



## SUMMARY

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other surrounding Gulf Arab nations an increasing number of males are opting out of higher education. In the UAE less than 30% of students attending public higher education institutions are male. Little however is known about why some males choose to continue their education and others do not. This policy paper, which is drawn from the first part of a study on understanding male enrolment patterns in the UAE, looks at a sample of males who have continued on to higher education. The paper begins with an overview of higher education in the UAE. It then looks at the factors influencing the participation and persistence of males in general. Next it outlines the study from which the data presented was taken, taking a closer look at the characteristics of males who have continued to higher education, including the roles of parents, schools and friends. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the challenges facing males who choose to continue their education and how these might be dealt with in the future

## The 30%: Who are the males in higher education in the UAE

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### Introduction

The decline in the number of males enrolled in higher education globally has been well documented. In the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the UAE in particular the percentage of national males attending federal universities and colleges is now less than 30%. One of the reasons for the low enrolment rate stems from the fact that a significant number of males are failing to complete secondary education, with dropout rates estimated to be as high as 20% for a single year (KHDA, 2010). Another factor often offered as a reason for the low male tertiary enrolment rates is the easy accessibility to low skilled public sector jobs such as the police force and the army. However, there have been few attempts made to systematically examine the reasons behind the poor retention and persistence rates of males at both secondary and tertiary levels. This policy paper uses survey data gathered from males who have continued their education and who are currently enrolled in colleges across the UAE. It is the first part of a larger study that is examining the causes and consequences of male dropouts, funded by the Emirates Foundation and the Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research.

The paper begins by giving an overview of higher education in the UAE. Next it looks at the literature on factors, which impact participation and persistence of males in education. Then it gives details about the study on which the paper is based and outlines the main findings. Finally, it concludes with a discussion about the emerging themes and some recommendations.

### Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates

Since the formation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971 the education sector has been rapidly expanding. Figures from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) show that 79% of Emirati female and 54% of Emirati male high school graduates apply for higher education either within the UAE or abroad (MOHESR, 2007). In terms of numbers at federal institutions<sup>1</sup> total enrolment has grown from around 28,000 in 1999/2000 to close to 35,000 in 2005/2006 (MOHESR, 2007).

The public higher education system of the UAE consists of three federal institutions, the oldest of which is the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), established in 1976. UAEU is located in the city of Al Ain in the emirate of Abu Dhabi and has over 12,000 students, 24% of whom are male (UNDP, 2012). The next oldest institution, established in 1988, is the Higher Colleges of Technology which has approximately 16,000 students, 38% of whom are male. The Higher

<sup>1</sup> Federal institutions are almost exclusively for Emiratis and are free to Emiratis making them the first choice of most candidates, KHDA figures for the emirate of Dubai state that 99.6% of students at federal universities are Emirati (KHDA, 2010).

Colleges have campuses across the UAE in Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and the Western Region in Madinat Zayed and Ruwais. These colleges initially were conceived as diploma granting, vocational style institutions but over time have evolved into degree granting institutions. They are particularly attractive to Emirati students as they allow them to live at home while studying, which for many female students is ideal. The newest entrant is Zayed University, which was established in 1998 as a university exclusively for women. It has campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and currently has over 7,000 students. In the past 3 years however Zayed has opened its doors to male students and the number of men attending is growing each year. Despite the growth in student places and number of federal institutions males still only account for around 30% of all students and this trend shows little sign of changing soon.

Not only do fewer males enroll in higher education, studies have found that fewer persist and that the problem of retention continues into the tertiary arena, with males being more likely to abandon their studies if they find employment. According to a National Admissions and Placement Office<sup>2</sup> (NAPO) survey conducted in 2005 only about half of male high school graduates who were admitted to UAEU and Higher Colleges of Technology actually chose to enroll (MOHESR, 2007). The remainder declined, often giving the reason as having found a job. The issue of easy access to public sector jobs, which require minimal education, has long been blamed for the poor retention and achievement of males<sup>3</sup> in the GCC. Public sector employment accounts for close to 90% of nationals' employment in Qatar and the UAE (Gonzalez, 2010) and is also high in other Gulf States. For Emirati men there has always been the highly popular option of the police and the military both of which have, at least until recently, accepted boys without a secondary school diploma.

In the UAE therefore we find a unique situation whereby fewer men than women continue onto higher education but despite this unemployment remains higher for women than for men. The typical work-education linkage that functions as an incentive for education elsewhere in the world does not appear to function in the same way in the Gulf. This disconnect between being educated and finding a job acts as a powerful disincentive to education. Coupled with a very poor quality, and a far from engaging, school system it does little to encourage males to persist with their education. Emirati males who have pursued graduate studies such as PhDs do not find themselves earning more than their

far less educated counterparts in the military, police or even local government. In addition, the dramatic decline in the number of male Emirati teachers<sup>4</sup> over the last 10 years paints a worrying picture of the future for males in the UAE and in the GCC at large.

## Factors Influencing Participation and Persistence of Males in Education

If we look at the wider literature on factors affecting participation and persistence there are two broad areas that have been well studied. The first is factors relating to the family and socio-economic status and the second is factors related to school. The debate about whether the school or the family is more important for a child's education is ongoing but there is compelling evidence from both sides.

### Family & socioeconomic influences

There are a number of factors within the context of the family that shape the social and academic lives of adolescents at school and beyond. They include family income, socioeconomic status (SES), level of educational and occupational attainment of parents, and family structure among others (Rumberger, 1995; Hunt, 2008). Many studies have linked parents' education with their children's academic achievement (Maurin and McNally, 2008; Carneiro, Meghir, and Matthias, 2007). Oreopoulos, Page, and Stevens (2003) have also found that the higher level of parents' education, the less likely their children were to repeat a year.

When looking at parents separately, studies have reported that maternal education has strong effects on child behavioral problems, math, reading, grade repetition, and educational achievement (Carneiro, Meghir, and Matthias, 2007; Black, Devereux, and Salvanes, 2003; Kemptner and Marcus, 2011). Similarly, father's education and occupational status are causally linked to the academic achievement of their children (Maurin and McNally, 2008).

Family is also known to play an important role in shaping the career aspirations and ambitions of students. Cross-national studies have shown that parents' education and expectations are very important in guiding students' decision about their future education (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Buchman and Dalton, 2002; Abbott-Chapman, 2000). Looking more closely at gender differences, in a study examining the aspirations of Jamaican male youths, Walker (1997) found that the young men's career aspirations are influenced by the

<sup>2</sup> NAPO is a part of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR)

<sup>3</sup> See PISA and TIMSS results, as well as internal Ministry of Education examination results (Ridge, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Communication with Yousef Al Shehhi (November, 2011).

occupations of their fathers. This supports an earlier study, which reported that a father's job significantly contributes to the son's, but not the daughter's, career aspirations while attending college (Dunlop and Canale, 1988).

### School influences

In addition to studies on the impact and role of the family there are also a slew of studies on school factors affecting participation and persistence of males. Some scholars argue that the decline in male achievement (and the resultant impact on participation) is influenced by the fact that schools have become 'feminized' catering better to the needs and preferences of female students (Gibb, Ferguson and Horwood, 2008). Other school-based factors that have been found to significantly affect males' education include disruptive classroom behaviour, an alienating school environment, irrelevant school curricula, and poor student-teacher relations (Trent and Slade, 2001; Brooks et al, 1997). Farmer (2001) argues that teachers can play a positive role in the experiences of students, whereby a supportive teacher at school who has high expectations of his/her students has been found to come second after parents and peers in terms of influencing student career choices and plans. Hanushek (2005) has also found that the difference between a good and a bad teacher can amount to up to a year's worth of learning. Studies on factors affecting retention have also found that failure at school is key to persistence in education and students who fail repeatedly or who have to repeat grades are more likely to drop out of school (UNESCO, 2007; Stearns et al., 2007).

Peer influences are also important in shaping the school experiences of males in collectivist or community-based cultures (Toldson, 2008). In a study of Black American males, Toldson, Braithwaite, and Rentie (2009) state that "Because of the collectivist orientation of black people, peer influences are hypothesized to be essential to promoting academic success and subsequent college aspirations among African Americans" (p.120).

## Examining Males in Higher Education in the UAE

This paper is based on an ongoing study, funded in part by the Emirates Foundation, which seeks to understand young Emirati males' reasons for continuing, or not continuing, their education past secondary school. The study in its entirety will examine two groups of Emirati males. The first group comprises those who decided to continue with their education and are currently

enrolled in the Higher Colleges of Technology, and the second group are those who did not complete school and dropped out prior to Grade 12. This paper focuses on approximately 350 male students who are currently undertaking tertiary education at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT). Data was gathered through administering a survey (adapted from an instrument used in the USA<sup>5</sup>) to a sample ranging from 25-75 students at each of the men's colleges across the UAE (see Table 1 below). The data was analyzed using SPSS and both descriptive and correlational data is expounded.

Finally, there were some limitations to the study. Firstly, two emirates, Ajman and Um Al Qawain do not have HCT campuses and thus the sample of young men from these two emirates is not as large as one would have hoped. In addition, young men who choose to attend the Higher Colleges are not the top-performing high school students as these will typically gain admittance to UAE University or may choose to study abroad. The sampled group therefore represents young men who completed high school but are not necessarily the most academically inclined. Finally, the instrument used did not capture some of the data that would be more helpful in the UAE context, such as family size.

## Findings

The main findings of the study are organized into three categories drawn from the literature on factors impacting persistence and performance in education. Firstly, family and socioeconomic factors, secondly school factors, and finally factors relating to ambitions and aspirations. The findings highlight how these factors affect or impact young Emirati males' decisions and capacity to continue to tertiary education rather than drop out before completing high school.

### Sample overview

It can be seen in Table 1 that the majority of students in the sample came from the emirate of Abu Dhabi, followed by Sharjah and Dubai which is consistent with demographics of nationals in the UAE. These campuses were over-sampled in order to reflect the demography of the UAE in the overall analysis.

Table 2 below illustrates the types of schools that the participants attended. It is interesting to note that the majority of students (74%) attended government schools. This finding highlights that the public sector is still very much the largest education provider for nationals in the country, and therefore provides a good reason why education reforms should continue to focus on the public education system. While emirates such as Dubai have seen larger numbers of Emiratis attending

<sup>5</sup> The instrument was used in Russel Rumberger's (1995) study "Dropping out of Middle School: A Multilevel Analysis of Students and Schools," which surveyed dropouts across the USA in grades 8-10.

**Table 1. Participants by Emirate**

Emirate	Number	Percentage
Abu Dhabi	113	32
Sharjah	78	23
Dubai	62	18
Ras Al Khaimah	51	15
Fujairah	26	7
Ajman	9	3
Um Al Quwain	3	1
Non-Emirati	5	1
Total	347	100

**Table 2. Participants by school type**

School Type	Number	Percentage
Government	257	74
Applied Technology High Schools	40	11.5
Private (Arabic)	23	6.5
Private (English)	16	5
Other	11	3
Total	347	100

private schools<sup>6</sup>, on the national level public schools still dominate as the education provider for Emiratis.

Over 80% of the students had completed high school in the last two years and the majority of the students surveyed were taking foundation courses, as we had requested students who were in the first or second year of study. There were around 5% who had completed high school over 10 years ago and had returned to study.

### Family and socioeconomic influences

Family and socioeconomic factors have been well documented as influential on young peoples' post-secondary education choices. Descriptive statistics for parental education revealed that 14% of mothers had no formal education while less than 10% had a bachelor degree or higher, the majority holding a secondary school diploma (40%). For fathers, 11% had no formal education, 20% had a bachelor degree or higher and 35% had a secondary school qualification. Thus, the fathers of the sampled population in general have received more years of education than their wives. This trend could reasonably be expected to reverse

itself if the current number of males dropping out from school persists. In terms of employment, fathers who worked were largely employed by the police or army (30%), while 32% were retired and nearly 10% were unemployed. It can be seen therefore that over 40% of the young men surveyed did not have a father who was working at the time. Studies from other countries have looked at the impact of unemployment, particularly of fathers, on children's education and future annual earnings and have found negative and significant relationships (Oreopoulos, Page, & Stevens, 2003; Stevens & Schaller, 2009).

Family factors were the only category in which statistically significant relationships were found, confirming other studies (Maurin & McNally, 2008; Carneiro, Meghir & Parey, 2007; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Oreopoulos, Page, & Stevens, 2003) that find strong correlations between education and the family. In particular the study found relationships between the father's education and career with young men's likelihood of repeating a year and their own choice of career. Contrary to other studies, which find strong

<sup>6</sup> Dubai School Inspection Bureau, 2010 Annual Report (KHDA, 2011)

relationships between mothers' educational levels (Black, Devereux, and Salvanes, 2003; Carneiro, Meghir & Parey, 2007) and various factors, this study found that for young men in the UAE the influence of the father should not be underestimated. A positive and significant relationship ( $p=.005$ ) was found between father's level of education and whether or not the young man had repeated a year of school, with more educated fathers being less likely to have a son who repeated a school year. Interestingly there was no significant relationship between the mother's education level and repeating a year of school. In addition, the student's career aspirations closely mirrored their father's occupation, particularly if the father worked in the police, army or in the private sector. The one place that the education of the mother was important was regarding who the student talked to about any problems. The data suggests that the more educated the mother is the more likely the son is to come to her with problems than others (friends or teachers for example). This is consistent with an Australian study (Abbott-Chapman, 2000), which found that 88% of sampled students considered their mother's advice (as compared to 76% in the case of their father's advice) important in making decisions about their studies, future education and career.

Again consistent with the literature siblings shared similar characteristics with 75% of the sample having siblings who also stayed in school. But the fact that 25% of respondents had siblings who had dropped out is still relatively high and suggests that these young men have had to overcome quite a lot in order to continue their education.

In terms of economic well-being students in the sample reported relatively high levels of wealth in general. Over 65% of the sample reported that their family owned more than 4 cars but only 56% reported they owned more than 4 computers, meaning that they could conceivably have more cars than computers in a household. Related to literacy it was found that 52% had less than 50 books in the house and only 39% received a daily newspaper. This confirms data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009+, which found that UAE's 15 year-olds scored 431 in reading literacy, which was well below the OECD average of 493 and ranked the country 11th from the bottom of the 65 participating countries in the test (Walker, 2011).

### **School experiences**

In terms of their feelings about school and whether they liked it or not, it might have been expected that young men who continue on to higher education feel quite positively about school. However the majority of

respondents (60%) felt that school was just 'ok', with 24% reporting that they 'didn't like it at all' and only 18% who said they 'liked it a lot'.

As reported before the majority of these young men attended a public school. Consistent with other data on public boys' schools (Ridge, 2008) this study also found that library usage at school was extremely low, with over 65% rarely or never going to the library in their final year of school. This coupled with the earlier data on the lack of reading material in the home compounds the reading/writing issue even further.

Friends' (from school) characteristics were also interesting with 70% of respondents reporting that 1 or more of their friends had dropped out of school. Interestingly, they were more likely to have friends who dropped out if they attended a public school versus a private school.

### **Ambitions and aspirations**

Finally, there were findings that could be best understood in the context of ambitions and aspirations. This reflected what these students hope to do with their lives in the future in terms of employment or giving back to society. While it may be expected that students who have continued on to higher education would have some idea of what sector they would like to work in, that was not the case. It was found that 30% did not know what they wanted to do when asked what job they would like to have at the age of 30 and another 21% aspired to be generic managers in any sector (public preferably), see Table 3 below.

Career aspirations also closely mirrored their fathers' career choices especially if the father was in the police/army. In fact, fathers played an important role across the whole study in terms of students' decision to continue with higher education and then with regards to what they would study. Related to career aspirations was the finding that 90% of students felt it was important to be successful at work. However what they mean by success was not captured and would be worth defining better for the future.

Attitudes to helping others were also interesting, with nearly 30% of respondents stating that addressing socio-economic inequalities was not important but that helping the community was very important. This points to strong community identification, which is consistent with a culture that emphasizes family connections. It may well be that within the community context addressing socio-economic inequalities is important but that out of this context it becomes a more difficult concept to grasp. Perhaps future surveys could phrase these concepts differently to reflect local notions of community and inequality.

**Table 3: Job Aspirations of higher education students**

School Type	Number	Percentage
Manager	74	21
Engineer, architect, pilot	65	19
Army or police	54	16
Private sector	28	8
Public sector	21	6
Don't know	105	30

## Conclusions

While this is only part one of a two part study some intriguing findings have presented themselves that deserve further and perhaps more in-depth consideration. Firstly, the role of the father, which in much of the international literature is marginalized, seems to be of great importance in the UAE context. Secondly, attitudes to reading, which are developed in both school and the home, have the potential to have a highly detrimental impact on current and future tertiary studies. Finally, the purposes of higher education for young men in the UAE seem to be at odds with conventional purposes of higher education in other countries.

### The role of the father

Our study found a significant and positive relationship between the education of the father and the likelihood of repeating a year in school. It also found that young men's career aspirations were largely consistent with the career of their fathers. While studies from other parts of the world emphasize the importance of the education of the mother (Black, Devereux, and Salvanes, 2003; Carneiro, Meghir & Parey, 2007) our study suggests that, at least in the UAE, having educated fathers is equally important. This is, however, consistent with more recent studies (Kemptner and Marcus, 2011) in which the background (education and occupational status) of the mother's partner was a strong determining factor of the son's, and not the daughter's, academic achievement. "The[se] gender differences are in line with the idea of gender-specific parental role-models and the finding that children identify stronger with the same-sex parent" (Kemptner and Marcus, 2011, p.14).

The importance of the father in light of the high percentage of male Emirati high-school dropouts and the small number of male Emiratis continuing onto higher education should be a focus of policy makers in the UAE. If males do not continue their education it is more likely that their sons will repeat a year of school, and the more a child repeats a year of school the more likely he is to then drop out (UNESCO, 2007; Stearns et al., 2007). While it is important to educate women,

having a well-educated mother does not necessarily translate to the son doing well in school and thus it is equally critical that the next generation of men be well educated too.

### Attitudes towards reading

Across questions relating to reading in the home and in school young men reported very little engagement with books, newspapers or even reading online (with more cars than computers in the average home). Over half of the young men surveyed had less than 50 books in the home and only 39% had a daily newspaper. At school nearly 70% of these young men rarely or never visited the library in their final year. The absence of good reading models and encouragement of reading for pleasure or learning has a potentially highly detrimental impact upon students once they reach higher education. It makes university course reading lists difficult and researching assignments arduous. A lack of fluency in reading in general adds a tremendous burden to the workload at the tertiary level. It is clear that far more attention needs to be paid to improving and instigating a culture of reading both in the home and in school in order to help young people (men and women) succeed in their tertiary studies. Ultimately, if this situation persists there are only two likely scenarios, either standards at higher education institutions will continue to be low or foundation years at tertiary institutions will continue to be needed. In both cases the demands of higher education will seem insurmountable to students, potentially leading to more cases of plagiarism and paying for someone to write papers for them (Swan, 2012). In either situation the outlook is far from promising.

### The purpose of higher education for young Emirati males

The study findings showed that a full 30% of young men did not know what they wanted to do in the future. A further 20% responded they just wanted to be a manager. This means that 50% of the students surveyed did not have adequate knowledge or information about the sector or career that they wanted to work in when they graduate. While there is always some uncertainty

about where a degree leads to, one would expect that there was at least a particular sector that these young people wanted to work in. It appears that many of the young men surveyed were pursuing higher education without much clear direction and possibly for reasons other than a career. For some it may be because of their parents' ambitions or desires for them to be educated,

for others it may be seen as way to have instant status through becoming a manager right after graduation. However it is clear that there needs to be a lot more research conducted to understand the motivation behind these young men attending college and what they hope to get out of it in the end, especially if employment is not the deciding factor.

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