

Stakeholder Perspectives on Labour Nationalization in UAE Education Sector

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ABSTRACT

This presents a study on evaluating the challenge of UAE education sector on labour nationalisation where the public and private education sectors are dominated by foreign labour. At the same time, participation of locals in the sector is also very low despite the socio-cultural needs and implications of education. This research utilised semi structured questionnaire in interviewing the 12 selected head teachers. The findings of this study is that English as a medium of instruction offers the best way to rapidly enhance human resource development in the country. There seems to be an overarching desire to fully adapt the English language even if it comes at the expense of fully utilizing local expertise. It also indicated that this has led to a growing perception that cultural factors and imperatives are not as important in developing a locally focused human resource for the country as they used to be. Nevertheless, this is not true because socio-cultural background is inevitably linked to how people think and act from their own distinct socio-cultural and educational paradigm.

Keywords

Emiratization, HRD, local labour

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1. Introduction

Foreigners' dominance in the workforce was even more pronounced than in the total population. In all of Gulf Cooperation Council nations, non-nationals formed a majority of the labour force, with an average of nearly 70 percent for 2004. The lowest rates were in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, but even there were more than 50 and 65% of the workforce respectively. Up to 82% of the population in Kuwait were foreign, nearly 90% in Qatar [1]. In the case of, UAE, more than 90% of the workforce is foreign [2]. This development is posing security, political, social-cultural risks. Consequently, there has been a growing need for increasing the level of economic participation amongst the locals.

In order to keep an extremely privileged place of the nationals, a lot of Labour National restrictions are enforced: via a rotational system of expatriate labour to set a limit on the length of foreigners' remain, curbs about the naturalization and the citizenship rights of people who were naturalized. But a number of these steps haven't brought the expected outcomes, particularly, the projected rotation of this work force has proved impossible to realize. The free market economy has become stronger. Nearly all expatriates have remained past the 20condition of their contract because companies usually prefer to maintain employees

who have gained some local experience instead of bring in the newest ones. Additionally, importing a new employee involves additional costs to companies [3]; [4]; [5]. Because of this, the typical time period that overseas employees spend in the GCC nations continues to expand, and also the amount of nearly permanent' overseas workers has also increased, albeit not officially reported.

The situation is made more difficult by the fact that the tremendously privileged position that the nationals have enjoyed over the decades has begun to change. An increasing number of nationals are experiencing problems in locating the type of employment they've been on the lookout for. The general public sector, where many nationals tend to seek out employment, has become fully filled; at the same time, the private sector has remained overly competitive for the majority of them [3]. Ever since the unemployment among nationals started to grow, GCC authorities chose to embark on labour market plans to improve the situation through creation and promotion of adequate employment opportunities for nationals, and also to restrict the dependence on the expatriate labour [6]. This is manifested through localization, nationalization or indigenization of work as follows: Saudization in Saudi Arabia, Omanization in Oman, Emiratization UAE [6].

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the challenge of Labour nationalization in the UAE's education sector. It seeks to identify the specific challenges faced by the education sector taking into consideration the outsized role of education in preparing future Emiratis for full participation in the economy. First, to identify teacher localization challenges and second, to determine stakeholder perspectives on localization of teachers

As UAE continues to rely on expatriates, the level of unemployment amongst nationals is on the rise. This has become a source of concern for the government and policies are being put in place to increase the level of engagement and participation of locals into the labour force. Emiratisation is one of the most visible strategies for ensuring that indigenous population participates in the labour force. This research contributes to the discourse by identifying specific education-sector challenges and outlines potential solutions.

2. Literature Review

In the UAE, review policy initiatives of the mid to late 1990s, a period marked by low oil prices will show how strategic policy re-alignment have had lasting impact on the nation's human resources. For instance, guaranteeing of public sector jobs to nationals only resulted in an increasingly unproductive, expensive and in some cases bloated workforce [7-8]. Similarly, economic diversification strategies across the region have yielded modest outcomes. Consequently, there have a series of government-sponsored labour rationalization across the GCC. In Bahrain, the government sought to make the cost of hiring nationals less expensive to the private sector by placing taxes on foreign labour [9]. In Oman, strict employment quota have and are still being enforced designating that certain roles are filled by nationals [10]. In the UAE, the policy of Emiratisation continues to be a key force in the labour sector. Overall, majority of the labour rationalization policies in the region have not fully yielded the desired results. This is evidenced by the growing dependence on foreign labour across the region. Between 1991 and 1995, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia implemented a five year labour development with the goal of reducing dependence on foreign labour. However, in that period the number of expatriates increased significantly.

The failure of "first generation" policy measures led to the formulation of reactionary "second generation" policy initiatives [10]. Forstlechner argues the second generation policy initiatives were well thought out and better institutionalized. In the UAE and to a small extent in Qatar, there have been considerable efforts geared towards the transformation of the education sector [11-12]. Some of the key policy measures include greater emphasis on English instruction and focus on science and mathematics. As the economies in the region work towards diversification from hydrocarbons, the need for developing high technical and industrial expertise has never been more urgent [12]. In order for nationals to effectively compete with expatriates and hold their own in the marketplace, countries in the region must be able to offer first class education and also inculcate the right kind of attitudes that will encourage venturing [7]; [13]; [14].

At the moment, the public sector remains highly saturated with the key hydrocarbon revenue source largely dependent on foreign labour. [14] blames the enduring labour market dualism for the failure of GCC countries to create effective, appropriate and sustainable human capital. One of the overarching goals of this study will be to identify strategies for dismantling the labour market dualism with the ultimate goal of creating appropriate and competitive national labour.

At higher levels, GCC governments offer considerable sponsorship to learning institutions abroad. Nevertheless, previous studies continue to show that there is a mismatch between the education being offered and the needs of the labour market [15]; [16]; [17]. The mismatch has been growing over the years with Emirati graduates increasingly unsuited for the private sector labour market [17]. For instances, Prime Minister and Vice President of UAE, His Highness Sheikh Bin Rashid Al Maktoum said that Emiratis are unable to take over jobs in the private of public sectors without the necessary qualifications or expertise. His Highness also mentioned that UAE's education system needs to focus more in teaching young people to think as opposed to just memorizing.

One of the issues that have been identified as stifling the suitability and relevance of UAE education system is the lack of involvement of citizens in the educational process [18]. There are structural barriers that limit the ability of Emirati

citizens to effectively participate in the private sector. [18-19] argue that both the government and family provide safety nets for individuals making unemployment less scary to nationals. Thus, socio-cultural factors are also to blame for the work ethic issues and vocational choices made by Emiratis. In the last decade the government has put considerable efforts towards changing the language of instruction to English. Consequently, there have been tensions in the educational system especially in the context of cultural imperatives and the need to embrace English the global language of learning [19-20].

3. Interview Results

This study was to determine strategies for sustainable Emirati human resource development in Abu Dhabi and by extension the larger UAE. This study sought to identify perceived success of Emiratisation and its potential going into the future. The interview was conducted through semi structured questionnaire where the first part is an open ended questions where the second part is structured where the respondents had to tick where they agreed or otherwise. This interview involved 12 head teacher and the open ended question posted to them is: Do you think localization of teachers has any potential for adding value to the learners and the educational process in general? Firstly the respondents were requested to give opinions than they need to rate. The results are as below:

R1: *"The social studies must be taught by locals at any school."*

R2: *"I believe teacher localisation allows students to relate to teachers, and enables them to understand something more. This allows them to be more comfortable in the environment. But, I also feel that the localisation of teachers, restricts the diversity of knowledge and experience available from elsewhere...."*

R4: *"If they work together with the EMTs then I highly believe that value would be added to the learners and the educational process in general."*

R5: *"For foreign teachers there is little stability for the future as the UAE can never be a permanent home, this affects how long we stay in our positions as teachers."*

R7: *"I am sure that any teacher with the proper knowledge and practice can add to the teaching*

environment. Having a teacher with the same background will definitely be a plus"

R8: *"There is a commitment by the teacher, he knows the culture and customs of the country, knows the nature of children in the country, and knows the orientations of the country."*

One of the key themes that emerged from informal and formal engagements with teachers who actually interact and engage with students on a daily basis are that local can have a positive impact on learner outcomes. Respondents R1, R4, and R5 are of the opinion that social studies would be better trained by locals. This is understandable considering the fact that social studies is shaped by socio-culture and as such is best trained by someone who has experienced the culture. As outlined by respondent R2 localization will deliver greater interactive learning environment for students albeit with issues of reduced diversity. The issue of continuity and commitment on the part of foreign teachers has also arisen as a limiting factor.

R6: *"They need to be well trained and speak the proper English to teach in private schools."*

R9: *"Language barrier, teaching is a very demanding job in terms of time and effort which will not be very convenient for them."*

R12: *"I think students are very privileged to have a range of teachers from all over the world teaching them. This poses them to best practice and gives them a world vision so needed in our youth today. This is definitely the right move to ensure a society that is tolerant of cultural diversity and religious differences. Localization would in my view impede this essential development"*

The issue of skills and capability was raised by a number of teachers who participated in the survey. Level of training and language proficiency amongst local is major problem in their absorption into the teaching profession. However, some of these perspectives seem to be more informed by stereotypes than by the reality of the actual reality.

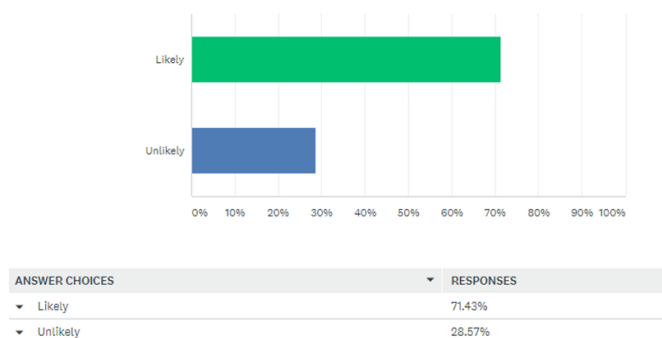


Fig.1 – results of rating

Fig. 1 shows teacher perception on the potential for teacher localization. A significant majority of 71% are of the opinion that having local teachers can significantly add value to the educational process in general. Considering the fact that most of the teachers who participated in this survey are foreign, this is a significant result.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study educational leadership in Abu Dhabi have come to the conclusion that English as a medium of instruction offers the best way to rapidly enhance human resource development in the country. There seems to be an overarching desire to fully adapt the English language even if it comes at the expense of fully utilizing local expertise. However, this study has also established that whilst English as a medium of instruction allows UAE to quickly integrate into global knowledge economy, it comes with multiple challenges include including communication barriers and socio-cultural difference. This echoes the results of previous studies by [11-22] who established that teaching of English as a foreign language a number of challenges have been identified including diminished student motivation, low levels of literacy, dependence on rote learning and memorization, under-achievement, over-reliance on high-stakes testing. In essence, using English as a medium of instruction should not necessarily eliminate the role of Arabic in the educational process.

The switch to teachers from the West (America and Europe) seems to have brought UAE's education system to modernity. However, it poses another challenge from cultural difference when students are basically forced to model foreign culture. Ultimately, this has created a situation whereby the competitive nature of private sector is

frowned upon by locals; this could be a failure of the education system. Teaching student to be critical thinkers and problem solvers is not particularly dependent on the language of instruction. There is too much emphasis on the language at the expense of the socio-culture. His Highness also mentioned that UAE's education system needs to focus more in teaching young people to think as opposed to just memorizing. Therefore, the issue of medium of instruction should not arise when it comes to teaching critical thinking. Many countries remain globally competitive without necessarily adopting English Wholesale.

The findings also indicated that this has led to a growing perception that cultural factors and imperatives are not as important in developing a locally focused human resource for the country as they used to be. Nevertheless, this is not true because socio-cultural background is inevitably linked to how people think and act from their own distinct socio-cultural and educational paradigm. Western trained teachers draw from western educational models, values, pedagogies to teach students from a different and in most instances opposing epistemologies [23]. The resultant effect is that educational journey for most students is not adequate or natural as it should be. However, the prevailing situation in the country is that most parents view private schools as more capable in terms of creating highly confident and globally aware children compared to public schools [24]. There is no concrete proof for this though. It is just a long-held perception created and sustained by the perceived success of foreign trained nationals in the country.

Most parents seem to be losing confidence in the public education despite both public and private schools offering largely the same curriculum. This is one of the major predicaments facing educational sector in the country – how to balance between local cultural imperatives and the need to develop globally relevant children [20-25]. This is despite the fact the issue of continuity and commitment on the part of foreign teachers has also emerged as a limiting factor. This has further served to exacerbate the ability to create an educational system that is capable of creating sustainable human resource for the country. The findings of this study echo the findings of previous studies by Godwin [26] and Raven [11] which show that from the outset, UAE has always

struggled with creating an education that serves the interest of local culture while at the same time embraces globalization. Despite the huge investment made by the government in staffing and enhancing public schools in the country, private schools are still perceived as offering better education [24]. Considering that there is a predominant perception that private schools emphasize English and other subjects at the expense of culturally required and often relevant Arabic and Islamic studies [20-25], the role of cultural pride in the development of capable young men is completely lost.

Conclusion

This research strongly believes that more of local teachers into the educational system will in the medium and long term is the solution. Language proficiency and educational attainment should not be a barrier to entry of local teachers. Education as a socialized process and with teachers as facilitators working with parents, cultural background is of paramount importance. It has emerged is that educational leaders are not particularly focused on teacher localization. Localization of teachers seems to be a problem that cannot be resolved in the medium due to a number of issues ranging from language barrier, interest, and capacity development. On the other hand, teachers who are actually engaged with the student on a daily basis are of the opinion that localization of teacher can be strategic in the development of a local populace that can fully participate in UAE's envisioned knowledge economy.

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