

WHICH UNIVERSITY? FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT CHOICES AT AN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN THE UAE

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Abstract: *Across the world, higher education is seen as a ticket to better jobs through skills acquisition, thus it functions as a positional good. Students who gain acceptance to highly selective courses and universities have an open door to prestigious and perhaps lucrative careers (James, Baldwin and McInnis, 1999). Thus, higher educational environments have become very competitive in Western countries, and there has been an increasing amount of research conducted regarding university choice (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Hirsch, 1976; Gambetta, 1986). However, very little research has been done on university choice in the United Arab Emirates.*

The UAE has a very short modern history and its social and economic changes have been virtually unprecedented. The sudden oil wealth enabled a very rapid development in all areas, including education. The country's leaders realize that social progress can only be achieved through educating its nationals and there have been great improvements in higher education that have been made available to virtually all UAE citizens at no cost at all. As the number of young Emiratis is rapidly increasing, the government has realized the importance of investing in improving the national human capital. In addition to the local workforce, the UAE economy has been heavily dependent on expatriate workers since less than 20 per cent of the country's population consists of nationals. There has always been a large number of skilled and semi-skilled expatriate workers in the UAE whose presence has been essential for the country's development. Every year thousands of their children coming out of secondary schools are now seeking university places in the UAE that would provide them with good career opportunities. Similar to Western labor markets, employers in the UAE seek graduates not only with good academic knowledge, but also with excellent communication skills in English, experience with Western cultures and business environments as well as team working, problem solving and interpersonal skills.

Higher education participation represents a substantial investment to students and families, both in financial and physical terms. Their choice of university depends on a number of factors such as the university's reputation, courses offered, tuition fees and fees at other higher educational institutions. Today, students can choose from a great variety of courses in a number of universities. Free public universities for Emirati nationals have been established and state-of-the-art American, Western European or Australian universities were invited to open local campuses in the country. These universities are highly competitive and offer good career prospects and international accreditation albeit at a high cost.

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This paper explores the issues relating to university choice in the UAE. The study identified similarities to university choice in Western countries; however, some aspects of it are different due to the UAE's different socio-cultural context.

Keywords: higher education, university choice, UAE

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has had an enormous impact on our lives, and education is no exception. Although modern education is relatively new in the Arabian Gulf countries, within half a century it has very rapidly developed from providing Koranic schooling to Western university education to its students. Over the last 50 years, countries in the Arabian Gulf have experienced unprecedented growth. This has been due to the huge revenues they received from oil and natural gas exploration. The governments decided to invest their wealth in three areas: the creation of socio-economic infrastructure, the development of agricultural and industrial sectors and social services such as health care and education. The development and expansion of public education thus is strongly related to the rise in oil revenues (Bahgat, 1999).

For centuries, before the oil exploration, formal education took place in mosques where students were taught by Muslim scholars. Their education included basic writing, arithmetic skills and reciting the Koran. That changed in the 1950's when the GCC countries hired their educational advisors from Egypt. Since then, Egyptian educational influence has long been dominant; public schools in the UAE are still under the control of Egyptian personnel, who also dominate the Ministry of Education (Findlow, 2001). In the last thirty years, participation in higher education has increased dramatically. In 1990 there were only 5 higher educational institutions in the UAE; in 2013 their number stood at 71.

Nevertheless, the most notable change that has been taking place recently, is the 'importing' of the Western model of education to the Gulf countries. Since the 1980's a number of English-medium federal and private colleges and universities have been established. Federal institutions are for UAE nationals, whereas private ones are open for all nationalities. In 2013 the total number of enrollment in higher educational institutions was 128,279. 45,385 students were enrolled in federal institutions; 92% of those were Emirati nationals. 82,894 students were enrolled in non-federal institutions; 42% of them were Emiratis (The UAE higher education, 2015). Thus, expatriate students opt to go to non-government universities and colleges, whereas federal universities are for UAE nationals.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between traditional and international universities is in the student body: all traditional universities and colleges are strictly segregated where males and females have no chance of mixing whether in lectures, cafeterias, libraries or sport complexes. In government universities nearly

80 percent of students are females and their reasons for attending these universities stem from their cultural backgrounds. Although most families now support the idea of further education for their daughters, “many would never concede to allowing them to attend a gender-integrated campus or class” (Bristol-Rhys in Davidson & Mackenzie Smith, 2008, p. 102).

Research conducted by Sara Sayed focusing on national college students’ opinions and attitudes about women’s involvement in public life, found that traditions are still strongly followed relating to females’ role in public life. Sayed revealed that nearly 60% of respondents feel that females need to be protected at all times and believe that women should only travel or study abroad if they are accompanied by a male family member. According to the results, only “15% of males and 19% of females believe that coeducational classes are acceptable” (Sayed, 2004, p. 55). Students are accustomed to studying in segregated schools and believe that mixed classes are against the teachings of Islam and the UAE’s traditions. They also feel that females would be disrespected by males in mixed classes. This explains the stringent security measures on women’s campuses which act as an assurance for parents that their daughters will be safe (Bristol-Rhys in Davidson & Mackenzie Smith, 2008).

The greatest demand in the area of private higher education has been for Western universities with campuses in the UAE catering for all nationalities. In order to promote the advancement of national human capital, international higher education and training institutions have been invited to the country to provide knowledge-based skills. “They provide the stage for shopping for education and business solutions across wide range of products and services, as well as encouraging networking, and eventually job placement” (Gonzalez, *et al.* 2008, p. 128). These universities were not only established to provide a locally obtained, competitive Western degree, but to accommodate the rapidly increasing expatriate student population who are denied access to federal universities. As these degrees are accredited worldwide, offering great career opportunities, the number of students applying has been steadily rising in the past few years. In 1997 the ruler of Sharjah established the University City of Sharjah, and in 2003 Dubai established a dedicated education zone, Knowledge Village and the Academic City, to bring together globally recognized international universities and other educational institutions. “Cashing in on the trend of Persian Gulf youth not wanting to go abroad to study ...foreign academic institutes are invited to open offshore campuses” (Janardhan, 2006, p.1). These international universities offer highly competitive degrees with dual accreditation. Since their degree is internationally accredited, many students continue their education by joining graduate schools in the US, Canada or Europe.

Across the world, higher education is seen as a ticket to better jobs through skills acquisition, thus it functions as a positional good. Students who gain

acceptance to highly selective courses and universities have an open door to prestigious and perhaps lucrative careers (James, Baldwin and McInnis, 1999). In the Arabian Gulf countries achieving an education is valued by the majority of people, and to achieve a Western degree epitomizes the dream of many (Meleis, 1982). American degrees have long been considered valuable due to the United States' central position in technological research and development, and by the great variety and number of institutions that are available. The Arabian Gulf countries have long been close allies of the US and Europe and there are many multinational companies in the region in all areas of petrochemical, telecommunication and manufacturing industries. Consequently, similar to Western labor markets, employers in the UAE seek graduates not only with good academic knowledge, but also with excellent communication skills in English, experience with Western cultures and business environments as well as team working, problem solving and interpersonal skills.

However, higher education participation represents a substantial investment to students and families, both in financial and physical terms. Their choice on selecting a university depends on a number of factors such as, the university's reputation, courses offered, tuition fees and fees charged at other higher educational institutions. Although there are a growing number of international universities in the Arabian Gulf countries, little is known about students' reasons for choosing these higher educational institutions. This paper discusses the findings of research conducted at an international university (referred to as The University) in the UAE, focusing on factors influencing students' choice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The UAE is a federation of seven states situated on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, extending from the Gulf of Oman to Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The UAE is a relatively young country formed out of unification of seven sheikhdoms in 1971 (UAE Yearbook, 2005). Until the 1960s, when they struck great quantities of oil, the major industries were fishing, herding and producing dates. Since 1971 when the sheikhs terminated the defense treaties with Great Britain, not only the country's wealth, but also the population has been rapidly growing. In 1968 when the first census was conducted in the country, the population was 58,971. According to latest figures, in 2010 the total population of the country was 8.2 million. The Emirati population constitutes only about 20 percent of the country's total population (Boyle, 2012). In the UAE, 75 percent of the expatriate labor force is from Asian countries and over 40 percent of them are from India. The remainder of the expatriate population includes other Arab nationals and only 3% Westerners. Perhaps no other country is as dependent on foreign workers as the UAE (UAE Statistics, 2012). Foreigners do not only make up 80 percent of the population, they also make up over 90 percent of the private workforce (Al Asoomi, 2008). For

several decades there have been many skilled expatriates working in the service industry as well as professionals such as teachers, doctors, engineers but today the majority of the expatriate workers are the poorly paid workers employed in the construction and service industries (UAE Statistics, 2012). Although there is a large number of Arab expatriates, many of whom were born in the UAE and lived their whole lives here, they do not receive UAE citizenship. Most expatriates reside in the country with a renewable three year residence permit, and have very little prospect of obtaining the legal right to permanently stay in the country. There are no exact figures, but recent estimates reveal that nearly 200 nationalities, 150 ethnic groups live in the UAE speaking over 100 languages (Randall and Samimi, 2010) making the UAE a truly cosmopolitan, multicultural society.

FACTORS INFLUENCING UNIVERSITY CHOICE

Students' motivation in selecting colleges and universities has been studied extensively in the US and Western countries (Maringe, 2006; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Hirsch, 1976). However, little is known about students' choices regarding international universities, especially in the Arabian Gulf region. College choice process is often looked at through socio-psychological studies, economic studies and social status attainment studies (Kim, 2004; McDonough, 1997). These examine university prestige, programs offered, campus facilities, sports and lifestyle, expected returns from a college degree, career advancement and the differences in college access based on their socioeconomic standing. Thus, university choice is very complex and includes personal characteristics, institutional characteristics combined with other external factors.

STUDENT FACTORS

Friends' and family members' recommendations are often considered one of the most important factors influencing university choice (Turner, 1998; Bourke, 2000). Many studies have investigated the amount of influence parents have on their children's university choice, and racial and cultural background seem to play a role in the amount of influence they have on students' decision making (Freeman, 1999, 2005). According to Foskett & Hamsley-Brown, in Western countries parental influence on schooling decisions declines as children get older, "...among the external influences... parents are the least important" (2001, p. 473; Harn, 2015). However, the situation might be different in the Middle East with a prevailing paternalistic family pattern. "In the field of education one result is imitative rather than creative system...the individual student's academic choices will often reflect his father's desires rather than his own wishes or capabilities" (Harfoush, 1978, p. 24). Many students choose a major that is approved by their families. Parents move their children away from creative fields such as digital media, film or music to more 'professional' qualifications like engineering, business or medicine

(Achkhanlan, 2016). In fact, in 2013-2014, over 30% of all students were enrolled in business studies, whereas nearly 20% were engineering majors (The UAE higher education, 2015).

In addition to entrance requirements, high tuition fees have often been considered a sign of a good university (Foskett, *et al.* 2006). However, the rising cost of university tuition has been an increasing concern especially in the United States and the UK (Hamsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Since social class is closely linked to income, students from lower-social income groups tend to opt for less prestigious and more affordable institutions (Perna and Titus, 2004). Higher education has characteristics of a consumption good since a consumer chooses the bundle of goods and services that gives him/her the highest possible utility given a certain budget. Studies in Western countries show that “as for any consumption good, demand for higher education will vary with income and prices” (Duchesne and Nonneman, 1998, p. 212). The demand for any good is affected by its price, by income levels and by the prices of other goods. If education is considered a normal good, then demand for it increases when parental incomes are high. The price of education affects its demand, since less people can afford to pay higher fees; thus, enrollment decisions are influenced by the cost of attendance. “Enrollment rates are negatively related to tuition, but positively related to financial aid” (Perna, 2005, p. 24).

At The University, students have to pay 90,000 UAE Dirhams (USD 25,000) per academic year in tuition fees, in addition to lab and technology fees and textbooks; thus a 4 year undergraduate program costs minimum USD 100,000 for a student. This is in line with other international university fees in the country: depending on the major, a bachelor’s degree costs between USD 70,000-120,000 (The UAE higher education, 2015).

International higher education is big business and foreign students contribute more than USD 12 billion annually to the US economy (Altbach, 2004). According to a UNESCO (2006) study, almost a quarter of international students select the United States as their destination for higher education, followed by the UK, Germany, France and Australia. Between 1995 and 2004 a total number of 2.7 million students were enrolled in universities outside their home countries (OECD, 2006). However, educational export from developed countries to developing ones has grown exponentially as governments recognize the enormous potential of overseas markets. By 1997, education exports from the UK were over GBP 9 billion and from Australia over A\$ 2 billion (Bennell & Pearce, 2003). Similarly, many American universities have also opened offshore branches or operate as US accredited and sponsored universities. These institutions deliver US curriculum, use English as the language of instruction and they often attract a very heterogeneous student body, not only from the host country but from neighboring countries as well.

Studies in international universities found that students often want more from their studies than career placement. In fact, many students choose to study in foreign or international universities for the 'international' exposure. They see an international education as a way of overcoming "the limitations of their own parochialism" (Pyvis & Chapman, 2006, p.236). Since many of these students are outside their home countries, the mixing of various nationalities on campus creates unique international learning environments.

INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Higher educational environments have become very competitive in Western countries, and educational institutions strive to maintain their advantage. Much research has been done to study the purchase intention of prospective students (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Hirsch, 1976; Gambetta, 1986). It has been asserted that students are increasingly becoming consumerists when selecting their university (Maringe, 2006). Some studies have long considered higher education as a part of a macroeconomic theory to consumer choice to enroll. "Demand is known to be affected not only by price but by the income of the buyer, by tastes and preferences, and by the value of the good from a consumption or an investment perspective" (Leslie and Brinkman, 1987, p.200). As a result, education has not only been thought of as a consumption good, but also as an investment good. According to Perna, "the long-term investment benefits of higher education include higher lifetime earnings, a more fulfilling work environment, better health, longer life, more informed purchases and lower probability of unemployment" (2005, p. 24). Therefore, enrollment decisions are influenced by a number of different factors.

Studies show (James, Baldwin, McInnis, 1999 Blar, N., Jafar, F. A., & Monawir, 2015) that students' choice in selecting a higher educational institution greatly depends on the prestige and quality of teaching. According to Maringe (2006), consumers in higher education exist in a positional market where universities compete for the best students and applicants compete for the best institutions. Dibb (1997) defined positioning as "the process of designing an image and value so that customers within the target segments understand what the company or brand stands for in relation to its competitors (in Wilson and Gilligan, 2002, p.302). Thus, higher education participation is in part a positional good. Many students' choices depend on their institutional and course reputation promising rewarding careers and greater employability. In his study, Tomlinson discusses the perceived importance of grades and institutional profile by students in the UK. "It was clear from students' responses that they were keen to capitalize upon the institutional profile and status of their university as a way of gaining a positional advantage in the labour market" (2008, p. 57). This has been supported by another study conducted in the UK by Maringe, who found that institutional prominence is very

important in students' decision making and the reputation of the institution and staff credentials are of overall importance (2000).

Studying for a foreign qualification in one's home country is a direct result of internationalization of education. Having an international qualification is becoming increasingly important especially for the international business community and transnational organizations (Bennel & Pearce, 2003). In the UAE, students and their parents often expect a degree that is not only locally, but also internationally recognized. An Indian parent in a Gulf News interview said, "Depending on the course that my daughter was intending to take up, the university should have international accreditation and recognition" (Ali, 2008, p.5). Thus, the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD) undergraduate and postgraduate degrees are accredited by the UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and audited by the Australian Universities Quality Agency. The degrees are recognized within the UAE, in GCC nations and internationally for further education and employment in the private and public sectors. Similarly, American university degrees are accredited in the US by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. They are also licensed and accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the UAE (AUS Catalog, 2013-2014). In the UAE, international universities offer local and international accreditation; therefore, they are often the first choice for many expatriate students who might wish to relocate to Western countries after graduation.

Graduates from different universities experience diverse personal and financial benefits from participating in higher education. Students in the UK "viewed the acquisition of higher education qualifications as a significant boost to their level of human capital, which would provide them with advantages in the labour market" (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 52). Students buy the benefits that a degree provides in terms of future career opportunities and post-degree earnings. Thus employment prospects are a paramount source for students' motivation (Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2008). However, Kotler and Fox, (1995) claim that the true customers are the graduates' future employers who 'buy' the product: the trained graduates. Thus, the recognition of the programs offered by a university and the university's reputation among employers are crucial.

In addition, many students want more from education than lectures in a structured environment. Increasingly, they want their university life to be 'cool'. According to Ali (2008), students look for facilities, faculty quality and freedom on campus. Many international universities pride themselves on providing excellent sport facilities, clubs and associations, extensive library and state of the art IT support. Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects is freedom of choice which rates high among students. "What I appreciate most about this university is the friendly atmosphere, teachers and the freedom to do and wear whatever you

chose”, said a first-year marketing student at the Canadian University of Dubai in a Gulf News interview (Ali, 2008, p. 5). Thus, students’ decision making is highly complex and includes a combination of personal and institutional characteristics.

METHODOLOGY

The investigation had both quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitative surveys enabled me to reach a large number of students and revealed patterns that were later investigated in the interviews. Participants were chosen through theoretical sampling: they had to meet select criteria. They were first or second year students, so their memories about their selection choices were relatively fresh, males and females of various majors and nationalities. Some of the students came from outside the UAE; others have stayed their whole lives in the country. A total of 124 surveys were completed. The survey included brief biographical questions, and 25 questions regarding institutional and personal factors. Respondents had to rate the importance of various factors from not important to very important. The survey ended with seven open ended questions where they had a chance to elaborate on their answers in greater detail.

Once data were collected, qualitative inquiry was used to obtain richer information about participants’ views. This enables a researcher to explore complex issues and is more suitable to “address ‘why’ questions to explain and understand issues or ‘how’ questions that describe processes or behavior” (Hutter and Bailey, 2008, p. 1120). As I was seeking to elicit respondents’ personal experiences and feelings, in-depth, narrative interviews were the best method for data gathering. The interviews were conducted with 14 students and the questions were aimed to generate unexpected areas, revealing patterns and insights that could be further investigated.

RESULTS

Table 1
Factors influencing university choice

<i>Factors influencing choice</i>	<i>Percentage of responses as Important or Very Important</i>
University reputation	100
US accreditation	94
Post-degree earnings	93
Career prospects	93
Majors/qualifications offered	89
Quality of teaching	86
Financial aid	78

contd. table 1

<i>Factors influencing choice</i>	<i>Percentage of responses as Important or Very Important</i>
Opportunities for postgraduate studies	75
Tuition fees	71
Expected experience as a student	68
Parents' influence	62
University location	61
Entrance requirements	61
Course content	59
Become an international person	58
Social benefits as student	57
Transfer options to US	57
International exchange program	55
Coeducation	54
Proximity to home	42
Friends' influence	38
Dormitory	37
Lifestyle as a student	36
Campus facilities	35
Clubs & sports facilities	25

Survey results showed that the most important factor was the reputation of the university: all participants claimed that it was either important or very important, closely followed by US accreditation. Career prospects and post-degree earnings are of equal importance. The 5th most important factor was the majors and qualifications offered at the university. Since most Emirati students receive scholarship or sponsorship from local companies, cost of studies and financial aid were of great importance mostly to expatriate students. The interviews revealed that Emirati respondents received 50-100% scholarships from the government; even their textbooks were free. On the other hand, expatriate students claimed that the financial aid they receive does not exceed 5%.

There is also a difference in students' aspirations after graduation. Most Emirati respondents, both males and females, stated that they were hoping to get a job in the UAE public sector, in their father's company or become entrepreneurs. Similar answers were given by female non-Emirati respondents, but their workplace preference was in the private sector or with multinational organizations. On the other hand, over 80% of non-Emirati males stated that they wished to continue their studies in the US or Europe and possibly find jobs outside the UAE. Their answers regarding their post-graduate plans included "MBA in Europe/Canada/USA", "Graduate from LSE in London and work there", "Work for a globally known firm in London or the US".

In the interviews, participants claimed that a US degree will enable them to find good jobs easily upon graduation. An American university is a "brand" that

provides excellent benefits to a graduate. They believe that employers seek graduates from The University as it is considered to have good standards and reputation. They stated that they would receive “an outstanding degree” and that The University “has an outstanding image”. In addition, the dual accreditation in the UAE and in the US is considered an added advantage. Therefore, based on the respondents’ experience, a degree from this university offers them excellent career opportunities and they hope to find jobs easily upon graduation.

As Figure 1 shows, more than half of the students in the study wanted to pursue their university studies in other institutions: their most preferred destinations were the US, Canada and the UK. A few wanted to study in other EU countries such as Germany and Holland, and a small number chose Lebanon ahead of this university. However, parental influence was a major factor in applying to this university. Most claimed that their parents would not let them study so far away from home because they worried about cultural differences and discrimination. Those that wanted to study in Beirut changed their minds due to the political unrest there. Many students claimed that their father had made the decision for them. One quoted his father as saying, “The US is too far, if you go there, I know you’ll not come back, choose any other American University in the region; we have a lot of really reputable universities”. As this university and the city was considered safe and secure, many parents from neighboring Gulf countries and the Sub-Continent were confident that their children would not ‘get into trouble’ and would be safe.

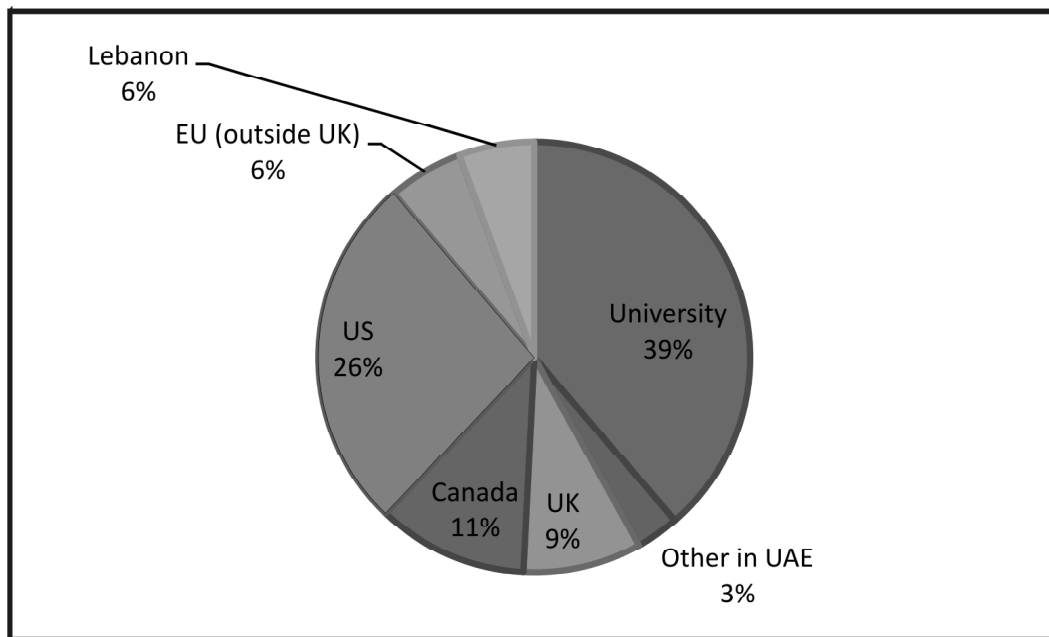


Figure 1: Students’ first choice of a university

The least important factors related to campus and sports facilities, lifestyle as a student, friends' influence and the availability of dormitories as well as coeducation. Follow up interviews revealed that students had very little information about the university's international exchange program, which might explain its lack of importance. In addition, the majority of the respondents attended coeducational schools, thus a coeducational environment was not a decisive factor for them.

International exposure and becoming an international person was more important to those who had not resided in the UAE prior to joining the university. Generally, students who came from more homogenous societies than the UAE, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Russia and various African countries claimed that an international education and consequent 'internationalization' was of great importance.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated factors influencing students' university choice at an international US/UAE accredited university in the UAE. The case study investigation offered an insight to students' motivation for selecting The University for their higher educational studies.

The research shows that factors influencing university choice is different from studies conducted in the US and UK. Rising tuition fees is an increasingly pressing issue for many students, especially in the US and the UK, but the situation at The University is somewhat different and there is a clear difference between Emirati nationals' and expatriates' views. Emirati nationals receive substantial financial aid and scholarship from the government, whereas expatriate students rely mostly on their parents to pay their tuition fees. Therefore, they consider cost of education an important factor in their decision making; however, Emirati nationals are less concerned about it.

Yet, there are similarities to the literature, as the most important factor for choosing this university for all students was the reputation of the institution. Institutional reputation is closely related to their future aspirations. Students see a degree from this university as an investment, and believe that it will help them in their career prospects and future earnings. Most Emirati students want to stay in the UAE working in the government sector or in their family business while others would like to be entrepreneurs. In contrast, many expatriate respondents claim that they intend to work or continue their post-graduate degrees outside the UAE. Interestingly, more than half of the students wanted to study outside the UAE, but due to strong parental influence they applied to this institution. The location of the university and students' chosen major is often decided by the parents.

Although most students chose The University for its reputation and international accreditation, the international element and curriculum was an

important consideration for non-resident students. Those who had lived in the UAE's cosmopolitan society prior to applying to The University found the international campus a natural educational environment. However, those that came from more homogenous societies considered the international element an important advantage.

This paper has shown that demand for an American degree at an international university can be attributed to students' perception of the high quality education they receive. Motivation for an international degree varies between UAE nationals and expatriates. Their degree does not only help them finding jobs locally, but international accreditation enables them to pursue their studies or find work outside the UAE. The study has generated some small scale understanding and knowledge in the area of students' motivation that perhaps could be utilized by university administration regarding student recruitment.

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