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## Globalization of Higher Education in United Arab Emirates

John S. Spranza III

### Abstract

*This article explores the educational history of the United Arab Emirates, a young and vastly wealthy nation located in the Middle East. A nation for just over 40 years, its leaders have struggled with educating and supporting its native population and managing the massive infusion of immigrants created by the progressive job markets established within its borders. With a mix of mandated free education for natives and a lucrative educational investment market from various other nations, the educational structure in the UAE has become a unique system that attracts students and faculty from around the world. The opulent landscapes of the primary cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi create a truly global educational environment poised to help lead the region into the future.*

As a country, the UAE population is highly concentrated in its two major cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, with 70 percent of the total population living in these locations. The oil industry boom in the late 1970's drew a large number of immigrant workers (initially primarily from India and Pakistan) and the trend of attracting droves of migrant workers has continued throughout the last 40 years. Today, approximately 88 percent of the total UAE population are expatriates drawn to the country for the labor market, leaving only 12 percent of the population as native Arabs (NQA, 2013). Currently, almost 65 percent of the national population is under the age of 24 so the country's growth in its native peoples is on the upswing. This presents the opportunity to cultivate a strong educated national workforce that could help balance the UAE's reliance on expatriates in the labor market.

Education has been a priority for the UAE government since the country's inception in 1971 and the leaders have invested highly in the development and promotion of all levels of education, from nursery schools to doctoral level programs. However, the UAE government had a steep sand dune to climb since the national literacy rates in 1975 were 54 percent for men and only 31 percent for women. The UAE constitution and Federal Law No. 11 of 1972 established compulsory primary education and guaranteed free education at all levels for all UAE nationals. However, secondary education through grade 12 or age 18 was not made compulsory until 2012. The end result of the concentration on education for its citizens was shown in a 2010 report that indicated the national literacy rates were 89 percent for men and 91 percent for women (UNESCO, 2012).

The government-sponsored higher education system was started in 1975 when the young nation opened the UAE University in the city of Al Ain near the border with Oman. UAEU now has six campuses across the country. The largest national institution, the Higher Colleges of Technology, was founded in 1988 and now has 17 campuses across the country. The third and newest national institution, Zayed University, was founded in 1998 and has two campus locations. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) governs and sets policy for all institutions of higher education across the country, but several Emirates also have governing bodies that regulate the education sector in their own territory. When the MHESR was created, it was established on four policy decisions that would guide its efforts. These decisions included: 1. The UAE would build and operate its own universities; 2. Qualified faculty that

meet international standards would be employed; 3. Instruction would be predominantly in English; and 4. Education was to be free for all qualified Emiratis, and would include women (MHESR, 2007). The Ministry also includes the Commission of Academic Accreditation (CAA) which certifies all institutions of higher education much like the SACS organization does here in the southern part of the United States. According to the CAA, there are currently 116 higher education institutions in the UAE with a cumulative enrollment of 116,912 across 644 accredited academic programs (NQA, 2013). Since there are only three federally-sponsored institutions out of the 116 qualified by the CAA, all of the other higher education institutions are international organizations or institutions that have formed partnerships or joint ventures with either the federal or local governments to establish campuses in the UAE. Due to the population concentration in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, most of the foreign institutions can be found in these two cities, with 19 institutions in Abu Dhabi and a mass of 62 institutions in Dubai (MHESR, 2015). Most of the private institutions can be found in one of the 15 economic “free zones” established by the UAE federal government or local governments of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The Free Zones are special areas in the city that offer tax exemptions and other incentives to foreign companies to encourage capital investments that benefit both parties, creating a true global market in these cities within the city. The Dubai Knowledge Village and the Dubai International Academic City are the primary locations of nearly all of the private institutions of higher education, and include institutions from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Australia, and India. The institutions found in the free zones are governed by the Dubai Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) and further managed by the University Quality Assurance International Board (UQAIB) to ensure all institutions meet the benchmarks of quality and accreditation established by the UAE government.

Given the mandate that all levels of education would be free to its citizens, the government of UAE spends over a quarter of the federal budget on education. In 2009, the education budget was approximately \$10 billion, or 28 percent of the federal budget for that year. In contrast, the participation rate for eligible citizens in the higher education system is still considerably lower than that of the U.S. or European countries, with only 25 percent of eligible Emiratis attending as compared to 71 percent of eligible students in North America and Western Europe (UNESCO, 2009). However, the pending “boom” of youth coming-of-age (65 percent of national population is under the age of 24) in the next decade has the government of UAE looking for ways to keep up the funding levels for education to maintain the quality and meet the demand from its citizens. Costs per student has already impacted the funding model given the inflation rate and increased demand for matriculation, and the government has had to freeze acceptance rates in order to limit the volume of new students in an effort to maintain the quality of instruction and services at the government-funded institutions. Projections by the MHESR indicate that over 50,000 students will be knocking at the universities’ door by the beginning of the next decade (MHESR, 2007). Additionally, if the native population of UAE follows the trend of other countries in regards to adult learners returning to college, the MHESR predict that could potentially add another 13,000 students to the 50,000 youths expected to flood the higher education system if only 10 percent of the 25-29 year olds decide to enroll (MHESR, 2007). Some of the demand for education has been met by the private institutions that have set up shop in the various free zones primarily in Dubai, but these are options typically only available to the more affluent upper-middle and upper class of the socioeconomic scale.

Faculty teaching in both the federal system and throughout the private institutions are heavily international. Within the UAE federal system, only approximately 10 percent of the

2,568 full-time faculty in 2013-2014 were UAE nationals. Similarly, less than 2 percent of the 3,949 faculty teaching in the private institutions within the free zones during 2013-2014 are UAE nationals (MHESR, 2015). The mandate set by the MHESR regarding the international qualifications of its faculty had assisted the recruitment of foreign scholars in the past, however, due to a static funding level the ability for federal institutions to attract and retain top faculty has declined considerably as the salary and benefits packages offered are no longer considered to be competitive (MHESR, 2007). Additionally, studies have shown that the most popular degree offerings and largest faculty expenses are no longer congruent with the needs of the employer market. Business, engineering, and health sciences dominate the course offerings and faculty appointments across all levels of higher education in the UAE, with 50 percent of students at federal institutions pursuing these degrees; 60 percent of students at private institutions enrolled in these majors; and 60 percent of UAE nationals studying abroad studying these same majors (NQA, 2013). Areas of study with huge industry demands that are not currently being met within the UAE educational system include information technology, education, architecture and construction, natural and physical sciences, and tourism and hospitality (Kazim, 2013).

### **Critical Analysis**

Overall, I feel the UAE has had a very progressive and positive outlook on education as a young nation. I was surprised that women were not only given the right to public education but also heavily encouraged to attend, which is not how I envisioned females being treated in the Middle East given the stereotypical oppression of Arab women that we see in the media. I was also very surprised that high school education was not mandatory until just recently in 2012, which seemed a bit counter-productive to all of the other policies and goals of the UAE educational system. Several studies indicated that 94 percent of UAE nationals required at least a year of “foundation” studies when entering higher education to improve their performance levels in science, math, English, and ethics (KHDA, 2012). I wonder if these students would require that much remediation if they had been required to finish a high school education. However, I can also see that the exclusion of mandatory high school attendance might have been a financial decision since the federal government had established the free education policy for its citizens. But that exclusion then created a void in the preparedness of its native peoples that handicapped them in being able to compete in the global job market that permeates the country. I find it hard to understand why a country with such a vast population of non-nationals living and working within its borders would not want its native people to be more educated and better equipped to compete with the foreigners. I found it impressive that the government was working proactively to recognize these deficiencies and were proposing methods to combat the issues that have arose due to the looming disproportion of the population. It was also interesting to see the correlations between the UAE’s funding problems of doing more with less and the financial issues we have experienced here in Georgia (and nationally) over the past decade. But at the same time, I find it hard to believe that a country with so much wealth from its oil market has trouble allocating additional funds to its educational system.

UAE is undoubtedly a globalized country and has become a major player in global business, yet it still has a stark gap between the haves and have-nots in regards to its citizens. The United States has considerable stakes in the country, from business to education to military interests. Within the UAE educational system, faculty from the United States makes up the second-most international population of teachers at nearly a quarter of all instructors (MHESR,

2015). Additionally, U.S. institutions such as Michigan State University, New York University, and New York Institute of Technology all operate campus locations within the free zones of Dubai and Abu Dhabi; and hundreds of other U.S. institutions are sites of native Emiratis studying abroad. I also saw correlations between the U.S. educational system and the UAE institutions in the need to switch gears from what programs were once in demand to programs that are now in demand according to the job market and growing economic areas. Both systems struggle with breaking into new concentrations and convincing students to pursue a different path to their careers. Overall, I was impressed with what I learned about the UAE and its dedication to higher education, and I can see why it has been one of the fastest growing nations over the past several decades. It offers a modern outlook in an area of the planet that is often classified as being entrenched in ancient tradition and backwards social constructs.

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