the number of analyses). The interviews with students give a more fine-grained insight into these challenges and what kind of environment and support students find effective. In the section below, we present the three components, each starting with the survey statements that were rated as most challenging, illustrated by the students' experiences as related in the interviews and situating them in the literature.

#### 4.4.1 Continual adaptation to TNE

The first, and largest, component may be interpreted as students' continual adaptation throughout the years to the progressively more demanding requirements of the British Bachelor's programmes the students are in.

Within this component the survey results indicate that adaptation of their own approach to studying is generally perceived as the most challenging, notably new assessment forms and no exclusive focus on exams and memorisation, and new advanced vocabulary being introduced in every module. Teacher expectations are also higher, specifically regarding independent learning, although lecturers rarely make this explicit:

*Actually it's more challenging, because it is up to you. If you would like to learn here, nobody will tell you "you have to learn this" so it should come from your heart. You are learning for your study, so you are focused and you should be not like in secondary school, you just follow the teacher, you just copy it from the board. [B6].*

When students come from an Arabic medium secondary school system with a traditional focus on information transmission and exam-oriented rote learning from a book (World Bank, 2013), it is a tremendous shift for students to enter into English medium British Bachelor's programmes where the focus is on the dialogical process of learning, independent learning with critical reading of several sources and critical writing.

Adapting to different styles of teaching was challenging as lecturers do not take a similar approach: some participants said that lecturers explain everything, a few others that students cannot ask any questions and lecturers do not interact with the students. A few of them state specifically that the slides help, and that attendance is related to how lecturers teach, with higher attendance particularly if students can be active in class and share ideas. When asked at the end of the interview if there was anything else they wanted to say, four students called for teaching improvement.

There were multiple interview participants who described a wide variety in teaching approaches ranging from very negative to very positive experiences, and the extent to which they had found certain aspects challenging depended on the teacher. This might be another plausible explanation for the high standard deviation in the survey. Only occasionally did it depend on the module or the

topic. This is in line with earlier research that found that academics' teaching practices can play a crucial role in supporting students' adaptation of learning behaviour (Eaves, 2011), and can have a positive influence on the quality of the learning (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006; Zepke & Leach, 2010). The lecturers whom the participants consider to be most supportive are those who take a learning-centred approach facilitating active learning in class so that they achieve not only the learning outcomes, but also the acquisition of discipline specific vocabulary and the necessary skills for academic writing. This finding is in accordance with what Jordan, Bovill, Othman, Saleh, Shabila and Watters (2013) and Bovill, Jordan and Watters (2015) found in a similar context in Iraq.

The development of critical thinking skills was perceived as quite a challenge and students feel that lecturers vary too much in their approaches. Critical thinking may have been an item that is difficult conceptually and participants interpreted it solely as problem solving. Three of them stated explicitly that this is not developed in class and another three said lecturers only focus on the subject. With lecturers who do set up group discussions though, four participants commented on how they enjoy these and they really need more:

*We need to solve problems more often in class. The discussion style suits us, especially students like us. Even when someone is not very interesting you have to listen to the lecturer while through the discussion you can be active in the learning. [B6]*

*Everybody in the group helps me and I get more ideas about the scenario, so you get more solutions for the problem. [C2]*

Although students appear to have an incomplete notion of critical thinking skills, they thought in-class group discussions would help. Yet they indicated that not all lecturers set up discussions and some just seem to give a lecture. It might be that lecturers assume students' English is insufficient to set up such activities in this environment or rather that it is incongruent with their own teaching approach (Arenas, 2009) i.e. transmitting information. The literature indicates that traditional lecturing is counterproductive to optimal learning (Loughran, 2013), and Virtanen and Tynjälä (2018) found that lecturing correlated negatively with the learning of generic skills such as problem solving and critical thinking, but that interaction with staff and peers was conducive to learning these skills, exactly what the interview participants indicated they needed.

Survey respondents perceive the level of English required for their studies nor getting support from their lecturers inside the classroom as that much of a challenge. More than half of the interview participants thought their English was good enough to manage in class, and said they could ask questions regarding content or vocabulary. Experiences with lecturers varied widely again as a few spoke about teachers who pro-actively support them in class to learn more English (academic) vocabulary, yet others just want to finish the slides and ignore questions. As one student answered in response to this item:

*That depends on the teacher, the person. Some of them are very supportive; you just ask them, they will be more than happy. Some of them usually just want to finish, they want just proudly talking, talking, do not ask any questions. [B3]*

A few students indicated here that there is a cultural issue in that some girls are too shy to ask questions in class. Nevertheless, they raised issues with English multiple times across six other statements, notably advanced discipline specific vocabulary as opposed to informal English:

*There's two types, we have general English and in universities especially there's academic English. Most of our people [=students] they don't understand what's the difference. [C4]*

The UK academic regulations are quite different from their school system as half of the interviewees pointed out, and take about two semesters to become familiar with although not in much detail as the use of formal English may be a barrier:

*The English in general is not that strong in the GCC countries. So understanding the rules and regulations comes from understanding the language itself. [C4]*

The next item, getting enough support from the lecturer outside class, is a practical challenge. Lecturers are required to schedule an extra five hours of academic advising per week, yet participants pointed to lecturers not always being available. Six students reported seeking additional explanation regarding the module content, the assignment instructions or a draft of their writing:

*Clearly, they help, it depends on the timing, they are not always free and they have lots of students to deal with. [C1]*

Expecting a high level of support from lecturers outside class is similar to what Prowse & Goddard (2010) found in Qatar, and some participants sought early feedback on assignments (Picton, 2018).

The least challenging, according to the students, within this component is knowing how to avoid plagiarism. Half of the interviewees reported that lecturers state explicitly and repeatedly that they should write using their own words in order to avoid plagiarism, but they said they found this difficult in the beginning, learned through trial and error, with only a few lecturers practising paraphrasing or referencing with them in class:

*In the beginning it was difficult to understand, now it is a little bit easier. One assignment after the other, you will learn. You will learn to say it in your own words. I know how to avoid it [=plagiarism]. [B3]*

The challenges of adapting to the expectations of the British programmes are not limited to the initial transition into TNE, and students at all levels depend heavily on the teachers for guidance and the development of higher order thinking skills.

#### *4.4.2 Achieving learning outcomes*

It is paradoxical that students do not see how the level of English needed for their studies relates to academic literacy, when they identified writing as the most challenging aspect of all. English language proficiency and academic literacy inevitably overlap and interact in complex ways (Murray, 2012). Academic literacy is generally defined as reading and writing behaviours in higher education. It is also connected to particular disciplinary domains (ibid), although Evans (2011) argued that it also includes

listening to lectures, participating in seminars, acquiring specialist vocabulary, and that writing is the most challenging aspect, which is confirmed in the survey.

The interview participants were almost unanimous in finding there was nothing as challenging as writing, apart from two students who like writing as such. First and foremost came writing long answers in exams, sometimes with requirements of up to 750 words per question. Some issues are related to task fulfilment, organisation and concision, as illustrated below:

*In the exam, I like to write more, because I don't know whether this is correct or not so I write everything I know. [C2]*

Another main issue they raised was time constraints in exams, which affected their spelling, neatness and accuracy in accounting, or accessing advanced vocabulary, even at level 6 (the final year of the Bachelor's programme) as one student explained:

*Maybe I knew it before, but in the exam I was in such a hurry and nervous and I don't have long time, so I use simple short words that I remember at that time. [B8]*

The topics themselves could also be problematic when they moved beyond what was covered in class, had not been discussed in class at all, or were long theory questions. Some stated explicitly that they were not trained in class how to write long answers.

Similarly challenging was writing assignments, which more than half of the participants said was totally new and they therefore relied heavily on the assignment instructions. Again student experiences varied from one lecturer to the next, with many students learning through trial and error:

*I start by reading the assignment and see what I'm supposed to do, what is the requirement. You know, Miss, when they give us the assignments they usually tell us what they want. So I just read and follow what they ask for. [B2]*

*It was challenging, of course. This was the first time I had to write an assignment, here in the college. In the beginning you have to do it three or four times until we know the strategy, how we can start it. [B6]*

*Some teachers make us practise in class. Now I have one teacher, she comes in class and checks, we write in class, if anything not clear, you can ask.... Now I think that if all teachers are like this teacher I think all students will be fine. [B1].*

Other issues students raised here were shortage of books in the library at the time of assignments; collecting data; a challenging topic; the length; proper referencing; formal register; insufficient amount of time given till deadline; and finding reliable websites. One student in his additional comments wished the teachers would give briefs, examples, and formats of how to write assignments.

Similar to what Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland and Ramia (2012) found with international students, the students here identified writing as the most challenging aspect, whether in exams or assignments, which may be closely related to critical thinking and critical writing. Artefacts consulted

for this study are the External Examiners' reports in which they repeatedly commented on the lack of critical writing in both exams and assignments, particularly in the final year (level 6) where pass rates compare unfavourably to those in the UK. Lengthy open exam questions in the final year relate to higher order thinking skills and require far more than the regurgitation of memorised facts demonstrating knowledge (C. Smith, 2011). It might also be that students are not sufficiently familiar with assessment verbs, and that there is a gap between how lecturers and students understand the meaning of these assessment verbs (Williams, 2005). A case in point is that the interview participants only talked about problem solving rather than critical thinking.

Not surprisingly, giving presentations was considered to be relatively easy by the interview participants as was speaking English although this was not always the case for their classmates, and three female participants reported feeling shy in front of the boys, as there were no mixed classes in secondary school. Working with other students in class is also relatively easy and participants said sharing ideas and explaining to each other helps them learn, although some point to the issue of mixed gender groups. A few highlighted that the class management skills of the teacher are important here. This finding corresponds to those reported by Almarghani and Mijatovic (2017) in Libya and by Yao & Collins (2018) in TNE in Vietnam.

All in all, achieving learning outcomes seems to be closely linked to academic literacy, something that applies to students worldwide but is even more accentuated in TNE in Oman and may be closely linked to disharmonious profiles in English language proficiency where reading and writing are far less well developed than speaking and listening.

#### 4.4.3 Other

Most participants admitted that they had not tried to access the online library and that they preferred to get a book out of the library or look things up on the Internet. Yet the survey results indicate that online access is quite a challenge and this might be a matter of passwords having to be changed regularly.

More than half of the participants stated that applying theory to practice is not done in class and that it is therefore challenging. Some students said the good teachers make the link in class or give them a case study to practise making the link between theory and practice, and other students said the level of difficulty may depend on the theory itself. A few indicated that other students shared their work experience in class and could show the meaning of the theory in practice. Balancing work and study is another item that is similarly challenging but some said that with good time management they can manage.

Where understanding module content is concerned, this may be challenging depending on the difficulty of the concepts, on the vocabulary used, or a combination of the two. Half of the interview participants indicated that it depends on how the lecturer explains new content:

*But others they explain to you in detail, they give you examples; they make it easy for you, not fast. So it depends on the teacher, what I noticed. [B3]*

Finding opportunities to study together with other students in the college and studying outside class were not that much of a challenge. Most participants indicated that only a few lecturers tell them explicitly what they need to do outside class. An unexpected outcome of the interviews is that nine participants have been in long-term study groups throughout their Bachelor's programme. These study support groups frequently emerged unelicited in the interviews and proved to be instrumental in dealing with challenges. Participants had set these study groups up themselves and the social aspect of learning and knowledge construction seems very important:

*Before I was studying in the morning and then I changed to the afternoon, but they still come to ask me "We have a problem with this, what have you taken in your class?" and we are sharing the information. We share the information they got in the morning from a different teacher, and I give them from the afternoon. It became very easy for us. [B8]*

The kind of practice that these TNE students believe to be effective and particularly suitable for them is cooperative learning set up by the lecturer inside class and collaborative learning outside class, as it facilitated their learning and was a stimulus not to fall behind their friends. Peers played an important and positive role for the students interviewed, similar to what Peregrina-Kretz et al. (2018) found. Students met outside class to help each other in understanding the content and the vocabulary, a core aspect of learning communities (Brouwer & Jansen, 2019; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009), and in understanding the requirements for assignments.

#### **4.5 Limitations**

The six female interview participants presented themselves naturally, but it took considerable effort to find male volunteers. This might have been caused by the fact that the first author / interviewer is female which in this context might be culturally sensitive. A similar issue was identified by the interview participants, i.e. male and female students working separately in class, corresponding to what L. Smith (2009) described in Qatar. In the end, most male students who participated were personally introduced by their lecturers. This did not seem to affect their willingness to talk, though, as the interviews with the male students actually lasted slightly longer on average. That being said, the first author may have benefited from an outsider status as a Western researcher who was not part of the teaching staff.

There may also have been a selection bias as both the male and female interview participants felt confident enough about their spoken English to take part in the study. However, some reported that their classmates' English proficiency was not that strong. Therefore, topics that the participants described might be bigger issues for some of their peers.

#### **4.6 Conclusions and implications**

##### **4.6.1 Practical implications for academics teaching in TNE in Oman**

Based on the interviews held with students in which they gave examples of good practice employed by some of the lecturers that helped them cope with the academic demands of the British programme, we come to the conclusion that first and foremost, TNE lecturers need to be consistent in their teaching approach. The instances of good practice that the students identified as effective and the

central role they placed on teaching staff concur with Kuh et al.'s (2006) overview of the literature on effective teaching. These examples of good practice relate specifically to the development of critical thinking skills, something the Omani students were not familiarised with during primary and secondary school. Therefore, the lecturers, rather than merely assessing students on their critical thinking in exam questions or assignments, need to explicitly design learning activities such as group discussions and debates to practise these skills in class. Secondly, and even more crucially, they need to support students in how to transform ideas discussed in groups to writing these up in notes or slides for presentations followed up by formal writing for assignments, as suggested by Lea and Street (2006). Students need to be explicitly taught how to improve their writing within their discipline similar to what Ryan (2011) proposed for reflective writing. Students could be put in pairs or small groups and asked to compare good and poor answers previously written in exams, identify key linguistic features of each, assess peer work and identify how the written text can be improved, before moving to their own writing.

As some participants indicated that critical thinking was not developed in class, and some that they enjoyed class discussions, TNE students in Oman are likely to benefit from cooperative learning activities set up regularly by all lecturers, such as debates, discussions, case studies and class presentations, to support the development of higher order thinking skills. Cooperative learning can be made more effective by structured procedures stipulated by the lecturer (Davidson & Major, 2014); setting students pre-reading, guided reading and structured discussion questions in class (Cruikshank, et al., 2012); or designing worksheets (Heron, 2019).

Students in Oman may also find value in the flipped classroom just as TNE students in Vietnam reported (Yao & Collins, 2018). What may be particularly useful for students in TNE is the use of special software that makes a video recording showing the slides and records the voice of the lecturer presenting and explaining the topic for that week. Students could then be required to view the "lecture" part online before class, look up vocabulary they do not know yet, check understanding with peers in their study group, and come with follow-up questions to class. This format would free up the contact hours for learning activities that develop students' critical thinking and writing in dialogue with lecturers and peers.

#### *4.6.2 Implications for the wider context*

The context in which TNE in Oman takes place is a complex one and brings specific challenges to the teaching and learning environment. The academics teaching British programmes are expected to contextualise the modules in such a way that it facilitates learning in TNE, yet contextualisation is often understood in a narrow way as in giving local examples students can relate to, and thus making content comprehensible. What would transform learning, however, is to expand the term so as to include culturally suitable pedagogy, which in this case would mean cooperative learning and group discussions; drawing global comparisons using local and regional case studies; scaffolding dialogues and debates skilfully towards critical thinking and analysis; and actively supporting students in acquiring the academic literacy within their discipline.

The interview participants placed the teaching staff and their practice central to their experience. And although some practices were not characteristic of their school system, they were able to recognise effective teaching practice when exposed to it. They also noted that there is no consistent approach

to teaching while inconsistency impacts negatively on the quality of teaching as a whole. This is a challenge for institutions in TNE as Wilkins, Butt and Annabi (2017) found in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates, and addressing this inconsistency in their policies should be a focal point for institutions. Additionally, institutions need to actively encourage students to set up study support groups from the start since the interviewees had indicated that in response to this environment and types of assessment, collaborative learning facilitated their learning process and contributed to their academic success.

And last but not least, the benefits of a UK programme and students gaining an internationally recognised degree while studying in their home country are at risk when the profiles of academic staff are inadequate for the complexity of the teaching and learning environment in which they work as it requires a much greater awareness of the linguistic demands placed on the students. Only at levels higher than B2, described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as 'independent user', or an IELTS 6.0, are language users able to express themselves fluently on academic topics (Council of Europe, 2018), both in speaking and writing. We therefore recommend that at national level the English proficiency required for academic teaching staff be raised to a minimum of C1, described as 'proficient user', or an IELTS 7.0, so that they can competently support students in the development of academic literacy within their discipline which the progressively more demanding cognitive and linguistic skills require of the students throughout their Bachelor's programmes.