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Engaging with arranged marriages: A lesson for transnational higher education

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Engaging with arranged marriages: A lesson for transnational higher education

Purpose

High levels of absenteeism have been observed amongst male students attending two transnational higher education institutions (TNHE) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). One reason offered is an obligation to attend engagement ceremonies. Many ceremonies are linked to arranged marriages. This study contradicts assumptions that suggest higher education reduces arranged marriages, and also highlights that university policies overlook cultural nuances.

Design/methodology/approach

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 male postgraduate students aged between 22 and 45. Content analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data.

Findings

Several interviewees chose to have an arranged marriage and some saw their postgraduate studies as an opportunity to have a better chance of securing a wife. Equally, several students felt that university policies were unsympathetic to cultural obligations.

Research limitations/implications

This research was restricted to male students from two TNHE institutes in the UAE.

Practical implications

This research provides insight for TNHE managers by providing student centric research into cultural reasons that prevent student attendance.

Social implications

TNHE is not fully responsive to familial obligations within collective societies. In consequence, there has been a lack of sympathy within policies regarding students' requirement to fulfil cultural commitments.

Originality/value

The article explores the challenges of creating culturally sensitive educational policy and practices.

Keywords: arranged marriage; education policy; South Asian men; transnational higher education; United Arab Emirates; research paper

Introduction

Often the notion of arranged marriage is seen in Western cultures as a predominantly Islamic construct. However, arranged marriage is a cultural conceptualisation that also includes Christianity, Hinduism and Jainism, and features strongly in South Asian societies (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013). This paper adds value because it looks at male students' attitudes where, typically, female attitudes are most often sought.

As educators we noticed that both male and female students often took time off mid semester in order to attend family ceremonies. This led to the current study which provides empirical data from two transnational higher education (TNHE) institutions that draws on the knowledge that students often provided documentation regarding their obligations to be present at engagement ceremonies.

However, in this paper, we examine the attitudes and beliefs towards education and arranged marriages of 25 postgraduate male students aged between 22 and 45 attending two (TNHE) institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The research draws on detailed interviews examining the students' attitudes towards and experiences of contemporary relationships, and whether these attitudes and experiences result in a bias, either for or against, assisted, or arranged matrimonial practices. The paper considers whether possessing a TNHE academic degree is believed by students to provide enhanced status for matrimony. Alternatively, does it encourage a different conception that challenges the static vocabulary around arranged or assisted marriages? In turn, this raises the question of whether education could potentially provide male students with a new social awareness that challenges parental influences and cultural interpretations.

This paper offers a pragmatic examination of male student experiences in TNHE that can feed back into policy making. This practical exercise does not purport to provide theoretical implications. Rather, it is a reasonable exploration in response to the observed behavior around student absenteeism and the link between this and engagement ceremonies. Any attempt to create a theoretical construct from this initial research would lead to a crude model that would not serve these results well. Instead, we argue that policy makers need to be attuned to a variety of inter-cultural needs and not apply a one-size fits all policy code.

Following our brief critique of representations of non-Western arranged marriages, this paper explores the expectation of knowing an arranged marriage may be a future reality, and how this affects the educational experience within TNHE. Focusing specifically on the realities surrounding male student expectations, the men were asked to consider their views on relationships, and whether these views had been re-evaluated in the light of their university experiences. Interviews also explored whether educational policy supported the cultural expectations set by arranged marriages. In so doing, a mismatch in students' attitudes and educational policy was identified that might affect student motivation and academic performance. In order to understand this mismatch, we first need to acknowledge the geographical context of this study.

The private international university branch campuses based in the UAE differ from the local federal universities in terms of gender segregation. In the former, education is conducted in mixed gender classes, while the government universities have segregated classes. Often TNHE institutions are not registered with the local Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) and instead are licensed by a separate authority that governs the quality of private education in the UAE. These licensing authorities use the standards adhered to by the home country campus as the preeminent governing factor. There has been criticism in the past

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3 that TNHE does not meet specific country or cultural requirements, and this needs to be
4 acknowledged if TNHE managers want to attract diversity amongst students. Even at the most
5 basic level, the TNHE institutions based in the UAE only make small adjustments in
6 consideration of being based in an Islamic country. However, they are less responsive to the fact
7 that approximately 85% of the residential population are expatriates, and the largest cohort living
8 and studying in the UAE are Indian nationals estimated in 2015 to be 27.15% of the overall
9 population (The World Fact Book, 2016). These ratios are mirrored in the national profiles of
10 students attending TNHE institutions.
11

12
13 McStay (2016) noted a strong Western influence on UAE's tertiary education sector, and
14 recommended that the Western-based parent campuses needed to enhance consultation and build
15 greater awareness of the cultural differences in their branch campuses, both in terms of the
16 country they were operating in, and developing a better understanding of the needs of the
17 students and staff. Pyvis (2011) provided a commentary on challenges for quality assurance in
18 TNHEs and had recommended that TNHE should incorporate policies, practices and goals that
19 foster educational diversity. He noted that "the pursuit of 'sameness' is in contradiction of the
20 preservation of diversity" (p. 741). The operationalisation of cultural standards should
21 incorporate the "perception, thought, judgement and actions which are considered normal,
22 generally accepted by, typical of and binding on a certain culture" (Holzmüller & Stöttinger,
23 2001, p. 607). O'Mahoney (2014) conducted a study of issues within TNHE which showed that
24 one of the largest challenges was related to cultural issues, and that this included cultural
25 relevance in governance (e.g. quality control and local regulatory systems).
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29 **Types of marriage**

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31 At a simple level, marriage can be broadly defined in terms of two forms of marriage:
32 either 'love' or 'arranged' marriages. 'Love' marriages tend to be more of a Western construct,
33 where partners are free to choose each other (Munshi, 2014). Whereas a traditional arranged
34 marriage is one that has been organised by the family on behalf of the couple (Bowman &
35 Dollahite, 2013). There is also much written about arranged marriage and romance (e.g. Mody
36 2008; Jamieson, 2011) but the emphasis in this paper falls on male responses to arranged
37 marriage in the context of understanding its broader linkage to educational timetabling and ethos
38 as opposed to crafting a deeper sociological understanding of intimacy. It is intended that future
39 research will develop those themes.
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42 **Prevalence and characteristics of arranged marriages**

43
44 In terms of prevalence, "arranged marriages have existed for millennia, and are widely
45 instituted among many cultures around the world" (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013, p. 207).
46 Arranged marriages are a common feature in South Asia (Ahmad, 2012; Allendorf, 2013; Myers
47 et al., 2005), the Middle East (Alsuwaigh, 1989; Nasser et al., 2013) and Africa (Munshi, 2014).
48 This is further confirmed by Harkness and Khaled (2014, p. 589) who state that "marriages in
49 which spousal choice is arranged by parents or other family members have long been normative
50 in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia". Alsuwaigh (1989) noted that a new, hybrid version of
51 'semi-arranged marriage' has been growing in popularity, whereby the couple may originally
52 find their spouse but only marry them with the joint approval of both families. Arranged
53 marriages are not just between the couple, but also between their two respective families;
54 therefore, it is important that the process considers the "interests of the individuals concerned
55 against the needs of the families as a whole" (Hense & Schorch, 2013, p. 107). The authors
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3 reported that in arranged marriages, the families choose the criteria which they deem to be
4 precursors for successful lifelong relationships; love does not play a significant role in the
5 selection criteria. Typically, the couple are of the same caste and religion (Allendorf, 2013). It is
6 not unusual for the couple to only meet a few times before the nuptials (Allendorf & Ghimire,
7 2013).
8
9

10 **Arranged marriage dichotomy and its reflection of collective societies**

11 Early writing on marriage seemed to promulgate that love marriages for those from South
12 Asian backgrounds presented a “struggle between tradition and modernity” (Harkness & Khaled,
13 2014, p. 589). This dichotomy has been depicted through the lenses of Western and Eurocentric
14 biases, which portray this form of matrimony as “duty-bound systems that suppress individual
15 freedoms and subjugate women” (Ahmad, 2012, p. 194). Little has been researched from the
16 point of view of the groom. However, it is important not to get drawn into an individualistic
17 account of marriage, or lose sight of the situated cultural practices in which arranged marriages
18 are negotiated.
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21 India provides a rich backdrop against which to understand the multifaceted and
22 culturally diverse examples of arranged marriages. Despite divergent cultural and religious
23 ideological differences that shape expectations of arranged marriages, Juvva and Bhatti (2006)
24 note that these variations are bridged to an extent by the fact that India, comparative to Western
25 societies, is much more collectivist. Part of this collectivism manifests itself through the respect
26 given to the older generation. In turn, young single adults expect their parents and future in-laws
27 to have a strong influence over the choice of marriage partner. Hense and Schorch (2013)
28 acknowledged that most often it is the mothers who scout for potential spouses on behalf of their
29 children. Ahmad (2012) emphasised the importance of mothers in the process of partner
30 selection, and discovered that mothers were more amenable to their daughter’s choice when the
31 daughter held an academic degree. There is little written on the fathers’ role in arranged
32 marriages (Hense & Schorch, 2013). Indeed Jennings et al. (2012) acknowledge generally a lack
33 of research on paternal influence in arranged marriage in comparison to a larger number of
34 studies on maternal influence.
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39 **Religion and marriage**

40 The power that women potentially hold within the role of mother or mother-in-law in the
41 decision making process of arranged marriages cannot be decontextualized from religious
42 doctrine. For example, marriage is viewed as both obligatory and sacramental in Hinduism. This
43 concept creates a union between both families, as marriage is considered a life-long commitment
44 (eg. Allendorf & Ghimire, 2013; Banerjee, 1984, Majupuria and Majupuria, 1978; Pothen,
45 1989). Divorce is not permissible in Hinduism nor is the remarriage of a widow or inter-caste
46 marriage (Pothen, 1989). Hinduism also provides guidance on hierarchy relating to gender and
47 respect for elders (Banerjee, 1984).
48
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50 In Islam, marriage is regarded as a foundation for society and is governed by Islamic law
51 (Shariah) which provides conduct guidelines for both men and women in relation to protocol and
52 practices (Kamali, 2008). Ahmed (2013) attested that “there is relatively little written about the
53 evolving dynamic of the Muslim marriage process, particularly in a modern Western context” (p.
54 4.) In her study of second generation Asian Muslims in the United Kingdom, she contended that
55 the first generation are keen to uphold arranged marriage traditions against a sea of change. This
56 echoes Ramadan’s (2004) earlier reportage of increased tensions between first generation and
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subsequent Asian Muslim immigrants with regard to preserving Asian cultural Islamic heritage in non-Asian environments (2003).

There is a perception that Christian marriage belongs to a Western construct of 'romantic love', which would be less likely to promote arranged marriages. However, arranged marriages among Christians in India is widespread, even if they are bound by a different constitutional framework. The British-Indian administration enacted the Indian Christian Marriage Act (1872) which regulated and solemnised Christian marriage in India. This legislation extended to all of India with the exception of some territories. For example, marriages amongst Christians in the former State of Cochin are governed by the provisions of the Cochin Christian Civil Marriage Act (1920) and there is no statute regulating marriages among Christians in some other states, e.g. Kashmir and Manipur, where, instead, customary or personal law takes precedence (Lijphart, 1996).

Dowries

Dowries are part of the organising principles within arranged marriages. These payments are essentially the "transfer of wealth made by the family of the bride to that of the groom at the time of marriage" (Munshi, 2014, p. 4). Dowry payments are common in South Asia (e.g. Anderson, 2007; Botticini & Aloysius, 2003; Caplan, 1984; Rozario, 1998; Waheed, 2009).

In an Indian context, despite the Indian Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the dowry system is still widely practiced, and according to Anderson (2003) the transfer of wealth from the bride's family to the groom's is on the rise. In an earlier paper, Rao (1993) noted that the actual amounts that transfer between families has increased in the latter part of the twentieth century - a trend that he dubs "dowry inflation" (p.283). This inflationary trend also correlates with higher education, where grooms command a higher price if they have a university degree. Munshi (2014) affirmed that the educational attainment of a groom helps differentiate him from his competition. Munshi (2014) highlighted that dowry payments were particularly prevalent within the Protestant Christian community of South India.

Munshi (2012) had earlier reported that within the Muslim community, the level of dowry increases where there are a shortage of eligible grooms resulting in the pool of prospective brides widening. This in turn means that educational attainment becomes a significant differentiator between men. The practice of grooms receiving dowries prevails in Muslim, Christian and Hindu communities throughout Southeast Asia (Munshi, 2012, 2014). This differs from the practice of providing dowries in Arab-centric cultures, whereby it is the bride who commands the dowry (Coulson, 2011).

Desired characteristics of potential spouses

It is worth pointing out that even when single adults welcome their parents taking the lead on arranging their marriage, the bride or groom-to-be still have a list of requirements that their parents are likely to take into account. Equally, there are key factors that are almost non-negotiable requirements, such as the same religion and caste (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013). In contrast, Apostolou (2013) reported that the beauty of a prospective spouse is more important to the candidate who will marry them than to the candidate's family. In the Bangladesh context, Goni and Rahman (2012) indicated that lack of educational attainment was correlated with younger age at marriage. In their study, it was suggested that whilst Muslims were more likely to marry at a younger age, there was little to distinguish this from the Hindu and Christian religions.

Higher education

In the context of studying South Asian women in the United Kingdom, Bhopal (2000) attested that higher levels of education led to women rejecting arranged marriages. However, her study also indicated that there were just as many women who aligned themselves with the traditional South Asian marriage practices than those who did not, despite living within the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, Bhopal (2000, p. 45) mentioned that “education is an important variable which affects South Asian women’s participation in arranged marriages and dowries”. Ahmad (2012) interviewed British Muslim women and found evidence of a correlation between social class, higher educational attainment, and the choices these women made regarding marriage options. The consensus was that the attainment of a degree provided enhanced options which extended beyond the parameters of an arranged marriage.

Differences in criteria between daughters and parents

Ahmad (2012) found that women prioritised financial security and stability of prospective marriage partners. In addition to these attributes, parents also sought similar family backgrounds, educational attainment and were more concerned with the groom’s profession. Daughters seeking grooms further commented that intellectual compatibility and pleasing personality were significant (Ahmad, 2012). By the time a woman was in her thirties, and still seeking a spouse, the level of educational attainment that the candidate possessed was deemed less important (Ahmad, 2012).

Engagement ceremonies

The engagement ceremony is a formal requirement and a precursor to nuptials. This is the time where both families ritualise and formalise the engagement, and often also select the most auspicious date for the wedding, depending upon astrological positioning of the stars (Netting, 2010). There are various customs which differ in religions and regions, but the ceremony has great significance and is seen as a prequel to the main wedding. Moreover, weddings are now exhibited as an extension of Bollywood culture industry with high expectations and cost (Kapur, 2009). Any form of traditional ceremonies such as engagements and weddings are likely to come into temporal conflict with higher education timetables. There is no literature on how this impacts on Indian men, but although based on Muslim women in a British context, Mohee (2011) observes that parents put their children under pressure to maintain family responsibilities whilst at university. This can result in some students not being allowed to engage in any form of extra curricula activity at university. Conversely, the pressures of fixed university timetables often disrupt family celebrations, and that can bring students into conflict with their parents.

Methodology

The research here is based on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with 25 participants. Prior to this, four unstructured interviews (two women and two men) were conducted as part of a pilot study that helped inform the questions asked in the subsequent interviews. An introductory question was:

Is there a possibility that you will have an arranged marriage?

After identifying the students who were likely to have an arranged marriage, we explored how they felt and tried to establish how much agency they had within this process. We also unpacked the ways in which university policy impacted upon cultural obligations.

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3 The research reported here is part of a larger project that will go on to look at female
4 students as a discrete group, and compare the experiences of men and women studying in similar
5 TNHE institutions. In this study, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with male
6 postgraduate students, and the questions covered a variety of themes such as the influences of
7 higher education and professional status on their marriage options and choices. Of the 25
8 students in this study, nine were Muslim, eight were Hindu, seven were Christian, while the
9 remaining participant followed another religion which will be termed 'other' to preserve privacy.

10
11 The study relied on self-selecting convenience samples from two international branch
12 campuses in the UAE. All participants were male. Nineteen were of Indian nationality, although
13 many of these men had been born and raised in the Arabian Gulf. The remainder were Gulf
14 Nationals (but not Emirati), from Africa, from a Western Culture and from a Central Asian
15 nation which was formerly part of the Soviet Republic. Some specific countries have not been
16 identified to maintain the anonymity of the participants involved.

17
18 Following the recruitment phase, potential participants were randomly assigned to a
19 member of the research team. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the respective team
20 member, with interview length averaging 50 minutes. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity,
21 minor editing was conducted to remove potentially identifying information, and to further
22 enhance the study's credibility and trustworthiness, a second research team member reviewed
23 recordings and compared transcripts. The interviews focused on the students' expectation that an
24 arranged marriage may be a future reality, and how this affected the educational experience
25 within TNHE. Interviews also explored whether educational policy supported cultural
26 expectations around family life. In so doing, a mismatch in students' attitudes and educational
27 policy was identified that might affect student motivation and academic performance

28
29 We also wanted to know what attributes the men hoped to find in their future spouse. In
30 addition to determining what the respondent was looking for in a wife, in their own words, this
31 question aimed to identify common themes which could developed into a standardised
32 measurement tool for future comparisons between male and female participants. Therefore, we
33 asked the men to rank the importance of 20 different criteria, such as being of the same religion,
34 level of education, shared values, looks, physical well-being and nationality. We anticipated that
35 there might be differences between men that wanted to have an arranged marriage and those
36 looking for a love match. We also predicted that the parents' educational attainment might also
37 influence what men were looking for in a future wife, so we asked a number of questions about
38 their family backgrounds, including the highest qualification that each of their parents had
39 attained.

40
41 The interview data were analysed using an interpretive content analysis approach, which
42 is a technique popular in qualitative research due to its ability to gain insights from complex
43 word data (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005; Yin, 2011). Data from the transcripts were categorised
44 and coded into common themes, as recommended by Yin (2011), and selected quotes were
45 chosen as representative of identified themes. Given the nature of the study and the small sample
46 size, it would not be appropriate to make statistical correlations, but it is possible to see general
47 overall preferences of the sample. Analysis of the criterion ranking exercise also revealed
48 common attributes that the men were seeking in future spouses.

49
50 Given the nature of the study and the small sample size, it would not be appropriate to
51 make statistical correlations, but it is possible to see potential relationships between various
52 factors. The data collection, handling, and analysis complied with the ethical guidelines of the
53 British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011).

Findings and analyses

Open to arranged marriage

One of the most notable findings from this research is that over half the men interviewed were open to the prospect of an arranged marriage. More specifically, 17 out of 25 reported that they were either likely to have arranged marriages, or were considering arranged marriages. However, what is of greater interest within this cohort are the attitudes that underpin this response. When asked whether they had a choice in the matter, many of the men indicated that they were choosing to have an arranged marriage. By the time the men were doing their postgraduate studies, many reported that they were working and financially independent. Therefore, they reported that an arranged marriage was their choice, and not part of coercion through a lack of financial autonomy.

This is not to say that this was universally welcomed, because the results show that eight men were not likely to pursue an arranged marriage. However, one of those eight participants suggested that this may change if he does not find a wife on his own within a matter of a few years. Of the remaining seven who reported that they were unlikely to have an arranged marriage, two of these men were Muslim, two were Hindu and three were Christian. The men that were not planning arranged marriages were also exercising their right to choose, but with the exception of a Catholic Christian, these men put less importance on a future wife being from the same religion or same cultural background. This perhaps indicates that free choices are shaped by how involved and interwoven people are with family life. This echoes some of the literature written from the woman's perspective, where it was found that religion is often used by parents to maintain the pressure of conformity and carrying on the family traditions (Mohee, 2011).

Characteristics of a wife

In addition to considering whether men were more likely to choose an arranged marriage, we explored what men were looking for in a future wife. Here we asked how important different attributes were to them. In line with the importance of culture referred to above, it was also found that having a wife with the same religion was important, with 15 of the participants rating this as being a very important element. Similarly, Allendorf (2013) and Bowman and Dollahite (2013) recognised that a major component for a potential spouse is being of the same religion. However, despite the importance placed on religion, there was no observable relationship between men seeking an educated wife and those that said they wanted a wife of the same religion. Although the numbers are small, this was found to be consistent across the various religions.

We had anticipated that we might see differences between men that were opting to have an arranged marriage and the desire for a wife that had a university degree. Sixteen men indicated that their wife's education was either important or very important. The participants were also asked to specify what educational level they would wish their spouse to have attained. Ten stated that they wanted their wife to possess at least a bachelor's degree, with three preferring a postgraduate degree. However, when we compared their answers between choosing an arranged marriage with the importance placed on education, there was no clear pattern. Eight out of 17 participants that plan to have arranged marriages gave high priority to their future wife's education. Yet, three out of the seven participants who did not plan to have arranged marriages also placed a high priority on their wife's education. This provides relatively equal

prioritisation of spousal education across all the men who participated in the study, with half who answered this question saying that it is of importance.

Education of wives and mothers

Given that there is no obvious relationship between the desire for an educated wife and the likelihood of choosing an arranged marriage, we investigated whether participants' own family background influenced their decision. It would be reasonable to expect that a man's experience of women is shaped and normalised by his own mother. For example, if a man's mother has a university degree, it might be expected that the man would want his wife to have a degree.

Surprisingly, there was no evidence of a mother's level of education influencing the desire for an educated wife. Rather than seeing education as a way of achieving intellectual compatibility, one participant mentioned that it was important that his wife was "well educated to be presented to society". This suggests that having an educated wife is viewed in the same way as being well presented, or good looking. Incidentally, looks were only perceived to have importance for just under half of the students interviewed, with 12 denoting this to have importance. To understand this, we need to consider what it is that is being valued when participants claim to value education, or indeed what is perceived as good looking.

The intrinsic value of education

Most of the students had parents that valued the need for their sons to go to university, but we do not know whether they place an intrinsic value on education, or whether it is seen as a way to secure a good job. These two factors do not need to be mutually exclusive, but globally, the marketisation of TNHE institutions has led to the expansion of business-focused or vocational degree programs, and the decrease in arts-based subjects. Commodification in TNHE in the UAE has been recognised (Annabi & Muller 2016; Annabi & Wilkins 2016; Wilkins 2013). Similarly, market forces mean that social class and parental income are the main predictor of who goes to university (Angus, 2004; Brewer, Gates & Goldman 2002; Lynch 2006; Sheng, 2014; Wilkins 2013). It is therefore likely that the students see their education being primarily important because of the credentials gain, rather than a mind-expanding or transformative experience (O'Sullivan, 2003). This is in keeping with the fact that 11 of the participants believed that it was important that they shared the same values as their spouse, yet only two thought having the same political beliefs were relevant in any potential match. Certainly, humanities and arts-based degrees are more likely to encourage a progressive political outlook (Gross, 2013), which contrasts with the business orientated degrees our students were undertaking. All believed that their postgraduate degrees would advance their career, and many were self-funding because they were already working.

Education as a route to financial security

For some, the participants' own education was not only linked to securing a better job, it was also a means of gaining a suitable wife. Five of the students questioned, (one fifth of the total), were partially motivated into higher education because they believed that holding a postgraduate degree would increase their chances of securing a better matrimonial offer. This is consistent with Munshi (2012), who had written about educated men commanding larger dowries. Some of these men saw themselves in traditional patriarchal roles, where it is their responsibility to work. Indeed, only seven thought that their spouses' financial status was

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3 important. 14 of the male students said that it did not matter what profession their spouse had. Of
4 the eight who said that it did matter, they did not provide an idea of the profession that they
5 would seek. One said as long as she was “not a nurse or doctor or anything in the medical field”,
6 because he did not want his wife to work long hours or do shift work, as such work patterns
7 would not be conducive to family life. Interestingly, none of the men wanted their wives to be
8 more qualified than they were.
9
10

11 **Educations as a challenge to unequal gender roles**

12 Returning to the issue of dowries, one of the men commented:

13 “...For Indians and Asians there is a huge list of things that are important like family, like
14 caste, and language, if you’re from same village and how much dowry you get”. He
15 viewed the dowry as a “horrible thing but, unfortunately, it’s still practiced”.

16
17 This extract shows that some men are speaking out against some of the stereotypical
18 patriarchal attitudes. Nevertheless, there is a gap between voicing disapproval and feeling able
19 to openly challenge these practices if they happen in their own families. For example, one man
20 was critical of dowries and the caste system, but simultaneously, he did not want his parents to
21 know that he was dating someone. He felt he had to keep it a secret, because she was from a
22 different caste, and he knew his parents would not approve. Whilst education may lead men to
23 question certain cultural aspects of their own backgrounds, they are also deeply embedded within
24 their family life.
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27 On the whole, the participants were guarded in their answers around dowries with many
28 deflecting the questions by saying that their parents handled this aspect of their marriage
29 negotiations. Due to the fact that dowries are not officially sanctioned, (the Indian Dowry
30 Prohibition Act 1961), we did not pursue this despite the fact that Munshi (2014) noted the
31 prevalence of grooms receiving dowries in Muslim, Christian and Hindu communities
32 throughout Southeast Asia. We would have liked to explore this issue further, but if we take the
33 answers at face value, and acknowledge that the parents deal with this aspect of matrimonial
34 discussions, then this financial incentive does not appear to be a direct consideration by the
35 prospective groom himself. In consequence, it is not possible to make any comment on whether
36 possessing a TNHE academic degree is believed by students to provide enhanced status for
37 matrimony. Furthermore, the lack of research into the fathers’ role in arranged marriages,
38 (Jennings et al. 2012; Hense & Schorch, 2013), might feasibly explain why there is little known
39 about the mechanism and approach to dowry negotiation, as logically such a financial
40 undertaking would falls to fathers. This is worthy of further research.
41
42

43 Although it is difficult for both men and women to challenge gender inequalities, because
44 both sexes are risking good relations with their families, perhaps women feel they have more to
45 gain. This concurs with both Bhopal’s (2000) research, which saw women declining arranged
46 marriages because their level of education provided alternative options. This is consistent with
47 Ahmad’s (2012) findings that educational attainment extends women’s opportunities beyond
48 marriage. Equally Ahmad’s (ibid) research discovered that women seeking grooms were keen to
49 find intellectual compatibility, and they prioritised financial security and stability of prospective
50 marriage partners. This paper highlights a gap in what each respective gender may look for as
51 additional outcomes from higher education; this current research identified that for men a
52 prospective partner’s financial status has less relevance. (Our follow-up research plans to explore
53 this gap in greater depth.)
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Marriage: Uncertain futures

There may be several uncertainties that men face when thinking about their future spouse. For example, one man who was going to having an arranged marriage mentioned that “arranged marriages are a gamble – it totally depends on luck”. Whilst yet another stated that he trusted his parents because he knows that their experience makes them better qualified to select his life partner. This participant described his own arranged marriage preparation akin to those discussed by Alsuwaigh (1989), who defined the new, hybrid version of ‘semi-arranged marriage’. The student had originally identified a prospective spouse on his own, but had only agreed to marry her after receiving the joint approval from both families.

There were other telling expressions of family bonds that were missed in direct questions but, from the answers, became a tacit undercurrent regarding cultural expectations. In particular, one of the men shared that he was the favourite child and, therefore, his mother had expressed a wish to live with him when she was no longer able to live alone. As a result, her choice of wife became more crucial in that she was entrusting her own future to the woman she chose to be her son’s spouse. In a similar vein, another participant discussed the need for any prospective wife to come and live with his family to ensure that she was a good fit with his whole family in general, and with his mother in particular. This echoes earlier research from Hense and Schoch (2013) on the importance the groom’s mother has on spouse selection. The interview questions had not expressly tackled the extended family ties beyond reviewing which family members had the most input into the selection of a partner. However, the answers illustrated that the collective society was an inescapable feature.

Time off from university

Another area of difficulty that came out in the interviews was the tension between fitting into the universities’ rigid timetables and managing family expectations when it comes to traditional ceremonies. Several students mentioned the importance of attending family engagement ceremonies and revealed that this had already caused issues at the university they attended. For example, the South Asian engagement ceremony is seen as having great importance, and the collective nature of their culture means that family members are required to be in attendance. Engagement is not seen similarly in Western cultures, and therefore there is little sympathy for students missing classes or exams to attend engagement ceremonies. These things are deemed less important by TNHE university policy makers who review mitigating circumstances paperwork and set their own criteria from the stance of the Western home campus. Although Pyvis (2011) had been writing on challenges for quality assurance in TNHEs when he suggested that metrics should be adapted to local conditions, he equally contended that TNHEs should incorporate policies, practices and goals that foster educational diversity.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of these interviews are important because they impart the views and lived-experiences of tertiary educated men in a transnational context. They have significance when we consider that TNHE policy tends to adopt a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach across all international settings, thus failing to recognise the importance of cultural preservation and sensitivity. This study indicates that the incidence of arranged marriages in students attending TNHE is still high, and therefore there are several issues that need consideration by educational policy makers. With one fifth of the participants in this study specifying that higher education had the potential to impact on their own arranged marriage prospects, there is a role here for reflection on what

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3 TNHE managers should do with that information. It also appears that, for men, there is a more
4 pressing desire to be better educated than their potential spouses. Also, if women are hoping to
5 unleash potential opportunities from their own educational attainment, as per previous research,
6 it would be prudent to take stock of the differing student aspirations and ascertain what role, if
7 any, education should philosophically have in these differing objectives. For example,
8 educational administrative policies do not seem to support non-Western cultural practices. With
9 so many TNHE institutions using their internationalization and globalization as a branding
10 differentiator to lure in international students, the lack of cultural awareness has equal potential
11 to backfire and alienate many students.
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14 One of the easier take home messages from this study is that students are often required
15 to attend and observe ritual formalities in their home country and that this necessity is not
16 regarded with sufficient cultural sensitivity by home campus management: Policies, practices
17 and goals fail to embrace and nurture educational diversity and take cognizance of the traditional
18 needs of students hailing from collective religious communities. Therefore, the question for
19 TNHE is: What policies could or should be adapted to provide more cultural understanding of
20 the distinguishing elements of class and exam absenteeism as a result of having to attend
21 engagement ceremonies?
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