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ENGIN, Marion and MCKEOWN, Kara

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Motivation of Emirati males and females to study at higher education in the United Arab Emirates

Marion Engin, Sheffield Hallam University

Kara McKeown, Zayed University

Abstract

This article reports on a study into the motivation of young Emirati undergraduate students for studying in a higher education institution in the United Arab Emirates. The participants were male and female undergraduate students in their first or second year of studying. The aim of the study was to examine their motivation using a framework that recognized the unique sociocultural context of the UAE. Data were analysed according to an adapted framework encompassing both Self-Determination Theory and Personal Investment theory. SDT was chosen due to its focus on different types of extrinsic motivation, and PI theory was chosen for its non-culture specific applicability. A major finding of the research is that an examination of motivation according to dichotomous relationships of intrinsic vs. extrinsic, collectivist vs. individualistic, self as individual vs. self as part of society are over simplistic in this specific context. A more useful paradigm is one in which the individual is influenced by personal and professional goals, as well as social and familial expectations. Unexpectedly, use of language (Arabic or English) did not influence the results. These findings will provide teachers and university administration with a better understanding of their students, and will replace certain stereotypes that teachers may have about their students and their motivation for studying.

Keywords: motivation, self-determination theory, personal investment theory, sense of self

Introduction

Prior to 1971 the UAE formally known as the “Trucial States” was a British Protectorate, relatively isolated from the rest of the world and extremely poor. With independence and the advent of oil the speed and extent of change across all aspects of life has affected every aspect of Emirati culture and society, creating in Khalaf’s (2002) words “a rupture in the local life pattern” (p. 18). This speed of change is reflected in population statistics. In 2013 the total population of the UAE was recorded at 9.2 million. This contrasts with the figure of 4.10 million just under a decade earlier in 2005 (Doing Business 2014). Emiratis share one of the highest GDP per capita incomes in the world. In March 2015 the UAE Minister for Economy recorded that the UAE GDP was 112 times higher than in 1971 (UAE GDP 112 times bigger than in 1971 due to wise economy, 2008). As Shibab (1997) observes, this high level of wealth has enabled the UAE to bypass the stages through which other developed countries have passed.

The Education available in the UAE before 1971 was basic. The first federal Higher Education Institution, the University of the United Arab Emirates opened in 1977. The Higher Colleges was founded in 1988 (The UAE Education system, 2013).

The site of this study, Zayed University, was founded in 1998 (Zayed University, 2015). In 2012 there were 40,433 Emirati students enrolled at these three federal institutions. (Centre for Higher Education data and Statistics 2012). As Ridge (2010) observes, since higher education has become freely available more females have taken up this opportunity than men. In 2011, 70% of students in Higher Education were female (Abdulla and Ridge 2011). Abdulla and Ridge (2011) state that UAE women's pursuit of Higher education has become a social and familial expectation and that women are encouraged to pursue higher education because of its availability and because it means they will be less dependent on their future husbands. Furthermore, in the advent of divorce, will be able to support themselves. Less is known about UAE males in connection with higher education. Abdulla and Ridge (2011) note that there has been a lack of research on males and education in the UAE. They call for future research on the choices that young males make in connection with education. However they posit that it is likely that the stereotypical view of the privileged Gulf male who has guaranteed employment may not hold true for the males of the less privileged northern Emirates.

In general, there has been little examination of motivation for studying at higher education in the Gulf context, in particular, in this fast changing context of the UAE. Some studies have focused on the motivation for specializing in certain subjects at higher education such as English (Midraj, Midraj, O'Neill and Sellami, 2008), dentistry (Rashid, Ghotane, Abufanas and Gallagher 2013), and teaching (Ashcraft 2007; Sharif, Hossan and McMinn 2014). One of the purposes of this study is to raise awareness amongst faculty of who our students are in terms of goals and motivation. Some faculty may believe that students lack motivation for studying in higher education, and that they lack specific tangible goals. In order to find out more about our students, this study aims to explore the motivation for males and females continuing past secondary school into higher education, regardless of subject. This study also aims to situate this examination within a non-culturally specific framework of analysis.

Background

Motivation studies in the Gulf

The study of motivation for continuing into higher education is entrenched in the unique sociocultural context of the Gulf. In terms of previous studies on motivation of women, Findlow (2013) reports on findings that suggest some Emirati women go into higher education not for financial reasons or jobs, but because it gives them time to reflect on who they are and their roles within the family and society. One of the major findings of her extensive survey of women and higher education in the Gulf was that while women want to enroll in higher education, there was found to be a tension between the surface desire of society to educate women, and the lack of actual participation opportunities both economically and politically. Abdulla (2005, 85) found that women have been "deceived by the movement towards education". Research suggests that there is considerably less participation from males in higher education than women (Abdulla and Ridge 2011). Some reasons which emerged from their study pointed to sociological factors, such as the role of the family and lack of

support from the family. The authors also state that some males do not participate, as they believe connections will get them a job rather than education. This is in direct contrast to reasons stated by women (Abdulla 2005). Hopes and expectations from women outside the home are high amongst family members (Madsen 2009), particularly if pursuing a degree in education to become a teacher (Ashcraft 2007). In a study with Emirati and other Arab students, Rashid et al (2013) found that amongst both male and female students, the main reason for studying dentistry is financial stability and a good standard of living. These were strong pragmatic reasons for pursuing a degree in higher education. In short, there are conflicting reports on reasons for why Emirati males and females join higher education.

Various motivational scales have been used to investigate motivation for further study in the UAE. Sharif et al (2014) used a scale which included intrinsic, extrinsic, altruistic, and pragmatic dimensions of motivation. Altruism has been found to be a strong motivation determiner in other studies in the Gulf (Ashcraft 2007; Engin and McKeown 2012; Findlow 2006) as this refers to the desire to serve one's country and contribute to the development of the nation. The pragmatic dimension in Sharif et al's (2014) study refers to the desire to get a job and be an active member of society. Javid, Al Asmari and Farooq (2012) refer to this pragmatic dimension of motivation in their Saudi students as "utilitarian". These features may not be part of a motivation framework set in a more Western context. Thus, in order to capture the essence of motivation amongst young people in this rapidly changing and developing country, it was felt that the theoretical framework would need to encompass a range of motivational constructs from different perspectives (Jung, McCormick, Gregory, and Barnett 2011).

The role of language in culture identification

Language choice in terms of positioning and identity are crucial to a study in which participants use two languages, in this study, one a native language (Arabic) and the other, a second language (English). Identity in the study of motivation can be defined as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (Norton 1997, 410). In this definition we see the significance of language choice in terms of notions of self as an individual, self as part of a social group, and future goals. Not only will the choice of language position the speaker, but also the choice of words and vocabulary in that language of choice. Language is one of the strongest symbols in the construction of a particular cultural identity (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). Findlow (2006) suggests that use of Arabic embodies cultural authenticity, tradition, religion, whereas English symbolizes modernity, internationalism, business, and secularism (p. 25). Indeed, these themes also equate to the former being a feature of collectivist culture, and the latter being a feature of individualistic culture. Thus, it could be argued that when the participants use Arabic to define their understanding of motivation constructs, and their motivation for studying, that their answers would mirror the themes of tradition, altruism, and social relations. Similarly, when using English their answers would relate to themes of an individualistic nature such as 'getting on', and monetary success. Findlow (2006) in fact found that participants gave more altruistic answers in Arabic to the question as

to what they hope to gain from a university education, such as ‘to help my country’ (p. 30). When using English common motifs were status in business and a good education, whereas in Arabic the themes were more patriotic and ‘idealistic’ (p. 28) such as status, dreams, and service.

Collectivist and individualistic cultures

In a discussion of culture and motivation, the dichotomy of collectivist and individualistic cultures is inevitable. The type of cultural influence can be seen in the variables associated with motivation studies in terms of goals and sense of purpose. (Triandis 1995). Kumar and Maehr (2007) suggest that the distinction is relevant because the Western-oriented theories of motivation are defined from an individualistic perspective which favours individual goals rather than societal and group goals. Although there is debate as to whether the dichotomy is useful, valid, or even based on empirical evidence (Voronov and Singer 2002), McInerney (2012) argues that non-Western traditional and homogeneous societies will necessarily be more collectivist oriented. The dichotomy cannot be completely relied on, as all cultures have similar values, and the significance of a value will depend on the context. However, McInerney (2012) makes the point that in a study of motivation the type of culture needs to be acknowledged as this will play a role in the sense of self, a crucial aspect of motivation.

Theoretical underpinnings

Theoretical framework: Self-Determination Theory

The main theoretical underpinnings of our analytical framework rest on two well-established theories of motivation. Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory is premised on the notion of needs and regulatory behavior, and as such recognizes the role that society and others may have on one’s psychological drive or motivation. SDT also recognizes the self as the central driving force. SDT comprises two main types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsically motivated activities are those which “people do naturally and spontaneously when they feel free to follow their inner interests” (234). As such, intrinsic motivation is related to levels of autonomy and competence. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is managed to a certain extent by external regulations. The least self-determining type of regulation is external, that is regulation by rewards or avoidance of a punishment. The second is introjection, in which external regulations are partially internalized, but not fully assimilated. A more internalized form of regulated motivation is identification, when the individual accepts the external regulation, assimilating it as part of their own values. The last level of regulated motivation, which is the most self-determined, is integrated extrinsic motivation. The individual has accepted the external regulation, but has integrated it with their own values and beliefs, and other parts of their identity.

Deci and Ryan’s (2000) conceptual framework is particularly relevant to this study as it acknowledges the significant force played by others in the environment of the individual. However, it has been argued that frameworks such as Deci and Ryan’s are too Western-oriented as they focus almost entirely on the self and are premised on the

concept of individual freedom to behave (Kumar and Maehr 2007; Ng, Winter and Cardone 2011; Triandis 1995; Trumbull and Rothstein-Fisch 2011). Scholars argue for a theory of motivation that is culturally-sensitive and excludes the assumption that individuals are motivated by a need for independence, personal agency, and control (Salili and Hoosain 2007). Maehr and Meyer (1997) highlight the need for research on motivation which is studied in natural settings and is therefore context based. “Researchers especially need to situate this exploration in the contexts that the students (teachers, parents, and others) “naturally” experience” (p. 393). Ushioda (2006) calls for a sociocultural theoretical perspective on motivation in second language learning as “motivation is not located solely within the individual but is socially distributed, created within cultural systems of activities involving the mediation of others” (p. 154). A sociocultural perspective then needs to take account of the individual as self, but also as part of a larger culture and society in which he/she exists and performs.

Theoretical framework: Personal Investment Theory

As a result of the arguments above, Personal Investment Theory has been proposed as a more contextual and non-culture specific framework for studying motivation (King and Ganotice 2013; King and McInerney 2014; Maehr and Meyer 1997; McInerney 2008). King and McInerney (2014) argue that SDT rests on the concept of personal choice, which may not be an option in collectivist cultures. It is argued the PI theory crosses cultures, as its fundamental premise is that motivation derives from a sense of self, perceived goals, and facilitating conditions. Facilitating conditions are particularly relevant to this study due to the current discourse on educating youth and the follow up provision of educational opportunities (Fox 2007).

Although PI theory emerged from work in schools and is generally applied to achievement motivation studies in school classrooms, some concepts and measurements are directly applicable to this study. In particular, the following concepts are valid for the UAE context:

- Social goals as part of achievement goals. This is manifest as the value given to social concern and affiliation
- Sense of self. This is related to aspirations and self-worth both as an individual, and as part of the wider society. A sense of purpose derives from a sense of self.
- Sense of purpose. This derives from sense of self, and relates to the degree to which an individual values school (studying / university) for the future e.g. to get a job. “Focal here is the individual’s construction of ‘success’ and ‘failure’.
- Facilitating conditions. These relate in particular to parental support, peer support, and pride from others in the wider society. This also relates to the student’s perceived role in the society.

Thus, the framework used in this study was derived from SDT, PI theory, as well as a recognition of the notions of collectivist and individualistic cultures. There were several reasons for adapting and merging the two established frameworks (Adcroft 2011). Firstly, an earlier study by the authors used primarily the SDT (name deleted

for anonymity). It was felt that the SDT did not encompass many of the complex social and societal variables described in the earlier sections of this paper. Secondly, both frameworks start with a central notion of self. It was felt that this was crucial to a study of motivation, regardless of the particular culture. Thirdly, SDT gave the various scales of motivation which served as a sound starting point for analysis, whilst PI theory provided concepts which could transcend Western-oriented notions of the primacy of independence and self as an autonomous being.

Table 1 below summarises the overlapping constructs from the theoretical frameworks. This table aims to build on the two main theories of motivation by demonstrating their reciprocity, rather than mutually exclusivity. SDT and PI theory have overlapping connections in terms of perception of self as an individual, and self as part of a society or community. Introjected motivation relates to social goals, and motivation or lack of motivation from parents and peers. Although PI theory has been used to explore classroom motivation, the notion of social goals and pride from others is particularly relevant to the Gulf context. Another strong motivation force is what Deci and Ryan (2000) refer to as external rewards. We equate this to PI theory's sense of purpose. In the context of this study, "good jobs" and a "good life" were strong motivators for studying and getting a degree from university.

TABLE 1 HERE

Methodology

Research questions

1. What are Emirati students' motivations for studying in higher education?
2. Do their answers differ when using Arabic and English?

Context and participants

The university which was the site of this study is an English-medium university for Emirati students, predominantly female students, in the United Arab Emirates. Depending on their level on entry to the university, students study between 6 months to 2 years in the pre-sessional Foundation programme to develop their English skills. Students then move into the University College where they study English composition for three semesters, as well as Maths, Arabic, Environmental studies, and Global Studies. The sample for this study was drawn from volunteer students in Foundation classes (one male and one female), and two University College classes (one male and one female). In total there were 21 males and 15 females. Therefore there was some gender bias towards male participants. However, we believe that the commonality of themes raised by both groups mitigates the possibility of strong bias. The majority of the 36 participants were aged between 18 and 23 with 4 outside of this aged bracket. The teachers of the classes were asked if a group of volunteer students could participate in the study over one class period (50 minutes).

Ethical considerations were fulfilled in the following ways. Full ethical clearance was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the university. The study was described to the student and they were asked to complete a consent form. An Arabic interlocutor was available to translate where necessary. Students were informed that they might withdraw at any time. Consent was granted by a total of 36 students. Thus the sample size was small which proved to be a possible limitation of the research. However, the researchers felt that the four groups represented the general student population in the two departments.

Approach

The study is a qualitative one, specifically a phenomenologically-based study (McInerney 2012) in which the participants' perspectives are central to an understanding of the topic. Such an approach "emphasizes the subjective meaning of situations in light of individuals' culturally determined belief systems such as beliefs about self, perceptions of appropriate goals, and perceived alternatives available for pursuing these goals (McInerney 2012, 637). Phenomenologically-based research can develop both collective themes (across all participants) and also individual themes (specific to one or two participants). This approach suits the current study as the starting point for an examination of motivation was the participants' understanding and use of the constructs in motivation rather than the researchers' interpretation of terms.

Data collection

This study used interviews in Arabic and questionnaires in English. In the first part of the interview (See Appendix A) the interlocutor asked the participants to explain their understanding of the terms frequently used in studies on motivation. The terms we felt were pertinent were *achievement, goals, motivation, success, and failure, and values*. These terms were chosen as they are often referred to in the literature on motivation and are considered to be key concepts (Kumar & Maehr, 2007; Parks & Guay, 2009). It was necessary to first establish students' interpretations of the terms in order for the researchers to better understand the motivating forces and contextualize the study. This part of the interview was conducted in Arabic as a group discussion. In the second part of the interview the interlocutor asked questions in Arabic about reasons for choosing to study in higher education. Students were interviewed as a small group by an Arabic interlocutor. The interview was audio recorded, and the interlocutor translated the main points from the interview into English.

Following the interview in Arabic, the participants were given the same questions in English, and were asked to write their answers in English (see Appendix B). The researchers wanted to compare answers in Arabic and English (Findlow 2006) to see if motivational constructs were perceived differently in the native language and a second language. The reason for conducting the Arabic interview first was to support the comprehension of the questions in English and thus reduce the linguistic and cognitive load (Meyer 2000). Appendix B summarizes the data collection techniques used.

It is important to point out that the data collected in Arabic and in English were different in certain aspects. Although the questions were the same, the Arabic data were collected through an interlocutor and was oral. The data collected in English were written self-reports. While it is possible that the data collected with an Arabic interlocutor may be richer due to the students operating in their first language and in a linguistically familiar environment, there was a larger bank of data which were collected in the written English self-reports. However, we believe that due to the strong commonality of themes across both languages, possible limitations have been accounted for.

Data analysis procedures

The data were analysed qualitatively. Both researchers studied the data from the interviews in Arabic, from the English questionnaires, and identified main themes and categories. During the coding, the researchers used both the theoretical framework (see Table 1) as well as used their own experience (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The analysis of the data was conducted separately, and then discussed and negotiated for a final list of categories. The researchers worked with both a priori categories from their previous work (name deleted for anonymity) and a posteriori categories which emerged from the new data (Wellington 2000).

Results

Question 1: What are Emirati students' motivations for studying in higher education?

Participants were asked to explain what the terms *goals*, *achievement*, *motivation*, *success*, *failure*, and *values* meant to them by giving synonyms or short explanations. One feature, which was evident in the answers in both Arabic and English, was a commonality in the words and phrases students used to define these constructs. A summary of common categories for participants' understanding of motivation constructs can be seen in Appendix C. All the data referred to the affordances of a higher education.

Specifically, one theme which emerged was the students' perceived need to ensure a secure future. A secure future includes both tangible outcomes such as jobs, as well as notions of a good life. These reasons for university education seemed to be driven by personal and individual desires and needs. The need for a degree in order to secure a job was an overwhelming reason for coming to university. One male student commented that "It (an education) is a life necessity; you must have a degree to find a job, a high school qualification does not help much anymore". Both male and female students specified specific jobs such as diplomat, but in general the majority of students referred to the need for a job and a career. Education was seen as the key to a job and a resulting comfortable life. The phrase "good life" was used extensively by both male and female students. The interpretation of "good life" could refer to both financial comfort and social status. Only one male student used the word "salary" to refer to "good life" suggesting that perhaps the financial security is not paramount.

Female students commented on “happiness” as a goal of obtaining a higher education and achieving security. Participants’ goals were encapsulated by one male student in his comment: “To own security and good life with a good job and a small family.” Thus, it seems that obtaining a job perhaps provides security of a comfortable life and social status rather than financial security.

Social status was a strong motivator for acquiring a degree. We believe that this awareness and desire stems from individualistic needs, rather than the needs of society. This can be seen in comments from both males and females relating to wanting a high position. This is not a high position in a job in order to help the country, but a high position for purely individual status. One male student commented: “My father told me once that if I do not have a certificate, people will control ‘boss’ me”. A female student commented that she wanted to be a “successful woman”, with her “own office” again suggesting a higher social status. These comments demonstrate the desire to be their own boss, to have a certain status and power. Due to the very young population, and the new emerging universities and opportunities, getting a degree is key in positioning themselves as educated citizens. Comments such as “High position” and being an “important person” show how students see their role in society, but from a personal perspective, rather than a societal one which places expectations on them. Interestingly, education is seen as a way of securing status, power, and thus a family through marriage. Only male students commented on the link between a good education and marriage. Male students see that a degree makes them more eligible as a husband. This could be part of societal expectations, but this need could also arise from personal expectations of themselves.

A third major theme which relates to the students’ collectivist cultural orientation is societal and familial expectations. Family, country, and marriage were key constructs in their motivation. The family is seen as a motivating force, and students want to fulfill their expectations and make them happy. One female student commented that she was in higher education “so my parents are proud of me”. The development of the country is also seen as a reason for gaining a university education. The importance of this social goal can be seen in comments from both male and female students such as “to serve the state” and “to represent my country”. Students believe that if they have a higher education, they will be more useful to their country. Currently, there is a strong emphasis in the UAE to educate its youth for the future development, and to be able to place them in key positions. The policy of Emiratisation aims to replace expatriate experts with local experts. The goal then of serving the country can be seen in the light of this social climate. One response to the question ‘Why did you want to study at university’ elicited the following response from a male student “to be responsible for the people of the UAE”. In this response we see a strong sense of roles in society. The responsibility extends beyond the family, and into Emirati society. In fact, society can be seen by some students as an extension of the extended family. In this case, we don’t believe the student is referring to financial responsibility, but a responsibility to get a gain a university education and the ensuing skills to help make the UAE a better place. Students want to better their country in terms of developing it, and

participating in its progress. These are all strong altruistic goals and fit in with the current discourse of Emiratisation and development of the UAE.

Fulfilling dreams was a recurring theme, particularly amongst female student responses. Reasons for coming to university, as well as connotations for the word “achievement” elicited many comments related to the fulfillment of dreams. Female students made many comments in terms of higher education serving a way to fulfill dreams. One male student used the word “dream” in terms of obtaining a “dream position”. Findlow (2006) argues that the Emirati concept of “dreams” is connected to fulfilling the dreams of the country, rather than personal dreams. However, in the data from the current study, dreams often connoted with dreams of a job. In this data, the word ‘dream’ was used in a more personal and individual sense than dreams for the country, or even fulfilling the dreams of the parents.

Interestingly, participants’ responses indicated firm confidence that the goals of gaining a degree could be achieved. Considering failure was not an option. Both male and female students came across as very determined with comments such a “anything is possible” , “Yes, of course nothing is impossible we wouldn’t have goals if we can’t achieve them”. We questioned whether students were aware of the work ahead of them, and if they were organised in this goal of gaining a degree. However, students seemed aware of the necessity of hard work and planning. One female student commented “work hard, study hard, be patient, never give up.” “Planning” “work hard” “study hard” were recurrently mentioned as required components for future success.

In summary, the strongest motivations for studying at higher education were tangible, pragmatic goals such as getting a job and getting work, as well as fulfilling societal and familial expectations. Students in this context have to justify their own motivations against the backdrop of their family and social roles.

Question 2: Do their answers differ when using Arabic and English?

In terms of the role played by the language used, very little difference was found. Based on previous studies (Engin and McKeown 2012; Findlow 2006) the authors expected to see a qualitative difference in the answers of the group discussion and the written questionnaire. It was expected that the reasons for studying in higher education would be more altruistic when using Arabic to discuss these with a native speaking Arabic interlocutor. In fact, the data shows that there is a direct correlation between Arabic and English. For example, for question 1 “why did you choose to go to university?”, an answer given in Arabic was “to help my country”, male and in the written questionnaire the same reason was given in English. One theme which was more predominant and more specifically articulated in Arabic was that of marriage and children. For the question “What are your long term goals?” some students highlighted children and marriage in the English questionnaire, but in Arabic one male student specifically said “My wife will appreciate me on the wedding night” suggesting that Emirati females are more likely to seek a husband who has a university degree. This comment could provide an insider perspective into the relationship between higher education and marriage, although it would be interesting

to further explore this notion with a wider sample of students to discover whether such a view is indicative of current beliefs among male Emirati students. We recognise that one comment is an individual theme, rather than a collective theme (McInerney 2012), but we believe that such comments may still provide significant insights. This perspective is further confirmed by one answer to question 3 “Why are these (your goals) important to you?” In English, students of both genders mention that it is important to the family and for social prestige. In Arabic to the same question one male student mentioned that a degree is necessary for the “package of marriage”. Once again, the social pressure on males to have a degree for marriage eligibility is evidenced through answers in Arabic rather than in English.

Discussion

Before discussing the main conclusions to be drawn from this study, it is relevant to point out the limitations. The first of these is the small sample size. Access to students was through the class teachers, and the sample was opportunistic as the researchers relied on the goodwill of colleagues to allow students to leave class for an hour. Secondly, there was the possibility of interlocutor variability. The interlocutors were native Arabic speakers and could discuss with students the questions in more depth than perhaps was revealed in the translation of the audio recordings. In order not to burden the interlocutors with work, the researchers asked them to summarise the main points from the discussion. This meant that we had four different types of summaries, one was almost verbatim, while another was a list of bullet points. Thus, some very meaningful data may have been lost “in translation”. The interlocutors also had varying statuses and nationalities. One of the interlocutors was Emirati and a final year student. The other three interlocutors were from other Arab countries, each speaking their own Arabic dialect. The participants may have felt more comfortable with the Emirati interlocutor, and would have spoken local Emirati Arabic. As a result, the quality and depth of responses may have been different. However, as we mention above, the commonality of themes was evident in all the data, which we believe adds to the reliability of the study. Thirdly, the Arabic answers come from a group interview, while the English answers come from individual questionnaires. As a result, we obtained richer data in English as we had a total of 36 completed questionnaires in English, and only summarised notes from the Arabic interview in which not all students actively participated. However, these limitations do not detract from the rich data which emerged, and the major findings which we believe will resonate with other researchers and educational practitioners working with young university students in the Gulf context.

The first major finding is the strong sense of pragmatism in the reasons for studying in higher education, and students’ sense of what they can achieve as individuals in their society. This utilitarian dimension of motivation in this study is similar to the findings of Javid et al (2012). The word “my” was used many times, suggesting a more individualistic motivation construct. Of importance to many students was having a good degree, a better life, and getting a good job. Findlow (2013) suggests that Emirati women do not go into higher education for jobs. However, our data suggests that in fact the securing of a good job was a highly motivating force.

Although female students do not mention financial reasons, they do stress the importance of a job and career. However, whether the female students will achieve the career they seek is an area for future study. Abdulla (2005) refers to the feelings of deception that Emirati women hold due to the lack of actual opportunities in the workforce. It is possible that the female students in this study had similar worries, by using the word “dreams” to describe their future. They clearly want to work, and secure a good job, but at the same time indicate their lack of faith in the system by using the word “dreams”. The desire for a job are part of social expectations, but at the same time there was a strong utilitarian and individual expression of wants and needs.

The second major finding is that Emirati youth are highly conscious of their role in the family and in society. They are motivated by their family in terms of fulfilling their family’s dreams, as well as being motivated by the support from their family. This is similar to the findings of Madsen (2009) who states that families support their children to go to university. However, unlike Abdulla and Ridge (2005) who state that lack of support from the family is a reason for less male participation in higher education, our data pointed to strong support from family and friends to pursue a degree. Some male students specifically mention how their families want them to finish a degree in order to obtain a better position. This fits in with the current rhetoric of the UAE which encourages young people to get a degree for the better of the country, and students are supported in terms of facilities and opportunities (Fox 2007). Having a degree from University provides a high status in Emirati society, and students are fully conscious of this. Therefore the family unit, the wider society, and societal expectations are strong extrinsic motivators for students. This is to be expected in the more collectivist culture where group cohesion and group goals are of higher priority. The students in this study hold a strong desire to be an active member of society (Sharif et al. 2014). A significant part of the group identity and cohesion are altruistic goals, such as serving the country and securing an education to build the future of the UAE, supporting earlier studies on Emirati youths’ motivation (Ashcraft 2007; Engin and McKeown 2012). The socio-economic environment of the UAE could explain why on the one hand students are motivated by collectivist ideals of the betterment of society, whilst at the same time influenced by their individual desires. Saroglu, Delpierre and Dernelle (2003) argue that socio-economic development weakens the negative correlation between tradition and self-direction.

As a result of our findings, we suggest that a variety of motivational factors interact with each other in the motivation for Emirati students in attending higher education. Earlier studies have examined motivation of Emirati youth from either a pragmatic perspective, or a social perspective. Our data indicate that motivation is centred around and influenced by a sense of self. It would seem that this crosses boundaries between collectivist culture and individualistic culture. The students in this study were clearly influenced by forces originating from their mostly collectivist culture, but at the same time influenced by forces emanating from a typically individualistic culture due to the unique position of the UAE in terms of economic and technological development. Societal factors influenced students’ motivation for seeking status. Status and being an important person were viewed as a reason to get a degree, status

being determined by families and society. Families also held expectations that their son or daughter would fulfill a certain role in society. Whether all female students have this opportunity in reality would be a further long-term study. At the same time as accepting society and family expectations, students also had their own sense of purpose in terms of getting a job and career. While their families had more idealistic notions of children fulfilling social roles, students were also focused on the pragmatic needs of securing a job and a better position in society.

Conclusion

This research aimed to shed light on the personal meanings in motivational constructs of Emirati youth, and their motivation for studying at higher education. It would seem that an examination which dichotomizes collectivist and individualist cultures, or Western-oriented constructs and non-Western-oriented constructs fails to provide an accurate picture of the motivations of young people in this fast-changing society. The data suggests that motivation in the Gulf context is set within frameworks of self as an individual, and self as part of society. Individual expectations, pragmatic goals, and societal and family goals are strong influences on motivation to study at higher education. The conclusions from this study suggest that there are further areas which would benefit from research. For example, it would be timely to examine what jobs male and female students take on graduation. As noted in this study, female students are enthusiastic about securing a job, but how realistic is this, and are female students able to participate in the workforce as fully as they talk about? Similarly, it would be useful to further probe answers related to altruistic reasons for studying. Do the students really believe this, or is it part of the rhetoric of Emiratisation? Finally, it would be valuable to study a much larger cohort of students, by using the current findings as a basis for more quantitative studies through questionnaires in both English and Arabic. Although one finding was that use of English or Arabic does not influence the answers, we still have a strong sense that language identity does position the respondent to a certain extent. This needs further exploration.

In conclusion, an examination of the motivations of our male and female students can help to dispel certain notions that faculty may have about the reasons why UAE students are at university. It is important to know who are students are, and where they see themselves in five years time. There is a sense amongst faculty that Emirati students do not have to worry about the future, that they are financially secure, and therefore do not have specific, tangible goals for their studies. This may be due to a sometimes perceived lack of motivation in students by faculty. However, it is clear that these young male and female Emiratis do have clear purposes, and have come to university for both individual and societal reasons. Faculty need to acknowledge this in their perceptions of student motivation, and leverage the students' desire for specific, tangible outcomes.

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Table 1

| SDT (Deci and Ryan 2000) | Personal Investment theory (King and McInerney 2014) |
|--|--|
| External (rewards) | Sense of self - sense of purpose |
| Introjected (avoid feeling pressure or anxiety) | Achievement goal - social goal Facilitating conditions - pride from others (parents and friends) Lack of facilitating conditions |
| Identified (Important to them in personal way) | Sense of self - positive self concept Social goal |
| Integrated (achievement because of own goals and values) | Sense of self Altruism |

Table 1: Theories of motivation and overlapping constructs

Appendix A: Interview questions

1. What do the following concepts mean to you?
 - a) Achievement
 - b) Success
 - c) Failure

- d) Motivation
- e) Goals
- f) Values

2. Why did you come to university?
3. What are your long-term goals (e.g. where do you see yourself in the next five years?)
4. Why are these important to you?
5. How do you plan to achieve them?
6. Do you think you can achieve these goals? Why / why not?
7. What motivates you to come to university?

Appendix B: Summary of data gathering techniques

| Technique | Male participants | Female participants | Language of instrument / technique | Oral / written |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Group: Interview questions Part 1: Interpretations of motivation constructs | 21 | 15 | Arabic | Oral |
| Group: Interview questions Part 2: Questions | 21 | 15 | Arabic | Oral |
| Individual questionnaire Part 1: Interpretations of motivation constructs | 21 | 15 | English | Written |
| Individual questionnaire Part 2: Short answer questions | 21 | 15 | English | Written |

Appendix C: Themes from motivation constructs

| Concept | Answers |
|----------------|----------------|
|----------------|----------------|

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Achievement | <p>graduation certificate achieve goals dreams job being successful in the future Serve my country be one of the important persons in my country</p> |
| Success | <p>degree job marriage to have a successful life to be a successful person high position graduation</p> |
| Failure | <p>learn a lesson from this learn and start again laziness depression / disappointment</p> |
| Motivation | <p>to achieve your goal complete studies your family, friends and state motivates you to secure your social status respect to make my family happy be an important person</p> |
| Goals | <p>ambassador businessman success to know more being positive planning, steps to planning lists of needs</p> |
| Values | <p>fundamental values which are Islamic values. We cannot violate them” respect responsibility respect others’ culture to be a better person religion and culture</p> |