Chapter 7
The Experience of Quality in Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates: In Times of Rapid Change and Complexities

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Abstract In less than five decades, from offering formal education only in a few schools to a small tribal community to providing a selection of three public and approximately 100 private higher education institutions to the citizens of seven emirates creates a unique context in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is an evolution that corresponds with its remarkable economic growth. Quality assurance of diverse higher educational institutions requires complex schemes to ensure their fitness for purpose, while perhaps development and enhancement aspects need time to mature. The quality of the education is especially important because the UAE yearns for the diversified and knowledge-based economy; one that is led by its own citizens whose contribution to the workforce is currently less than 10%. This chapter highlights contextual complexities in the UAE that might have direct and/or indirect impacts on the quality experiences in the higher education sector, with proposed recommendations.

7.1 Introduction

While emphasizing the rapid and dramatic cultural and social changes in the UAE, Hopkyns (2016) citing Winslow, Honein, and Elzubeir (2002) highlights the paradox that, "Adults who were Bedouins, tending goats and farming dates, have children driving Land Cruisers and studying in America" (p. 89). The UAE's remarkable economic success and modernization owing initially to oil-based revenue since the late 1960s, along with more recent attempts to develop a diversified and knowledge-based economy, have led to the establishment of a record number of higher education institutions (HEI) in a relatively small country. Policy development over the

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years in such areas as improvement of the educational system and encouraging participation of nationals in the workforce has created many complexities, which arguably have an impact on the quality of HEIs in the country. Based on relevant theoretical and empirical research, this chapter will examine the following issues as well as offer viable responses:

What are the main complexities that may affect quality of HEIs in the UAE?
What could be recommended to increase the quality of (higher) education in the UAE that strives to become a knowledge-based economy?

7.1.1 The Higher Education Context in the UAE

In an era following the agricultural revolution and the industrial age, when manufacturing skills (manual labour) predominated, the recent global landscape seems to be shaped by the knowledge era that requires mento-facturing (mental labour) skills in innovation, research, information, and communication technologies (Marquardt, 2011; Weber, 2011). The role of higher education and the critical importance of well-educated human capital in the development of nations have been acknowledged by both scholars and policy-makers, and thus, improving education systems is one of the most important agenda items internationally (Marginson, 2010). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2017) reports that raising educational standards in order to establish a diversified knowledge-based economy and reducing its oil-dependent gross domestic product (GDP) to 20% by 2021 are the UAE's strategic goals. Thus, it is not surprising for the UAE government to develop policies to enhance the human capital capacity in various HEIs; to invest in research, innovation, and other modern knowledge-based economic systems (Ashour & Fatima, 2016). Nevertheless, Ashour and Fatima (2016) state that although the UAE's global competitiveness reports in quality of education and training show positive trends, there is room for improvement regarding the quality of the graduates and their skills to play an effective role in the knowledge-based society. If "[E]ducational outputs are eventually assessed in the context of their relevance to local, regional, and international labor markets and their contribution to broader national objectives," (Wilkins, 2011, p. 4) it is important to discuss factors that may have an impact on graduates' skills and competences in the UAE.

Arguably, the following factors influence the HE context in the UAE, which merit evaluation before discussing the quality of education:

- The demographic composition of this small Islamic monarchy.
- Federal and non-federal HEIs and multi-layered QA systems.
- HE students' and educators' profiles and orientations.
- The UAE's Vision 2021; to attain ambitious economic and social goals and national workforce.
- Cultural and social landscape of the UAE.

This chapter will briefly analyze these factors while discussing the quality in HE in the country. For clarity, the rather elusive concept of 'quality' (Harvey & Green,

1993) will be framed from the perspective of the quality of the graduates along with the quality of teaching and learning, while considering the expectations of a knowledge-driven economy. Noting that the numerical data regarding percentages in workforce, female participation in the workforce, and private institutions vary between sources, especially due to the reality that things change fast, the most recent available sources are used whenever possible.

7.2 Higher Education and Complexities in the UAE

7.2.1 Economic Breakthrough and Demography

The UAE is a small Muslim Arabian Gulf country governed as a federal monarchy constituting seven emirates, which were among the British-Trucial states until gaining independence in 1971. The UAE is a very ambitious country that has transformed "from rags to riches" within the course of less than fifty years, primarily due to its oil revenue (Shihab, 2001). The local economy of the 1960s, which was based on simple trading, fishing, pearl diving, and farming driven by the tribal inhabitants with little or no formal education (Al Sadik, 2001), has changed into today's highly competitive and diverse business context with world-class initiatives, as well as liberal international business prospects and foreign investment opportunities (Rawazik & Carroll, 2009).

Due to the lack of trained workforce, the UAE's rulers implemented an immigration policy to invite qualified expatriates to build the newly formed nation and modernize the infrastructure (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014). Rapid economic transformation, based upon liberal policies, has also influenced its demographic composition. According to UAE government records (The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2018), Emirati nationals comprise approximately 10% of the UAE's population of 9,627,390 people, which has indeed increased dramatically from less than 80,000 dwellers since the early 1960s (Worldometers, 2019). As for workforce proportion though, out of the five million positions in the private sector, only 27,000 of them are held by Emiratis; 60% of nationals are employed in the public sector (The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2019). That is, historically and currently, the UAE's financial goals have been realized as a result of the expatriate workforce from Asia, South Asia, Africa, and many Western nations (De Bel-Air, 2015). Only nationals may benefit from the free public (higher) education, as provision to all eligible Emiratis is a national policy.

7.2.2 Various HEIs and QA Schemes

Over the years, coupled with the economic growth and an increasingly diverse population with different needs, the number and kinds of HEIs have increased rapidly (O'Sullivan, 2016). According to The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher

Education (QAA) country report (2017), there are approximately 140,000 HE students in the UAE. Of these, approximately one-third (43,000) study in three federal HEIs is for free; 90% are nationals and 10% are fee-paying international students. The remaining two thirds of the higher education student population is enrolled in 100 non-federal, mostly for-profit private HEIs, such as international branch campuses (IBC), emirate-based semi-government HEIs, and other international collaborative partners (QAA, 2017).

The UAE opened its first federal university, The United Arab Emirates University, in 1976 in Al-Ain. In 1989, the Higher Colleges of Technology were established to provide technical-vocational training to the nation's male and female students separately in each emirate. The youngest federal HEI in the country, Zayed University, was opened in Abu Dhabi and in Dubai (the two largest emirates) in 1998, to offer tertiary education to the nation's female students; males were admitted after 2009.

The semi-independent status of the seven emirates of the UAE allows them to implement independent policies and economic models from the federal government. One particular policy, especially in the emirate of Dubai followed by the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), has attracted foreign-based HE providers in the free zones, which are purpose-built geographical locations that allow tax-free investments and other incentives (QAA, 2017). As a result, by hosting 34 IBCs, the UAE is now one of the top four international educational hubs along with China (34), Singapore (12), and Malaysia (12) (C-BERT, n.d.).

Outside the free zones, emirate-based HEIs such as American University of Sharjah, University of Dubai, and Abu Dhabi University are also on offer, as well as highly prestigious universities such as Paris Sorbonne and New York University funded by the Abu Dhabi emirate to establish themselves with a less business-oriented strategy than that of Dubai and RAK (QAA, 2017). Without employing gender segregation, the private for-profit institutions offer HE to non-Emiratis as well as to nationals who could not meet the entry requirements and/or who do not choose to go to a federal university for a variety of reasons such as commuting issues, not having desired majors, or opting for a more internationally recognized institution for better employment possibilities (Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012).

Regarding the QA schemes, national accreditation through the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) has been mandated for all the federal universities since 2014 (see, e.g., QAA, 2017). Beforehand, federal institutions were either self-regulated, or sought international external QA as in the case of Zayed University, which gained accreditation from the Middle States Commission for Higher Education in 2008. The CAA also accredits all private HEIs operating outside free zones for their official recognition in the UAE. Conversely, QA of those HEIs in the free zones are provided by emirate-based agencies such as the Knowledge and Human Development Authority in Dubai, and the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK), until recently known as Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) in Abu Dhabi. The IBCs in the free zones are also required to comply with the QA schemes of their mainland institutions, which may not always correspond well with the US model that CAA follows (Ashour, 2017). In addition,

several for-profit HEIs in the free zones have opted for CAA accreditation, even though they are not required to do so because they aim to have the degrees that they provide to be recognized by the UAE authorities. As indicated in O'Sullivan's study at a private institution in the UAE, for faculty members, "there is always an upcoming accreditation visit to prepare for" (O'Sullivan, 2015, p. 8), and they need to meet the criteria of different QA agencies, "… each with varying demands, which sometimes caused some practices to be paused," as corroborated by another study from a federal institution (Tezcan-Unal, Winston, & Qualter, 2019, p. 12).

In short, QA practices seem to overwhelm the HEIs, which may not leave quality time for pertinent quality enhancement and development issues. While, on the one hand, their efforts provide structural effectiveness (Stensaker, 2011), with the aim of improving learning dynamics (Tezcan-Unal et al., 2019), they may also lead to a compliance culture (Cardoso, Rosa, & Stensaker, 2016).

7.2.3 Student and Educators' Profiles and Quality Concerns

The preceding section summarized quality matters in the UAE from a 'fitness for purpose' (Harvey & Newton, 2004, 2007) perspective. This section will focus on the profiles and status of educators and enrolled students as well as majors offered, aiming to reflect on deeper issues that may affect quality in HEIs.

Fox (2007) reports four founding principles that constitute the HE policy: establishing and fully funding federal universities, hiring mostly international and highly qualified faculty, providing it for free to all the eligible nationals, and making English the medium of instruction (EMI). Thus, the language proficiency of the entry level students to pursue tertiary studies in an EMI setting has been an issue in the national agenda. Since 2016, federal HEIs have recruited post-secondary Emirati students, whose general education, English language ability, and readiness to enter an HE are measured by The Emirates Standardized Test (EmSAT). The minimum entry level of English required corresponds with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 5.0, which does not align with international guidance provided by IELTS for students to pursue a bachelor's degree in an EMI setting (Schoepp, 2018). Correspondingly, in Tezcan-Unal's (2018) study, academics highlight the challenges they face due to low levels of English proficiency and its potential impact on quality issues. Stated differently, over the years and despite many costly educational reforms to increase the English competency of students, success in this area is not yet substantial, which thus directly affects their academic success and institutional quality.

Alongside language literacy, many students also lack basic numerical, critical thinking, team-learning, and problem-solving skills, challenges that are arguably a reflection of the traditional, rote-learning-based K-12 education, despite efforts to improve teaching methods (OSullivan, 2016; Wilkins, 2010). While lecturers struggle with keeping quality in class with this fairly demanding student profile, they are also pressured with research demands without release time (O'Sullivan, 2015).

In addition, because they are offered short-term contracts, their commitment and engagement may be affected (Chapman, Austin, Farah, Wilson, & Ridge, 2014). If the teacher's role is essential in building nations as elaborated in Sahlberg (2012), referring to the renowned educational success story of Finland, policy-makers could consider issues that affect faculty morale and workload.

Non-federal HEIs have their own issues. First, many of them were drawn to make business in a wealthy country without substantial market research and ended up competing for a scarce number of students (Wilkins, 2010). Resonating with what is happening in other educational hubs such as China and Singapore (Altbach, 2010), the IBCs of the free zones that have a physical presence deliver a limited range of majors, of which running costs are low without offering a proper campus experience (Wilkins 2011). In order to cut costs further, in some cases, these HEIs tend to hire part-time faculty with no home campus affiliation, offer them little or no professional development, and in others, students experience frequent faculty turnover, a lack of resources, or not receiving some advertised modules (Wilkins, 2010). In addition, echoing Altbach's (2010) concern, relaxing admission standards as commercial institutions in a relatively small market is not uncommon, and once students are enrolled, faculty are pressured to satisfy the "customers" rather than learners (Wilkins, 2010), which sometimes leads to grade inflation (Gerson, 2010). Another issue that may have an impact on the quality in both federal and non-federal HEIs in the UAE is that the majority of the highest achievers prefer to study in top-tier universities in western countries instead (Wilkins, 2010).

In short, quality of education is influenced by the learner identity of the recruited students, which has a circular effect on academic performance (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017), as well as teachers' profile and status. The ways in which both federal segregated and non-federal co-educational HEIs choose to confront these issues have an ultimate impact on the quality of the education that they provide.

7.2.4 National Vision Versus Student Profile

The UAE Vision 2021, which was launched in 2010 to coincide with the golden jubilee of the union of the emirates, envisages, "the UAE among the best countries in the world" by 2021. In order to realize this aim, the country prioritized six focus areas, two of which are a First-Rate Education system and a Competitive Knowledge Economy (UAE Vision, 2018). The vision highlights the need to transform the education system and teaching methods to support coming generations to become creative, ambitious, and responsible and to equip them with such skills as entrepreneurship and leadership, as well as a stronger foundation in Arabic language, science, and innovation.

One needs to be reminded that even though the expatriate population in the UAE exceeds the national population by 90%, they are essentially considered as "guests" or "social citizens" because judicial citizenship is only a rare occasion granted by rulers (Wang, 2015). Hence, it is not unusual for the UAE government to aim at sustaining its remarkable economic growth and attaining its future goal to establish itself as a global actor in the knowledge-driven world with its own youth. However, there exists an incongruity between the intentions of the country and the skills and professional orientation of the nationals (e.g., Ashour & Fatima, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2016). For example, as reported in O'Sullivan (2016), the scores of 15-year-old UAE nationals in reading, science, and mathematics in international tests are significantly lower than their counterparts. Further, nearly 80% of Emirati HE students enrol in majors in social sciences, humanities, and business programs (O'Sullivan, 2016). Bearing in mind that building a knowledge-based economy necessitates innovation, research, and scientific thinking, one can predict that most Emirati nationals will not be able to make contributions by 2021.

Not only the academic orientations of Emirati students, but also career choices indicate a lack of readiness to meet the challenges of a knowledge economy for several reasons. First, Emiratis tend to prefer employment in the public sector because such jobs offer almost guaranteed employment, higher salaries, better working hours, and more incentives than jobs in the private sector (O'Sullivan, 2016; Wilkins, 2010). The articulation of the Vision 2021 also suggests that the UAE government is aware of Emirati employees' lack of skills, experience, and commitment to work, echoing Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner's (2014) study on the perceptions of international CEOs/managers including Emiratis. In line with the nationalization of the workforce policy, the UAE has targeted an increase in the number of Emirati citizens in the private sector by 5% (QAA, 2017), which seems to be a solution only on paper. Emiratization, a form of positive discrimination imposed by a government policy to increase the number of nationals in workplaces, has had mixed outcomes. Some studies support the policy as a solution for the double-digit unemployment rate of Emirati post-secondary graduates (Daleure, 2016), whereas others argue that it has created job dissatisfaction and stressful workplace environments both for expatriate employees and Emiratis (Alabdelkarim, Muftah, & Hodgson, 2014), who are promoted to higher paid roles without proper qualifications (Kirk, 2010).

Exceptional Emirati students and employees do exist, yet recent studies corroborate the notion that skills such as being an effective team member, independent learning, data-informed problem-solving, as well as flexibility of Emirati employees should be cultivated and the level of individual motivation needed in today's competitive workplace environments should be increased (O'Sullivan 2016). It is interesting to see that the educational changes do not happen as quickly as infrastructural changes, as similar topics were highlighted in Fox's (2007) study nearly ten years before O'Sullivan's.

7.2.5 Cultural and Social Factors

The final complexity highlighted in this chapter can be summarized as "UAE society may be leaping forward into a new era, yet it remains faithful to its cultural traditions, which are deeply intertwined with Islamic beliefs and practices." (Wang & Kassam, 2016, p. 77). In this context, the focus will be given to the issues that might have a direct or indirect impact on quality in HEIs, such as Western educational norms, native Arabic and English languages, gender issues, and how traditions and religion influence career choice.

The foundation of UAE's education system was based on modern Western norms delivered by predominantly Western and/or Western-trained teachers, "…who teach and present information from a predominantly Eurocentric, English-language base" (Kirk, 2010, p. 26). Conversely, in line with Islamic principles, federally funded schools mandate segregated education, inclusion of religious and Arabic heritage studies, as well as deliberate content elimination "… from the UAE Government curriculum, namely political studies, evolution, and all topics that relate to sexuality" (Godwin, 2006, p. 8). Federal HEIs are also designed as gender-segregated campuses for undergraduate students who meet professors, administrators, or other employees from both genders. To provide an educational perspective, Diallo (2014) argues that, philosophically and epistemologically, western pedagogies, whereby learner autonomy, fact-finding, multiple interpretations, and rational and critical thinking are encouraged, are essentially not fully supported by the Islamic framework of thinking. To illustrate, Diallo quotes Halstead, who notes that:

> [K]nowledge must be approached reverently and in humility, for there cannot be any 'true' knowledge that is in conflict with religion and divine revelation, only ignorance [... because] the appropriate use of knowledge from a Muslim perspective is to help people to acknowledge God, to live in accordance with Islamic law and to fulfil the purposes of God's creation. (2004, p. 520).

Similarly, Wilkins (2010, citing Romani, 2009) states that the conservative landscape prevents researchers from producing high quality and internationally recognized research that explores culturally or socially "taboo" areas.

Islam, traditional values, and the Arabic language are considered sacred issues in the UAE. For example, while arguing the power of the indigenous language which carries symbolic and spiritual value, Al-Issa argues that "Arabic is above all the language associated with Islamic beliefs (the language of the Qur'an) and Arab identity" (2017, p. 125). On the other hand, Hopkyns (2016, citing Randall & Samimi, 2010) explains how English is essentially the *lingua franca* in the UAE. Not only as a part of the everyday life in a country where the international population is high, but in the HEIs as well, where it is the medium of instruction where most instructors are Western and/or Western-trained (Diallo, 2014). Some studies suggest that students hold on to their traditional values, despite being educated via British curricula in western educational settings that are equipped with cutting-edge educational technology and with exposure to social media (Wang & Kassam, 2016). Perhaps, using Wang and Kassam words, the UAE has created an "indigenous form of modernity" (p. 91).

Nonetheless, the tension and a sense of fear that westernization and "Englishization" cause between the conservative values and high-speed modernization do exist. For example, Al-Issa's (2017) study emphasizes how Arabic, the indigenous language of the nationals and the official language of the UAE, is marginalized in EMI settings. Findlow posits that since gaining independence in 1971, the UAE has experienced feelings that are "inward-looking in contemplation of the term 'indigenous', and outward-looking in the sense of dramatically extending the range of supra-national networks" (2005, p. 287). Findlow also suggests that HE reflects a global-local dichotomy while imitating Western values on the one hand and resisting to them on the other. Findlow's argument, thus, makes sense when one considers that Western consultancy has been sought while making policies to reach international standards and implementing procedures to improve the English proficiency of learners with mostly Western faculty members in EMI settings, but at the same time there are opponents of these policies who argue that dominance of the English language and Western influences may lead the country toward becoming "a clone of the West and consequently lose its culture" (Wang & Kassam, 2016, p. 75). Resonating with this concern, Solloway (2016) posits that English is not only seen as a potential threat to the cultural integrity in the UAE, but also to its religion, Islam, and concludes that while Emirati students appreciate the fact that English proficiency is necessary in the current economic and social climate of their country, their preference of medium for their academic studies would be Arabic, but they find themselves in the situation of a "choiceless choice" (Troudi & Jendli, 2011, cited by Solloway, 2016, p. 191).

Similarly, when the values and goals of HEIs are reviewed, one notices how several aspects of Western values such as research, creativity, qualitative and quantitative thinking, and team-learning are highlighted. However, as Tezcan-Unal (2018) noted, there may be situations when students cannot cope with the task requirements measuring their teamwork, creative thinking, and academic language proficiency, but continue to expect high grades as they were awarded in schools mostly thanks to rote-learning (O'Sullivan, 2016). In other words, conflict will invariably occur when the expectations of Western standards reflect Western values coupled with Western/Western-trained professors' professional ethics. This is especially true for students whose educational expectations are merely based on receiving certification (Ashour & Fatima, 2016) rather than for higher learning goals.

A different, relevant paradox is that of females in higher education and the workforce. Female participation in HEIs is 77%, the highest in the world, despite the fact that their participation in the workforce (mainly in the public sector) is still low with 25% (Wang & Kassam, 2016). The mismatch between the pursuit of higher education pursuit and employment for females, as well as their choice of majors, is probably affected by the traditional roles and values, i.e., prioritizing family and traditions. For example, most female students tend not to choose majors in science, technology, and engineering (STE) for two primary reasons: The UAE is a "family-based patriarchal society with clearly defined gender roles" and, "the unavailability of university STE [Science, Technology, Engineering] programmes in reasonable distance to students' residence" (Aswad, Vidican & Samulewicz, 2011, p. 561).

Meanwhile, their male counterparts tend to drop out of schooling as a whole, as early as age 16, and join the army or police force, lured by high salaries (O'Sullivan, 2016), most likely in an effort to pursue their traditional role as providers (Wang & Kassam, 2016).

Arguably, complexities explained in this section stem from multiple factors, such as rapid changes and the push from the government to establish a globally recognized knowledge economy, the desire for a high-quality education system prioritizing English in the educational environments as an international language, and the possible resistance to maintaining traditional values and cultural norms. This dilemma sometimes causes concerns in educational settings, reflected by the career choices of genders, their attitudes towards English, as well as their competencies in EMI settings.

Thus far, this chapter has attempted to summarize five current contextual complexities in the UAE that may have direct or indirect impact on the quality of higher education graduates, bearing in mind the strategic economic and social goals articulated in UAE Vision 2021. The following section will present recommendations to facilitate the transition from the UAE's current state, which seems to be some distance from the desired one, to the espoused state of building and sustaining a strong, diversified, knowledge-based economy with a national workforce.

7.3 Recommendations

7.3.1 Resolving the Workforce Imbalance

It is fairly clear that the population of the UAE's nationals will not increase rapidly, nor its dependency on qualified expatriate workforce decrease, considering the ambitious economic goals articulated in UAE Vision 2021. Possibility for the expatriate workforce to become citizens after a certain amount of time is not an option in the UAE. Considering the costs of residency, work permits, and other benefits for 90% of the workforce in the country, and their tendency to make investment and/or transfer their salaries to their families in their own countries (Daleure, 2016), policymakers may consider developing schemes to offer naturalizing opportunities for exceptional non-nationals (including international academics working in HEIs) in order to increase the number of qualified citizens, to cut additional recruiting costs, and to encourage them to contribute to the local economy. The application criteria could involve academic success in the fields of STE, extraordinary contributions to enhance the knowledge-driven economy with research and innovative activities, as well as certain cultural and social standards such as being bi-literate in Arabic and English and being a practicing Muslim in order to show respect for national cultural sensitivities. Eligible individuals could be given an "indefinite leave to remain" and/or "permanent residency" for a certain period of time as in the United Kingdom (see for example British Citizenship, n.d.) before full citizenship. As in several western

countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, another idea could be offering full scholarships for exceptionally bright foreign students with scientific and innovative aptitude to study in federal HEIs in order to increase the quality of research and create a competitive but collaborative international environment. Depending on their sustained contributions to the UAE's goals, these bright individuals could also be naturalized.

7.3.2 Focusing on Quality Development and Enhancement

As a country that houses nearly 100 HEIs, the UAE's efforts to ensure HE providers fitness for purpose are essential and commendable, yet measures need to be taken to synchronize various QA schemes (Ashour, 2017), which are reportedly overwhelming, time-consuming, and confusing. Supporting university leadership in establishing an internal quality culture based on quality development and enhancement (Ashour, 2017; Elassy, 2015) that relies on data-informed decisions, professional and reflective debates as a result of multiple action-research cycles in small communities of practice as in learning organizations (Tezcan-Unal, 2018) may generate sustained growth opportunities while ensuring accountability (Tezcan-Unal et al., 2019). A flexible approach toward the complacency of those universities and/or programs that have already undergone international accreditation from reputable accreditation agencies would also be another option to reduce the duplication of work.

7.3.3 Educating Nationals for National Goals

In order to abandon its status of "consumer" educational practice (Kirk, 2010) from the Western countries, the UAE needs to create its own teaching workforce from K-12 to higher education, mirroring the internationally acclaimed Finnish educational model, which embraces the crucial role of highly trained teachers in nation-building (Sahlberg, 2012). The formal policy, which targets an increase in the number of government teachers to 90% by 2020 (Kirk, 2010), is unlikely to be attained probably because the number of graduates from teaching colleges has not reached a level of demographic significance (Kirk, 2010). However, more importantly than quantity, professional development of these teachers to provide the quality education based on inquiry that a knowledge-based economy requires needs to be the focus of attention, accepting the fact that it will be a long and evolutionary process (see Dede, 2006).

To meet the expectations of the knowledge-based economy, fields of scientific research and innovation should take precedence. Since encouraging STEM education is not only an issue for the UAE, policy-makers could analyse and adapt to the national curricula successful models that have been applied in other countries. For

example, starting from early ages, students could be encouraged to take part in problem-solving and inquiry-based pedagogies, while integrating STEM in the curriculum as in the Finnish model (Su, Ledbetter, & Ferguson, 2017).

Another possibility is to encourage the majority of the HE students, particularly females, to pursue STEM fields. Aswad et al.'s (2011) study conducted in the UAE suggests that if lack of awareness by students and parents of what is expected in STEM-related fields is addressed, if student interests are stimulated prior to choosing majors, if visibility and accessibility of STEM related fields increase, then stereotypes associated with STEM related career pathways, such as "masculine", "nerdiness" and "difficult" may be overcome, and these areas become more socially and culturally approved. It is hard to argue against Aswad et al.'s comment:

> In an era where a country's competitive edge relies more than ever on technological innovation, a low supply of national high-calibre STE graduates is a barrier in the economic transition process and makes it more difficult for both the government and private firms to find and employ local talent (2011, p. 560).

7.3.4 Developing Employability Skills of Graduates

Today's workplaces expect employers to possess not only technical but also so-called soft-skills "such as communication, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethics" (Robles, 2012, cited in Tezcan-Unal, 2016, p. 45). Referring to Wilkins's (2011) comment on the quality assessment of university's output being based on placement of graduates in the labor market, measures should be taken to support student employability skills, combined with subject-specific expertize in the HEIs. One possible initiative could be the program described by El-Temtamy, O'Neill, and Midraj (2016). Discussing the value of broader skills and experiential learning for workplace readiness, the scholars highlighted the effectiveness of the program "that offers undergraduate students opportunities (e.g., internships, work placements, role-play) to develop skills (e.g., communication, relationship management), and traits (e.g., reliability, professionalism) that have been found to enhance post-graduate employment" (p. 111). Funding programs for undergraduate students even before their internship stages may help them to strengthen their workplace readiness.

7.3.5 Supporting Academics Teaching English Language Learners in EMI Settings

The apprehension concerning English hegemony was mentioned in the context above. However, it is important to remember that "English is the premier language of business and the professions and the only global language of science, research, and academic publication" (Marginson, 2010, p. 6973). Thus, it is essential to

accept the role of English in the HEIs while providing substantial support to the students, as well as the academics, who are not necessarily trained to teach content in EMI settings to english language learners (ELLs). Research on the effects of the medium lecturers use for instruction indicates that student learning is influenced by the pronunciation of key terminology, comprehension of concepts, and sometimes lack of visuals that support instruction (see Hellekjær, 2010). As revealed in the study conducted by Dearden, Macaro, and Akincioglu (2016) in the Turkish HE context, lecturers might benefit from collaborative lesson planning activities with English language specialists, who are more competent with understanding learners' linguistic capacity. Jacob's (2007) study reports that conversations between the language specialists whose field-specific discourse questions raised the content specialists' awareness of the students' academic literacy challenges allowed both parties to appreciate the language as a means to convey meaning for specific purposes in the context.

Thus, a way forward in the UAE may be establishing partnerships between lecturers and language specialists and/or investing in faculty development programs focusing on overcoming the common challenges in EMI settings (e.g., Humphrey, 2017; Lavelle, 2016) such as adapting course content in accordance with field-specific genres and registers and creating an academic and language-rich discourse designed specifically for the course and program learning objectives. This approach would significantly improve the quality of work, rather than relying on a few credit bearing "language support" type courses, because reaching the learning goals of a baccalaureate degree through the medium of a second language that is understood at a lower than the recommended level of proficiency would naturally have a detrimental influence on educational quality.

7.3.6 Allowing Time for Educational Change

Marginson (2010) concludes that capacity and meta-strategy are the two major factors that affect nations' and institutions' global strategies, stating that one of two assumed elements of capacity is "the inherited educational traditions, language and culture" (p. 6972). The main cause of current concerns seems to be the rapid change undertaken in the UAE in a short space of time which has essentially been regulated and frequently updated by the state (O'Sullivan, 2016), considering the educational and cultural background of the nation mentioned in the preceding section. The more educated the parents are, the more value they attribute to their children's pursuit of higher quality education (Dede, 2006). Slowly but surely, future generations in the UAE will be more fortunate than the previous ones.

When one reviews the Ministry of Education Strategic Plan 2017–2021 (Ministry of Education, 2019), one notices that the government has set ambitious educational goals to prepare students for the knowledge economy, such as becoming one of the top 20 countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), reducing the enrollment rate in tertiary language foundation programs to 0% by

applying modern language methods as revealed in the K-12 English as an International Language framework (National Unified K-12 Learning Standards Framework, 2014), and even by eliminating foundation year programs (Salem & Swan, 2014). Using an analogy from biology, Dede (2006) posits the establishment of educational changes as an evolutionary 'scaling-up' process, as they will need to pass iterative stages such as design, dealing with resistance to change, and contextual adaptation before they become institutionalized. Top-down decisions may initiate major policy implementations and may have some motivational impact (Kirk, 2014); however, rather than implementing frequent reactional changes, allowing time seems to be necessary for newly imposed educational traditions to become "inherited".

7.4 Conclusion

The UAE's economic and infrastructural achievements since 1971 are unquestionably remarkable. Providing high-quality education has always been a primary concern of the UAE government. The efforts are reflected by the generous budget allocated to education by the current government (Zacharias & Saadi, 2018) and the detailed principles and efforts in government websites such as Quality Education (2019). However, as a country that is determined to be a globally competitive actor and sustain its growth, the UAE needs to focus on the quality development and enhancement of HEIs. Financial strengths of a country undoubtedly afford technologically advanced infrastructures, recruiting highly educated international faculty with competitive employment packages, and lower lecturer-student ratios, which are important when it comes to the ranking of HEIs (QS, Methodology, 2019). However, while allocating a substantial amount of money definitely helps, it may not suffice in solving matters of quality without delving deeper into educational, cultural, and social issues. This chapter summarized five major interconnected complexities that require deeper philosophical reformation when dealing with HE quality matters in the UAE for the policy-makers to take into consideration while preparing for ambitious national goals.

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