

**The Power of Who You Know:**  
**An Explorative Study of *Wasta* and Justice Perceptions in**  
**Saudi Universities**

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A thesis submitted in partial to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Master  
of Research

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## Statement of Candidate

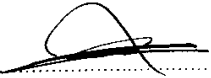
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I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee.

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## Abstract

*Wasta* is an Arabic word that refers to a reliance on personal relationships to achieve particular outcomes, and is problematic and controversial in Saudi Arabia. People form these relationships either directly, or through a *waseet* – a mediator who goes between the seeker of *wasta* and its provider. There are a few *wasta* relationship bases that encourage *wasta* to occur but do not necessarily result in it. These bases include immediate family, tribal relations, seniority, job status and social standing. *Wasta* is perceived negatively in the literature, whereas there is ambiguity surrounding every aspect of *wasta* in practice. This study uses qualitative and interpretative approaches to capture the perceptions of Saudi university faculty members regarding *wasta* and justice in their universities. Nine semi-structured interviews were carried out. The study found that inaccurate religious perspectives, unclear and insufficient regulations and ineffective management practices are factors that can explain the confusion around the acceptability of *wasta* and, thereby, its prevalence. *Wasta* is perceived to be unfair because it interferes with outcomes allocation processes and affects the accuracy and efficiency of management practices.

## TERMINOLOGY

**Wasta:** The social practice where people rely on personal relationships to achieve particular interests which can be practiced either through a *waseet* or directly.

**Waseet:** A mediator who goes between the seeker of *wasta* and its provider.

**Wasta via marketing:** An approach to *wasta* where a seeker goes directly to the service provider and asks for *wasta* by introducing himself and the position he/she holds.

**Seeker:** The person asking *wasta*.

**Provider:** The person providing *wasta*.

**Service:** Whatever the seeker desires to achieve using *wasta*.

**Traditional *wasta*:** the *wasta* that is done through a *waseet*.

**Wasta base:** The concept is derived from guanxi literature. The base is when 'two or more persons have a commonality of shared identifications (Kiong & Kee 1998, p.77) and the existence of the base does not imply the existence of *wasta*.

**National Vision:** The vision announced by the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, which states the future of Saudi Arabia.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Statement of the problem

*Wasta* is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabian society. It is an Arabic word referring to the practice where people depend on their connections to achieve particular interests (Al.Harbi et al. 2016). *Wasta* can be practiced either directly, or through a *waseet* (mediator) who goes in between the person seeking the interest and the provider. The possession of *wasta* can get a person a position, employment or a promotion and it can speed up service delivery. *Wasta* is a force and capital that can provide protection and secure the future of the person who has it. According to Hutchings & Weir (2006, p.273) *wasta* "is seen as a force in every significant decision in Arab life" and per Al.Harbi et al. (2016, p.5) *wasta* is "central to decision-making, knowledge transmission and the creation of opportunity." For a phenomenon with that influence, prevalence and significance, it is surprising that there is limited and superficial literature about *wasta* (Aldossari & Robertson 2016). Studies tend to focus solely on the negative consequences of *wasta* or discuss it only in passing, neglecting the essence of such a social practice in Arabs' daily life and experience (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). There are many issues about *wasta* to be addressed. The relationship bonding the parties engaging in *wasta*, their intents to use *wasta* and how they approach *wasta* are among the practice-driven concerns of this research.

People consider *wasta* to be a problem that causes underdevelopment and damage to management practices in Saudi Arabia. In this context, *wasta* is bad, a form of corruption and ethically unacceptable. *Wasta* negativity is taken for granted as it is perceived to be oppressive and wrong. However, in reality it is effective and central in the decision-making processes in many organisations (Hutchings & Weir 2006b). The initial intention of this research was to investigate whether *wasta* has an impact on people's perceptions of justice or not. However, several incidents and stories from practice indicate that *wasta* is more complicated and a subject of debate and controversy (Lackner 2015). The use of *wasta* is not



merely limited to negative practices that lead to corruption, but it is necessary on some occasions. The distinction between accepted and unaccepted forms of *wasta* is not as clear as some studies presume (Lackner 2015). There is a great need for clarifying and classifying *wasta* practices into good and bad or accepted and unaccepted.

*Wasta* is blamed in the press, in practice and literature mainly for the deprivation of competencies as *wasta* is the most effective criterion for hiring practices (Mohamed & Mohamad 2011; Forstenlechner & Baruch 2013; Ramady 2015). *Wasta* engagement goes beyond that to take part in every management activity. However, there is a tendency to hide the practice of *wasta* even though it is apparent to people in the workplace where *wasta* has been used. Therefore, the focus of this research is on universities, to benefit from the researcher's familiarity and five years of experience as a lecturer in one of Saudi's public universities. The knowledge of the researcher about regulations, policies and procedures of universities can be helpful in getting people's trust and allowing them to be open.

## 1.2 Research background

*Wasta* is a controversial and problematic social practice in Saudi Arabian society. There is a disparity of perceptions of *wasta* in the literature as there is no single and agreed definition of it. Some studies have borrowed from western literature and practices such as nepotism and favouritism to provide insights into the practice of *wasta* (Alwerthan & Swanson 2016; Kilani et al. 2015; Loewe et al. 2008). On the other hand, some studies consider *wasta* a connection or a type of personal relationship, thus borrowing from social networking literature (Al.Harbi et al. 2016; Branine & Pollard 2010). However, *wasta* is not limited to either perspective. *Wasta* is a critical element of Saudi people's lives that engages and facilitates a variety of activities. The conflict perspectives contribute to the complexity of *wasta* and create a need for more exploration and understanding (Lackner 2015). In order to clarify the complex nature of *wasta*, the perspective of people engaging in and experiencing *wasta* should be taken into consideration.

*Wasta* prevalence and influence are ancient in Arab history. The meaning and forms of *wasta* have changed and developed over time (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). The limited research to date indicates that many people tend to rely on *wasta* to facilitate a variety of activities such as job attainment, university admission and securing positions and promotions (Aldossari & Robertson 2016). While the literature has identified some types of relationship that are required to receive *wasta* such as family and tribe relations (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993), other types of relationship such as seniority, friendship and locality have gained less attention. The role of *waseet* in the formation of *wasta* has received more attention in the literature (Ramady 2015) than the influence of job and social status in establishing and securing *wasta* relations.

*Wasta* is mostly spoken about negatively in the literature (Hutchings & Weir 2006b; Bailey 2012). A few studies have highlighted the positive impact of practicing *wasta* on society and management practices (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Hutchings & Weir 2006b). However, Hutchings & Weir (2006a) and Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993) argue that there is no clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate *wasta*. The perceptions of the impact of *wasta* on justice are affected by the vagueness concerning the distinction between good and bad *wasta*. Some studies tend to support the view that *wasta* affects fairness and equality in society without distinguishing between positive and negative *wasta* (Loewe et al. 2008; Alwerthan & Swanson 2016). By considering the vagueness of positive and negative *wasta*, this study applies organisational justice theory to grasp faculty members' perceptions of *wasta* and the fairness of management practices in their universities.

### 1.3 Research question and aims

This study seeks to address three main research questions:

**What is the faculty members' understanding of *wasta*?**

**What are the faculty members' perceptions of positive and negative *wasta* practices in the social context? And why?**

**What is the impact of *wasta* practices on faculty members' perceptions of justice in their universities?**

Initially, this research aimed to investigate whether *wasta* has an impact on justice in Saudi universities. However, the limited and conflicted literature calls for more understanding of the meaning and acceptability of practicing *wasta*. The study aims to deeply explore how *wasta* is perceived by individuals in the social context. There are only a few studies that focus on and try to understand and explore *wasta* as a social phenomenon. The research took place in the university sector in Saudi Arabia, which is targeted by Vision 2030, which states the future of Saudi Arabia. One of vision 2030's primary objectives is for at least five Saudi universities to be amongst the top 200 universities globally (Saudi Vision 2030 2016b). The research's main purpose is to capture Saudi faculty members' perceptions of *wasta* and its impact on their assessment of justice in their universities.

The first research question seeks to address *wasta*'s meaning, bases, intents and approaches. The literature provides a disparity of *wasta* views and perceptions. This study aims to contribute to the literature by clarifying the controversy of *wasta*. Moreover, one of the study's objectives is to identify the most effective bases of *wasta* relations and the profits Saudi faculty members try to get using *wasta*. The idea of bases is derived from *guanxi* literature. The base refers to the commonality the individuals share with one another such as family and friendship that increases the chance of *wasta* relations but does not necessarily lead to them (Kiong & Kee 1998; Chen et al. 2013). This research will go further to highlight

the common services, activities and tasks that faculty members tend to use *wasta* to acquire and facilitate.

Furthermore, the study seeks to extend the literature by discussing the complexity of *wasta* in practice. The study aims to reveal the distinction between good and bad *wasta* from the point of view of individuals who experience, engage or witness *wasta* practices. How do people perceive different incidences of *wasta* and what are the criteria that influence their judgment and why? These are the main themes that the second research question addresses. Besides reaching a better understanding of *wasta* complexity, this research seeks to identify the impact of *wasta* practices and interventions in the perceptions of fairness. The study considers two types of justice. The first, distributive justice, is concerned with perceived justice of outcomes allocation processes. The other type is procedural justice, which is concerned with the perceived justice of policies and procedures of outcomes allocation.

#### 1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter one has provided an overview of the research problems, questions and main objectives. Chapter two reviews the related literature about *wasta* to identify definitions, approaches, bases and intents. The social capital and guanxi bodies of literature are borrowed from to explore the social practice of *wasta*, and the acceptability of *wasta* and its fairness in universities in Saudi Arabia is discussed. Chapter three aims to demonstrate the social practice of *wasta* within Saudi Arabia and universities specifically. It is intended to address the religious and regulatory issues regarding practicing *wasta* in Saudi Arabia. Chapter four's main purpose is to justify the methodological approaches and techniques used in the research to collect and analyse data. In chapter five, the findings of the interviews and a discussion of the main findings are provided. The last chapter aims to explain the managerial implications of the findings and to suggest and recommend a future direction for future researchers and studies.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

*Wasta* is a prevalent social phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. *Wasta* is a critical part of Arab culture and it is engaged in a variety of activities in daily experience. Despite *wasta's* prevalence and significance, there is limited literature about it (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Mohamed & Mohamad 2011; Barnett et al. 2013). The practice of *wasta* has its root back in Arab history since it played a significant role in the time of tribal ruling (Al-Ramahi 2008; Barnett et al. 2013). One of the earliest studies that explored *wasta's* different forms and practices are Cunningham and Sarayrah's works in 1993 and 1994 (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993; Cunningham et al. 1994) which are considered to be seminal and fundamental in the *wasta* literature (Ramady 2015). There are conflicting views and definitions of *wasta*. The dominant perception of *wasta* is negative and the impact of *wasta* on justice is mostly taken for granted. However, the distinction between positive and negative *wasta* is vague and uncertain. This literature review aims to outline and discuss the different definitions of *wasta* with more emphasis on the Saudi Arabian context and the university sector in particular. It also seeks to investigate the related literature to identify positive and negative views of practicing *wasta*. The final part reviews the organisational justice literature to understand how to capture individuals' perceptions of the fairness of *wasta* interventions in management practices.

## 2.2 The social practice of *wasta*

### 2.2.1 Language and history

The practice of *wasta* has its roots back in Arab history. In Arabic language, *wasta* comes from the root *WST* which means middle (Aldossari & Robertson 2016) indicating that the practice of *wasta* goes between two parties. Traditionally, *wasta* played a critical role in resolving and preventing disputes between two or more conflicted tribes (Lackner 2015). Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993) distinguish between two types of *wasta*: intermediary *wasta* and intercessory *wasta*. The first type reinforces the role of *waseet*; an Arabic word that refers to a mediator who goes between the two parties concerned. The *waseet* needs to have *Jaha* - a high social standing to earn people's respect (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). The *waseet* played a variety of roles besides resolving tribal conflict, such as wedding arrangements and reconciliation between families. Nowadays, the meaning and uses of *wasta* and the role of *waseet* have changed as the political power of tribes has diminished.

The other type of *wasta* emphasises the role of intercession. The intercessory *wasta* refers to an intervention in favour of a client to achieve certain advantages (Makhoul & Harrison 2004; Cunningham, Sarayrah & Sarayrah 1994). The intercessory type is more diffused in daily life and widely practiced. *Wasta* as intercession aims to achieve various benefits such as securing jobs, admission to universities and career progression (Aldossari & Robertson 2016). This type of *wasta* occurs in different contexts such as academia, health services and public agencies (Barnett et al. 2013). The practice of *wasta* is embedded in the culture even if it has been practiced for different purposes

### 2.2.2 Definition of *wasta*

There is no precise definition of *wasta* even though people practice it on a daily basis. Definitions of *wasta* vary in the literature. According to Al.Harbi, Thursfield & Bright (2016, p.5) and Branine & Pollard (2010, p.722) *wasta* is "a type of personal relationship that is used to 'get things done.'" However, this definition does not capture the critical role of *waseet* in the practice of *wasta*, a role emphasised by other scholars (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Cunningham, Sarayrah & Sarayrah 1994). Aldossari and Robertson (2016, p. 1857), define *wasta* as "the involvement of a supporter in favour of an individual to achieve benefits and/or resources from a third party." This definition asserts the engagement of *waseet* in acting in between the benefit seeker and whoever is willing to provide it. However, the *waseet* is not the only approach to *wasta*. People can practice *wasta* directly using their tribe name or status to achieve their interest.

The last definition is that of the Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission, which is responsible for regulating *wasta* and other similar practices (Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission 2016a). According to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (2017, p.7) *wasta* is "asking a favour from a person having a connection with an individual with authority or using the power to achieve a particular interest to a person who cannot attain it by himself due to a lack of eligibility." The definition was taken from one of the Commission's publications and translated into English because the issue is only available in Arabic. This definition incorporates both the direct (without *waseet*) and indirect approaches (via *waseet*) to *wasta*. However, it implies that *wasta* is only done for those who lack eligibility, and is thereby always negative, which conflicts with many studies acknowledging the positive aspects of *wasta* (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Hutchings & Weir 2006b).

### 2.2.3 *Wasta* contexts

*Wasta* is a vital part of Arab culture that is widespread in a variety of human interactions. Most studies consider Arab countries as one unit of analysis (Hutchings and Weir 2006), however, there are 22 Arab countries spread on the Asian and African continents (Branine & Pollard 2010). These countries share history, culture, language and religion (Branine & Pollard 2010; Mohamed & Mohamad 2011). Most studies in this literature review are conducted in Jordan (Al-Ramahi 2008; Kilani et al. 2015; Cunningham et al. 1994), Lebanon (Makhoul & Harrison 2004; Kassab 2016), Egypt (Mohamed & Mohamad 2011), Kuwait (Tucker & Buckton-tucker 2014) and Saudi Arabia (Al.Harbi et al. 2016; Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Alwerthan & Swanson 2016), which are relatively recent. However, this research focuses only on universities in Saudi Arabia and aims to investigate the influence of *wasta* on fairness in these universities.

### 2.2.4 Universities in Saudi Arabia

Kassab (2016) explored the role of *wasta* within human resources practices in universities in Lebanon. Similarly, this thesis considers human resource activities. However, this research goes beyond that and explores faculty members' perceptions of the justice and fairness of these activities, rather than focussing solely on administrative staff or faculty members in leading positions.

Three studies in this literature review were conducted in Saudi Arabia and all published in 2016. Alwerthan & Swanson (2016) targeted public school educators in Riyadh and aimed to test the relationship between psychological distress (depression, anxiety, stress) and engaging in *wasta* (providing or receiving *wasta*). The authors focussed on the negative aspect of *wasta* and perceived it as a type of favouritism and nepotism. In contrast, the current research project will consider both positive and negative aspects. Further, unlike Alwerthan & Swanson (2016), it is explorative research aiming to interpret and understand



how *wasta* is practiced in the social context and how it affects the fairness of both outcomes distribution and procedures delivering such outcomes.

Aldossari & Robertson (2016) aimed to identify the impact of *wasta* on psychological contract perceptions for repatriates prior and post their return from international assignments. Like the current research, Aldossari & Robertson (2016) applied an interpretive approach to deeply understand why and how the psychological contract is preached and whether mutual obligations and expectations are met. However, unlike that study, this research concentrates not only on repatriates' perceptions of organisational culture prior and post their return but on faculty members' current perceptions of fairness regarding their organisation's whole activities and practices. Whereas Aldossari and Robertson investigated both repatriates and managers, this research will consider more the faculty members' point of view than the managers' point of view to avoid bias.

Al.Harbi et al. (2016) conducted a study to explore the social practice of *wasta* in Saudi Arabia. The authors aimed to examine the relationship between Arabic culture and perceptions of performance appraisal. As well, they investigated how the Western model of performance appraisal (applied in some Arabic countries) is influenced by cultural norms such as *wasta*. Like this research, the study was conducted in Saudi Arabia and applied an interpretive approach to understand the social context from the employees' point of view. In addition, the study applied organisational justice theory to understand employees' perceptions. However, it only applied the procedural type of justice neglecting the distributive type of justice, stating that the collective nature and acceptance of inequality in Saudi Arabian culture (Hofstede 1983) makes personal gains undesirable. In contrast, this research argues against this and applies both types of justice since "all of us carry both individualist and collectivist tendencies" (McSweeney 2002, p.105). As well, extensive studies argue the significant impact of distributive justice on subordinates' motivation and performance (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Cropanzana, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007;

Greenberg, 1990). Unlike Al.Harbi et al. (2016), the main purpose of this research is to explore the effect of *wasta* on fairness perceptions of organisational practices in general, including performance evaluations and other human resource activities.

## 2.2.5 Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory is one of the fundamental theories that provide a rich explanation of the social world. Hutchings and Weir (2006) assert that researchers should apply social network analysis to understand *wasta*. Many scholars define *wasta* as a type of interpersonal relationship between connected individuals who mobilise resources among them to facilitate individual or collective action (Al.Harbi et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2012; Velez-calle et al. 2015; Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Branine & Pollard 2010). Thus, social capital theory and social network analysis will contribute to understanding and conceptualising the practice of *wasta*. Social capital literature was influenced by the work of Bourdieu and Coleman (Häuberer 2011; Mcelroy et al. 2010). Social network literature provides a rich insight to how the social phenomenon of *wasta* is practiced. This section consists of an introduction to Bourdieu and Coleman works, social networks approaches and the integration of ego-centric approaches.

### 2.2.5.1 Bourdieu's *Forms of Capital*

Bourdieu introduced the term social capital in his book “Forms of Capital” in 1986 and outlines that there are three types of capital in every society: economic, cultural and social (Bourdieu 1986; Häuberer 2011). According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 8), social capital is the aggregation of the current and potential resources a group of individuals possesses, which can be accessed and mobilised within that particular group. Social networks are formed based on the commonality that members share, which can be the family name, kinship or friendship. The establishing or reproducing of such relationships, regardless of the length of the relation, is for securing various kinds of benefits. The continued exchange of resources is, in essence, to sustain a relationship and build a trust. The entry to a group can be possible through an institutional act such as marriage. Bourdieu points out that resources a certain group possesses are not accessible by outsiders due to the strong solidarity of that group (Bourdieu 1986; Häuberer 2011; Lin 1999a; Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998; Portes 1998).

### 2.2.5.2 Coleman's rational approach

Coleman's analysis of the concept of social capital has been used and applied intensively in sociology and related fields since his first publication in 1988 (Sandefur & Laumann 1998). According to Coleman (1988, p. 98) "social capital is defined by its function." Like Bourdieu, Coleman perceives social capital to be a resource that individuals seek to attain from the social structure (personal relationships). However, unlike Bourdieu, he applies rational theory to assert that a social actor has control over some resources and has the desire to obtain other resources. Thus, social structure becomes social capital if social actors are willing to share. Coleman identified three forms of social capital: expectations and obligations, information channels and social norms. The first two occur at an individual level via the interactions between social actors while the last is concerned more with the collective level. The last form reinforces the act in benefit to public interest rather than self-interest, thereby enhancing community cohesiveness. Coleman further argues that the effectiveness of social capital forms relies on how close the social networks are and the existence of appropriable social organisations (Coleman 1988; Portes 1998; Lin 1999a; Häuberer 2011; Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998; Sandefur & Laumann 1998).

#### 2.2.5.2.1 Criticism of both theories

Although both perspectives set the foundation of social capital theory, both were subject to criticism. Bourdieu states that social capital matters once it can be converted to economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, he does not sufficiently discuss how such a transformation can be done (Lin 1999a; Häuberer 2011). While he argues for close relationships as a condition for a continual profiting from the social group, he overlooks the various levels of the strength and the quality of relationships (Lin 1999a; Häuberer 2011). Both perspectives highlight the significance of close contacts to mobilise resources. However, Lin (1999) argues that close relationships are not necessary. Burt (1997) and Granovetter (1973) similarly state that weak ties individuals possess outside their social networks are more

advantageous than strong ties within their social networks. That is because weak ties provide more new and unique resources than strong ties that have access to the resources of the same social world.

#### 2.2.5.3 Social networks approaches to social capital

*Wasta* is perceived by many scholars as a type of relationship that influences many kinds of day-to-day activities (Al.Harbi et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2012; Velez-calle et al. 2015; Branine & Pollard 2010; M. Abalkhail & Allan 2016). Thus, applying social network approaches is appropriate. According to Kraimer and Liden, (2001, p.220), relationships are the primary data to be analysed. A network is defined as “a specific set of linkages along a defined set of persons” (Hutchings and Weir, 2006, p. 267). There are two main perspectives as to how to approach social networks: individual level (ego-centric) and group level (socio-centric) (Mcelroy et al. 2010; Lin 1999a; Sandefur & Laumann 1998; Häuberer 2011). The ego-centric approach concentrates on individuals and how they possess resources from their personal relationships in their social networks to take individual action or for seeking a return for the investment in the relationship such as occupational attainment (Mcelroy et al. 2010; Lin 1999a). Many scholars have applied this approach, such as Burt (1997); Granovetter (1973); Lin, Ensel, et al. (1981). The socio-centric approach reflects the ability of a group to develop and generate collective assets that help to take collective action for the group members’ best interests (Mcelroy et al. 2010; Lin 1999a). There are also many studies that have followed this perspective (Putnam 1995; Portes 1998) and there are some scholars who consider both perspectives, such as (Bourdieu (1986); Coleman (1988). With respect to *wasta*, this thesis applies an interpretive paradigm to understand the social world from the social actor's point of view, thereby, applying an ego-centric approach.

### 2.2.5.3.1 Ego-centric approach

#### 2.2.5.3.1.1 Weak Ties Theory and Structural Holes Theory

These two theories are concerned with the structure of a social actor's (ego's) social networks. Granovetter (1973) outlines that there are three levels of relationships based on strength: strong, weak and absent. The strong tie refers to a strong relationship that satisfies four criteria: emotional intensity, regularity, reciprocity of favours and intimacy. The ties that fail to meet these criteria are weak or absent. The weak tie can be a bridge between two or more strongly connected social networks. Weak ties connect people from different social systems who are not connected to each other. The author continues to highlight the significance of weak ties in providing access to new social worlds that have different information, resources and opportunities (Granovetter 1973; Seibert et al. 2001).

Burt (1992) introduced the theory of structural holes in his book in 1992. Burt (1992, 1997) asserts that what matters is not only to expand social networks but to add contacts who are from different social clusters. He continues further to explain the concept of the structural hole, which is a buffer between two diverse social networks. The people in the two social networks are focused on their own activities. They have access to the same kinds of resources and information, which Burt refers to as redundant contacts. If an individual in a certain social cluster is willing to spend more time and energy to network with new contacts from one or more different social clusters, he/she will have access to non-redundant information and resources. Burt asserts that individuals should have more non-redundant contacts than redundant contacts. Consequently, they will have timely access to unique information providing new opportunities and ideas, as well as strengthen their bargaining power. Thereby, they will control certain information and resources (Burt 1992; Burt 1997; Seibert et al. 2001).

Like Granovetter, Burt argues for the significance of weak ties. However, he states that Granovetter's weak ties are simple and, unlike his theory, do not provide a strong

foundation for a theory. However, it is not the connection to weak ties that provides the most benefit, but the access to different social clusters. As well, although Granovetter demonstrates the informational benefits of weak ties, Burt outlines the control benefits as an advantage in possessing such unique and new information (Burt 1992; Burt 1997; Häuberer 2011).

#### 2.2.5.3.1.2 Social Resources Theory

Contrary to the previous two theories, Lin (1999b); Lin, Ensel, et al. (1981); Lin, Vaughn, et al. (1981) demonstrate that what matters is not only the structure of social networks but the resources embedded in them. The personal resources of a certain individual include family background and personal achievements in occupations and education. The possession of such resources along with personal social ties increases people's chance to reach individuals with high status. The author aims to test the relationship between the status attainment process and both social relations and social resources. The findings of Lin's study show that social resources have a significant impact on occupational achievement. Lin, Ensel, et al., (1981, p. 403) argue that the constructed relations with high status contacts are more beneficial in occupational attainment than "ascribed relations" (Lin 1999b; Lin, Ensel, et al. 1981; Lin, Vaughn, et al. 1981; Seibert et al. 2001).

#### 2.2.5.3.1.3 Integration of ego-centric approaches

This research aims to consider both social relations and resources approaches to social networks. Generally, western culture treats the social world and the work environment as distinct while these two worlds overlap and interact with each other in the Arab world (Hutchings & Weir 2006b; Al.Harbi et al. 2016). Therefore, applying theories from western contexts to the context of Saudi Arabia can be difficult. For instance, Al.Harbi et al., (2016) point out that the objective nature of the western performance appraisal model applied by the company in the study contradicts the high appreciation of personal relationships in Saudi Arabian culture. While the ego-centric approach does not totally capture the essence of

*wasta* practices, this approach can provide an explanation and analysis of the *wasta* processes.

The role of *waseet* in *wasta* is significant. The *waseet* is the broker - in Burt's theory – who is connected to two or more various social systems. The *waseet* practices *wasta* as an act in between the seeker of a certain service and its provider. The strength of the relationship between the *waseet* and the requester of the service is determined by the base the two parties share. The base is defined as the commonality of shared identifications the individuals have with one another that can increase the chance for a relation to occur but does not necessarily lead to it (Kiong & Kee 1998; Chen et al. 2013). While scholars outline some bases in *wasta* literature such as immediate family, extended family or tribal relation, friendship and seniority (Al.Harbi et al. 2016; Kassab 2016; Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Cunningham et al. 1994; Hutchings & Weir 2006a), the order of such bases in relation to significance is neglected.

Besides identifying the social ties, this thesis seeks to understand what benefits individuals in the university environment seek to attain using *wasta* as an instrument. People practice *wasta* to obtain a variety of benefits such as university admission, occupational attainment, career advancement and performance evaluation (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Mohamed & Mohamad 2011; Hutchings & Weir 2006b; Kassab 2016; Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Cunningham et al. 1994). However, this thesis will focus on the desirable resources embedded in the university work environment. In addition, based on observation of the social world, *wasta* can be practiced directly without mediators. For instance, an individual holding a certain position in a university seeks a certain service from a bank. He/she will approach whoever can provide the service and introduces himself, the position he holds and offers a return for the service in the future. Therefore, he establishes and constructs a *wasta* relation based on favour exchange as he will be in debt to the service provider. One of the main objectives of this study is to investigate further how diffused such a practice is in the social



world. This research will consider the content of the social networks besides the structural factor to approach a better understanding of *wasta*.

## 2.2.6 *Wasta* and the Chinese equivalent (*Guanxi*):

The social practice of *wasta* is not exclusive to Arab countries. Social contexts where individuals take advantage of their relationships, exchange favours, and use power and influence to secure certain services to specific groups are similar to *wasta*. *Guanxi* is one of the similar social practices that is a type of interpersonal relations affecting organisations' management practices (Chen et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2012; Hutchings & Weir 2006a; Velez-calle et al. 2015; M. Abalkhail & Allan 2016).

### 2.2.6.1 *Guanxi*

There is an extensive literature exploring the Chinese practice of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* was introduced to the social science literature in the 1980s (Lin 2011). *Guanxi* is essential and vital for understanding Asian society. It is perceived as a sign of corruption causing significant damage to the human resources practices in China (Hutchings & Weir 2006b). On the other hand, it might lead to efficiency by providing flexibility to the management practices (Hutchings & Weir 2006b). *Guanxi* means relations in the Chinese language (Hutchings & Weir 2006b, p.276; Velez-calle et al. 2015). It refers to the relationships established between two or more individuals sharing a commonality of an immediate family, kinship or friendship (Chen et al. 2013; Hom & Xiao 2011; Smith et al. 2012). *Guanxi* assists in overcoming all difficulties of life in China once it is developed. Establishing *guanxi* relations moves individuals from being outsiders to being insiders, which is considered to be a source of identity, protection and loyalty (Hutchings & Weir 2006b). With respect to *wasta*, it is apparent that Chinese culture is quite different from Saudi Arabian culture. However, due to the many similarities between *guanxi* and *wasta*, *guanxi* literature provides a rich explanation and a great insight into the social phenomena, which can assist to understand *wasta*.

#### 2.2.6.1.1 *Guanxi* bases and characteristics

A *guanxi* base explains the commonality of shared identifications the individuals have with one another (Kiong & Kee 1998; Chen et al. 2013). The base increases the chance of *guanxi*

relations existing, but does not necessarily lead to it (Chen et al. 2013; Kiong & Kee 1998). The bases include immediate family, kinship, friendship, locality, trade association and social clubs (Kiong & Kee 1998). These bases vary in significance. While having a base is significant for the relation, the effectiveness of the *guanxi* relation relies on a few elements. These include *mianzi*, affect and reciprocity of favours. *Mianzi* means face, and represents the social image of a person in society (Lin 2011). Affect refers to the emotions and feelings between two parties sharing a *guanxi* relation (Lin 2011). These two characteristics and the continued exchanging of favours determine the duration, strength and effectiveness of the relation.

#### 2.2.6.1.2 *Guanxi* and *wasta*

Arabic *wasta* and Chinese *guanxi* have many similar aspects. The similarity might be linked to the cultural convergence. Based on Hofstede dimensions, both Chinese and Arab cultures scored high in collectivism and large in power distance dimensions (Smith et al. 2012; Velez-calle et al. 2015; M. Abalkhail & Allan 2016). These characteristics explain the high value and respect of family and seniority in Chinese and Arab life (Hutchings & Weir 2006a). Furthermore, both societies are considered “shame societies” where reputation is a precious asset (Hutchings & Weir 2006a). Failure in providing the service and paying the social debt (favour) may lead people to lose face (shame) or even losing the membership in the social network (Hom & Xiao 2011). Individuals of these societies have greater trust in insiders and in-group members than outsiders (Hutchings & Weir 2006a; Velez-calle et al. 2015; Chen et al. 2013). Trust, mutual obligations, loyalty and reciprocity of favours are critical elements for *guanxi* and *wasta* relations to occur and last (Velez-calle et al. 2015; Smith et al. 2012; Hutchings & Weir 2006a; Hutchings & Weir 2006b; Chen et al. 2013). Additionally, *wasta* and *guanxi* have positive and negative aspects. While they might lead to or be a result of corruption, they might also lead to efficiency and flexibility in management practices (Smith et al. 2012; Hutchings & Weir 2006a; Hutchings & Weir 2006b). In China and Arab countries, management practices are considered centralised and suffer from red tape and complex and

long bureaucratic procedures (Hutchings & Weir 2006a). Therefore, individuals in these societies believe that organisational or personal problems cannot be resolved without insiders' assistance.

On the other hand, *guanxi* and *wasta* are different in several aspects. Whereas *guanxi* is well-analysed and explored in the literature, *wasta* is in need of more exploration and investigation (Hutchings & Weir 2006a; Smith et al. 2012). The negative perception of *wasta* is more dominant than the positive perception in the social context (Smith et al. 2012; Chen et al. 2013). In contrast, there is a clear distinction between positive *guanxi* and corruption and bribery in China (Hutchings & Weir 2006a). In the Arab world, the role of mediation and benefactors is vital and critical, whereas there is less focus on the role of third parties in China (Hutchings & Weir 2006a; Ramady 2015). Furthermore, even though the bases of *guanxi* and *wasta* share many similarities, they vary in significance. For instance, political relations are more important than other bases in China while Arabs prioritise family, kinship and local relationships (Hutchings & Weir 2006a). In contrast to *guanxi*, tribal relationships are significant in the Arab world, which goes beyond close and extended family (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Al.Harbi et al. 2016). Additionally, in China, employees feel obliged to perform well to not lose *minazi* or face (Smith et al. 2012; Hom & Xiao 2011; Velez-calle et al. 2015). Conversely, Arabs tend to be more loyal to family and friends than to organisational goals and objectives (Al.Harbi et al. 2016; Hutchings & Weir 2006a). Despite *wasta* and *guanxi* differences, approaches conducted to analyse *guanxi* can be replicated and applied to understand *wasta*.

## 2.3 Positive and negative *wasta*

Positive and negative *wasta* is not always easy to distinguish. The literature conflicts and varies in the acceptability of practicing *wasta*. There is a tendency to translate *wasta* into some western concepts such as favouritism and nepotism and considering *wasta* as a harmful practice and a form of corruption. Mohamed & Mohamad (2011) perceive *wasta* negatively and as a form of favouritism. The authors argue that *wasta* is critical in job hiring in which it is more effective than qualifications and competencies. The authors presume that *wasta* is only done by people who lack the required qualifications and overlook that eligible people might be forced to look for *wasta* because of the system's oppression.

### 2.3.1 Negative perception

In the context of Jordan, Loewe, Blume & Speer 2008 (pp.259-260) assert that "in this region, favoritism is usually referred to as '*wasta*'." Alwerthan & Swanson (2016, p.1) define *wasta* as "an Arabic word used in reference to both favoritism and nepotism." Both studies stress that *wasta* is a form of corruption. Even though Alwerthan & Swanson (2016) cite Hutchings & Weir (2006) to support their claim, they overlook the argument that "it is possible to refer to good *wasta* and negative *wasta*", a point raised in the same article (Hutchings and Weir, 2006b, p. 278). *Wasta* is a product of Arab culture and can be understood in that context. Favouritism and nepotism do not convey the meaning of the social practice of *wasta*. *Wasta* goes beyond nepotism, which is only limited to the preference of family members and relatives over others (Padgett et al. 2015), to include tribal relations, friends, senior and high-status individuals (Cunningham et al. 1994). Unlike favouritism, which only considers the decision maker's perspective (Ponzo & Scoppa 2010), *wasta* is concerned with the whole process including the seeker and service provider's perspectives with more stress on the significant role of the *waseet*. Despite the negative impact of *wasta* on fairness and deprivation of competencies (Mohamed & Mohamad 2011), *wasta* can increase the solidarity

of the workforce and improve the efficiency of management practices through informal channels (Aldossari & Robertson 2016; Hutchings & Weir 2006b).

### 2.3.2 Confusion of *wasta*

Despite the fact that *wasta* is mostly perceived negatively in the social context, the practice of *wasta* still prevails. Tucker & Buckton-Tucker (2014) outline that 87% of the respondents to a survey conducted by the Arab Archives Institute perceive *wasta* as a corruption whereas 71% of the same respondents have used *wasta*. While Tucker & Buckton-Tucker (2014) argue that the inconsistency results from the lack of serious enforcement of sanctions, other scholars believe that it can be linked to the confusion and ambiguity of *wasta* practices (Lackner 2015). Lackner (2015) stresses that determining whether *wasta* is right or wrong is complicated as people usually have discrepant views about *wasta*. Lackner (2015) argues that inefficient management practices create a need for *wasta* and *wasta* can be the only alternative for people to get the service they seek. Moreover, the high unemployment rate forces people to use *wasta* for securing jobs (Lackner 2015). *Wasta* in some contexts is perceived to be substantial and not merely limited to attaining favours, but is used even to get the most “basic rights”(Lackner 2015, p.45). The management practices and other contextual factors are significant to understand *wasta* in practice.

Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993) assert that *wasta* is not limited to one single form that is perceived to be a cause of corruption. The authors outline a variety of real-life situations of *wasta* intervention. The situations are to show that *wasta* uses vary from being a help for people in need to deliver unapproved outcomes. Unfamiliarity with the processes of delivering the service and the management system can be a reason for *wasta*. Another reason is to obtain legitimate rights that the system fails or delays to deliver (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). The *wasta* is for speeding and affecting the delivery of services. Another use of *wasta* is to obtain services such as attaining jobs, university admission and securing promotions. This type of *wasta* is the most common perceived use of *wasta*. In this situation, *wasta* is a

critical factor that influences decision making despite qualifications and competencies (Mohamed & Mohamad 2011; Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). Additionally, the type of *wasta* that delivers services for people who are ineligible to obtain them is perceived to be corruption to the whole distribution system (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). People's perceptions of positive and negative *wasta* are surrounded by vagueness and confusion. One of the research objectives is to understand why there is a confusion in the social context.

## 2.4 Implications of *wasta*

### 2.4.1 Organisational Justice Theory

The involvement of *wasta* in organisations in Saudi Arabia has a significant influence on employees' perceptions of a fair workplace (Al.Harbi et al. 2016). Organisational justice refers to individuals' perceptions of the fairness of management practices in their place of work (Lind 2007; Colquitt 2012; Colquitt et al. 2001; Byrne & Cropanzano 2001). Greenberg was the first to introduce the term organisational justice in 1987 (Colquitt 2012; Greenberg 2009; Byrne & Cropanzano 2001). Organisational justice scholars have borrowed the existing social-psychological theories of justice to apply in organisational settings (Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Greenberg 1990). Organisational justice theory has its own distinction. While social justice aims to identify the fairness of actions, organisational justice is dependent on what social actors perceive to be a fair action (Cropanzana et al. 2007). Researchers have linked perceptions of fairness to a variety of organisational outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment and job productivity (Narcisse & Harcourt 2008; Ambrose 2002; Greenberg 2009; Hollensbe et al. 2008). On the other hand, injustice results in workplace sabotage, employees' theft and stress symptoms (Ambrose 2002; Cropanzana et al. 2007).

There are three main components of organisational justice: distributive, procedural and interactional (Greenberg 2009; Cropanzana et al. 2007). This research will discuss the implications of *wasta* concerning the first two components of organisational justice. *Wasta* is an interpersonal issue providing power and status to those who possess it. The interactional type of justice seeks to examine the justice perceptions of employees' treatment in the workplace. The discussion of *wasta* engagement in management practices is sufficient to provide rich insights to interactional justice. There is a tendency in the literature to study the formation of fairness in relation to specific events such as performance appraisal (Hollensbe et al. 2008). In contrast, this research will explore the involvement of *wasta* in various aspects of management practices to capture the general perception of the effect of *wasta* on fairness



in the workplace. This section discusses distributive justice, procedural justice and organisational fairness and *wasta*.

#### 2.4.1.1 Distributive Justice

Individuals' perceptions of the allocation of outcomes in their organisations are the concern of the first component of justice in organisations. Historically, one of the earliest studies to discuss justice in the workplace is Adams' equity theory in 1965 (Greenberg 1990; Byrne & Cropanzano 2001). The theory describes equity as a quantifiable ratio of the comparison between what employees receive from their organisations as resources and their contributions (Greenberg 2009; Greenberg 1988; Cropanzana et al. 2007). Employees consider a variety of perceived resources such as pay, job security, and supervision (Ambrose 2002). Employees are overpaid once their perceived inputs exceed their contributions, which leads to them feeling guilty (Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Greenberg 1990). On the other hand, employees are underpaid when they receive fewer outcomes compared to their contributions, which leads to them feeling angry (Cropanzana et al. 2007). Consequently, employees increase or decrease their performance in accordance to whether they are being underpaid or overpaid (Greenberg 1988). The literature on equity supports the findings of the equity theory of "over-reward effect" (Cropanzana et al. 2007, p.37) and focus less on the underpayment effect (Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Greenberg 1990).

Distributive justice does not merely consider equity as a distribution rule but goes beyond that to discuss other rules such as equality and need. Equality rule reinforces that outcomes should be all the same regardless the variation in contributions (Colquitt 2012; Leventhal 1980; Greenberg 1987; Meindl 1989). The need rule describes that allocations of outcomes should be based on individuals' requirement (Leventhal 1980; Cropanzana et al. 2007). According to Kabanoff (1991), the identification of the dominant rule of allocation is dependent on the social context's values. Adopting the equity approach is for the social context that values economic benefits whereas the equality approach is adopted by the social

context that values social relations (Kabanoff 1991; Greenberg 1987; Greenberg 1990). Cropanzana et al. (2007) argue that the adoption of any of the three rules relies on an organisation's strategic goal. Organisations apply the equity approach to foster performance while the application of the equality approach is to increase solidarity and group cohesiveness (Cropanzana et al. 2007; Colquitt 2012; Colquitt et al. 2001; Greenberg 1990). This research will consider the three distribution rules to investigate fairness in Saudi Arabian universities.

#### 2.4.1.2 Procedural Justice

Fairness in organisations is not solely about the allocation of resources among workers, but it is also concerned with how the decision of allocation is made. Researchers have realised that justice perceptions are not merely attributed to receiving fair outcomes but to the fairness of the system delivering those outcomes. Procedural justice has received more attention from scholars than distributive justice (Greenberg 1990). According to Leventhal (1980 p. 16) procedural justice "refers to an individual's perception of the fairness of procedural components of the social system that regulate the allocative process." Many comparative studies have shown that the effect of the process (means) exceed the impact of outcomes (ends) on perceptions of justice in the workplace (Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Alexander & Ruderman 1987; Colquitt 2012). The "fair process effect" is a concept in the literature asserting the idea that the justice of the system can mitigate the effect of a lack of distributive justice (Cropanzana et al., 2007, p 38; Greenberg 1990; Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Alexander & Ruderman 1987).

Thibaut and Walker's studies on conflict resolution in the legal context led to the development of the process approach to justice in 1975 (Shao et al. 2013; Colquitt et al. 2001; Alexander & Ruderman 1987; Konovsky 2000; Kim & Mauborgne 1998). The authors argue that in conflict situations, disputants would rather give away control over outcomes if they had control over the process (Alexander & Ruderman 1987; Kim & Mauborgne 1998; Konovsky 2000). Thibaut and Walker's classical works inspired other scholars in the field such

as Leventhal and Folger who introduce the theory to the organisation setting (Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Greenberg 1990; Kim & Mauborgne 1998). Leventhal has further argued that distributive justice is not sufficient to capture fairness perceptions in organisational contexts (Leventhal 1980). The author outlines that procedural justice perception is dependent on meeting some criteria such as consistency, freedom from bias, accuracy, representation of stakeholders, correction and satisficing ethical norms (Leventhal 1980). The perceptions of the system's fairness rely on the satisfaction of these criteria (Colquitt et al. 2001; Cropanzana et al. 2007; Byrne & Cropanzano 2001; Greenberg 1990). This research will consider these criteria with respect to the role of *wasta*.

#### 2.4.1.3 Organisational Justice and *wasta* in Saudi Arabia

There is a lack of cultural perspectives in organisational justice studies. The US context is the dominant focus of the application of organisational justice theory (Shao et al. 2013), thereby, raising assumptions that understanding justice in organisations is universal (Narcisse & Harcourt 2008). *Wasta* implications on fairness in the workplace are taken for granted. Many studies claim that the practice of *wasta* results in perceptions of injustice among individuals in the social context (Cunningham et al. 1994; Barnett et al. 2013; Alwerthan & Swanson 2016; Kilani et al. 2015; Kassab 2016; Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993), especially for certain activities such as job occupations (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011; Mohamed & Mohamad 2011). A few studies have applied organisational justice theory to identify the linkage between *wasta* and fairness in organisations, such as Al.Harbi et al. (2016). Al.Harbi et al. (2016, p.6) agree with Leventhal's idea that "people may accept some unfairness if they perceive the procedures that determine outcomes to be fair." The authors argue further that the strong solidarity and high degree of accepting inequality in Saudi Arabian culture affects the formation of justice in the social context, so that people are willing to accept a lack of distributive justice as long as the system remains fair. While that seems to be true, the authors overlook the different distributive rules. According to Leventhal (1980), the distributive rules vary based on the

characteristics of the social context. The social context that values group harmony tends to perceive the justice of distribution to be to all the same (equality) rather than to be based on contributions (equity). Unlike Al.Harbi et al., this research aims to consider the three distributive rules to investigate the perceptions of fair resources distribution among Saudi faculty members in their universities.

## Chapter three: Introduction to the context of Saudi Arabia

It is difficult to understand a social phenomenon in isolation from its context. The culture of Saudi Arabia is shaped by Islamic principles and traditions (Branine and Pollard 2010). Mellahi (2006) argues that national culture affects human resource practices. The characteristics of Saudi Arabian culture and its appreciation of personal relationships may explain the practice of *wasta*. Negative *wasta* contradicts the Islamic principles of justice and equality. The Saudi Arabian Anti-Corruption Commission considers *wasta* to be an ethical crime that warrants punishment. Even though negative *wasta* conflicts with Islamic principles and violates government regulations, it still exists in many private and public organisations. The focus of this study is the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Education exerts considerable control over universities regarding funding and decision-making; thereby, universities lack administrative, academic, and financial autonomy. This section discusses Saudi Arabian culture and religion, the regulations regarding the practice of *wasta*, and the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia.

### 3.1 Saudi Arabian culture

The cultural consequences model introduced by Hofstede (1983) will be applied to understand the characteristics of Saudi Arabian culture. This model distinguishes cultures based on four dimensions: individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, large versus small power distance, and strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 1983). Collectivism and power distance are two critical indicators that contribute to developing an understanding of the practice of *wasta*. Saudi Arabian culture is highly collective with a large power distance (Al.Harbi, Thursfield and Bright 2016; Aldossari and Robertson 2016; Bjerke and Al-Meer 1993; Branine and Pollard 2010; Hofstede 1983).

#### 3.1.1 Collective community

Collectivist societies are communities in which there are strong ties between individuals (Hofstede 1983). People care for each other and value the interests of others from the same

group whether that group is their extended family or their tribe. Al.Harbi, Thursfield and Bright (2016) and Aldossari and Robertson (2016) argue that the collectivist nature of Saudi Arabian culture explains the proliferation of *wasta* in society because individuals feel obliged to serve others from the same group (family, tribe, or friends). This collectivism may lead to nepotism, which means favouring family members over others (Padgett, Padgett and Morris 2015). It could further lead to in-group loyalty in which group members' interests are valued over organisations' goals and objectives (Mellahi 2006). The individual perceives himself or herself to be a member of a large group, and this membership comes with obligations and requires unquestionable loyalty.

### 3.1.2 Large power distance

Another characteristic of Saudi Arabian culture is the large power distance. Power distance is defined as the degree of acceptance of inequality in society; this dimension reflects the abuse of power and the degree of centralisation in organisations (Hofstede 1983). The large power distance in Saudi Arabia could be an indicator of the diffusion of *wasta*. In this particular situation, *wasta* becomes similar to patronage, which means that individuals in charge use their influence to reward their family members, relatives, or friends (Bearfield 2009). Managers reward and compensate subordinates just because they belong to the same group. According to Al.Harbi, Thursfield and Bright (2016), power distance explains employees' ability to judge, question, or disagree with managers' decisions. Employees in Saudi Arabia expect to do what they are told by their managers and cannot act independently; thus, managers can act arbitrarily without being questioned (Mellahi 2006). This abuse of power may result in an unfair distribution of outcomes to employees and create distrust in the human resource management system.

### 3.1.3 Criticisms of Hofstede's model

Many scholars have criticised Hofstede's model, which reduced the concept of culture into a set of values (Ailon 2008). Ailon (2008) questions the representation of the sample and asserts that the findings of the model overvalued the West and devalued the rest. Hofstede assumed that every nation has only one culture whereas it is possible to have more than one; for instance, in the Middle East, there are 35 different cultures in 14 nations (Baskerville 2003). McSweeney (2002) argues further that the dimensions are not as distinct and separated as Hofstede presumed. For instance, individualism and collectivism can exist together because we as humans can have contradicting values that vary depending on the context and the circumstances of the situation (McSweeney 2002). Despite these criticisms, the cultural consequences model has been applied extensively in business-related literature and psychology (Ailon, 2008; Baskerville, 2003; Baumann and Hamin, 2011).

## 3.2 Saudi Arabia

### 3.2.1 The Islamic view

The Islamic perspective about *wasta* is contingent on merit. The distinction between negative *wasta* and positive intercession is based on the qualifications of the person who seeks *wasta*. If *wasta* is done for a qualified individual and does not cause a more competent person to lose the opportunity, there is no wrong with using *wasta*. Alwerthan & Swanson (2016, p.4-5) confirm the distinction between intercession and *wasta* by highlighting a verse from the Quran, "Whoever intercedes for a good cause will have a reward therefrom, and whoever intercedes for an evil cause will have a burden therefrom ..." (An-Nisaa, 85). The authors stress that evil cause refers to *wasta* whereas the good cause refers to intercession.

Negative *wasta* conflicts with many Islamic principles. Islamic traditions are infused by the Quran and by the Prophet Mohammed's sayings and practices, both of which formalise the Shari'ah (Islamic Law) (Branine and Pollard 2010; Yousef 2001). Islam has many principles to guide, direct, and govern the practice of management, which is called Islamic work ethics

(IWE) (Ali and Al-Owaihan 2008; Yousef 2001). Studies show that IWE is significantly correlated with both job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Yousef 2001).

The first principle that *wasta* disobeys is justice. Justice is emphasised in Islamic literature on multiple occasions; there is no discrimination of any kind in Islam, and what matters are a person's actions and deeds. The Prophet Mohammed said:

"An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over a white except by piety and good action" (Branine & Pollard 2010, p.719).

People who engage in *wasta*, whether managers or employees are acting against Islamic traditions. When employees or managers serve people only because they are friends or family, they are affecting the equality in the workplace.

Another principle is perfection in work. The Prophet Mohammed also said, "God bless the worker who learns and perfects his profession" (Ali & Al-Owaihan 2008, p.10). It is apparent that practicing *wasta* is a false action that functions against organisational policies and procedures. The diffusion of *wasta* raises a question concerning the drivers of individual behaviour and attitudes in the workplace and whether their actions are derived from Islamic values or social norms.

### 3.2.2 Regulations

Regulations do not make a clear distinction between good and harmful *wasta*. The ambiguity of regulations regarding *wasta* could be the reason behind the diffusion of negative *wasta* and the confusion between negative and positive *wasta*. The Saudi Arabian government responded to the widespread practice of *wasta* (among other actions such as bribery that are considered to be corruption) by establishing the National Anti-Corruption Commission in 2011; also called *NAZAHA*, which means integrity in Arabic, (Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission 2016a). The commission is responsible for protecting integrity, endorsing transparency, and preventing financial and administrative corruption. *NAZAHA* is given financial and administrative autonomy and is associated directly with the king; the autonomy



is to protect secrecy and avoid political intervention from any authority (Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission 2016a). In the English version of the Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission (2014, p.11), report, favouritism is given as the equivalent term of *wasta*, and is considered financial and administrative corruption. A NAZAHA survey of 1254 public employees in government-providing entities from three different regions found that 62% of financial and administrative corruption is because of nepotism, the translation of *wasta* in English in that study (Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission 2016b). Despite the inaccurate translations of *wasta*, both reports do not specify the meaning of *wasta* nor the measurement of such a practice.

The legal aspect of *wasta* is not clear as there is no specific act, law or policy coping with *wasta* directly. There are a couple of articles in the Anti-bribery law issued in 1991 that can be linked to *wasta*. Article four states:

“Any public servant who breaches his office duties by performing or refraining from performing any of such duties as a result of a plea, recommendation or an intercession shall be considered as bribee and shall be punished by imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years and a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand riyals, or by either penalty” (Bureau of Experts at The Council of Ministries 2016).

Article 17 of the same law states that anyone who reports such conduct will receive a minimum financial reward of SAR 5,000 (Bureau of Experts at The Council of Ministries 2016). Reporting other employees' misconduct to obtain an award could be difficult in a collective society that values personal relationships. As per the Saudi National Anti-Corruption Commission (2014), only %7 of 2337 of reports that NAZAHA received from whistleblowers concerning financial and administrative corruption were revealing favouritism, the English translation of *wasta*. Due to *wasta* controversy, a separate act coping with *wasta* issues should be enacted.

### 3.2.3 Comments on the religious perspective and regulations

The articles concerning *wasta* in the anti-bribery law do not specify the meaning of *wasta* nor the criteria that can assist in classifying *wasta* actions. *Wasta* can encourage employees to perform and satisfy their job duties. For instance, a person who is eligible for a promotion and being failed due to system inefficiency could use *wasta* to obtain the promotion he/she deserves in the first place. The qualified person encourages employers to satisfy their job duties and promote him/her. Additionally, the Islamic point of view considers the eligibility to be the determinant of the legitimacy of *wasta*; however, the determination of right and eligibility is not always clear nor accurate. Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993, p.13) confirm that “distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate *wasta* is messy.” An example of that is to use *wasta* for speeding the delivery of a service and cutting through red tape (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993).

*Wasta* is in need of clarification. It is the policy maker’s responsibility to enact new acts and laws coping with *wasta* directly and in detail. The lack of clarity and inaccuracy of the religious perspective and rules lead *wasta* to be a controversial social practice. This research aims to analyse faculty members’ perspectives of religion, national regulations and university policies in relation to *wasta* practices and diffusion.

## 3.3 The higher education sector

### 3.3.1 Historical overview

Higher education is one of the fast-growing sectors in Saudi Arabia. In the last decade, the sector grew and developed, which has resulted in an increase in the number of universities from eight in 2005 to 29 universities today (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Australia 2016; Ministry of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia 2013). In 2009, three universities were established in rural areas: Majmaah University, Shaqra University, and Prince Sattam bin Abdul Aziz University in Alkarj (Majmaah University 2016). The new universities were established because of high demand and an increase in the number of people under the age

of 25, who now account for 60% of the population (Smith and Abouammoh, 2013). The initial concern was with the geographic spread, which indicated that the growth of higher education involved quantity over quality. Furthermore, the government has invested a massive amount of money in higher education, allocating SAR 77.2 billion in 2013 (Ministry of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia 2013).

### 3.3.2 The higher education management system

All public universities are linked to the Saudi Ministry of Education. The ministry is responsible for establishing policies and procedures and for engaging in strategic planning and resource allocation (Al-Eisa & Smith 2013). Universities are responsible for implementing these policies with low levels of independence at both the academic and administrative levels (Al-Eisa and Smith, 2013; Ministry of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia, 2013). The policies include, for instance, the number of students to be enrolled, the admission procedures, and human resources factors such as faculty members' salaries, promotions and retirement policies (Al-Eisa and Smith, 2013). The system is centralised, and the ministry exerts significant control over universities' budgeting and decision-making; the schools themselves are executed agencies with less autonomy and less involvement in the decision-making processes. Universities differ in location, work conditions, and the use of management techniques to fulfil employees' internal needs and to enhance the external factors. There are some initiatives aimed at self-governance for universities including financial and administrative autonomy; however, neither universities nor the government has much experience with institutional autonomy (Al-Eisa & Smith 2013). This study aims to investigate faculty members' perceptions of fairness concerning the ministry's policies and procedures as well as the distribution of rewards and punishments at the university level.

### 3.3.3 The future of the higher education sector

#### 3.3.3.1 National Vision 2030

Vision 2030, announced by Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, is considered a roadmap to economic and developmental reforms. The vision is followed by a transformation plan that aims to set the main goals, objectives, and policies for bringing the kingdom into a leading position in all fields and increasing its global competitiveness. One of the main goals is to restructure all government sectors and agencies; all government regulations will be reviewed, and new laws will be enacted. The plan emphasises evaluation by setting performance objectives and indicators by which to evaluate, assess, and align the actual performance of all sectors and agencies (Saudi Vision 2030 2016b; Saudi Vision 2030 2016a).

Regarding higher education, the vision aims for at least five Saudi universities to be among the top 200 universities in the world by 2030. Universities, as a part of the public sector, will be subject to the restructuring program as well as to reviews of their current policies and procedures. These actions could lead to an increase in the efficiency and effectiveness of universities' overall performance. Evaluations will hold universities accountable for any actions that indicate abuse of power, negative *wasta*, or any other misconduct. The reviews of current regulations may contribute to establishing new laws or policies that contribute to reducing the effects of negative *wasta* in human resource practices. Although the vision and transformation program are excellent steps, it is too early to make a judgment until they are executed.

## Chapter four: Methodology

This study applies a qualitative approach to explore *wasta* and perceptions of justice. A qualitative approach is the best to capture and articulate individuals' perceptions and feelings about their lived experiences in the social context (Marshall & Rossman 2006). The study employs an interpretive philosophical approach that seeks to understand social reality in terms of how social actors perceive it to be (Burrell & Morgan 1979). Practicing *wasta* is not limited to specific sectors, contexts, and businesses, nor specific social groups. There is insufficient literature to capture the various aspects of *wasta*.

### 4.1 Ethical considerations

*Wasta* is mostly spoken about in negative terms in Saudi Arabia (Hutchings & Weir 2006b). People tend to hide their practice and use of *wasta*. Nevertheless, people can easily recognise the practice of *wasta* in their place of work. For example, if a person being hired lacks eligibility, it is apparent that *wasta* is his/her way to the job. People do not speak about their use of *wasta* because they do not want to be accused of lacking merit. The regulations regarding *wasta* are inaccurate, and people are openly criticised of *wasta* in society. Taking these factors into consideration, the researcher asserts in the written consent form and verbally that the participants' identity will remain anonymous and that it is not the researchers' intention to discover personal involvement.

#### 4.1.1 Sampling

The targeted sample was Saudi male faculty members who are lecturer level and above, who do not hold an administrative position, and who have four years or more experience. The interviews were conducted with lecturers where face-to-face interviews were accessible. The exclusion criteria were to ensure a familiarity with the work environment and to avoid bias. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturers from six different Saudi public universities with a job experience range of between five to ten years. The study employed a snowballing technique that aims to ask the first participants, recruited via personal

connections and faculty member associations in Facebook, to recommend others (Saunders et al. 2012).

#### 4.1.2 Procedures

The participants were asked to take part in a one hour interview. The interviews ultimately lasted between 45 minutes to one hour and 20 minutes. Interviewees consented to the use of audio-recording and note-taking. The interviews were conducted in Arabic for interviewees to best articulate emotions and opinions about the phenomenon under study. The collected data was transcribed and translated into English by the researcher to ensure that terms being used were consistent with the terms in the literature, as well as to better engage with and understand the data.

#### 4.1.3 Data analysis

The analysis of data followed the processes and stages outlined by Marshall & Rossman (2006); Saunders et al. (2012). The stages included: organising data, generating themes and categories, coding data, analytic memo, offering interpretation and identifying patterns (Saunders et al. 2012; Marshall & Rossman 2006). Through the interview process, the researcher aimed to address the meaning of *wasta*, diffusion, approaches, bases and intents, and test the interviewees' acceptability of practicing *wasta* by providing some real-life examples. The research aimed to address contextual issues regarding the religious perspective and regulations and identify the perceived dominant rule of distribution and the perceived fairness of distribution and the policies and procedures delivering the outcomes.

Three main themes were identified from the literature and interviews: *wasta*, positive and negative *wasta* and the outcomes of *wasta*. Various sub-themes emerged during interviews such as the awareness of legal consequences at both national and industrial levels and the inefficiency of management practices in encouraging *wasta* practices. Other sub-themes include covers, techniques and justifications people tend to do when asking for *wasta* and the hidden nature of practicing *wasta*. Analysing data led to the identification of some

patterns and relationships. The confusion regarding the acceptability of practicing *wasta* is attributable to the inaccuracy of the religious perspective, the lack of clarity of regulations and the inefficiency of the management system leading to the diffusion of *wasta*.

## Chapter Five: Findings and discussion

The complexity and controversy surrounding *wasta* are evident in the perceptions of participants. There is confusion and ambiguity regarding different aspects of *wasta*. There are conflicting perceptions of *wasta's* meaning and acceptability. While some participants exaggerate the effect of *wasta* on fairness and reject the practice of *wasta* entirely, others perceive *wasta* as part of social norms and believe its fairness depends on worthiness and eligibility. This section aims to discuss the social practice of *wasta* in universities in terms of how Saudi faculty members perceive it. This section consists of a few themes: *wasta*, positive and negative *wasta* and the implications of *wasta* on fairness. The theme about *wasta* aims to explore the definition of *wasta*, diffusion, bases, intents and approaches. The positive and negative *wasta* theme seeks to explore the faculty members' perceptions regarding the practice of *wasta* in their universities. It goes beyond that to identify the effect of management practices and regulations on the acceptability of *wasta*, as well as discovering *wasta* asking techniques, covers and justifications. The *wasta* outcomes theme is concerned with the participants' perceptions of the distributive and procedural justice in their universities and the impact of *wasta* on their perceptions of both types of justice.

### 5.1 *Wasta*

#### 5.1.1 Meaning and diffusion

While *wasta* is embedded and widely practiced in Saudi Arabian culture, there is ambiguity surrounding the concept in people's minds. Mark, in his interview, says

"We cannot make a judgment about whether certain actions are *wasta* or not as long as there is no clear definition of *wasta*."

Most of the participants define *wasta* as intercession in general. They distinguish between *wasta* and intercession based on the eligibility and worthiness of the service seeker. *Wasta* is mostly perceived to be for those who lack merit. *Wasta* is defined as the person who



facilitates services for people seeking them. This person is called the *waseet* in Arabic, which means the person who goes in between the person seeking the service and the provider.

Participants have different opinions with respect to *wasta* diffusion in universities in particular. Some interviewees argue that the prevalence of *wasta* has been overstated while others support the idea that there is extensive widespread *wasta*. According to Bernard, who supports the first argument,

"In every ten faculty members, only one or two have got the job using *wasta*...."

On the other hand, Mark stresses that

"... everything is done via *wasta* from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom."

It is noteworthy that the party who argues for the overstatement of *wasta* diffusion lacks administrative experience, especially in being in a leading position. In universities, *wasta* is more diffused among administrative staff and for administrative matters while it is less diffused in academic affairs and among faculty members. Generally, in the community, *wasta* has become more like a habit. Alex affirms that:

"*Wasta* has become an obsession that all people unconsciously are looking for it even if they satisfy eligibility."

Some participants outline that this might be explained by the Saudi Arabian collective culture. People in society have a high reliance and dependence on others to get things done.

### 5.1.2 Bases of *wasta*

There are many bases of *wasta* relation that are critical for *wasta* to occur. The seniority base is not mentioned in the literature while it is valued in society. Ethan justifies:

"We pay a great respect in the society for elderly people."

Mark asserts:

"If I have been in a situation like that (old person asks for *wasta*), I would definitely help the old person when it is possible and does not harm others."

Most participants believe that the significance of a base is dependent on the values of the service provider. The immediate family base is perceived to be the most effective base. However, as Ivan explains:

"Whereas the family relation is important, it is not always available in the place where you seek the service."

The second significant base is tribal relations. Alex gives an example:

"My friend is a lecturer, and he needed a one-year extension from his university. There was a delay and he was about to lose his monthly allowance because of that. I asked him to look for one of his (*Jammaah*) his clan of his tribe because only they can help him with his matter".

Kyle justifies:

"... To not lose social standing (face), thereby, affecting their reputation".

Others argue that the influence of a person's position is more effective in getting *wasta* than tribal relations. They distinguish between the social standing of a tribal chief, for example, and the social standing of the person's job status. Albert acknowledges:

"the influence of the individual position matters in getting *wasta* because the service provider wants to owe the person with an influential position. They will ask that person for a repay in the future".

### 5.1.3 Intents to *wasta*

There are many purposes of using *wasta*. The most common use of *wasta* is for occupational attainment. Many participants even defined *wasta* based on this purpose. Harvey confirms:

"*Wasta* is to hire someone who is ineligible ...."

Moreover, Albert asserts:

"*Wasta* is to get a job without being eligible for ...."

This research goes beyond that to focus on current management activities. People engage in *wasta* to get privilege, either financial or career-related. Some participants argue that people engage in *wasta* to get what is their right. Ethan asserts:

"... To get their rights that the system fails to deliver".

Another common purpose is to speed procedures and not having to wait through long formal procedures. Kyle, who was a deputy in the deanship of admission and registrations for two years, confirms:

"Being a deputy of admission in the university makes getting things much easier, which would be long and exhausted procedures for a normal lecturer to be done."

Interviews show that faculty members use *wasta* to assist in many activities such as promotions, gaining leading administrative positions, extra income through invigilation of exams, participating in committees and condoning some of the scholarships' requirements. Some faculty members tend to rely on *wasta* even in the most routine tasks such as issuing a ticket after getting approval to study overseas. Moreover, people tend to use *wasta* to engage in the reciprocity of favours. Albert demonstrates:

"It is an issue of repaying the social debt ... I will be in debt for the person doing *wasta* for me and I need to repay the debt in the future".

Mark stresses:

"No one will do *wasta* for the colour of your eyes (expression indicates that no one will do anything unless there is a benefit for him/her). It is about give and take ... Sometimes, that goes beyond the university environment".

#### 5.1.4 *Wasta* approaches

##### 5.1.4.1 *Waseet*

There are a variety of approaches to the practice of *wasta*. The dominant approach, both in literature and practice, is the traditional one, which reinforces the role of *waseet* or the mediator. Bernard stresses:

"Obtaining the job for either the most qualified and less qualified candidates rely on the *waseet* who are capable of providing *wasta*, which I call the key."

#### 5.1.4.2 *Wasta* without *waseet*

##### 5.1.4.2.1 *Wasta* via marketing

The *waseet* is not the only approach to *wasta*. There is the constructed *wasta*, which Kyle calls *wasta* via marketing. He explains:

"The seeker of the service will introduce himself and the position he holds to show that he can return the favour if you deliver whatever he seeks."

Mark has experienced this approach himself:

"... A father of a female student occupying a position as the deputy of the governance in the province, where my college is located, came to me. I did not know him because I am not from that province; I just work there. He introduced himself, his position, left his card and offered to help with any matter from his place of work. After marketing (sarcastic), he asked me for help in a certain matter".

Alex argues:

"This approach is usually done for networking and will not get you *wasta* unless you know an insider ... There is an exception in which *wasta* via marketing could work. It can work if the position is really influential and that it is possible to benefit from in the future".

Personal relationships are valued in Saudi Arabian society, and cumulative social capital is precious. Henry mentioned one of the most famous sayings in Saudi Arabia: "knowing people is a trade." People treat *wasta* via marketing as an investment. The higher the return is, the higher the seeker's chance of getting *wasta*.

## 5.2 Positive or negative?

Most participants observe that *wasta* is mostly used in a negative way. Harvey perceives *wasta* to be extremely negative as, from his perspective, it is only done for those who lack eligibility. Harvey confirms:

"My definition of *wasta* is to facilitate a service for an ineligible person and to prevent the eligible person from getting that opportunity; otherwise, it is not *wasta* and you can call it whatever you want."

Harvey argues:

"If people are eligible, why they need *wasta*?"

On the other hand, Alex disagrees:

"I do not agree with that and I do not accept it (absolute and strict). Islam defines positive *wasta* as *wasta* that is done for an eligible person".

Most participants are against the idea that *wasta* is always negative. They argue that *wasta* sometimes is a necessity. Bernard agrees:

"If the management system is unable to deliver your rights unless you have *wasta*, then no problem with using *wasta*."

Positive *wasta* is called intercession. Alex confirms:

"I call it intercession because *wasta* in itself (signalling quotation marks) is a bad thing."

In the Arabic language, intercession and *wasta* are synonyms, however, in practice, intercession is perceived positively whereas *wasta* is mostly perceived negatively. Ivan demonstrates:

"... Socially, intercession is positive if it is in a good thing that satisfies eligibility and within the law."

Mark elaborates further:

"Intercession is the action that is being done for an eligible person and not depriving another qualified person. If not, then it is *wasta*".

However, determining eligibility and worthiness can cause confusion. *Wasta* that is done to speed procedures is acceptable if it does not prevent another eligible applicant or delay their

tasks from being done. People doing that type of *wasta* cannot be sure that speeding their procedures will not delay delivering the service for others. Ivan argues:

“There are a lot of grey areas where we cannot make a clear judgment about whether doing *wasta* is good or not. For example, some faculty members use *wasta* to get financial benefits that they may be eligible to get but they use *wasta* to get it”.

These grey areas raise a question about the efficiency of the management system and how it is related to the diffusion of *wasta*.

### 5.2.1 The management system and *wasta*

The question about whether it is the management system or *wasta* that people trust the most in getting things done was raised during interviews. The answers vary from one interviewee to another. Some answered that they trust *wasta*, such as Kyle:

“*Wasta* can bring miracles.”

Henry asserts:

“The system is not trustworthy ... *wasta* can make me a minister (sarcastic)”.

The stereotype that everything is done via *wasta* leads people to distrust the formal system. People using *wasta* are in a competition in which a person with strong *wasta* will be favoured over others. People tend to do *wasta* proactively to protect themselves from injustice. Alex demonstrates:

“Even the eligible person looks for *wasta* because he is afraid of the possibility of losing the opportunity for an ineligible person with *wasta*. He is afraid of injustice which explains why he feels forced to do *wasta*”.

On the other hand, other participants argue that people trust the system and *wasta* equally since the management practices in academia are efficient, so there is less need for *wasta*. Most participants' answers are dependent on the accuracy, transparency and clarity of the policies and procedures. Mark acknowledges:

“If the management system is good, adequate and clear with efficient implementation and consistency, there will be no *wasta*.”

Harvey agrees and explains further:

"If there is a computerised system to determine the most eligible candidate when applying for a certain job, then there will be no need to *wasta*"... "An example of a strict and computerised system is Qiyas. People will not look for *wasta* because they trust the accuracy of the Qiyas system".<sup>1</sup>

#### 5.2.1.1 *Management conduct*

The problem is not only with the management system but with people who are responsible for its execution. Alex observes:

"Most of the time, the problem is not with the system but the intervention and implementation that disable it." "... There is an overlap between management practices and personal relationships ... The person in charge feels like he owns the position and not only an executor ... Some people may refrain from performing because there is a personal issue between him and the service seeker."

Ivan confirms in different occasions during the interview that the abuse of power is what makes people look for *wasta*. Alex asserts that we can only minimise *wasta*, because it cannot be eliminated:

"I do not wish *wasta* to be eliminated because the system will never be perfect and there will always be a need for *wasta*."

Ivan agrees:

"*Wasta* is a human nature which all people are desired to obtain (he means taking advantage of personal relationships) and the strictness of the management system will only minimize it and make it rare like here in Australia where *wasta* is rare."

The interviews show that the efficiency of the management system is critical in the diffusion of *wasta*.

#### 5.2.2 Regulations

The rules regarding *wasta* are unclear at both the national and industry level with poor communication. No participant interviewed from the university sector was aware of the exact sanction of using *wasta*, even though some participants acknowledged its existence:

"People use *wasta* based on their judgment and always deal with it from a religious perspective." (Alex)

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<sup>1</sup> Qiyas is the national centre of assessment that aims to evaluate and assess "the scholastic achievement of the students applying for universities" (National Centre for Assessment 2017).

"Everything about *wasta* is a mirage ... No clear definition, no clear distinction between *wasta* and intercession and no specific law". (Kyle)

Participants highlight some possible consequences for practicing *wasta* such as suspension or expulsion. They exemplified the incident of the Saudi Minister of Labour who had been laid off and is currently waiting a trial for hiring his unqualified son (the first incident of its kind in Saudi Arabian history). However, participants were unaware of the sanctions that wait the minister. Mark affirms:

"I am not aware of the exact penalties ... Based on the news, there is an abuse of power act in the public sector".

The same vague legal issue is evident in the university sector. An orientation session clarifying the code of conduct for fresh faculty members is not provided. Participants looked up professional ethics by themselves as they were not communicated. Harvey acknowledged:

"I have gone through most of the universities' policies and procedures ... No act coping with *wasta* and outlining its sanctions".

The legal system needs to clarify *wasta* definition, actions and sanctions to diminish the diffusion about *wasta* and to assist individuals in distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate uses of *wasta*.

### 5.2.3 Asking *wasta*

#### 5.2.3.1 *Techniques*

People have certain techniques to ask for *wasta*, but all participants agree that people will do anything to get it. Kyle outlines a few techniques:

"People will ask *wasta* directly, if it does not work, go to whoever is connected to you or the most senior colleague, if it does not work, then your parents and you brothers. All that is to get *wasta*".

Alex reports:

"People tend to follow the hierarchy. They will go to the immediate family to seek *wasta* if not then a tribe chief and members or suburb's mayor for people not belonging to a tribe, if not, to a senior person with influential position, city governor or a minister. If all that does not work, people will go randomly



such as an old man will go to the university president to transfer his daughter from one college to another”.

#### 5.2.3.2 *Justifications and covers*

There are a lot of justifications and excuses to optimise *wasta* and take advantage of the confusion surrounding *wasta* practices. One of those is to mix it with intercession to give it a sort of religious sacredness. Kyle discusses:

“People take advantage of the confusion between *wasta* and intercession. They are asking for *wasta* but trying to convince the service provider that it is intercession and nothing wrong with it. They are twisting the truth to achieve their interests. To cover their use of *wasta*, they use Quran and Hadith (Prophet Mohammed sayings) such as (make things easy and do not make them difficult ...) to put some sacredness on their actions”.

Ivan explains further that people do that:

“... To not feel guilty and to reconcile with their conscience”.

However, both Ivan and Henry argue that this way is not effective because people are well-educated about religion.

Another cover is social justification. People are socially obliged to serve brothers, tribe members, seniors and friends. People looking for *wasta* take advantage of this social pressure. Kyle stresses:

“People will go to whoever has an influence on you such as your mother, your father or even your eldest brothers to achieve whatever they seek to achieve ...”

Henry justifies:

“People assume that being in a position means you must help your family, tribe members, etc. It is a sort of obligation, a social obligation not a religious obligation of course”.

There is an impact for failing to meet this social obligation. Alex acknowledges:

“... Helping each other is a mandatory and failing to do so results in losing social image (Face)”.

Kyle asserts:

“The continued rejection of *wasta* lead you to be on their blacklist, thereby, being abandoned and isolated. This action will be considered as a sign of shame that chases you to the grave”.

Bernard acknowledges:

"It is possible that absolute rejection of *wasta* might lead to outcast the person socially but I have not seen it."

However, he debates:

"In general, people have excellent social skills which enable them to turn *wasta* down without being blamed (social diplomacy)."

This social pressure along with other reasons may explain why practicing *wasta* is mostly hidden.

#### 5.2.4 Hiding *wasta*

People using *wasta* tend to hide it for a variety of reasons. People can recognise the practice of *wasta* even though it is hidden. The perceptions of the person doing *wasta* are negative in a society that gives a high appreciation to the individual's reputation. People tend to hide their practice of *wasta* in order not to affect their reputation. Albert demonstrates:

"People perceive the person using *wasta* as a failed (stresses) person who lacks merit and cannot get the service by himself."

Albert elaborates further how society perceives the person doing *wasta* and how he/she perceives himself:

"People are aggressive with the use of *wasta* even the person's self-perception is negative with low self-esteem ...The person getting the job via *wasta* is demotivated and will not perform well".

Negative self-perception and negative social image are two factors explaining the hidden practice of *wasta*. Another factor is social embarrassment. Ethan explains:

"... To avoid being in an embarrassing situation where he is known to be the person who accepts *wasta* (people will take advantage of that)".

Moreover, the fear of legal liability is another reason why people hide *wasta* even though they are not fully aware of the legal consequences and the exact sanctions of engaging in *wasta*. Kyle stresses:

"*Wasta* is hidden because whoever is doing it does not want to lose his position or his authority to be threatened."

## 5.3 Organisational justice

### 5.3.1 Distributive justice

The fair distribution process in universities is perceived to be based on equality. Kyle argues:

“... The equity rule in which distribution is based on contributions is for advanced societies but not ours”.

Henry justifies:

“... People do not want the distribution to be based on contributions and performance. For example, people are against the new system that links the annual raise for public servants to performance”<sup>2</sup>

Whereas participants agree that equality is the most dominant rule of distribution in practice, most of them prefer the distribution to be based on contributions. Ivan discusses:

“It is unfair to treat those who perform well and who do not as equal. This will affect innovation and everyone will seek his own interest, not the interest of the university where he works”.

*Wasta* and personal relationships play a significant role in the distribution process. There are many stories where *wasta* interferes in the distribution of outcomes. Bernard agrees:

“The university recruited me to be a lecturer because I got a master degree. However, there was not an available position as a lecturer, so I was hired as a teaching assistant instead. At the same time, one of my colleagues who is the university deputy’s son was hired as a lecturer even though he got lower GPA than me. I got an excellent GPA in two different majors since I got double degrees while he got a very good GPA and only a single major. I graduated from the top 25 universities in the US and he graduated from the worst 25 universities in the UK. Due to the qualifications, we both deserved to be a lecturer but who is the worthiest? (frustrated)”.

Most participants argue that *wasta* is critical in the outcomes distribution processes. Albert asserts:

“The criterion of every promotion, selection and recruiting is *wasta*.”

Kyle confirms:

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<sup>2</sup> This is a new policy but at the time of writing has not been implemented. The current annual pay raise is fixed.

"Tribe, social standing, religious appearance are critical factors for selection, not performance or qualifications."

### 5.3.2 Procedural justice

This thesis applies Leventhal (1980) criteria such as consistency, ability to be corrected, freedom from bias and accuracy to test perceptions of the management system's fairness in universities to examine the impact of *wasta*. People distinguish between the system and implementation. The problem mostly is not with the management system but in how it is executed. Kyle stresses:

"The system is good on paper but not in practice."

Faculty members agree on the lack of consistency but vary in their views of the extent of it. A few argue that:

"the system is consistent by 90% but there are a few expectations" (Ivan)

"The system is consistent in general ... there are irregular situations where you need *wasta*" (Alex)

Nevertheless, most interviewees assert that the system is inconsistent and biased. Henry gives an example of inconsistency:

"Two of my colleagues have been granted a scholarship from the university for studying English, not Master. However, one of them got a one-year scholarship and the other got three years' scholarship (inconsistency). Both have exceeded the maximum years to study (2 years for English course), and they were asked to get back to Saudi Arabia. The university gave them another chance to try to achieve the required score in the IELTS test while they are in Saudi Arabia. However, the university gave an extension for four months only for the person with three years' scholarship even he has exceeded the maximum limit. He was given an extension because he is from a tribe that is famous in that region".

Moreover, *wasta* has an impact on the complaint process, thereby, the chance of correction.

Mark confirms:

"... Your complaint might reach a certain level then swerve (make a sign by his hand) because of *wasta*".

The lack of accuracy in the policies and procedures can explain the diffusion of *wasta*. Harvey demonstrates:

"There are a lot of loopholes in the management system in which the provider of *wasta* tends to exploit ... For instance, the system outlines specific criteria for a promotion but the last article states that the final decision shall be made by the university council. That means the university council has the authority to reject your promotion even if you satisfy all the requirements".

**Bernard confirms:**

"...These loopholes affect the system accuracy".

## 5.4 Discussion

### 5.4.1 *Wasta*

#### 5.4.1.1 Meaning and diffusion

Faculty members vary in their understanding of *wasta*. Some define *wasta* as the whole process where there are three parties involved: the person seeking the service, *waseet* to go in between and the provider of the service. Others reinforce the critical role of *waseet* and argue that *wasta* cannot be done without one. The stronger the relationship between the seeker of *wasta* and the *waseet*, the more insisted the *waseet* is to convince the provider of *wasta*. *Wasta* is common in society in general and in universities. Even though some participants argue that *wasta* is less diffused in universities, no one denies its existence. There is a stereotype in society that everything is done through *wasta*. This stereotype leads people to use *wasta* proactively in order to not lose an opportunity to another less competent applicant who has *wasta*.

#### 5.4.1.2 Approaches to *wasta*

While the traditional approach to *wasta* (via *wasset*) is still diffused, *wasta* is not merely practiced in that way. There are other approaches to *wasta* that are overlooked in the literature. The *wasta* via marketing where the person seeks *wasta* by marketing his position and offering services is diffused in practice. Another approach is to get *wasta* via social standing and reputation. People get *wasta* via this approach even without asking for it. They can get *wasta* because of their tribe name, their father's reputation or because they hold an influential position.

#### 5.4.1.3 Bases and intents to *wasta*

Another critical aspect of *wasta* is the bases of *wasta* relations. There are many *wasta* relation bases that are necessary for *wasta* to occur. The most substantial base is the immediate family base then the tribal relation. The influence of the person's position is significant and influential since people are driven by the future benefits they can attain from the person

seeking *wasta*. People's responses to the *wasta* request of the individual with influence are contingent on the attractiveness of the person's position and the future benefits that are possible. Subsequently, there will be a reciprocity of favours and mutual obligations to satisfy both parties.

Faculty members engage in *wasta* to facilitate a variety of activities and tasks. People are obsessed about *wasta* in Saudi Arabian society. While some individuals tend to rely too much on *wasta* even when there is no need for it, others seek *wasta* out of necessity. While a person may not appear to require favourable treatment by virtue of their qualifications, skills and experience, in some cases *wasta* is the only method for employees to get their rights as the management system is no longer trustworthy. However, most faculty members use *wasta* because they want privilege, either financially or career-wise. In addition, Saudi faculty members assess their engagement in *wasta* relations based on interest and future benefit. If they believe they can at some point profit from the seeker of *wasta*, they will deliver what he seeks because they want him to owe them. The *wasta* seeker will feel obliged to repay the debt when faculty members ask for it. Occupational attainment is the most common intent of *wasta*, which is evident in many studies such as Mohamed & Mohamad (2011); Barnett et al. (2013). Other popular intents in universities specifically are promotions, leading administrative positions and monetary incentives through committee memberships and exam supervision.

#### 5.4.2 Positive and negative *wasta*

The initial reaction of most of the interviewees toward *wasta* is negative which is consistent with Hutchings & Weir (2006) who argue that *wasta* is perceived mostly negatively in the social context. However, compared to the literature, the interviews show complexity and vagueness concerning most uses of *wasta*. People's perceptions of whether practicing *wasta* is positive or negative are contingent on the merit of the person asking for *wasta*. Another determinant is the deprivation of other competent applicants for the service concerned. The

good *wasta* (called intercession) is done by a qualified person and does not encroach other people's rights, whereas the negative *wasta* is the opposite of that. However, people are confusing the word intercession with *wasta*. The confusion is derived from the religious perspective that optimises the word intercession while considering *wasta* as a negative practice. Some people take advantage of this confusion and manipulate the words to optimise *wasta* and make it happen.

There are no sufficient, clear and accurate rules and regulations to clarify what is accepted about *wasta* and what is not. There are only a couple of articles in the anti-bribery law that can be linked to *wasta*. No participants were aware of these articles nor the sanctions that could be involved in engaging in *wasta*. Not only are the rules lacking clarity, there is no communication of these rules. In addition, the inefficient management system complicates the practice of *wasta* and contributes to the ambiguity and confusion. The inefficient management system forces competent individuals to look for *wasta* to get their rights, which is perceived to be good *wasta*. On the other hand, other persons use *wasta*, which is perceived to be negative, to take advantage of the system's deficiencies to attain unapproved outcomes. These factors are this study's contribution in expanding the literature of *wasta*, and provide a rich insight to understand *wasta* practices in organisations based on faculty members' perceptions of *wasta* in their universities.

#### 5.4.2.1 Asking *wasta*

This study contributes to the literature by identifying techniques utilised by people when asking for *wasta*. *Wasta* seekers tend to ask the service provider directly at the beginning. If this does not work, they will go to whoever can influence the provider's decision. *Wasta* seekers try to use the social pressure of people who are connected to the decision makers to affect their decisions. Another technique is to follow the hierarchy and look for whoever has the power and influence to provide *wasta* or to be the *waseet* to *wasta*.



People tend to take advantage of the ambiguity of *wasta* practices in the social context. They use different covers to hide their practice of *wasta*. The religious cover is to use Quran verses and prophet Mohammed sayings to twist the truth and persuade the service provider that they are asking for something good, not *wasta*. Another is the social cover, where the seeker of *wasta* takes advantage of social obligations. People accept *wasta* requests because they do not want their reputation to be affected. As a collective society, individuals are expected to assist and help their family and tribe members, friends and whoever is connected to them.

Despite that, *wasta* practices are hidden as *wasta* is not openly practiced. The hidden nature of *wasta* practices is attributable to many factors. The perceived social image of the person who uses *wasta* is negative as people believe that person lacks merit. Avoiding social embarrassment and social pressure is another reason because if the person is known to be dealing with *wasta*, people will take advantage of that. Additionally, people hide their use of *wasta* because they are afraid of legal liability. Even though the legal consequences of engaging in *wasta* are not clear to individuals in the social context, they are aware that negative *wasta* warrants punishment.

### 5.4.3 Organisational justice

#### 5.4.3.1 Distributive justice

The study shows that *wasta* is perceived to be central and effective in management practices. The findings of this study indicate that the fair distribution of outcomes is significant for individuals in Saudi Arabia which is against Al.Harbi et al. (2016)'s claim. Al.Harbi, Thursfield & Bright (2016) argue that distributive justice is not a concern for people if the system is working in a fair way. However, authors of that study overlook the different distribution rules that vary in significance from one culture to another. The dominant rule of distribution is equality in the social context. Employees are expected to be treated equally. Moreover, faculty members assert that *wasta* affects the outcomes distribution process in their place of

work. *Wasta* is the most effective criterion in allocation processes. Interviews show that personal relationships, social standing, tribe name and closeness to the person in charge are critical in distribution processes.

#### 5.4.3.2 Procedural justice

Faculty members perceive the management system to be relatively fair, and the problem is with how the system is implemented. The management system lacks accuracy though. There are many deficiencies in the policies and procedures in which *wasta* is taking place. Employees providing *wasta* are aware of these loopholes, and they tend to make use of that to provide *wasta*. Additionally, the overlap between business and personal relationships leads to biased and inconsistent management practices. *Wasta* is critical and central to decision-making processes. As a result, other employees who do not have *wasta* find themselves forced to look for *wasta* to get their rights. The lack of management system consistency leads people to distrust the management system and rely on *wasta* instead. Moreover, *wasta* is engaged in the complaint processes. While *wasta* can lead to an employee's voice being heard, it can lower many voices. The possession of *wasta* can guarantee that a complaint will go through the formal procedures and the issue to be resolved. However, a lack of *wasta* can obstruct the complaint processes or even disable them in favour of others who have *wasta*.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

*Wasta* is a prevailing social practice in Saudi Arabian society. People seek *wasta* for employment, career progression, securing promotions and even for the most routine tasks that do not require *wasta*. There is a high reliance and dependency on *wasta*. The obsession about *wasta* is the reason behind the diversity of approaches, techniques, covers and justifications people tend to use to obtain *wasta*. People tend to take advantage of those who are connected to them to get *wasta*. They use the influence of their social and job status to get what they ask done.

The debate about *wasta* will continue as long as there is no clear distinction between positive and negative *wasta*. The complexity of *wasta* practices is apparent in the perceptions of positive and negative *wasta* as well as the perceptions of fairness. People use *wasta* for a variety of reasons, and not all are negative. The negative form of *wasta* affects the efficiency of management systems, thereby, the allocations of outcomes among faculty members. Other forms of *wasta* are a responsive action to the abuse of power, ineffective management practices and long bureaucratic procedures. Some employees use *wasta* to get their rights that the system failed to deliver. However, there is a fine line between using *wasta* out of necessity and using *wasta* out of habit. This chapter will present a summary of the main findings, discuss the managerial and policy implications of *wasta* and provide recommendations and suggestions for future researchers and studies.

### 6.1 A summary of main findings

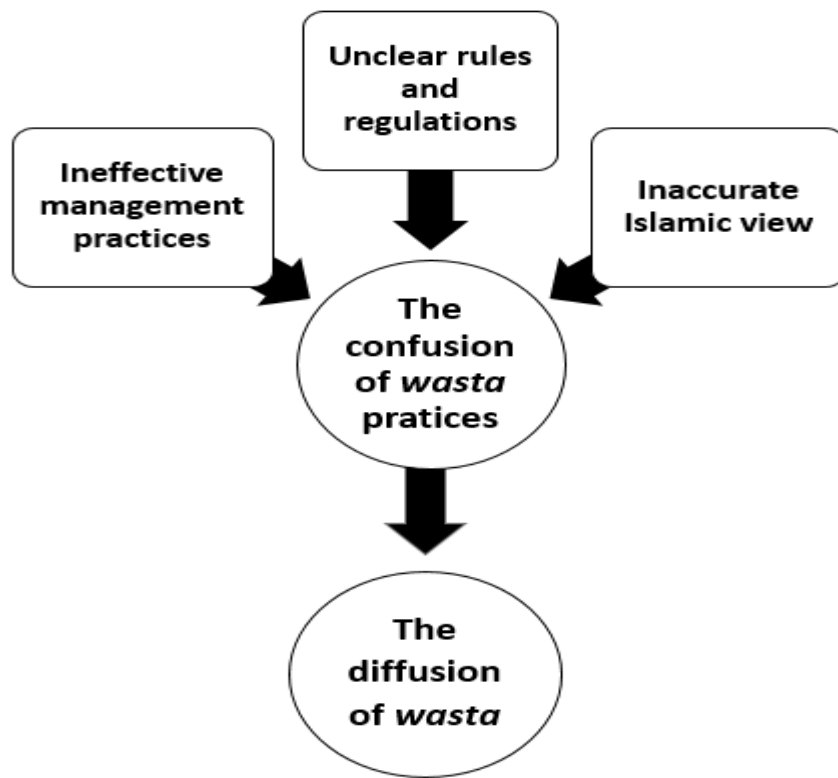
The study's primary purpose is to provide a better understanding of *wasta* and its implications on justice from Saudi faculty members' point of view. This study extends the literature of *wasta* by outlining the most significant *wasta* bases, different approaches to *wasta* and the techniques and covers people tend to use when asking for *wasta*. The study finds that there are many bases of *wasta* that the literature does not acknowledge, such as seniority and job status. The research discusses further the significance of different types of *wasta* bases. The

immediate family base remains the most effective base, with tribal relations and job status as the second influential base. The influence of the person's job status is identified as more effective in getting *wasta* than the person's social status.

People tend to get *wasta* even without having a relationship with the provider of the service. The influence of the position, the tribe name and the social status of the seeker or his/her family members' social status can help to obtain *wasta*. In addition, the seekers of *wasta* will try different methods to get *wasta* and influence the decision-making processes, such as going directly to the provider or those who have an influence on the provider of *wasta*. The seekers follow the hierarchy and reach up to the person with authority to pressure the provider of a service to get it done.

Moreover, people use different covers to get and justify *wasta*. One cover is to take advantage of the social obligations between individuals from the same social group such as family and tribe members. Service providers are expected to serve others from the same social group. Another cover is to put a religious sacredness on *wasta* by mixing it with intercession and make it happen. Unlike *wasta*, the perception of intercession is positive in the social world which is derived from the religious perspective which leads to the confusion between *wasta* and intercession.

This study shows that vagueness and ambiguity of *wasta* leads people to be confused. The confusion contributes to the diffusion of *wasta*. The study highlights three main reasons that can explain people confusion's concerning *wasta* practices (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** *wasta* confusion

The first reason is that the religious perspective is not accurate enough in distinguishing between good and bad *wasta*. Even though Islamic scholars state that good *wasta* is dependent on eligibility and merit, evidence and incidents from practice show that eligibility is not always easy to determine. Moreover, there is no adequate and accurate regulations and rules either at a national level or in the higher education industry. There is no specific act or law directly coping with *wasta*. Another reason is the management system and the conduct of people with authority. The study finds that the lack of effectiveness and the abuse of power can force people to look for *wasta* to get what they are entitled to. Positive and negative *wasta* is subject to the judgment of the people who use it. In the social context, *wasta* is considered a means that can go either way to negative and positive ends. The ends determine the acceptability of *wasta*.

The controversy of *wasta* is evident in individuals' perceptions of fair management practices. There was a conflict regarding the scale of *wasta* intervention in management practices in universities. The hidden nature of *wasta* practices, the different universities and

varying levels of experiences and engagement in administration activities may explain the different estimation of the degree of *wasta* involvement. Despite this disagreement, there was no denial that *wasta* has a significant impact on both the distribution of outcomes and the management system of universities.

*Wasta* is a central and effective criterion in management practices in Saudi Arabia. *Wasta* interferes in universities in the allocation of outcomes such as promotions, acquisition of leading administrative positions and securing extra incomes through committee membership and supervision of exams. The tribe and family name, social status, job status, religious appearance and closeness to the person with authority are factors that influence outcomes allocation decisions. The competencies, qualifications, experiences and capabilities are relatively less important.

People distinguish between the management system and managers' conduct. While the management system is perceived to be relatively fair, there is a lack of clarity and accuracy. There are many loopholes in the system in which *wasta* mostly is taking place. This study finds that some university policies are conflicting. In many policies, there is an article stating that the final decision shall be made by the university council which can revoke the rest of the policies. The lack of accuracy has raised the need for *wasta* for both those who want to take advantage of these deficiencies for illegitimate claims and those who are being failed by the system. Thus, people would rather trust *wasta* than the management system. The overlap between management practices and personal relationships creates the need for *wasta* in the social context. The intervention of *wasta* in management practices affects the system's consistency. Moreover, *wasta* interferes to speed complaint processes and reach resolution, as well as stopping complaints from going any further. The study shows that the possession of *wasta* can provide protection from management misconduct, as well as help attain unapproved outcomes. The possession of *wasta* can either activate the management system or disable it.

## 6.2 Managerial implications of *wasta* in universities

The effect of *wasta* on justice perceptions affects the overall performance of universities in Saudi Arabia. Unfair treatment by management can lead employees to distrust the management system in their place of work (Konovsky 2000). It is apparent from the faculty members' perceptions that they lose confidence in the efficiency of management practices, thereby, relying and depending on *wasta*. Faculty members lack job satisfaction which affects their job performance and collaboration with colleagues and subsequently, the overall performance of the university sector (Ambrose 2002). The impact of injustice perceptions among Saudi faculty members questions the capability of Saudi universities to be among the top 200 universities globally in the next five years as stated by vision 2030. The significant role of *wasta* in the decision-making processes poses a question about the ability for different government agencies to achieve the national vision developmental goals. Moreover, the injustice perceptions have an impact on organisational commitment (Colquitt et al. 2001; Cropanzana et al. 2007). Organisational commitment can be measured by affective commitment which refers to “the degree to which employees can identify themselves with the company and make the company’s goals their own” (Colquitt et al. 2001, p.429). *Wasta* is an indicator that employees do not act in the university’s best interest but for the best interest of their family, tribe members, friends, and people with high social and job status.

## 6.3 Policy implications

The main problem with negative *wasta* is that it favours less qualified people over others in many management activities such as recruitment, selection, promotions and other monetary incentives. As a result, people with merit, competencies and qualifications will be excluded. The lack of transparency and accountability has led negative *wasta* to spread in organisations. *Wasta* is a social dilemma and a critical part of Saudi Arabian society (Tlaiss & Kauser 2011). While *wasta* assists in bonding people and maintaining cohesion, affecting the delivery of service via informal channels and attaining legitimate rights the system fails to deliver, it

affects the fairness, equality and decision making. The Saudi Arabian government has been trying to eliminate *wasta* which leads to negative connotation of *wasta* in society, thereby leading to *wasta* practices being hidden. The government needs to clarify the controversy of *wasta* to diminish its negative impact and emphasise its positive impact. Moreover, universities should enhance their management practices and enact new rules and regulations that deal specifically with *wasta*. There is a need for effective communication of these rules and regulations in organisations.

## 6.4 Future directions

This study aims to reduce the gap between reality and theory by revealing the perceptions of social actors of the practice of *wasta* in the social context. However, there are many uncovered areas and aspects concerning the phenomenon of *wasta* in Saudi Arabia. The study identifies that *wasta* can be practiced directly such as in *wasta* via marketing. Even though reciprocity of favours is not required in the traditional *wasta* (via *waseet*) transactions (Barnett et al. 2013), *wasta* via marketing may require a reciprocity of favours. The study finds that accepting *wasta* requests in this approach is contingent on the attractiveness of the seeker's position. The provider seeks a repay of the favour from the seeker at any point in time in the future. The nature of the relationship between the two parties needs further investigation. Future studies should pay attention to *wasta* via marketing and investigate further the characteristics that affect the strength, effectiveness and duration of this approach to *wasta*.

Furthermore, many studies identify the influence of *wasta* on hiring processes, securing promotions and career success (Bailey 2012; Tlaiss & Kauser 2011) thereby, depriving competencies (Mohamed & Mohamad 2011). However, future researchers should pay more attention to the consequences of the negative practice of *wasta* on motivation, satisfaction, loyalty, organisational commitment and job performance.



Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993) provide some solutions to counter the *wasta* effect, such as privatisation. The authors question the effectiveness of privatisation as a solution, due to *wasta* intervention in the market. *Wasta* plays a significant role in the market by letting government give some companies advantages over other competitors. Despite that, the competitive nature of the private sector may compel businesses to cope with *wasta* especially in the internal environment. According to Ramady (2015) *wasta* is more diffused in the public sector where *wasta* is the primary criterion for employment and promotions. The study took place in Saudi public universities and identified a few variables that can explain the prevalence of *wasta*. Unlike publicly owned companies, private companies are forced by the market to perform better in order to sustain profitability and gain a competitive advantage (Cunningham & Sarayrah 1993). The comparison between the prevalence of *wasta* and its significance in public and private organisations is needed to measure the validity of the privatisation solution taking into account the variables identified in figure 1.

In addition, the gender difference receives less attention in *wasta* literature which can be attributed to the “highly patriarchal socio-cultural context” in Arab Gulf countries in general, including Saudi Arabia (M. Abalkhail & Allan 2016, p.163). The gender factor may provide a different perspective that furthers the literature about *wasta*. Moreover, *wasta* literature lacks quantitative studies which affect the ability of the current qualitative studies’ findings to be generalised. There is a need for statistical approaches to test the significance of variables such as rules and regulations and efficiency of management practices on *wasta* prevalence in Saudi Arabia. This study suggests that due to *wasta* controversy and complexity, the homogeneity of sample units is necessary. Even though this study focuses on Saudi lecturers in Saudi public universities, there was some variance in the responses. Case studies may be appropriate approaches to control such variances.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Ethics approval:

Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
(Research)

Research Office  
Research Hub, Building C5C East  
Macquarie University  
NSW 2109 Australia  
T: +61 (2) 9850 4459  
<http://www.research.mq.edu.au/>  
ABN 90 952 801 237



18 May 2017

Dear Dr Balnave

**Reference No:** 5201700294

**Title:** *Wasta and Organizational Justice in Universities in Saudi Arabia*

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review. Your application was considered by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities)).

I am pleased to advise that ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project to be conducted by:

- Macquarie University

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007 – Updated May 2015) (the *National Statement*).

### **Standard Conditions of Approval:**

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement*, which is available at the following website:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.

3. All adverse events, including events which might affect the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol and associated documents must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 4194 or by email [ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au)

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Office website at:

[http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how\\_to\\_obtain\\_ethics\\_approval/human\\_research\\_ethics](http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics)

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Karolyn White**

Director, Research Ethics & Integrity,

Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice*.

**Details of this approval are as follows:**

**Approval Date:** 27 April 2017

The following documentation has been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities):

Documents reviewed	Version no.	Date
Macquarie University Ethics Application Form		Revised application received 27/04/2017
Macquarie University Appendix B: Research to be Undertaken Outside Australia		Received 03/03/2017
Response addressing the issues raised by the HREC		Received 27/04/2017
Facebook/What's App Post: Arabic and English versions	1	27/04/2017
Participant Information and Consent Form: Arabic and English versions	1	27/04/2017
Email to Participants: Arabic and English versions	1	03/03/2017
Interview Questions: Arabic and English versions	1	03/03/2017

**\*If the document has no version date listed one will be created for you. Please ensure the footer of these documents are updated to include this version date to ensure ongoing version control.**

## Appendix2: Participants' consent form

Department of Marketing and Management  
Faculty of Business and Economics MACQUARIE  
UNIVERSITY NSW 2109



Phone: +61 (0)2 9850 7278  
Fax: +61 (0)2 9850 6065  
Email: nikki.balnave@mq.edu.au

Chief Investigator / Supervisor: Dr Nikola Balnave

### Participant Information and Consent Form

#### Wasta and Organisational Justice in Universities in Saudi Arabia.

You are invited to participate in a study of the role of *wasta* in universities in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of the study is to investigate the influence of the social practice of *wasta* on distributive and procedural justice in the university environment.

The study is being conducted by Mohammed Almutairi to meet the requirements of Master of Research under the supervision of Dr. Nikola Balnave, +61(0)2 9850 7278, nikki.balnave@mq.edu.au, of the Department of Marketing & Management.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-hour interview. The interview aims to identify the bases of *wasta* as well as the effect of *wasta* on the distribution of outcomes, and the procedures that deliver them, in your workplace. Such outcomes may include pay, promotions, involvement in decision making processes, acquisition of leading positions, performance evaluation and recognition. The research findings will increase the policy maker's (Ministry of Education) awareness of *wasta* implications on universities' management practices. You will not be asked to discuss your personal involvement in the practice of *wasta* (if any), or to reveal the identity of other individuals. The language of the interview will be Arabic. With your permission the interview will be audio-recorded for research purposes only. There is no risk or discomfort involved in this study.

The results of the research will inform the co-investigator's Master of Research thesis, and may be presented at conferences and published in academic journals. Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential, except as required by law. No individuals will be identified in the publication of the results. Only the researchers will have access to your interview recordings and transcripts. A summary of the results of the research can be made available to you on request via email to the co-investigator, Mohammed Almutairi (mohammed.almutairi@students.mq.edu.au).

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to participate and if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

I, *(participant's name)* have read *(or, where appropriate, have had read to me)* and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Block letters)

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Block letters)

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Committee through the Director, Research Ethics & Integrity (telephone (02) 9850 7854; email [ethics@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@mq.edu.au)). Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

**(INVESTIGATOR'S [OR PARTICIPANT'S] COPY)**

## Appendix 3: Interview questions

### ***Wasta***

- How do you define *wasta*? How common do you perceive the practice of *wasta* to be in your university?
- Describe the process of *wasta*? (direct/ indirect)
- What are the bases of *wasta* (immediate family, tribal relations, friendship, locality, seniority, high-status individuals, individuals with resources)? Which base are more effective in the practice?
- What profits people do seek to get using *wasta*?
- Is *wasta* always negative?
- Do people trust the system or *wasta*? Will people consider *wasta* in achieving what they deserve (i.e. promotion, pay etc.)?

### **Distributive justice**

- What are the rules of distribution equality, equity and need?
- Do you feel that *wasta* results in unfair distributions of outcomes in your workplace?  
For example, pay, promotions, performance evaluation, status, recognition, position acquisition and decision-making involvement.

### **Procedural Justice**

- the fairness of system: consistency, correctability, free bias, accuracy and align with ethical norms, representation.
- Trusting system over *wasta*?

### **Vision**

- What is the effect of the changes following the announcement of transformation plan 2030 regarding salaries, promotions and performance evaluation on fair distribution of outcomes?
- Will these changes assist to prevent *wasta*?