Word Emiratizing the Education Sector in the UAE: Contextualization and Challenges

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Introduction

One of the purposes of vocational education is to improve the skill set of a population and help grow the economy so that, ideally, everyone prospers. This chapter discusses a context where it is the other way around. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) the economy exploded following the oil boom of the 1970s and has continued to grow at record rates. The local population was unequipped at the time to cope with the rapid growth and so imported labor was brought in, and continues to be brought in, in huge numbers to carry out the work. Vocational education for the local population in the UAE continues to try to catch up with this phenomenal growth and to hand back jobs to the local Emirati population.

After providing a brief summary of the huge economic changes within the UAE over the past 35 years and its impact upon the labor market and subsequent training needs, this chapter will outline an attempt to upskill the local population and get them into jobs via education and a federal program called Emiratization. The specific role that one large governmental institution, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), fulfills in terms of vocational education will be discussed with a specific focus upon the development of teacher training programs.

Explosive economic growth in the UAE

The enormous growth in the economy of the UAE since oil was discovered and the country was formed in 1971 has been well documented (see Al Sadik, 2001, for example). In a relatively brief time span, the UAE has transformed itself on the back of oil money from one of the least developed economies to a modern, wealthy, fast paced industrialized country. The contrast is huge. As Shihab points out,

Before the discovery and export of oil, the economy of the Trucial States (which today form the UAE), depended mainly on subsistence agriculture, nomadic husbandry, the extracting of pearls and the trade in pearls, fishing and seafaring (2001, p. 249, parentheses in original)

Today, very few individuals remain in these industries and indeed many of the sea beds have disappeared under the construction of huge offshore islands supporting up market housing and tourism orientated industry. The population of the UAE now exceeds four million with the labor force spread amongst a range of oil- orientated and service orientated industries with a large public sector adding to the mix (UAE Yearbook, 2007, p. 217). The UAE economy remains fuelled by huge account surpluses due to oil revenues and continues to grow at a rapid rate (8.2% real GDP growth rate in 2005, for example). The country is now seeking to diversify into non-oil income sources such as tourism, perhaps due to International Monetary Fund Report recommendations and a perspective of over reliance on declining oil reserves and revenues (see UAE Yearbook, 2006, 2007). Despite a recent global economic slowdown, the UAE is a very wealthy country that is proud of its achievements.

However, these rapid changes have created issues for the local population. They have struggled to keep pace despite large improvements in the standard of living. The indigenous population was originally quite small as the country had few natural resources before oil was discovered and the locals worked hard just to survive in very harsh conditions. There was little formal education which meant that the local Emirati population was poorly placed to help with the rapid industrialization and construction of industries and infrastructure to support these industries following the oil boom. Instead, huge numbers of expatriate workers were, and continue to be, brought into the country to do the bulk of the work. This has created, as Shihab points out, a two tier labor market that continues today (2001, p. 251).

Although the Emirati population has increased with one of the highest birth rates in the world (6.9%) they still comprise only about 20 percent of the country’s population (UAE Yearbook...
2007, p. 214), although precise figures are hard to find (see Findlow, 2000, p. 31). Expatriates make up the bulk of the population, comprising everyone from highly educated professionals to millions of low paid laborers and menial workers brought in from relatively poor Asian countries who live in huge labor camps (Molavi, 2007, p. 106). The result is a society that is highly stratified by income, language, living conditions, religion and rights. The juxtaposition of varied cultures, while fascinating, threatens to overwhelm the local Arab-based culture, although, as Findlow points out, the attitude in the UAE is that of a “pick and mix culture” (2000, p. 40). The local culture wishes to adopt the best aspects of foreign influences while trying to maintain their own unique culture yet there remain many tensions between varying perspectives.

There is a huge distortion in the labor market as a result, one that has produced what Tanmia refers to as, “The Employment Problem” (2004, part one, p. 1). The minority Emirati population comprises only two percent of the private sector labor force but the bulk of the public sector (UAE Yearbook, 2007, p. 217). Emiratis generally prefer to work for the government due to the higher salaries and benefits and shorter working hours (Husain, 2007, Tanmia, 2004) and there is evidence that many struggle with the multicultural aspects of the private sector (see Schiphorst, 2004). However, the public sector has now reached “saturation point” (UAE Yearbook, 2007, p. 217). The problem is one of demand and supply: there are fewer choices now in the public sector for Emirati graduates and “foreigners dominate the private sector” (Tanmia, 2004, part 1, p. 15).

In addition, many thousands of Nationals graduate from educational institutions every year and this number is increasing. It is estimated that 315,000 Emiratis will enter Universities and Colleges in the next 10 years alone (A rare success, 2005). There is a legitimate concern about rising unemployment among the local population even with the booming economy, which creates an unusual and “unique” situation (Tanmia, 2004, p. 1). A growing concern for the government, therefore, is focused upon finding useful employment for Emiratis’ in the private sector with calls for policy changes to address the imbalance. In the UAE this policy comes in the form of a governmental campaign termed “Emiratization”, orientated towards nationalizing the labor force primarily in the private sector.

**Emiratization**

The Emiratization program consists of a number of quotas and incentives encouraging public and private companies to employ Emiratis, both men and women. In the banking sector, for example, 25 percent of new employees are required to be Emirati and in the insurance sector, 15% (A rare success, 2005). It is an ambitious program that will continue to impact the labor force of the UAE (see Tanmia, 2004). However, Findlow states that these quotas, “could prove difficult to fulfill, given the indigenous-expatriate population balance” (2000, p. 34) even though this is expected to change dramatically given the enormous Emirati population growth and the increasing educational opportunities for them.

The extra incentives have created an interesting dynamic in the country due to the disparate conditions of employment between Emiratis and expatriates and it remains to be seen how successful the program is in the long run. One of the biggest issues is pay equity and conditions of employment; local Emiratis typically demand higher pay and shorter working hours in comparison with expatriates employed in the same job (Tanmia, 2004, part 1, p. 16). In addition, “non-nationals are afraid that nationals will take over their jobs” (Schiphorst, 2004, p. 16), a logical outcome that nevertheless has created significant tension in the private sector as non-locals generally have to leave the country if laid off. Recent laws protecting Emiratis against dismissal during a time of economic recession has exacerbated the issue (Issa, 2009). It is a complex phenomenon fuelled by the uncertain state of the Global economy.

Hand in hand with Emiratization and the rapid development of the country has been a push for educating the national population in relevant areas (see Sowa & De La Vega, 2008). As the Washington Times observed recently in an economic report:
The Ministry of Planning realizes how difficult it will be to enforce the proposed quotas, but there has been a strong push towards a better-educated and prepared Emirati workforce; motivating them to obtain college degrees, computer skills, and the training and experience they need to take over management positions in the future (A rare success, 2005).

Emiratization is, therefore, part of a wider scheme to hand back the economy, now that it has been constructed by foreign labor, to a rapidly increasing local population. The transformation of a population, originally third world comprising nomads, pearl divers, fishermen and traders, into a modern workforce equipped with the knowledge and technical skills to run a modern economy within the space of thirty years or so is the goal. As Findlow points out, “Official reasons for the need to Emiratize are expressed in terms of raising the standard of living, giving individuals confidence in the global marketplace, helping to restructure the domestic economic base” (2000, p. 34). Naturally this project includes consideration of appropriate vocational education for Emiratis but there are numerous educational issues to consider.

Educational issues

The pressure to nationalize the work force was also a concern during the formation of the country in the 1970s when an intricate four tier education sector was constructed along with the new industries (Shihab, 2001, p. 255). Education is free for Emiratis by law with a choice of government schools and private schools and with generous sponsorship to overseas institutions. However, at present there is much evidence pointing to a mismatch between “the qualifications provided by the education and training system and labor market requirements” (Tanmia, 2004, part 3, p. 30). This gap has continued over time. In 2007, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum pointed out, for example, that Emiratis could not take over jobs without the qualifications and expertise to compete in both the public and the private sector and added that the Ministry of Education needed to do more to teach the young to think rather than memorize (see Harris, 2007). Emiratis need to be involved more in the teaching/learning process of their own people and this is seen as one of the key issues in the Emiratization process.

There is currently the view that economic independence is being held back by a “deficient educational system” (Muyksen and Nour, 2006, p. 957) and some link pedagogical concerns with the trend in the UAE for employing teachers from contexts that tend to use outdated methods. Most government schools in the UAE up to this point, for instance, have been staffed predominantly by expatriates from other middle eastern countries such as Egypt, perhaps because, as Findlow points out, “These teachers were the most accessible, as well as being culturally closest to Emirati society” (2000, p. 35). However, the culture of learning, particularly of the English language, in the Gulf region of the Middle East is under pressure to change, as mentioned above, which creates tension in the educational system. Teaching methodologies are being challenged to move forward towards more modern techniques (see Al Suwaidi, 1999, Al-Hazmi, 2003). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, in particular, Syed points out the following challenges:

EFL teachers in this region have identified student motivation, literacy, underachievement, reliance on rote learning and memorization, and dependence on high-stakes testing. These issues, coupled with outdated curricula and methodologies, insufficient support systems, and not enough qualified teachers, paint a very unflattering picture of education in the region (2003, p. 337).

The Vision 2020 initiative by the UAE Ministry of Education and Youth, for instance, is centered on radically updating and reforming schools, changes that they claim would be, “reflected in increasingly effective teaching, appropriate methodologies and rigorous evaluation processes” (see Clarke, 2006, p. 13). It is for perhaps this reason that many Western teachers are now
being brought into the country, particularly at tertiary level, because of the belief, as Findlow says:

They are considered best able both to work with the increasingly high tech materials that are brought from these countries and to help the state with its Emiratization process (2000, p. 37).

Student centered approaches to teaching and learning are being introduced and promoted as an alternative to the more traditional rote-learning approaches by some teachers in the region. These non-traditional pedagogies that focus on helping students become more autonomous or independent often support the negotiation of meaning by learners collaboratively through discourse rather than relying on “more authoritative” teachers providing static information (Cazden, 2001, p. 111). As Breen & Mann point out, teachers must truly have a desire to, “foster the development of learner autonomy in the classroom and be prepared to live through the consequences” (1997, p. 146).

Student centered approaches require a whole new perspective on learning that may require substantial retraining for practitioners used to teacher centered approaches. The introduction of new techniques such as this are often confronted with much resistance and is not an easy process to carry out.

Although educational practices and philosophies in the United Arab Emirates are attempting to catch up with the latest reforms, cultural considerations must be taken into account at the same time. Students’ willingness or lack of willingness to learn interactively, for example, can be related to their cultural beliefs. Pennycook believes we must look at the cultural and political side of this issue and he suggests it would behoove us to remember that, “promoting autonomy in language learning, therefore, needs to take into account the cultural contexts of the language learners, to open up spaces for those learners to deal differently with the world, to become authors of their own worlds” (1997, p. 53). In the UAE traditional Bedouin values, for instance, may conflict with educational pressures towards promoting learner autonomy and openness. This impacts on employment too, with Issa reporting in the case of Emirati women, for example, that “social barriers and family obligations are the main obstacles facing unemployed women” (2007, p. 2).

The role of the Higher Colleges of Technology

The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) was founded in 1988 to provide vocational or technical training for Emiratis. In the UAE, it is the “main producer of higher education graduates” (Tanmia, 2004, part 3, p. 86). The various colleges that make up the HCT system are spread across 17 different campuses throughout the Emirates with the office of the Vice Chancellor and Provost based in the capital, Abu Dhabi. The Colleges provide separate male and female campuses in keeping with cultural norms, although changes may be afoot to alter this separation to enhance equal opportunities (see Lipsett, 2006). HCT programs of study include Information Technology, Business, Health Science, Education, Engineering, and Graphic Arts at Diploma, Higher Diploma and Bachelor levels. To give an idea of the size of HCT, in 2006 it was estimated that there were a total of 47,887 graduates from HCT on the job market (UAE Yearbook, 2006).

As with the other federal tertiary institutions, Zayed University and the United Arab Emirates University, the language of instruction at HCT is English. Intensive foundations programs are required, as many of the students speak little of the language upon entry. The goal is to produce bilingual graduates ready for work since, as Findlow points out, “in the UAE, English is the language of commerce and industry” (2000, p. 32). This is perhaps surprising given its location and reflects the huge expatriate proportion of the population. At HCT, externally-based exam systems, specifically PET and IELTS, are used to measure English language proficiency. This approach is also used by the other federal tertiary institutions (TOEFL is also used). This
reliance upon external tests comes at a price, however, with significant resources taken up with preparation for these tests.

**Educational training at HCT**

Being the largest provider of vocational education in the UAE and the founder of many tertiary programs aimed at fostering the Emiratization process, it was inevitable that HCT would become involved in teacher education. As Clarke points out, “It was this widespread recognition of the need for change and improvement in UAE schools and classrooms that led to the development of HCT B.Ed degrees” (Clarke, 2006, p. 13).

The first B.Ed program was introduced in 2000 and was “developed specifically for the UAE’s teaching needs” (HCT Education Program, 2008). The first teaching degree at HCT, initially offered in September, 2000, specialized in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) and was developed jointly with the Faculty/Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia – a benchmarking relationship that still continues. In 2001 and 2002 post Higher Diploma B.Ed degrees were added in Teaching Information Technology and Careers Advising and Counseling. A number of other programs have since been introduced in various colleges across the system depending on need including degrees in Early Childhood Education, another program supported and benchmarked by The University of Melbourne, a B.Ed degree in Educational Technology and Diplomas for Teaching Assistants and Library and Information Services. The teacher education unit is currently undergoing an external accreditation process with the US-based Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC).

**Challenges facing efforts to Emiratize the Education Sector**

I believe that HCT faces three main challenges in its attempt to train Emiratis for employment in the education sector in the UAE. The first is with ensuring the relevancy of the degrees and diplomas being offered. As discussed earlier, UAE represents a unique cultural context, a blending of languages, religion, politics and ethics, with calls for rapid modernization of its government schools. Any attempts to influence this context via mainstream education with modern “western” techniques and beliefs must take into account the historical and cultural values of the country. Care must therefore be taken in selecting accredited programs from foreign countries with checks for relevancy to the local context. Quality assurance is essential. Part of this concern also relates to language. At HCT the language of instruction is English and yet the language of instruction in most government schools particularly in the younger years is Arabic. If HCT is training teachers for these schools then surely they must also continue to develop resources and teaching techniques in Arabic as well as English.

A second concern facing those involved in the training of Emiratis for the teaching sector is with promotion of teaching as a viable career. At present the perception amongst most Emiratis that I have spoken with is that teaching, particularly in the government sector schools, is a low status job. Even with higher remuneration many Emiratis would prefer not to work in the Education sector because of this perception and also because many of the Emiratis that I have spoken with have had bad experiences at schools due to outdated and sometimes punitive teaching methods, an observation mentioned previously. In a recent survey of Higher Diploma Business and IT students at Sharjah Women’s College, for example, only 14% said that they would be interested in pursuing a teaching qualification. Many of the current B.Ed – Educational Technology students, in addition, have said that they prefer to seek jobs in the corporate sector. Promoting Education as a viable career opportunity then is a key concern.

The third concern facing the training of Emirati teachers is adequate funding for the education sector. In 2008, HE Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahayan, Minister of Higher Education and
Scientific Research, observed that the shortage of funds meant that if “no action is taken, the situation is going to get worse and the country will suffer a severe shortage of human resources that will adversely affect the economic development” (Salama, 2008). Indeed vocational colleges like HCT are turning away thousands of students, including those wishing to study Education, due to a lack of funds which appears counterproductive and actually contradictory within a relatively rich country wishing to promote Emiratization. This issue needs addressing if HCT wishes to continue to train Emiratis for the education sector effectively.

References


