

Career Guidance in the United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

At what point in the evolution of a country's economy and society does the need for career guidance services become desirable? This article examines the factors influencing the emergence of a career development and guidance (counselling) culture in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It also explains the systems and structures that are beginning to develop in response to the needs identified by a range of stakeholders including federal and local governments, employers and employers' organisations, education providers and community organisations.

The UAE context

UAE's population continues to grow rapidly. Eighty per cent of its 4 million people are under the age of 40 which is a key factor in the need for services that will help young people to chart their course through the education system and labour market. Fewer than 9% of the population are Emiratis or 'locals' (also known as 'Nationals'). This means that the UAE in common with several of the Gulf States is an example of extreme dependency on expatriate labour. The policies that have been adopted to manage this situation have strongly influenced the way that career guidance services are developing.

The political system

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates presided over by the ruler of Abu Dhabi from the Al Nahayan family. The prime minister is the ruler of Dubai from the Al Maktoum family. The political system is stable and relatively conservative but open to change as evidenced by the holding of the first elections for a federal council in December 2006. Not only does the country maintain an external balancing act between the Arab and the western worlds, but internally, the powers of both federal and local emirate governments are held in balance. A key issue for the development of publicly-funded career guidance services for Nationals is determining the respective roles of federal and local bodies.

At the federal level, a major step forward was taken with the establishment of the National Human Resource Development and Employment Authority or Tanmia (the word means 'development') in 1999. Tanmia's mission is:

'The provision and development of qualified and well-trained National manpower that is capable of contributing effectively to the comprehensive development of the UAE and whereby Nationals are capable of taking up public and private sector jobs to ensure economic, political and social stability in the country.'

Tanmia is currently organised into three centres. The Employment and Skills Development Centre is the largest centre and provides employment services across the UAE. The Centre for Labour Market Research and Information provides a specialist research arm to inform policy-making in this area. The Centre for Career Guidance and Planning which opened in Sharjah, the emirate to the north of Dubai, in April 2003 has the potential to become the career guidance service for the UAE.

In addition to federal Tanmia, there are also local services in Sharjah (the Department of Human Resources - local Tanmia) and Dubai (the Emirates National Development Program - ENDP) in Dubai. Support for and confidence in federal Tanmia has tended to fluctuate over concerns about its perceived lack of progress in tackling the stubbornly high number of job-seekers despite the buoyancy of the labour market. Yet on the evidence of other indicators such as its work with schools, higher education institutions, employers and other government bodies it has made considerable progress in a short time. Hence, it remains to be seen whether the UAE will evolve a centralised, devolved or mixed system of employment and careers services for the National population

Religion, culture and society

Islam is the official religion of the UAE; but with the high expatriate population there are many adherents of other faiths including Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians. Although it is economically liberal, socially it is relatively conservative with some differences between the emirates. Families in Dubai and Sharjah, for example, are generally more progressive than in the other emirates, especially in their attitudes to women's participation in public life.

For many families, 'career', 'career development' and 'career guidance' are relatively new concepts but they have found ways of assimilating them which are consistent with their faith and culture. They are more at home, for example, with collectivist (e.g. family-based) rather than individualistic models of career decision-making. Duty and obedience to parents and senior male members of the family is generally expected but the wishes and happiness

of the individual are also prominent. Although their faith teaches them that an individual's destiny is pre-ordained, this does not remove from them the duty to make the most of their talents; and there is a specific prayer for those seeking Allah's help in reaching a decision.

The role and position of women is one aspect of social life that is undergoing the greatest change. The progress made by women in education and higher education is one of the success stories of the UAE (77% of the students at UAE University are women). With encouragement from the country's leaders, more and more families are supporting the idea of women working, although the role of 'wife and mother' is still held up as the ideal. Women and their families may set conditions for their participation in the labour market such as being allowed to wear the veil or to take a job in a same-sex environment which cannot always be accommodated, but the statistics show that more women are working than ever before (14% in 2005, up from 5% in 1995). Inevitably, this has given rise in the media to a 'Can women have it all?' debate. Many women are determined to participate fully in the country's economic and political life in ways that are consistent with their traditional roles and obligations. This was the gist of an essay by Noura al Darmaki, an IT student at UAE University, arguing for more to be done to break down obstacles to women's participation in the labour market (see Women in Engineering and Technology Forum website, <http://www.cit2.uaeu.ac.ae/wet/problems.php>, accessed 19th March 2005.)

Education

Investing oil wealth in the education of both men and women has been given a high priority by the rulers of the UAE.

The public education system (for Nationals only) is highly centralised. Until recently, pedagogy relied heavily on rote-learning and memorisation, but new methods and critical thinking skills are being introduced into the curriculum.

Although careers education is not part of the mandated curriculum in primary or secondary schools, there has been some discussion about the future provision of personal and social education. Tanmia, which has close ties with the Ministry of Labour, has started to co-operate with the Ministry of Education and to explore the possibility of developing careers and work-related education including enterprise. The Tanmia Centre for Career Guidance and Planning has even produced some draft guidelines for careers education in schools modelled on the Ministry's own 'scope and sequence' curriculum documents as a basis for future discussion. When and if careers education is formally established in the curriculum, its priorities will need to include raising awareness of work possibilities in the private and mixed (as well as the public) sector and preparing young Nationals for earning a living in a multicultural work environment.

One of the shortcomings of the secondary education system is the lack of provision of technical and vocational education which has some bearing on the problem of boys' underachievement. The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), the Institute of Applied Technology and the training establishments in the protective services (armed services, police, etc.) try to compensate for this. This situation is partly a cultural phenomenon as Nationals tend to shun manual and service jobs which are perceived as low status; but attitudes are slowly changing. Nationals will consider employment in the service sector if the company is reputable, if it employs other Nationals and if the employment conditions and remuneration are attractive.

English is the language of instruction in further and higher education in most subjects. While this puts additional pressures on students whose secondary education was in Arabic, it gives graduates a huge advantage in employment terms as English is an important language of business in UAE and globally.

The economy

The economy has changed out of all recognition in the last thirty years. Until the mid-twentieth century the area depended on general trading, farming, fishing and pearl diving; but the discovery of oil in the 1960s transformed the wealth of the country. The leaders have used this wealth to develop the economic infrastructure. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Dubai which has pursued a vigorous policy of economic diversification to compensate for the depletion of its oil reserves in 15-20 years' time. Even Abu Dhabi whose reserves are expected to last another 90 years, has begun to diversify its economy too.

Although tourism, property development and retailing have grabbed the headlines, the economic development in Dubai is also strongly focused on trade and transport, manufacturing and financial services. It is this policy of economic diversification that has triggered the need for career development and guidance services. Previously, understanding and choice of occupations and livelihoods were passed down through the family. However, parents may know little about the wide range of opportunities that exist for their children in the expanding economy. Career guidance and employment services offer an information and brokerage role between families and the providers of new opportunities.

The federal government is also aware of the value of having employment and career guidance services. It is concerned that key sectors of the economy will be run by expatriates thereby endangering national security. The Government is aware that the distribution of the National work force in the labour market is heavily skewed towards the public and semi-public sectors. Although the private sector constitutes 52.1% of the labour market, fewer than 2% of UAE Nationals work in this sector.

The response of the federal government has been to pursue a vigorous strategy of Emiratisation. Since 1999, banks have been required to increase their employment of Locals by 4% each year. They have been achieving just under 3% each year. Trade and insurance also have emiratisation quotas and there are targets for other sectors such as public relation, secretarial jobs and human resources managers.

Labour market difficulties

The UAE labour market is a very difficult one for all young people – both Nationals and Non-nationals. For skilled jobs, leading companies scour global labour markets to recruit 'ready-formed' and 'ready-to-go' employees. A culture of training and workforce development is beginning to emerge which will eventually benefit fresh graduates and school leavers, but they often find it takes time to get their first job.

Young Nationals face particular difficulties. Recruitment into the public sector is becoming harder as e-government initiatives take effect. Seeking employment in the private sector is still regarded as a less attractive option. Initial pay is less good, the work is often more stressful and hours are longer leading to a worse life-work balance. The work environment is also more alien where Nationals are in a minority. Tanmia and various employers' groups have produced reports and held conferences which have discussed strategies for changing the career and human resources development practices of companies. They have also focused on the need to change young people's understanding of how to behave in relation to the labour market. Staying at home until the right job comes up is not a substitute for pro-active job-seeking strategies. There are practical and ethical difficulties involved in relying on favours and influence (known as 'wasta' in the UAE). Unrealistic aspirations and lack of staying power and application is evidence of a poor work ethic. These messages are getting through to young people but stereotyped views of the behaviour of Nationals in the labour market will be slower to change.

Measures to improve labour market conditions for Nationals include several schemes to promote business enterprise (e.g. *Intilaq, the Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Establishment for Young Business Leaders*, etc.), some of them targeted specifically at the needs of women. A study by Tanmia (2004b) found that the majority of women-managed small enterprises are part-time, low capital investment, based on traditional home-based activities (perfume mixing, handicrafts, etc.) for the 'National' market. Typically, women faced a number of obstacles including limited access to networks, household obligations, problems recruiting workers and getting in touch with clients, competition from other small firms and unhelpful banking policies. The Tanmia study highlighted the need for more policy support to establish better ways of helping women entrepreneurs.

Progress in the development of career development and guidance services for Nationals

Secondary education

Tanmia's survey of 87 government and private schools in four emirates in March 2003 revealed that only two schools in the private sector had no careers provision at all. Activities were mainly focused on the final three years of secondary schooling and with students' higher education choices. Some help was given to students with choosing occupations and employment. Schools, especially in the government sector, relied mainly on talks by outside speakers.

Just over a quarter of schools, mainly those in the private sector, mentioned senior management involvement in organising careers activities but the main organisers of careers activities in all types of schools were the social workers (social counsellors) and psychologists. Over two-thirds of government schools and just under a half of private schools stated that the social worker was responsible for running careers activities. The social worker is mainly concerned with ensuring the health and well-being of students and helping those experiencing particular problems or difficulties.

Over a third of schools felt that the careers provision had a high or fairly high level of impact. They tended to define this in terms of 'practical' or 'economic' outcomes, e.g. students making the right choice of higher education, employment or career. Only a few schools evaluated their impact in terms of career development learning outcomes, e.g. enhancing students' career management and employability skills.

The survey also revealed the limited availability of print-based and ICT-based careers information relevant to the UAE education and labour markets.

Tanmia has led a number of initiatives to enhance careers information, advice and guidance for National students. They launched the careergate website (www.careergate.ae) with information for young people and their advisers. It also includes a phone and e-mail guidance facility. Tanmia has also published several guides such as a job-seekers' guide and collaborates with partners on various careers fairs held in different emirates. Education-business links are also being developed to bridge the gap between the worlds of work and education through specific targeted career activities.

Higher education

The UAE has a diverse further and higher education sector. As well as a flourishing private sector, the government sector for Nationals comprises the Higher Colleges of Technology on 14 campuses (including a men's and a women's college in each of the six largest cities), UAE

University (for men and women) and Zayed University (for women only).

In recent years, the government sector has had sufficient places for about 11,000 of the 15,000 school leavers seeking to enter higher education. The cost of private higher education can be considerable and students wishing to defer their entry have a very low chance of being accepted in a government institution the following year. Admissions are handled centrally by the National Application Processing Office (NAPO). The minimum entry requirement for bachelors degree courses in most subjects is a 70 per cent pass in the school leaving certificate, but it is higher in some subjects. In medicine, for example, the official requirement is 80 per cent but the pressure for places means that only those with 95 per cent stand a chance of being accepted.

Tanmia, NAPO and the higher education institutions themselves has been proactive in addressing young people's career guidance needs. In 2003, for example, Tanmia produced the first annual table of courses and in the following year, they published a guide to choosing higher education which complements NAPO's own guide. In addition, they collaborate annually with NAPO on a programme of visits to schools giving advice on higher education decision-making.

All government higher education institutions and most of the private ones have careers advisory services to help students with their choices of courses and with finding work experience and employment. Tanmia organises four professional development meetings a year for careers advisers/counselors.

Adult and employment settings

The UAE has a number of work preparation and work readiness schemes to try and tackle the problem of unemployment among Nationals. The Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce, for example, has run a 'Work Passport' programme over a number of years and the Centre of Excellence for Applied Research and Training (CERT) runs work readiness programmes which have enabled young people to find jobs. The Dubai Task Force for Hotel and Tourism has also been successful in boosting recruitment in those sectors. Tanmia too maintains an extensive programme of job-seekers' training and career guidance programmes. Some sectors are less pro-active - a survey by Tanmia of desk jobs in construction industry (2005) found that only 29% had career development programmes and only 6% had special career development programmes for Nationals.

Some schemes are specifically targeted at the needs of women such as the small business start-up scheme run by the Women's Federation and the initiatives to promote women in business by the Emirates Business Women's Council and the Women's consultative commission for the banking sector).

In the private sector, a number of businesses have begun to establish themselves offering career coaching and career assessment and development centres.

Creating a career guidance infrastructure

Tanmia

Tanmia has begun to develop a career guidance infrastructure for the UAE although the main driver of public policy in this area is securing employment for Nationals. This helps to explain why assessment of individuals, job-seekers career guidance workshops and employment information and advice are key priorities. Resources are directed at frontline activities to tackle unemployment. Nevertheless, Tanmia has allocated significant resources to the development of career guidance services. In 2003, Tanmia commissioned a report from VT Careers Management on a national strategy for career development in the United Arab Emirates (Tanmia, 2004a). A further contract was awarded to VT Careers Management in 2004-05 to help Tanmia strengthen its careers service provision. The project covered a wide range of areas including strategic planning, quality assurance, training and professional development, work with partners and the development of new resources including a directory of occupations.

In 2004-05, a contract was also awarded to Tecslut to develop a series of tests which could be used to assess the interests, aptitudes and work values of clients.

Career development and career guidance professionals

The lack of a mandated curriculum for careers education means that the role of 'careers teacher' does not exist in the secondary public education system. This is not to say that it could not emerge at some time in the future; but no decision has been taken at federal level yet on a workforce structure for the careers education and guidance sector.

At present, careers education and advice is most likely to be provided on a voluntary basis by a social worker or interested member of staff. The drawback of this situation is that not all social workers are interested in taking on a careers role and even fewer have the time or have been trained to do so. In 2004, the Tanmia Centre for Career Guidance and Planning developed a careers manual for social workers and with the support of the Ministry of Education held the first of a number of training course based on it for officers responsible for social workers in the local education zones.

In private schools in the UAE, it is interesting to note that the workforce structure tends to follow the country of the curriculum they follow. Thus in an English curriculum school they may have a careers co-ordinator, while in an American curriculum school they are more likely to have guidance counselors and/or education advising professionals.

A Central Careers Unit for HCTs and Universities in the UAE

The higher education sector has made most progress in embedding career development learning and advice in its provision. The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCTs) have led the way in setting up careers advice centres and developing activities for students such as the use of e-portfolios for careers (e.g. at Sharjah Women's College) and the staging of careers days and careers fairs. Zayed University has been a leader in showcasing the talents of its students to potential employers.

Collaboration between higher education institutions on careers matters has developed to a certain extent. Tanmia has facilitated networking between practitioners and in 2005 drafted proposals for a central careers unit for HCTs and universities in the UAE that have yet to be presented formally to the sector.

Training and professional development

Considerable progress has been made in establishing counselling and career counselling as a professional specialism in the UAE. The Higher Colleges of Technology established the first BEd programmes in Career Advising and Counselling at the women's colleges in Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah. Graduates from these programmes are now working in human resource departments, Tanmia, schools and higher education. As yet, there is no comparable opportunity in the men's colleges.

The second major advance has been the launch of the annual Counselling Arabia conferences. Each year, the scale of the event has become more ambitious and during 2005-06 the organising committee took the tentative steps towards establishing itself formally as an association for both general and career counselling professionals. The leading light in these developments was Gillian Johnston, a Canadian Career Counsellor educator, who ran the BEd Career Advice and Counselling programme at Sharjah Women's College from 2003-2006. Counselling Arabia aims to be inclusive reaching out to both Nationals and non-Nationals working in the various counselling and career counselling sectors. Its website is at <http://www.counsellingarabia.org/index.html>

Future challenges

A career guidance culture and infrastructure in the UAE has begun to emerge through a combination of bottom-up and top-down initiatives to meet a range of perceived needs. The challenge for the future will be to make progress and create a durable system.

A number of difficulties still have to be resolved. The foremost is how to achieve an equitable system involving private and public sector solutions that meets the needs of the whole population – Non-nationals as well as Nationals.

The creation of a long-lasting system needs to have built into it a capacity for managing change. In the years ahead, the UAE is likely to see a further growth in the demand for career education and guidance for students, support for career development for employees and a growing need for Third Age guidance. These different groups will also expect quality services, well-trained staff and more personalised forms of support, including the ability to access services through the use of ICT.

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