

Sustainable Human Resource Development in Education for an Expatriate Dependent Education Sector in UAE

Abdalla Hassan Almarashda¹, Norliana Sarpin²

¹ Researcher, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Batu Pahat, MALAYSIA

² Lecturer, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, University Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Batu Pahat, MALAYSIA

ABSTRACT

In UAE, 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 evaluates the challenge of local human resource development in the Abu Dhabi department of education. The research utilizing a mixed method surveys teachers and education sector practitioners. The study conducted questionnaire survey and interview with respondents who are responsible to education sector. The study found that satisfaction with supervisor is ranked the highest factors in job satisfaction group of human resource domain. While the correlation analysis found that perception of organizational career support (OCS) have significant impacts on an individual's overall job satisfaction. In term of interview results, it found that at the leadership level, interest in localization of human resource in gradually diminishing with importance of local teachers in the educational processes being considered increasingly unnecessary. For teachers, the prevailing perspective is that having local teachers can significantly add value to learners. This study recommends enhanced focus on localization of the education sector without too much emphasis on language proficiency.

Keywords

Personal career development, organizational career support, Emiratization

Article Received: 10 August 2020, Revised: 25 October 2020, Accepted: 18 November 2020

1. Introduction

United Arab Emirates (UAE) labour market has been described as highly idiosyncratic [1-2]. Local labour shortage coupled with rapid economic development over the last four and half driven by discovery of oil forced governments in the region to allow for an influx of foreign workers [1]. UAE and other GCC countries had to adopt a liberal policy on foreign labour to allow for the massive infrastructure development and also to support the fast growing local economy. Governments essentially allowed private companies to freely acquire foreign labour with little intervention. The country had to attain its growth objectives primarily by relying on foreigners since nationals not only lacked the necessary skills but were also too few to fill in the vacancies available. Over the last decade, UAE's population increased and so has the demographics; however, the level of indigenous participation in the labour force has not increased [1]. The country still relies a great deal on expatriates whose role in the economy only continues to increase. The discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf led to the transformation of states in the region from sheikhdoms to modern states. In the process, the region has experienced rapid population growth. The region has experienced

tenfold population increase over the last six decades. This increase was not caused by just the increase birth but also through massive importation of foreign labour into the region. Foreigners have gradually become the dominant source of labour. This is unlike the case of the West where migrant labour only served to compliment local labour. Across the GCC, foreigners have become the primary source of labour. This is happening at a time when the native population is growing rapidly leading to reduced levels of employment.

Labour nationalization policies have never really been fully implemented. According to Nader Fergany, "attempts to organize the pan-Arab labour market have fizzled out into ineffective declarations of intent that have been impeded in reality by perceived narrow national interests, particularly of countries of employment, acting the mind set of buyers in a buyers' market." Moreover, "labour movement in the Arab region has been captive to the ups and downs of Arab politics, sometimes with devastating consequences to the welfare of embroiled migrants" [3]. In the early to mid-2000s, GCC authorities began to public admit that overreliance on expatriates was increasingly becoming a national security risk.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the challenge of local human resource development in United Arab Emirates (UAE) especially within the department of education in Abu Dhabi. Public and private education sectors are dominated by foreign labour. It seeks to contribute towards the resolution of persistent national challenges such as: the desire to reduce dependence on foreign labour and develop local capacity; meeting the rapidly evolving needs and expectations for learners; the desire to preserve local heritage and culture while also embracing globalization; and the need to develop adequate and appropriate skills for the nations' posterity: (1) to identify sustainable medium and long term HR strategy for Abu Dhabi's educational sector, (2) to identify educator needs and expectations from educational institutions and (3) to identify sustainable human resource localization strategies for Abu Dhabi's educational sector.

This study is relevant and timely at a period when the UAE government is placing greater emphasis on increasing productivity and employability of nationals. The government is increasingly calling upon government back entities to increase productivity through enhanced on-job training. The education sector is central to UAE's economic diversification strategy as the nation seeks to transition to a knowledge-based economy that is less driven by oil and gas revenue [4]. The main challenge facing the public sector in UAE and indeed most GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) is how to adequately develop and equip human resources in the region.

2. Literature Review

Over the past 30 years, the concept of strategic human resource management (SHRM) became dominant as an aspect of human resource management in academia and also in policy [5]. However, over the last 10 years, SHRM has evolved resulting in the emergence of the concept of sustainable HRM [6], [5]. In this regard, HRM has become increasingly linked to elements and aspects of sustainability. The discourse of sustainability is problematic given the semantic challenges in its conceptualization and the diverse perspectives that it attracts from scholars and practitioners. Principally, sustainable HRM envisions the role of HR as one that goes beyond the financial outcomes or immediate organizational objectives [7], [8]. Sustainable

human resource management is cognizant of the overarching importance of human and social outcomes in relation to the role of HRM. Sustainable HRM explicitly identifies the positive and the negative impacts of the HRM on a wide range of stakeholders stretching well beyond the individual organization [9]. In addition, SHRM takes into consideration and acknowledges the tensions that exist across competing interests from within and outside the organization. SHRM seeks to reconcile diverse interests from an explicit moral position in relation to desired outcomes both in the short and long term [5].

Over the past 10 years, it has come to the realization of most governments in the Arab Gulf (Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and UAE) that not all emergent labour will be absorbed into the public sector, at least not the largely bureaucratic and unproductive sectors. This is best evidenced by the fact that concerted efforts are being put in place to nationalize labour [10]. In the UAE, top-down and bottom up approaches have been used in labour nationalization. Top-down approach includes imposition of quotas on certain private sector industries, taxation of expatriate labour, and reservation of certain job categories for nationals [11] and [12]. Bottom up approaches include overhaul of the educational system, introduction of minimum standards, and provision of vocational training [10]. The common goal for most governments in the region is to encourage citizens to join the private sector. However, such efforts have been largely undermined by the high public sector remuneration and very favourable working conditions.

In order to contextualize the need for strategic HR re-alignment in UAE, it is important to first understand the idiosyncrasies of the country's labour market especially as concerns citizens. The public sector is mostly staffed by nationals with expatriates dominating the private sector. The disproportionately high level of remuneration and benefits in the public sector has created a situation whereby most citizens prefer to wait for openings in government [10-11]. Secondly, there is a widespread perception that nationals lack the requisite skills and work ethic to effectively work in the private sector [13]. Third, socio-cultural factors have also contributed to the diminished engagement of nationals in the private sector. Working in the private sector is viewed as

inappropriate domain for nationals to pursue their career development [14-15].

As early as 2010, strains had started to emerge across the GCC as concerns the ability of governments to sustainably provide jobs for citizens [1]. Despite the rapid economic growth in the region over the past decade, unemployment levels amongst nationals remain relatively high [16-17]. At the same time, the youth population is rapidly growing. Educational attainment has also increased with salary expectations also going up. This has only served diminish the interest of nationals in private sector employment.

In the 1970s, the period after the formation of the nation, nationalization of the workforce was considered in the context of the constructed four tier education system [18-19]. The four tier education system was described as intricate and in some cases problematic [20]. 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 [19-20]. In essence, UAE's education system has always been at cross roads. At the moment, education is free for all Emiratis – this is something that is mandated by law. Despite the fact government schools offer free education, majority of Emirati children are actually enrolled in private schools [21]. According to the UAE's Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), a total of 57 per cent of Emirati children attend private schools. Every year 7 per cent of public school enrolled Emirati children migrate to private schools. Despite the huge investment made by the government in staffing and enhancing public schools in the country, private schools are perceived as offering better education [21].

The growing attendance of private schools by Emirati children has raised issues with the government decrying teaching of Arabic, Islamic studies and culture in private schools [21]. 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 [21]; [22] and [23] most parents view private schools as more capable in terms of creating highly confident and globally aware children compared to public schools. Overall, 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.

3. Results of Qualitative Interview

A mixed method approach premised on pragmatist philosophy was adopted for this study. In an in-depth interview of one of the education department leaders in Abu Dhabi conducted. The interview was an open ended questions and the results are as follow;

Q1: How would you rate the success of Emiratisation?

“We are trying but it is challenging, we are now requiring even local teachers to speak in English, so this is something that will take longer time...”

Based on the above response, the idea of human resource localization is not only not working as anticipated but also seems to have flawed from the outset. The fact that even local teachers are now expected to speak and teach in English seems to be counter-productive to idea of integrating teaching with local culture. Principally, the above perspective is indicative of an Emiratisation strategy that was just designed to create jobs for citizens as opposed to having greater objective of deeply integrating local culture into the educational system. This could be the reason why this approach has consistently failed to yield expected results.

Q2: Are citizens acquiring the right kind of skills required for a transition to a knowledge-based economy (one of the strategic goals of the country)?

“Skill are there amongst the people; however, the math, physics books are in English... previously they were in Arabic... therefore, the most important thing is to raise the level of the English language”

Development of the right kinds of skills amongst the locals is foundational to their full participation in development of the country. According to the head of research, availability of such skills is not the issue; it is the language barrier that is the issue. 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 in the process nation building and most importantly

in the educational process of future generations. It is ironic that human resource localization in the nation principally depends on a foreign language and expertise.

Q3: Do you think culture is an impediment to full participation of nationals in the economy?
"I don't think the culture will be an impediment to realizing full participation of nationals in the economy"

This is another contradictory statement which reflects the scale of the problem with localization of human resource in the country. Socio-culture is blamed to lack of full participation the economy but is also not seen as an impediment to full participation. There is definitely a missing variable as to how socio-culture can be the problem and also not the problem at the same time.

Q4: Is it possible to fully localize education in the country in the medium term?
"It is not going to be possible to have a fully localized education system in the medium term"

Localization or Emiratisation was a favoured idealism that has over time lost its lustre. The desire to build a competitive knowledge-based economy requires top notch expertise without compromise. This is becoming a challenge for the country – how to balance between pressures of national competitiveness and localization of human resource. Eventually, a trade-off needs to be made at some point.

Q5: Do you think teachers who have a proper understanding of local cultures are better placed to prepare students for proper engagement in the labour market?
"I do not think proper understanding of local culture is any important in the proper engagement of students"

This is also another statement that reflects on the diminishing allure of Emiratisation. Increasingly, there is 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. The merits or demerits of this position will probably be judged by history.

However, the questions of sustainability are apparent.

4. Results of Quantitative Questionnaire Survey

This study collected data from a wide range of stakeholders including policy makers, educational leaders, teachers, and government human resource managers. A survey targeting teachers was also conducted to evaluate job satisfaction levels and perspectives on Emiratisation. For the survey, this study adapted the standardized Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) was adopted. The survey managed to secure 111 respondents and the demography of the respondents is in table 1

Table 1 – Participant

Item	Range	Frequency (number)	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	51 or more	9	8.1
	46-50	15	13.5
	41-45	20	18
	36-40	19	17.1
	31-35	21	18.9
	26-30	25	22.5
	21-25	1	0.9
	Missing	1	0.9
	Total	111	100
Gender	Male	43	38.7
	Female	68	61.3
	Total	111	100
Work Experience (years)	more than 20 years	17	15.3
	16-20 years	18	16.2
	11-15 years	21	18.9
	6-10 years	32	28.8
	3-5 years	19	17.1
	1-2 years	3	2.7
	Less than 1	1	0.9

	year		
--	------	--	--

Table 2 above shows participants' statistics. The table shows one missing data and this missing data was generated using mean imputation technique. Hence a total of 111 responses were used in the study. In terms of age, majority of participants were between the ages of 26 and 50 with people aged between 26 and 30 forming the largest group (22.5% of participants). Only 1 participant was below the age of 25 with 9 participants being above 51 years old. Males accounted for 61% of all participants with females accounting for 39%.

4.1 Human resources development

Respondents were requested to tick the 5-point Likert's scale on the degree of satisfaction to each of the job satisfaction group in human resources domain. Where scale 1 indicates the highly dissatisfied and scale 5 indicate highly satisfied. The results are as in table 2

Table 2 – rank of factors in job satisfaction group

Nos.	Factors	N	Mean score	Std. Deviation
1	Satisfaction	111	5.4077	1.27135
2	Contribution	111	5.1847	1.13454
3	Nature of work	111	5.1351	1.00158
4	Communication	111	4.8776	1.28102
5	Contingent rewards	111	4.5691	1.42966
6	Pay	111	4.5330	1.22764
7	Fringe benefits	111	4.5090	1.09287
8	Promotion	111	3.6284	1.28092
9	Operating conditions	111	3.5278	0.80649

Table 2 above shows levels of satisfaction of factors in job satisfaction group. The highest rank is satisfaction with supervisor ($M=5.4077$, $SD=1.2713$) and the lowest rank is operation conditions ($M=3.5278$, $SD=.8064$). However, satisfaction with pay ranked much lower than the author anticipated ($M=4.5330$, $SD=1.2276$).

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Then the collected was used for correlation analysis. The analysis was undertaken between

grouped variables of personal career development (PCD), organizational career support (OCS), and job satisfaction. The result of the analysis is as table 3.

Table 3 - Job Satisfaction, PCD and OCS

Items	Job Satisfaction	OCS	PCD
Job Satisfaction	1		
OCS	0.590**	1	
PCD	0.161	0.475**	1

**correlation significant at $p<.01$; *Correlation significant at $p<.05$ (2-tailed)

Table 3 above presents correlation results between job satisfaction, OCS and PCD. No statistically significant relationship between employee job satisfaction and perception of personal career development (PCD) ($r = 0.161$, $n = 111$, $p = 0.091$). Thus, there is no relationship between total job satisfaction and how employees perceive their PCD. This is generally unexpected as high level of PCD has always been linked to high levels of job satisfaction. For *PCD and OCS*, there is a weak but significant correlation between PCD and OCS ($r=.475$, $n=111$, $p=.000$). In the context of table 4 which has reported significantly higher levels of PCD relative to OCS, the above results show that while perception of PCD could be high, it has no impact on an individuals' overall job satisfaction. However, perception of OCS have significant impacts on an individual's overall job satisfaction.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Sustainable HR Development Strategy

Overall, 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 [22], [23]. 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

[20] and Raven [19] 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 [21]. 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 [22], [23] the role of cultural pride in the development of capable young men is completely lost.

5.2 Teacher Needs, Perception and Expectation

The findings of this study have also reported significant correlation between PCD and OCS. Increasing levels of PCD is accompanied by increasing levels of OCS. Essentially, organizations with adequate OCS measures in place are also likely to have employees with high levels of PCD as well. A previous study [24] also reported similar conclusion arguing that that an individuals' career success depends on the correlation between individual plans and organizational practices.

Another interesting result that has been reported by this study is the markedly lower levels of PCD, OCS and job satisfaction amongst UAE citizens compared to non-citizens. Issues of culture, perception of competence, and intrinsic motivation should be further investigated during the interviews and focus groups to extract more insights on the remarkably lower levels of engagement amongst UAE citizen employees. Of great interest is the fact that a significant majority of 71% are of the opinion that having local teachers can significantly add value to the educational process in general. Considering that the survey comprised of majority foreign teachers, these results reflect an issue that the educational leadership has largely chosen to ignore.

5.3 Emiratisation of Abu Dhabi Education Sector

Emiratisation is four decades old. Policies have evolved over the years. The failure of "first generation" policy measures led to the formulation of reactionary "second generation" policy initiatives [1]. Some of the key policy

changes over time include greater emphasis on English instruction and focus on science and mathematics [19], [25]. This switch definitely increased educational attainment amongst the locals but level of natural economic participation has not increased in a commensurate manner. This study echoes and builds on the studies by [26], [27], [28] that Abu Dhabi and indeed countries in the region must be able to offer first class education and also inculcate the right kind of attitudes that will encourage venturing. This does not necessarily mean wholesale importation of an education system and teachers but greater adaptation of local best practices with global best practice.

Conclusion

There is a need to reduce emphasis on English proficiency as a bar minimum requirement for teaching. This should underpin a sustainable medium and long term HR strategy for Abu Dhabi's educational sector. Currently, majority of teachers who actually interact with students strongly believe localization of teachers can add significant value to learners. In essence educators need the presence of local teachers for them to effectively execute their role. Finally, education sector leaders must not give up on localization of teachers as it currently seems they have. The very objective of creating a knowledge-based economy driven by nationals is largely premised on having nationals participate in the training process.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia for supporting this research work.

References

- [1] Forstenlechner, I. and Rutledge, E. J. (2010). Growing levels of national unemployment in the Arab Gulf: time to update the 'social contract, Middle East Policy, 17(2), pp. 38-51.
- [2] Fasano-Filho, M.U. and Goyal, R., 2004. Emerging strains in GCC labor markets (No. 4-71). International Monetary Fund.
- [3] Fergany, N., 2001. Aspects of labor migration and unemployment in the Arab

- region. Almishkat Center for Research, Cairo, 3.
- [4] Government of Abu Dhabi, 2008 Economy and Vision 2021 retrived from <https://www.government.ae/en/about-the-uae/economy>
- [5] Kramar, R. (2014). Beyond strategic human resource management: is sustainable human resource management the next approach?. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(8), 1069-1089.
- [6] [6] Jamali, D.R., El Dirani, A.M. and Harwood, I.A., 2015. Exploring human resource management roles in corporate social responsibility: the CSR-HRM co-creation model. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 24(2), pp.125-143.
- [7] Greenwood, M. 2012. 'Ethical analyses of HRM: A review and research agenda.' *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1-12.
- [8] Preuss, L., Haunschild, A. and Matten, D. 2009. The rise of CSR: Implications for HRM and employee representation. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19, 954-972.
- [9] Jackson, S. E., Schuler, R. S., & Jiang, K. (2014). An aspirational framework for strategic human resource management. *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), 1-56.
- [10] Rutledge, E., & Al-Shamsi, F. (2015). The impact of labor nationalization policies on female participation rates in the Arab Gulf. *Women, Work and Welfare in the Middle East: The Role of Socio-Demographics, Entrepreneurship and Public Policies*, 525-551.
- [11] Al Ali, J. 2008. Emiratization: Drawing UAE Nationals into Their Surging Economy, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 28(9): 365–379. 17
- [12] Al Dosary, A., and S. Rahman. 2005. Saudization (Localization) — A Critical 18 Review, *Human Resource Development International* 8(4): 495–502
- [13] Edgar, D., Azhar, A. and Duncan, P., 2016. The impact of the saudization policy on recruitment and retention: A case study of the banking sector in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Business*, 1(5), pp.01-14.
- [14] Harry, W. 2007. Employment Creation and Localization: the Crucial Human Resource Issues for the GCC, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 18(1): 132–146
- [15] Marmenout, K., and P. Lirio, 2013. 'Local Female Talent Retention in the Gulf: Emirati Women Bending With the Wind,' *The International Journal of 3 Human Resource Management* 25(2): 144–166
- [16] Assaad, R. (2014). Making sense of Arab labor markets: the enduring legacy of dualism. *IZA Journal of Labor & Development*, 3(1), 6.
- [17] Marchon, C., & Toledo, H. (2014). Rethinking employment quotas in the UAE. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(16), 2253-2274.
- [18] Gaad, E., Arif, M., & Scott, F. (2006). Systems analysis of the UAE education system. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20(4), 291-303.
- [19] Raven, J. (2011). Emiratizing the education sector in the UAE: Contextualization and challenges. *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues*, 4(2), 134-141
- [20] Godwin, S. (2006). Globalization, education and Emiratization: a case study of the United Arab Emirates, *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* 27(1), pp. 1-14.
- [21] Troudi, S. and Hafidh, G., 2017. The Dilemma of English and its roles in the United Arab Emirates and the Gulf. *Gulf Research Center*.
- [22] Litz, D. and Hourani, R.B., 2016. Developing educational capital in times of change: The experience of Abu Dhabi. In *Leveraging social capital in systemic*

education reform (pp. 115-141). Brill Sense.

- [23] Younes, M. I. (2016). The Impact of CLIL on Arabic, English and Content Learning of Arab High School Students in the UAE (Doctoral dissertation, American University of Sharjah).
- [24] Gadi, P.D. and Kee, D.H.M., 2018. Human Resource Management Practices and Turnover Intention: the Mediating Role of Perceived Organizational Support in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. *International Journal of Engineering & Technology*, 7(3.25), pp.715-722.
- [25] Callen, M. T., Cherif, R., Hasanov, F., Hegazy, M. A., & Khandelwal, P. (2014). Economic diversification in the GCC: Past, present, and future. *International Monetary Fund*.
- [26] Askary, S., Kukunuru, S., & Pech, R. (2014). An assessment of employee commitment to work among UAE nationals. *International Journal of Business Excellence*, 7(1), 1-15.
- [27] Marchon and Toledo (2014), and Assaad, R. (2014). Making sense of Arab labor markets: the enduring legacy of dualism. *IZA Journal of Labor & Development*, 3(1), 6.