

10-31-2020

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Recommended Citation

Jackson, Melvin (Jai) and Jackson, Kaitlin M. (2020) "Factors that Influence Emirati Male Achievement in Higher Education," *Journal of Research Initiatives*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uncfsu.edu/jri/vol5/iss2/4>

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Factors that Influence Emirati Male Achievement in Higher Education

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Keywords

Arab, Emirati, Male, Men, Higher Education, Success, Factors, Achievement

Cover Page Footnote

For Marley, Lennon, and Cruz.



FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EMIRATI MALE ACHIEVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Emirati male students' success in higher education is filled with positive interactions between the students, faculty, and staff. The influence of faculty on the success of Emirati males is vital to the overall curricular success of this student population. The strong cultural ties to seeking out elders for guidance and influence is easily replicated on college and university campuses. In this manuscript, we examine the history of education in the Middle East from its inception to higher education's meteoric rise. By examining the past and present education, we will explore how the cultural and societal norms have provided an instrumental key to the factors that encourage success amongst Emirati males. A two-fold study explored the factors that Emirati males believed had the most significant influence on their curricular and co-curricular success in higher education environments. Findings indicate that Emirati male achievement in higher education may be mediated by a sense of patriotism, obligation to represent the family, and influenced by interactions with faculty members.

Introduction

The landscape of higher education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is often characterized by its recent inception, meteoric expansion, and the gendered distribution of male and female students enrolled within the higher education system. Between 2009 and 2013, post-secondary educational institutions in the UAE experienced enrollment growth of nearly 35% (UAE Higher Education Factbook, 2013-2014). The student gender breakdown is one-sided, with female students comprising nearly 66% of the student population enrolled within the federal institutions throughout the country (UAE Higher Education Factbook, 2013-2014). While men form the majority of the workforce within the UAE, they enroll in lower numbers throughout federal educational institutions. Based on the disparities in higher education enrollment and employment between males and females, the literature gap on UAE higher education achievement is problematic. This research study focused on exploring the factors that led to individual success in higher education for Emirati men who effectively completed a minimum of post-secondary education.

History of Education in the United Arab Emirates

The inception of the UAE began with establishing a system of agreed upon terms between the fledgling cooperative and the government of Great Britain (Potts, 2012). What started as a peace treaty (1892) among the coastal sheikdoms and the British empire gave way to the establishment of a Trucial state, a unified peace agreement in accordance with established members of the early emirates (Zahlan, 2016). Initially financially cemented by a powerful

pearling industry, the Great Depression and political turmoil with neighboring India caused the trade and demand for these difficult-to-acquire sea treasures to wane (Koch, 2005). Without the influx of foreign trade and funds due to the pearling industry's near dissolution, the various emirates experienced an inability to establish and, in some cases, upgrade the country's infrastructure (Koch, 2005; Potts, 2012). During the mid-twentieth century, the discovery of fossil fuels injected substantial financial benefits into the country, which resulted in setting forth the process of establishing a more robust and recognized nation that would be independent of external influence and control (Abed & Hellyer, 2001; Zahlan, 2016). The discovery of oil and the subsequent influx of financial resources provided UAE leaders with the opportunity to fast-track the country's development to a global standard. Infrastructure projects multiplied in the subsequent decades, along with establishing a unified/universal education system and government. The UAE was founded on December 2, 1971, when the leaders of six of the current emirates (excluding Ras Al-Khaimah) signed a declaration of independence and ushered in establishing and recognizing the newly created state (Potts, 2012; Zahlan, 2016).

The educational system before the founding of the UAE existed outside of traditional brick and mortar ivory towers. Education and the pedagogical arts mainly focused on cultural and religious instruction instead of Western ideals of general education (Abed & Hellyer, 2001; Koch, 2005). It was important for students to understand their cultural heritage and an even greater comprehension and appreciation for the country's religious texts, traditions, and birthright (Findlow, 2008). The imagery of neatly stacked rows of wooden desks and plumes of chalk was uncommon. Much of what was taught during the pre-establishment period was imparted through person-to-person (p2p) interaction, storytelling, and hands-on learning (Findlow, 2008; Zahlan, 2016). The most prevalent form of education was hands-on pedagogy through apprenticeships (Macpherson, Kachelhoffer, & El Nemr, 2007). The method of transferring knowledge, skills, and history through this technique became a societal norm and, in many cases, still extends to today with the art of falconry and Qur'an teachings.

The transition from apprenticeships and oral traditions came about as money from the sale of petroleum products injected much needed capital into the country and its leaders. A more formal pedagogical design style and a standard curriculum based on a generally well-rounded education came to fruition as a remnant of British and other Western influences (Wilkins, 2010). In addition, the four pedagogical periods that help to build the educational pursuits of Emiratis also cemented the importance of education and the benefit of oral tradition. Their contributions established a rich foundation for which today's Emirati education is supported. The Qur'anic period of education focused primarily on the teaching of the Qur'an to young children, intending to bestow principles and beliefs that were in accordance with Islamic teachings and spirituality (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015; Wilkins, 2010). Due to the prevalence of illiteracy amongst individuals, the teachings were based on oral instruction. Because of religious nature (Gaad, Arif, & Scott, 2006; Wilkins, 2010), memorization and comprehension were assisted through a multifaceted education approach. That which was taught by relative Qur'anic scholars was compounded in all facets of life throughout the land, and students were fully immersed in their teachings (Gaad, Arif, & Scott, 2006; Wilkins, 2010). This method of Qur'anic teaching is still present today, with youth enrolling in regular classes being taught at their community masjid (mosque).

The rise in 17th-century regional commerce and trade gave way to the period of Educational Assemblies. These assemblies focused on education through opportunities granted

by tribe leaders (sheiks) and other wealthy benefactors (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015; Wilkins, 2010). Scholars who specialized in religion, phonology, literacy, and several other areas were petitioned by these wealthy patrons and leaders to travel to the region and teach (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015; Wilkins, 2010). The Western tradition of school houses designed for large-scale instruction had not yet been adopted during this period, so much of the instruction took place in any space available. Suitable places for instruction included open areas of the masjid, backrooms of businesses, and family homes. Alnabah (1996) described the region of Julphar (present-day Ras Al Khaimah) as a hub for international trade. With this trade came educators sharing knowledge from various regions of the globe.

The early 18th century saw the progression of the semi-formalization of education within the UAE. This period is also considered a point of awakening and the Holy Quran's re-emergence as the main focus of education (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015; Gaad, Arif, & Scott, 2006; Wilkins, 2010). As wealthy benefactors from the region sought regional Islamic scholars from all over the Arabian Peninsula, a greater push for an appreciation and mastery of the Arabic language became essential to this educational movement. Education saw the materialization of a close coupling between Islamic beliefs and the education provided to those within the country. Furthermore, teachings that did not support beliefs, practices, and upholding Islam's pillars were shuttered from the educational systems as they caused an occasional contradictory existence with life (Wilkins, 2010). The commencement of World War I resulted in an expansion of British influence throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and the Trucial States (UAE) and surrounding areas became of great importance and influence to the British Empire (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015; Wilkins, 2010). The conclusion of the war led to the remnants of educational colonization from the British. Their influence led to the expansion of education and the formalization of the educational system within the Trucial States (Wilkins, 2010). A greater emphasis was placed on education. The various Sheikhs recognized the need to invest in their people vigorously as they had begun their investment in infrastructure and commerce (Alnabah, 1996; Alrawi, 1996).

The various periods of educational progression led to the contemporary educational system in place today within the UAE. As the exchange of goods continued to grow within the Trucial States, education became a valuable commodity and once again. Sheikhs and patrons recruited educators to lead an educational modernization. The first modern school to open was the Alqasimiah School (1930), established in Sharjah by Sheikh Mohammed Almahmoud (Alnabah, 1996; Alrawi, 1996). While the establishment of the school created a ripple effect that saw the launch of additional branches in Ras Al Kahimah (1955) and Dubai (1956), the curriculum was primarily Kuwaiti, and the schools were managed by the Kuwaiti government (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015). The infancy of established educational systems and the need for region-specific education that was representative of the population and the people spurred the decision to use the Kuwaiti materials (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015). It would be nearly two decades before the UAE would establish and implement a domestic curriculum (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015; Alnabah, 1996). With the declaration of nationhood in 1971, the United Arab Emirates began developing and implementing a locally derived and focused educational system for all Emiratis (Alrawi, 1996). This system has seen several iterations as it has shifted from Arabic language instruction to English language instruction to its current focus on dual-language mastery and preparation (Alnabah, 1996; Alrawi, 1996). As the Emirates' needs continue to evolve, the method and content of instruction will follow suit.

Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates

Post-secondary education in the UAE came about soon after formalizing the universal primary and secondary education systems. The late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan recognized the importance of providing his people with a life of wealth beyond simple monetary aspirations. Six years after the UAE's creation, the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) was established in the oasis of Al Ain (Kirk & Napier, 2009). UAEU is considered the flagship institution of the UAE and carries the recognition of being the most comprehensive research and training institution within the UAE (Kirk & Napier, 2009). The establishment of UAEU and the subsequent desire to establish the UAE as a regional and international knowledge center spurred the expansion of higher education across the Emirates. In 1988, the UAE government established the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) (Kirk, 2010; Kirk & Napier, 2009). These new colleges focused on expanding access to educational programs rooted in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The third institutional system created was Zayed University in 1998. Initially, a women's only university has since integrated and accepts both men and women (Kirk 2010; Kirk & Napier, 2009). These three university systems (Zayed University, HCT, and UAEU) are considered federal institutions and fall under the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR). The UAE is not without its share of private (non-federal) institutions and boasts several international universities divided throughout the Emirates. Universities from the United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, India, and Canada have international campuses and the American University brand of universities. While primary and secondary education traversed through several periods of evolution and localization, the higher education system of the UAE operates on a Western model of operation, and the various institutions confer Bachelor's, Master's, doctorates, certificates, and some medical degrees (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015).

The success of Emirati men in higher education is an important factor for both the achievement of the individual students and for the accomplishment of the overall goals and aims of the national (UAE) agenda. In a country that has experienced meteoric growth and development in less than 50 years, its citizens' educational capital must continue to progress and mature to a level that builds on the goals of becoming a knowledge-based society/economy. The reality of an ever-shrinking economy due to the fall and stagnation of petroleum prices has continued to accelerate the drive to achieve further an economy that is less reliant on fossil fuels and increasingly diversified in job sectors (C.R. & Nair, 2017). Due to financial certainty, the UAE government has continued to invest heavily in the education sector through increased budget allocations and foreign investment solicitation in the higher education sector (Bardsley, 2017).

Purpose of the Research Study

The current economic condition for governments reliant on petroleum-based exports has motivated authorities in the Arabian Gulf to diversify the fields in which revenue is generated. Within their borders, an increase in educational attainment amongst citizens has become a foundational aim. In exploring factors and influences that promote Emirati male achievement in higher education, the researchers set out to develop a greater understanding for educators, families, and government personnel to increase and replicate female Emirati students' success with Emirati men in higher education. In a post-petroleum economy, innovation and education will be the guiding lights that lead the UAE to a future of success (Al Zarouni, 2016). Improving academic achievement in higher education for Emirati male students is an important goal for the

UAE government. It helps diversify human capital while also stimulating innovation at this integral time. By understanding the factors that motivate and foster success for Emirati males, educators can use this knowledge to align the institution's goals with those of the students they educate. A thorough understanding of the factors that influence Emirati male achievement in higher education also creates a direct connection between the factors and the government who has made it a priority to educate the populace and grow the potential and outcome of a country pushing the boundaries in every endeavor when it comes to investing in its citizens (Al Subaihi, 2012).

The researchers analyzed the factors that influence Emirati male success in higher education via qualitative research methods. This topic's investigation led the researchers to explore familial relationships, educational attainment amongst parental influencers, and general motivational techniques and strategies (intrinsic and extrinsic). To seek rich data on factors that influenced Emirati male educational success and attainment, the researchers distributed an online questionnaire to male alumni of Zayed University (Abu Dhabi and Dubai) to solicit their responses to a set of intentional questions. Additionally, the researchers conducted a set of focus groups inviting questionnaire participants to expand on their experiences and the factors that helped them experience success. In exploring factors and influences that promote Emirati male achievement in higher education, the researchers set out to develop a greater understanding for educators, families, and governmental personnel regarding potential methods that may increase male students' success rate pursuing post-secondary degrees.

Methods

Explanatory research is the vehicle utilized to observe significant events and describe them in detail to represent the entire event from several perspectives while using multiple descriptors (Shaw, 1999). For this research study, the primary investigator implemented qualitative inquiry through phenomenology to explore and expose the factors that influence the success of males in higher education within the UAE. As Newman (1998) states, researchers focusing on qualitative inquiry take considerable lengths to provide an in-depth analysis of the study population. Phenomenology served as the methodological framework to enable the researchers to examine the individual narratives of the participants. Furthermore, qualitative research exposes phenomena that occur during the data collection phase, and after the information has been analyzed, these phenomena uncover new areas of understanding and knowing. It explores variation, relationships, individual and group experiences, and is used better to understand group norms (Denzin, 2009).

Sampling

The sampling method for the present study was stratified sampling. This method was beneficial to the researchers because it reduces sampling error by utilizing and intentionally selecting a stratum, a subset of the population that share common characteristics, to collect rich data. The criteria for sample selection are described in Table 1. By using stratified sampling, the researchers collected a sufficient sample size that was large enough to represent the desired population while also providing rich data upon which meaningful inferences could be concluded. The population included Emirati males enrolled in higher education institutions anywhere in the United Arab Emirates. The sample included Emirati male students attending one federal university in Abu Dhabi, UAE, which totaled approximately 150 individuals. Participants were recruited via email listserv to all male students within the university, available to researchers based on employment status.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Participant Sample Selection

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Gender	Male	Female
University affiliation	Zayed University undergraduate and Alumni	No affiliation with Zayed University
Resident status	Resident or citizen of the UAE	Non-resident/citizen of the UAE
Age	18 years of age or older	

Data Collection

For the study, the researchers developed a 10-item questionnaire to identify factors with varying degrees of influence on Emirati males' success in higher education. The questionnaire utilized a Likert scale assessment (Likert, 1932) for research participants in this study to select the rate and gravity at which various factors influenced their pursuit of success in higher education. Some of the questionnaire factors included motivation for pursuing higher education, family involvement, friendship involvement, and motivation for continuing and completing higher education. Additional questionnaire items included demographic items, such as gender, parental education level, and employment status. Lastly, the questionnaire contained two open-ended questions in which participants were asked about their motivations to pursue and complete higher education.

Study participants were invited to complete the questionnaire via email, which required no more than 30 minutes of participation. Additionally, participants were provided the opportunity to volunteer for a focus group interview to expand upon their experiences regarding their motivation for enrolling, attending, and graduating from their respective higher education institutions. The focus group was strictly voluntary and did not require participants to have completed the initial survey beforehand. The addition of the focus group data allowed the researcher to ask further probing questions that promoted initial results. Six focus group interviews were conducted on the university campus over two weeks, with 32 participants.

Data Analysis

After completing data collection, a total of 45 usable responses were obtained for a response rate of 30%. The quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to produce means in the rate and gravity of the questionnaire's factors. The qualitative data were analyzed inductively, as the researchers began by reviewing, organizing, and sorting the data. Phenomenology drove the data analysis process by focusing on relevant themes in language to create categories. Focus group interview data were transcribed, reviewed, and organized in a similar manner as the questionnaire data. The researchers reviewed the categories for consistencies and inconsistencies across the questionnaire and interview data to capture the overarching themes and phenomena.

Limitations

Limitations arose due to the low sample size and survey fatigue evidenced by missing items and incomplete responses. Additionally, the questionnaire and interviews were conducted in English, as the university was an English-speaking university. However, language barriers

may have interfered with meaning and intent. Finally, biases in sampling and phenomenological data analysis may be limitations as well.

Results and Discussion

Towards the achievement of higher education goals and objectives, there are several factors this research study identified that have a substantial impact on the overall success of Emirati male students. Of the factors, those with the greatest level of influence are discussed in the order of importance attributed to each by the Emirati male study participants.

Faculty Motivation

Student retention is an increasingly relevant topic in the field of higher education. Dozens of research studies, books, and publications are dedicated to understanding what methods can successfully increase higher education retention. Scholars often propose integrating academic and student lives into a melting pot with seamless integration. However, in an environment that places less emphasis on the residential and student life aspects of higher education and greater importance on academic achievements, it is difficult to blur the lines of students' curricular and co-curricular lives. While sometimes challenging to facilitate outside of the classroom, participants indicate that faculty/student interactions are instrumental in motivating Emirati males to return each year in higher education. College/University faculty have a profound influence on the success and achievement of Emirati males. Based on the responses analyzed from the research study, faculty/student interactions are the key to Emirati male students' continued success in higher education. As one participant described, "Having great professors motivated me to want to do my best for my professor and me."

Faculty interactions, formally in classrooms and informally through campus involvement and interactions, are one of the paramount forecasters for student retention and success (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). For Emirati males, these interactions with faculty consisted of developmental conversations that motivated them to achieve their goals. Commonly, the relationships served in more of a mentorship capacity, and regardless of the nationality of the individual faculty, the relationship progressed and helped push the student to succeed. Based on Ewell and Jones's (1996) research, faculty/student partnerships are widely recognized as a "good practice" in higher education to benefit the overall academic and social environment. Faculty helped to bridge a gap of understanding between primary/secondary education and the higher education environment. For many of the research participants, there was a lack of familial experience and support when transitioning from the structured environment of PK-12 schools to university studies (Halawah, 2006). Tinto (1993) posited that student success is a successful curricular and co-curricular integration within the collegiate environment. The faculty/student relationship helps ease this transition by effectively creating an *in loco parentis* environmental structure for which the faculty serve as de facto parents. *In loco parentis* (in place of parents) is a doctrine of belief that supports the idea that college/university personnel assume parents' role for students under their responsibility (Stamatakos, 1989). Though colleges and universities throughout the United States have transitioned beyond this doctrine of practice, the concept works towards the success and benefit of Emirati male students. Based on the five forms of power by French, Raven, and Cartwright (1959), faculty hold both legitimate and expert power. Legitimate power exists when individuals have formal or prescribed power to assert requests and expect outcomes.

In contrast, expert power's assertion is bestowed on faculty because of their skills and knowledge (French, Raven, & Cartwright, 1959). These conferred powers afford faculty respect from students and, more importantly, the families. As discussed below, familial influence and approval rank high amongst Emirati males (Halawah, 2006), and as the faculty/student relationship blossoms, the acceptance and support of this relationship by the family further increase the chances of success in higher education (Halawah, 2006; Khurshid, 2017).

Familial Influence

Constructing an environment that cultivates student success in higher education relies on a strong foundation rooted in parental involvement and influence (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2011). For Emiratis, much of their success is rooted in support from their family (Richardson, 2004). Families provide the foundation for which these students contend to build an impressive career academically and professionally. The education system of the UAE serves as the scaffolding to support their aims. A common response from the participants focused on replicating the success their parents experienced for themselves. Because of the intergenerational lineage that is well documented and celebrated among families, these students have a detailed record of the accomplishments of their fathers and grandfathers; however, with this record of success comes an urge to achieve and exceed expectations. One participant explained, "I saw how my parents are successful, and I also want to be somebody important someday." Many participants remarked on the pressure to be successful based on their parents' standard and other influential family members. While individuals from the United States may steadfastly believe that success is defined by each individual's goals and values, for these Emirati male students' success is realized in their parents' and families' affirmations. Thus, further promoting an ideal that while families are a substantial factor in Emirati male students' success, they can also influence the level of importance higher education plays in the overall life and goals of these students.

Patriotism/National Duty

National pride and patriotism are promoted in every avenue of Emirati culture. If residing or visiting the country, one cannot enter a building, pass by a car, or recognize a sign or symbol celebrating the country's past, present, and future. This sense of national pride is deeply engrained in Emirati males as early as they can hold a flag and pledge their loyalty to the Gulf nation. The country's founder and unifier, Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, set out to instill the values of patriotism and progress amongst his fellow Emiratis. Mentions of education's importance commonly accompanied these values as the most significant investment that would build the country from sand dunes to skyscrapers (Al Fahim, 1995). In the words of Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, "The real asset of any advanced nation is the standard of their education measures its people, especially the educated ones, and the prosperity and success of the people." This sense of nationalism is one of the factors that motivate Emirati males to continue to achieve and push the boundaries of their educational pursuits domestically and internationally. National identity is something Emiratis carries with them everywhere they travel. They take absolute pride in educating and celebrating, which makes them an individual culture amongst their gulf and regional neighbors. The UAE's environment is one of a mixed bag of items spanning 200 different cultures and communities from around the world. Though Emiratis number less than expatriates, their sense of national pride and its catching nature create a loyalist's haven. To fulfill their duty to work to progress their country to be one of educational distinction, tolerance,

and achievement, Emirati males strive to live and realize the vision of the country's founder Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan.

Conclusion

The factors that influence Emirati male students to realize success in higher education are both intrinsic and extrinsic in their origins. The desire to serve and see the nation persist in economically and politically tumultuous times while also seeing it progress to be competitive in an increasingly globalized world is telling of the motivating factors that have emerged. Family is a unifying thematic representation of all of the factors that motivate Emirati males to succeed in higher education. The term family is widely encompassing and represents their biological family and their academic family, who is recognized as a support structure for these students. Emirati males are motivated to succeed in higher education because they are raised with a sense of responsibility to their country, culture, and environment. They live to make sure the dream of the late Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan for his people is realized, they thrive to continue to celebrate and promote the richness of their culture, and they work hard to pay respect to the various stakeholders who serve as a foundation upon which they build themselves into successful Emirati men of the future. All of these factors come together to push these students past the idea of regularity and towards transcending expectations.

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